

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 8, 2000

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QUEENS CIVIC COMMENTS ON CITY PRELIMINARY BUDGET

In testimony presented today (Tuesday, February 8, 2000) to the Queens Borough Board, the Queens Civic Congress [QCC] called for a fair share of the City's budget for Education, Youth, Seniors and Parks to be allocated to Queens, additional building and housing inspectors, funding for traffic studies and sign replacement, routine staffing of community police beats, increased use of civilians in the NYPD, funding to increase school maintenance. The statement, prepared by QCC President Sean Walsh (Douglaston), Executive Vice President Corey Bearak (North Bellerose) and Expense and Capital Budget Chair Anthony Avella and presented at Borough Hall by Vice President and Infrastructure Chair Margo Hill (South Ozone Park), follows:

Dear Borough President Shulman and Borough Board Members:

Thank you for affording the Queens Civic Congress the opportunity to comment on the City's Preliminary Expense and Capital Budget. As an umbrella group of 95 civic organizations, our membership represents almost every community in the borough.

The number one topic of Queens civics in 2000 is Education. Education in our borough offers an example of what can be done when teachers, parents and children work together. Overall education funding needs to continue at a level necessary to ensure that our children are receiving the best education possible. The controversy over the allocation of capital monies for new classroom seats illustrated the need to increase funding for education in our city. In addition, the budget must include resources to drive class sizes down and restore music, sports and art programs. Funding for new books, Project Smart Schools, restoration of SWAT teams for school maintenance and accelerating the elimination of coal-fired furnaces are high priorities. There also exists a need to formalize community input in siting new schools before proceeding presenting fait accompli. Sports remains an important part of the school experience but new schools lack playgrounds and playing fields and where they get included in plans, they are woefully inadequate.

There exists a need to build on the regional beacons; the city must open more neighborhood schools at night and on weekends for youth programs to supplement Beacons and to keep our children off the street. Queens needs this because Beacons tend to be separated by great distances--a function of its lower density nature. Keeping an after school program open costs much less than incarceration.

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Likewise the library budget must be increased, not cut. Cuts at the Preliminary Budget often result in Summer hour reductions that do not get restored until some three months after the City budget's adoption in early June. City Hall should know better than to take an action that reduces library hours -- even if the budget cut gets restored by the Council in June -- at the time of year many children are off from school and should have the benefit of more not fewer library hours. Branches built in 60's and 70's have outgrown their quarters. For Queens Libraries to meet the challenge of the information age and population growth, residents need new and/ or enlarged buildings.

One of the best attributes of our borough are our parks. Since Queens has the largest amount of parkland, it is important that Queens receive its fair share of the Department of Parks and Recreation budget. While private funding sources and workfare participants have had a positive impact on the conditions of our parks, much more needs to be done. A recent study by the Parks Council indicates the need to better resource parks. Funding for more trees and expanded maintenance and pruning promotes a healthy urban "forest." Funding must be allocated to restore park attendants. Stationing a park worker in a park or playground provides better and more efficient maintenance; it also improves security for parents and their children and helps to reduce vandalism and graffiti. The cuts in the Preliminary Budget plan make no sense.

Efforts to further recycling and expand participation rates in low-performing districts must be explored to address the closing of Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island. The enormous cost and the adverse impact from additional trucks make exporting trash something the City ought to minimize, not rely upon.

Many communities in the borough still need street reconstruction and sewer projects to address flooding. This includes many older combined sewer and storm lines that require replacement.

Water rates increase out of reach of single family homeowners, the coops, and the small businessman. Capital costs must be removed from the calculation of the water rate. In no other portion of the city budgeting process are capital items funded by a regressive use tax. In addition why must rates be increased prior to the determination of agency expenses. This system was to be changed. We cannot tolerate any further delays in making public officials directly accountable. In fact, be on notice, change the system or not, we are holding you accountable.

Continuing television and newspaper accounts of building collapses and structural weaknesses only point to a lack of proper enforcement and supervision. Additional building inspectors for both the Departments of Buildings and Housing Preservation and Development must be hired immediately to ensure that our housing stocks and new construction meet all codes. Funding must also allow for immediate and meaningful follow-up enforcement and coordination with the Environmental Control Board. This includes linking community board computers with ECB and the Department of Finance data base records.. At this time, we again take a moment to urge your support to pass State Assembly Member Audrey Pheffer's bill to convert ECB judgements to tax liens.

Funding for traffic studies still needs to be increased to ensure prompt turnaround times for dangerous locations. Sign replacement is almost nonexistent.

The Police Department deserves our congratulations for continuing achieving significant reductions in crime. However, we have three areas of concerns that need to be strengthened.

The New York City Police Department has consistently decreased the number of uniformed patrol strength in Queens. Queens gets less than 1/5 of the NYPD's uniform man power while it has about 1/4 of the reported city wide crime. We believe that the budget discussions should address this disparity of manpower allocation

Queens again this year has the highest response times in the city. We also would like to suggest a study to review the effectiveness of precincts in the larger community board districts. Many residents feel some districts are too large to ensure prompt response time. Moreover, this points to a need to provide staffing for Radio Motor Patrols in sufficient number.

This staffing disparity has also resulted in cuts and, in many cases, elimination of the Community Policing Program, formerly known as C-POP; it needs to be re-instituted. Nothing reduces crime more than a beat officer. Many quality of life concerns could be addressed by the presence of a foot patrol officer. Police visibility is an important element of any crime prevention program. Efforts must be made to free police officers doing tasks that civilians can do.

Our cultural institutions, youth and seniors all require the continuation and strengthening of their respective programs. We need ensure all communities that need assistance receive it and outreach must be expanded so that all eligible seniors sign up for the benefits they may qualify for.

The 1999 rejection of Community Board 11's 197A Plan by the City Planning Commission suggests a need for funding planners to prepare a plan to protect the low-density neighborhoods of our city from out of character development. There seems a mind set in that agency to seek large scale developments along all of the Queens' east west thoroughfares, even where it would upset the integrity of neighborhoods. You must stand firm against over-development schemes.

A word about Creedmoor: The QCC finds the current plan to compress three schools in a space suitable for one on only a portion of property at Creedmoor unacceptable. It is unsound educationally to spend capital funds in this manner. We stand by our original master plan that was later incorporated in the Borough President's Working Group on Creedmoor.

Finally, the Mayor's Financial Plan correctly leaves the funding for the Independent Budget Office intact -- as required by the City Charter. An independent budget analysis is key to an informed public and crucial to hearings such as this one.

Thank you for your time and consideration.