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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 2002

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QUEENS CIVICS COMMENTS ON CITY PRELIMINARY BUDGET

In testimony presented today (Thursday, February 21, 2002) to the Queens Borough Board, the Queens Civic Congress [QCC] rejected massive borrowing to balance the City's budget and called for a fair share of the City's budget for Education, Youth, Seniors, and Parks, additional building and housing inspectors, routine staffing of community police beats, funding to increase school maintenance. The Congress also advocated adequately funded Offices of the Borough President and outlined opportunities to help maintain core services and avert massive borrowing to close the budget gap. The statement, presented at Borough Hall by Founder Robert I. Harris (West Cunningham Park), follows:

Borough President Marshall 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 100 civic organizations, our membership represents almost every community in the borough. The Queens Civic Congress recognizes the magnitude of the City's fiscal difficulties but we find unacceptable cuts to core programs and services when the current administration follows practices of the past when it comes to realistic opportunities to maximize revenues and strategically address the City's structural deficit. We will suggest revenue opportunities after identifying our concerns about cuts in vital services.

Rather than cut the borough presidents' budget, we need to provide them the resources to empower each to carry out their charter functions and help New York City weather the current fiscal crisis. City Charter Chapter 4, particularly section 82, clearly requires borough presidents to monitor service delivery, review all capital projects in the borough, advise the mayor on the formulation of the Preliminary and Executive Budgets, provide technical assistance to community boards, and identify the borough's strategic needs. The budgets of the borough president's offices remained static over the last eight years.

The top concern of Queens civics in 2002 remains 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 to ensure that our children receive the best education possible. Take care to insure that no cuts in education reach schools and classrooms. If avoiding that result means restoring the education budget, then make it happen. All analyses of educational outcomes show good results with smaller classes and the addition of programs in music, sports and the arts. Monies anticipated as a result of the Campaign for Fiscal Equity lawsuit must supplement, not replace any current funding. Limited funds to build schools make it imperative to work to site them where needed.

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The Congress opposes cuts to youth and aging programs. There also exists a need to build on the regional beacons; the city must ultimately plan to 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 programs open costs much less than incarceration. If we fail to provide for our seniors, often the glue that hold the fabric of our communities together, we may face greater costs down the road, particularly in health care. 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 for which they may qualify.

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.

One of the best attributes of our borough, our parks and natural areas, remain threatened despite the great efforts of agency personnel – special kudos are due Borough Commissioner Murphy for his efforts past and present. With the largest amount of parkland, Queens must receive its fair share of the Department of Parks and Recreation budget. Funding for more trees and expanded maintenance and pruning promote 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.

Efforts to further recycling and expand participation rates in low-performing districts make sense when the alternative – shipping waste out of state – threatens to break our budget in the near future. The enormous cost and the adverse impact from additional trucks make exporting trash something the City ought to minimize, not rely upon. Rather than suspend metal, glass and plastic recycling, make it work. Look a buy back centers as low cost collection alternatives that will substantially increase recycling.

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. Rate caps for large buildings threaten to shift the cost burdens of the system to homeowners. The Congress urges equalization efforts to that extend relief equally to all ratepayers. Capital costs must be removed from the calculation of the water rate. No other portion of the city budgeting process funds capital items by a regressive use tax. In addition, why must rates be increased prior to the determination of agency expenses? Support pending legislation sponsored by Assembly Member Mark Weprin and supported by the QCC to delay rate-setting until after the budget's adoption.

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. No excuse about resources for this need: use the monies generated by building permit and other fees.

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The New York City Police Department has consistently decreased uniformed patrol strength in Queens. Queens gets less than 1/5 of the NYPD's uniform staffing while it has about 1/4 of the reported citywide crime. The budget discussions must address this disparity of manpower allocation

Queens still has the highest response times in the city. We renew our call for a study to review the effectiveness of precincts in the larger community board districts. Residents feel some districts are too large to ensure prompt response time.

The disparity in staffing highlights the need for a true community policing program, adequately staffed. Many quality of life concerns could be addressed by the presence of a foot patrol officer.

We need City planners to protect the low-density neighborhoods of our city from out of character development. Queens needs a Row House zone that would preserve this major one-family use that often falls prey to out of scale development schemes. There seems a mind set in that agency to seek large-scale developments along Queens' east west thoroughfares, even where it would upset the integrity of neighborhoods. You must stand firm against over-development schemes.

Having discussed needs, let's look at paying for vital and mandated services. We reject selling bonds to infuse \$1.5 billion this year with taxpayers paying \$130 million in 20 subsequent budgets for this one-shot. Better ways exist. We offer this menu:

*Recoup \$1 billion for illegal uses of real property that pay taxes reflecting a classification at variance with their use.

*Aim a modest Personal Income Tax adjustment at multi-millionaires to net \$500 million.

*Almost all the agency cuts involve services. Before approving cuts to services and programs, require commissioners to first do without a spokesperson, an intergovernmental type or a few less managers and gain, conservatively, \$10 million.

*More aggressive use of Alternative to Incarceration and Alternative to Detention programs nets the City \$50 million and could capture a like amount from the state that could realize savings at its end from City funded programs.

*Re-introduction of bottle and can buyback centers rather than cutting out recycling of metals, glass and plastic should net save another \$100 million.

*Reinstate the Commuter tax -- perhaps at a bit higher rate -- phased in could net \$450 million to start and reach \$1 billion by FY'2006

Not having to borrow the \$1.5 billion should save 130 million in annual debt payments

A strategic capital plan that funds project based on real progress, not speculation, could result in \$500 million that can induce further savings that enable debt pay-down.