

MAYOR'S ADDRESS

December 1, 2008

CHIEF JUSTICE WILLIAMS, MEMBERS OF THE CITY COUNCIL AND SCHOOL COMMITTEE, PUBLIC OFFICIALS AND MOST OF ALL, RESIDENTS OF THE GREAT CITY OF EAST PROVIDENCE WHO ARE HERE TO CELEBRATE THE INAUGURATION OF YOUR NEW CITY GOVERNMENT.

TODAY REPRESENTS A NEW BEGINNING FOR OUR CITY, BOTH LITERALLY AND FIGURATIVELY. TAKE A LOOK AT OUR CITY SEAL ON THE FRONT OF YOUR PROGRAM – IT'S A SEAL THAT IS CONTAINED IN ALL OFFICIAL CITY DOCUMENTS AND PROMINENTLY FEATURED IN THE CENTER OF COUNCIL CHAMBERS, RIGHT BEHIND THE MAYOR'S CHAIR.

YOU WILL SEE A DATE ON OUR SEAL -- DECEMBER 1, 1958. THAT IS BECAUSE AT THIS MOMENT EXACTLY 50 YEARS AGO TODAY, EAST PROVIDENCE BECAME A CITY. TONIGHT, WE PUT OUR FIRST HALF CENTURY BEHIND US AS OUR CITY TURNS TO ITS NEXT 50 YEARS.

IN SO DOING, HOWEVER, WE WILL EMBRACE OUR HISTORIC CITY MOTTO THAT WAS ALSO EMBLAZONED ON OUR SEAL BY OUR FOUNDERS – THAT IS "PRO BONO PUBLICO" OR "FOR THE PUBLIC GOOD." IT IS A MOTTO THAT PLACES THE PUBLIC INTEREST AHEAD OF ANY AND ALL SPECIAL INTERESTS.

LESS THAN A MONTH AGO, THE PEOPLE OF EAST PROVIDENCE ELECTED A NEW COUNCIL AND SCHOOL COMMITTEE THAT IS BEHOLDEN TO NO SPECIAL INTEREST, NO UNION BOSSES AND NO POLITICAL PARTY. WE ARE ALL IN IT FOR THE COMMON GOOD, EXACTLY AS THE FOUNDERS OF OUR GREAT CITY INTENDED.

TOGETHER WITH OUR APPOINTED OFFICIALS ON THE CITY AND SCHOOL SIDE, LET NOTICE BE SERVED – THERE IS A NEW TEAM IN TOWN –

ONE THAT VALUES WHAT YOU KNOW OVER WHO YOU KNOW, ONE THAT PLACES MERIT OVER POLITICS, AND ONE THAT WILL CHALLENGE THE SYSTEM, RATHER THAN LET EP TAXPAYERS AND HOMEOWNERS BE TRAMPLED BY IT.

AS YOU KNOW, TODAY MARKS MY RETURN TO EAST PROVIDENCE CITY GOVERNMENT AFTER A TWO YEAR ABSENCE. I HAVE BEEN YOUR COUNCILMAN AT LARGE FOR SIX TERMS OVER THE LAST 16 YEARS, SINCE I WAS FIRST ELECTED IN 1992. I HAVE BEEN PRIVILEGED TO SERVE AS MAYOR, AS ELECTED BY THE COUNCIL, FOR THREE TERMS. TONIGHT I BEGIN MY FOURTH.

LET ME SAY THAT IN ALL MY YEARS OF SERVICE, I HAVE NEVER BEEN MORE EXCITED TO BE BACK THAN I AM TONIGHT. THAT IS BECAUSE THE PEOPLE OF EAST PROVIDENCE IN THEIR WISDOM ELECTED A COUNCIL THAT IS NOT ONLY COMMITTED TO THE IDEALS OF GOOD GOVERNMENT, BUT ONE THAT HAS THE ABILITY AND WILL TO CHALLENGE THE STATUS QUO FOR THE BETTERMENT OF OUR CITY.

IN WARD I, WE HAVE BOB CUSACK, WHO IS BEGINNING HIS SECOND TERM. BOB HAS BEEN THE COUNCIL'S FISCAL WATCHDOG THESE LAST 2 YEARS, FIGHTING TO ADDRESS SCHOOL DEPARTMENT OVERSPENDING AND UNAFFORDABLE CONTRACTS. BECAUSE HE HAS FOUGHT AND WILL CONTINUE TO FIGHT THE GOOD FIGHT FOR EP TAXPAYERS, HE IS OUR CHOICE FOR ASSISTANT MAYOR. WHILE HE WAGED A LONELY BATTLE FOR FISCAL SANITY IN THE PAST, WE HAVE A MESSAGE FOR BOB – HELP IS ON THE WAY.

THAT IS IN LARGE PART BECAUSE OF THE NEW COUNCILMAN FROM WARD 2, FORMER STATE REPRESENTATIVE BRIAN COOGAN. BRIAN IS A FIRST TIME COUNCILMAN, WHO WILL BRING NEW IDEAS AND ENERGY. HE ALSO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR A NEW TERM IN CITY CAMPAIGNING – THAT WORD IS “COOGANIZE.” AS ANYONE WHO LIVES IN OR DROVE THROUGH ANYWHERE IN WARD 2 EVEN ONCE THIS ELECTION SEASON KNOWS ALL

TOO WELL, YOU COULD NOT ESCAPE THE OMNIPRESENT “COOGAN FOR COUNCIL” CAMPAIGN SIGNS OF ALL SIZES, FLYERS, SHIRTS, MAILINGS AND WORKERS. THEY WERE EVERYWHERE. SO WHEN ANYONE ASKS ME HOW TO WIN AN ELECTION, I TELL THEM TO DO IT LIKE BRIAN – AND “COOGANIZE” THE DISTRICT.

TURNING TO WARD 3, WE HAVE COUNCILWOMAN VALERIE PERRY, WHO IS BEGINNING HER THIRD TERM ON THE COUNCIL. VALERIE BRINGS DECADES OF EXPERIENCE IN CITY GOVERNMENT AND DEDICATION AND PROFESSIONALISM TO THE PEOPLE OF OUR CITY. SHE WILL PLAY AN IMPORTANT ROLE ON THE COUNCIL.

IN WARD 4, BRUCE DITRAGLIA BEGINS HIS SECOND TERM ON THE COUNCIL. BRUCE IS ALSO A LONGTIME PARTICIPANT IN CITY GOVERNMENT, HAVING SERVED MANY YEARS ON THE CITY’S PLANNING BOARD. WE LOOK FOR HIS SUPPORT TO MOVE EAST PROVIDENCE FORWARD.

IN ADDITION TO THE COUNCIL, YOU WILL SEE SEVERAL NEW FACES TONIGHT IN THE FORM OF COUNCIL APPOINTMENTS CALLED FOR IN OUR CITY CHARTER. UNLIKE DEPARTMENT HEADS AND OTHER CITY STAFF, THE APPOINTMENTS OF CITY CLERK, OUR LEGAL DEPARTMENT AND OTHERS EXPIRE EVERY 2 YEARS AND THE COUNCIL MUST MAKE NEW ONES.

WHILE A COUNCIL MAY CHOOSE TO REAPPOINT THE SAME PEOPLE FOR MULTIPLE TERMS, A NEW COUNCIL CAN, AND WE BELIEVE SHOULD, MAKE CHANGE AT TIMES TO INFUSE CITY GOVERNMENT WITH FRESH FACES AND NEW IDEAS. WHILE OUR APPOINTEES HAVEN’T EVEN STARTED, THEY HAVE ALREADY MADE POSITIVE SUGGESTIONS FOR REFORM. WE PROUDLY CHOSE EACH APPOINTEE BASED ON EXPERIENCE AND MERIT, NOT PARTY POLITICS. WE HAVE NO DOUBT THAT THEY WILL DO AN OUTSTANDING JOB FOR THE PEOPLE OF EAST PROVIDENCE.

EAST PROVIDENCE GOVERNMENT, LIKE THOSE IN ALL RHODE ISLAND COMMUNITIES, IS IN THE MIDDLE OF AN EXTREME FISCAL CHALLENGE. OUR TAXPAYERS ARE STRAPPED, OUR REVENUE IS DECLINING, STATE AID IS GOING DOWN, NOT UP, AND EXPENSES ARE INCREASING.

WHILE WE ARE NOT IMMUNE FROM THE RECESSION, YOUR COUNCIL, SCHOOL COMMITTEE AND APPOINTED OFFICIALS ALL HAVE TO LOOK OUTSIDE THE BOX TO CONFRONT THIS CHALLENGE. THE DAYS OF GIANT PROPERTY TAX INCREASES TO PAY FOR UNAFFORDABLE CITY GOVERNMENT ARE OVER.

ITS DEMISE STARTED LAST TIME I WAS ON THE COUNCIL. TWO YEARS AGO I SPONSORED A 3.5% ANNUAL TAX CAP FOR OUR CITY, THE LOWEST IN THE STATE. I ALSO SPONSORED A CHARTER AMENDMENT TO ENSURE THAT EP WOULD NEVER HAVE ANOTHER SCHOOL CONTRACT WITHOUT A SIGNIFICANT HEALTHCARE COPAY. NO FUTURE SCHOOL CONTRACT WILL BECOME LAW WITHOUT COUNCIL APPROVAL.

YOU SHOULD KNOW THAT SCHOOL SPENDING CONSTITUTES OVER 60% OF THE ENTIRE CITY BUDGET AND THAT SALARIES AND BENEFITS OF THE RECENTLY EXPIRED TEACHERS' UNION CONTRACT CONSTITUTE NEARLY 80% OF THE SCHOOL BUDGET. YET, IT IS A CONTRACT THAT NO CITY OR TOWN IN THE STATE COULD AFFORD.

THE EXPIRED CONTRACT HAS A \$0 COPAY FOR HEALTHCARE BENEFITS THAT FOR A FAMILY PLAN COSTS TAXPAYERS OVER \$16,000 A YEAR, HAS ONLY A TOKEN PRESCRIPTION DRUG COPAY, AND CONTAINS A HEALTHCARE BUYBACK CLAUSE FOR \$5,100, EVEN FOR THOSE OBTAINING INSURANCE FROM THE CITY THROUGH A SPOUSE. JUST AS BAD, THIS YEAR THE UNION CONTRACT CALLED FOR A PAY INCREASE AVERAGING 5%.

LIKE MOST ALL OF YOU, I WAS A PRODUCT OF THE EP PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM, AND CREDIT EP TEACHERS FOR THE JOB THEY DO DAY IN AND DAY OUT. WE MUST ASK, HOWEVER, WHEN SO MANY TOWNIES ARE STRUGGLING TO KEEP OR FIND A JOB AND PAY FOR THEIR OWN HEALTHCARE, SHOULDN'T WE BE TAKING EVERY ACTION POSSIBLE TO END AN UNAFFORDABLE UNION CONTRACT THAT HELPED CREATE A \$4 MILLION SCHOOL DEFICIT?

NOT TO FEAR, TO UNDO THE WORST CONTRACT IN EP HISTORY, YOUR SCHOOL COMMITTEE HAS TAKEN A COURAGEOUS STAND -- AND HAS SAID "ENOUGH!" IT HAS PUT A PROFESSIONAL TEAM IN PLACE TO DRAFT A CONTRACT THAT IS FAIR AND REASONABLE WITH A REAL COPAY.

AS A PROVIDENCE JOURNAL EDITORIAL RECENTLY STATED, THIS SCHOOL COMMITTEE NEEDS OUR FULL SUPPORT. AND THAT IT SHALL HAVE. THIS COUNCIL WILL WORK WITH THE SCHOOL COMMITTEE IN PARTNERSHIP TO RIGHT ITS SHIP. OUR KIDS AND OUR TAXPAYERS EXPECT AND DESERVE NO LESS.

INDEED, GETTING SCHOOL SPENDING UNDER CONTROL IS A TOP PRIORITY FOR THE CITY. A FAIR AND REASONABLE TEACHERS' CONTRACT WOULD SAVE OVER \$3 MILLION A YEAR -- FREEING UP DOLLARS TO ERASE THE SCHOOL DEFICIT, AND PROVIDING MUCH NEEDED RENOVATION OF OUR SCHOOL BUILDINGS FOR THE BENEFIT OF OUR CHILDREN.

IN LIGHT OF THE STATE BUDGET CRISIS, WE EXPECT STATE AID TO EP, AS IN OTHER COMMUNITIES, TO FALL, WHILE CONTRACTS CALL FOR INCREASED SPENDING. WHILE THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY TAKES AWAY AID, WE MUST INSIST THEY ALSO ELIMINATE UNFUNDED STATE MANDATES. THESE MANDATES COST COMMUNITIES LIKE EAST PROVIDENCE MILLIONS EACH YEAR AND ARE OPTIONAL REQUIREMENTS. MANY ARE NOT EVEN THE LAW IN OUR NEIGHBORING STATES.

WE WILL BE A LEADER IN ANALYSIS AND ADVOCACY TO END THESE MANDATES – NOT BECAUSE WE WANT TO, BUT BECAUSE WE SIMPLY CANNOT AFFORD TO DO OTHERWISE.

NOW, MORE THAN EVER, EAST PROVIDENCE NEEDS FRESH NEW IDEAS, NOT THE SAME OLD DOGMA. WE WILL LEAVE NO STONE UNTURNED IN THE SEARCH FOR WAYS TO PROTECT OUR TAXPAYERS DURING THESE DIFFICULT TIMES.

IF AN IDEA HAS MERIT, WE WILL CONSIDER IT; IF THE BUREAUCRACY SAYS IT CANNOT BE DONE, WE WILL DEMAND TO KNOW WHY. IF A BAD LAW IS AGAINST US, WE WILL PUSH TO CHANGE IT.

FOR THIS COUNCIL, SAYING THAT AN IDEA HAS NEVER BEEN TRIED BEFORE MAY WELL BE A REASON TO PURSUE IT; IT WILL CERTAINLY BE NO BASIS FOR REJECTING IT. WITH THE PEOPLE OF EAST PROVIDENCE FOOTING MORE OF THE BILL FOR OUR CITY AND SCHOOLS – THEY EXPECT AND DESERVE NO LESS.

IN CONCLUSION, LET US NOT FORGET THAT WE ARE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER. I ASK YOU JOIN ME AND THE ENTIRE COUNCIL IN MAKING OUR CITY A MODEL OF OPEN, HONEST, PROFESSIONAL AND INNOVATIVE LOCAL GOVERNMENT. VOLUNTEER YOUR TIME, SHARE YOUR IDEAS, PARTICIPATE IN YOUR GOVERNMENT.

THIS COUNCIL WILL ALWAYS REMEMBER – WE SERVE YOU, NOT THE OTHER WAY AROUND. LET THAT SERVICE BEGIN TONIGHT.

THANK YOU.