



Queens Civic Congress

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QUEENS CIVIC CONGRESS COMMENTS ON CITY BUDGET PROPOSAL

In testimony presented today (Friday, April 30, 2004) to the Queens City Council Delegation, the Queens Civic Congress [QCC] called for a fair share of the City's budget for Education, Youth, Seniors, and Parks, additional building and housing inspectors, and routine staffing of community police beats and rollback of the property tax hike. The Congress also advocated adequately funded Offices of the Borough President and outlined opportunities to help maintain core services and to close the budget gap. The statement, presented at York College by QCC Executive Vice President for Public Affairs Corey Bearak (North Bellerose Civic Association) follows:

Members of the Queens City Council Delegation:

Thank you for affording the Queens Civic Congress the opportunity to comment on the Mayor's Executive Budget. As an umbrella group of 100 civic organizations, our membership represents almost every community in the borough. The QCC finds cuts to core programs and services -- libraries, seniors, youth, Parks, and CUNY -- unacceptable. The Mayor must recognize his responsibility to include these core programs and services the Council added during past budget negotiations; it remains grossly irresponsible of Mayors past and present to fail to baseline programs that provide essential services. We also find troubling the mayor's failure to maximize revenues and strategically address the City's structural deficit. Last year we outlined revenue opportunities, including at least \$2 billion through real estate and personal income tax reforms. We ought not to need to outline these missed opportunities next year.

At the outset, as QCC advocates in its platform, empower borough presidents to carry out their charter functions. City Charter Chapter 4, particularly section 82, 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. Eight years of static budgets and cuts in 2002 and 2003 severely restrict their performance of these duties envisioned by 1989's City Charter reforms and the voters who overwhelmingly approved them. In addition, programs financed by the Office of the Borough President, including for our youth and seniors, must continue and not face attacks merely because the funding gets allocated through our borough chief executive.

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Queens civics' top concern remain Education. The Queens Civic Congress recommends overall education funding at a level to ensure that our children receive the best education possible. All analyses of educational outcomes show good results with smaller classes and the addition of programs in music, sports and the arts. We must press the Governor and State Legislature to provide the funds required by the Campaign for Fiscal Equity decision.

When mayors cut services for seniors and kids, schools, libraries, parks, cultural programs and housing and neighborhood preservation initiatives, they know exactly what they are doing. This diverts the City Council away from looking throughout City government and mayoral agencies to identify less worthy programs or services that cry out for more efficient delivery. When City Hall releases a budget with fewer funds for those programs, it often initiates program or service cuts in the current budget year. As a result, even if the adopted budget restores cuts in the Mayor's Preliminary budget, the public experiences gaps in services.

The Congress opposes cuts to youth and aging programs. Build on the regional beacons and open more neighborhood schools at night and on weekends for youth programs to supplement Beacons and to keep our children off the street. Afterschool and summer jobs programs costs much less than incarceration, now \$100,000 annually per city inmate. Failing to provide for our seniors, often the glue that hold the fabric of our communities together, means greater costs down the road, particularly in health care and Medicaid. Look at the NORC model as a means to improve senior services; look closely at the pilot program to extend to homeowners this program currently only funded for apartment complexes.

Preliminary Budget cuts to libraries historically reduce summer hours, even if the budget adopted in early June makes restorations. It makes little sense to make our air-conditioned community branch libraries least available when school is out and when the summer heat can be unbearable. Library hours should be longer during the summer. City Hall should know better than to take an action that reduces library access when many children should have the benefit of more not fewer library hours.

With the largest amount of parkland, Queens must receive its fair share of the Department of Parks and Recreation budget. Our parks and natural areas remain threatened despite the great efforts of agency personnel – including Borough Commissioner Murphy who continues to excel. Funding for more trees and expanded maintenance and pruning promote a healthy urban “forest.” Fund park workers in parks or playgrounds; it provides better and more efficient maintenance, improves security for parents and their children, and helps to reduce vandalism and graffiti. The attack on our Queens Zoo also offends.

The Congress urges equalization efforts to that extend water rates relief equally to all ratepayers - single-family homeowners, the coops, and the small businessman. We oppose the 5.5% rate hike and question the \$120 million rent paid by the water board to the City. Its elimination would obviate the propose rate hike and fund a further reduction. Remove capital costs from the water rate calculus. The QCC supports legislation sponsored by Assembly Member Mark Weprin to delay rate-setting until after the budget's adoption.

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Ensure our housing stock and new construction meet all codes and people live and work in safety. Add funds for more building inspectors for the Departments of Buildings and Housing Preservation and Development, and immediate and meaningful follow-up enforcement and coordination with the Environmental Control Board. Use the monies generated by building permit and other fees. It's time the Council addresses the failure of the Department of Buildings to spend the surplus monies its collects in permits and fees on improving plans examination and enforcement.

Uniformed NYPD patrol strength remains a concern. The budget must address the disparity where Queens gets less than 1/5 of the NYPD's uniform staffing to address about 1/4 of the City's crime. We need true community-policing, adequately staffed, which also helps to addresses many quality of life concerns.

In the past two year, we noted more than a decade passed since we got a tax surcharge for Enhanced 9-1-1, yet New York City emergency communications remain mired in the last century. The surcharge ought to cover the system upgrade not basic operations and maintenance. Repeal the surcharges and re-impose the sunset provision to coincide with completing the upgrade and bar any surcharge revenue for other purposes.

The budget must fund enough city planners to protect our low-density neighborhoods from out of character development. Queens needs a Row House zone to preserve this major one-family use that often falls preys to out of scale development schemes.

As to the "debate" over a rebate or a modest across the board rate reduction, the QCC offers a simple message: The property tax hike must go. Two years ago, in place of 18.5% property tax hike which hit homeowners by 22%, we called on City Hall to recoup \$1 billion* from illegal uses of real property that pay taxes reflecting a classification at variance with their use. Raise another \$1 billion through a surcharge on the personal income tax on (New York State Adjusted Gross) incomes over \$200,000; nearly 90% of this gets raised from those who earn over \$1,000,000.** The Queens Civic Congress real property tax initiative would also reduce the inequalities in the co-op/ condo tax structure.

Re-think agency cuts that involve services – as virtually all agency cuts do. Require commissioners to do without a spokesperson, an intergovernmental type or a few less managers and gain, \$10 million.

Re-instate the Commuter tax -- perhaps at a higher rate -- netting \$450 million to start and reach \$1 billion soon after.

Our 2002 platform advocates a strategic capital plan that funds projects based on real progress, not speculation; the result: \$500 million that can induce further savings that enable debt pay-down. Paying down capital debt saves money and reduces future projected deficits.

* Current estimates range from three to five times more.

Information on our platform, our PIT proposal and next meeting follow on the next page

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The Queens Civic Congress stands ready to work with our elected officials as we all seek to move our City forward.

Thank you.

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The entire Queens Civic Congress Platform may be viewed on the Internet at:
<http://www.queensciviccongress.org/Platform/02platform.htm>

The Queens Civic Congress Biennial Luncheon takes place Sunday, May 2, 2004 1:00 p.m. at Antons of Queens Village with a keynote address by Senator Charles Schumer and an award for Community Service to Claire Shulman

The next Queens Civic Congress meeting, takes place Monday, May 17, 7:30 p.m. at the Kew Gardens Community Center, 80-02 Kew Gardens Road.

Find the Queens Civic Congress revenue proposals on line at http://queensciviccongress.org/Media/files/2003/2003-01-28_Queens_Civic_Congress_Revenue_Proposal.pdf

Queens Civic Congress Members

Assoc. of Old Forest Hills Bayside Hills Civic Assoc. Bayswater Civic Assoc. Bay Terrace Community Alliance Beachside Bungalow Preservation Assoc. Bellaire/Belvill Civic Assoc. Belle Harbor Property Owners Bellerose-Commonwealth Civic Assoc. Bellerose-Hillside Civic Assoc. Bell Park Manor-Terrace Community Council Bowne Park Civic Assoc. Briarwood Community Assoc. Cambria Heights Civic Assoc. College Point Civic Taxpayers Assoc. COMET Concerned Citizens of Laurelton Creedmoor Civic Assoc. Doug-Bay Manor Civic Assoc. Douglaston Civic Assoc. Douglas Manor Assoc East Flushing Civic Assoc. Federation of Laurelton Block Associations Floral Park Community Council Flushing on the Hill Civic Assoc. Flushing Heights Civic Assoc. Flushing Suburban Civic Assoc. Forest Hills Chamber of Commerce Forest Hills Community & Civic Assoc. Forest Hills Crescents Assoc. Forest Hills-Van Court Assoc. Fresh Meadows Homeowners Assoc. Georgetown Mews Glen Oaks Village Owners Greater Whitestone Taxpayers Civic Association Harding Heights Civic Assoc. Harrison Place/Sunnyside Gardens Hillcrest Estates Civic Assoc. Hilltop Village Co-op #4 Hollis Hills Civic Assoc. Holliswood Civic Assoc. Hollis Park Gardens Assoc. Holly Civic Assoc. Howard Beach Civic Forum Hunters Point Community Coalition Hyde Park Gardens Jackson Heights Beautification Group Jamaica Estates Assoc. Jamaica Hill Community Assoc. Joint Community Council College Point Juniper Park Civic Assoc. Kew Forest Neighborhood Civic Assoc. Kew Gardens Civic Assoc. Kew Gardens Hills Civic Assoc. Kissena Park Civic Assoc. Little Neck Bay Civic Assoc. Little Neck Community Assoc. Little Neck Pines Assoc. Locust Manor Neighborhood Civic Assoc. Lost Community Civic Assoc. Malba Civic Association Middle Village Property Owners Mitchell-Linden Civic Assoc. 97 Place Block Assoc. Newtown Civic Assoc. North Bellerose Civic Assoc. North Flushing Civic Assoc North Hills Estates Civic Assoc. North Queens Homeowners Civic Assoc. North Star Civic Assoc. Norwood Neighborhood Association Oakland Terrace/Gardens Council Off Broadway Homeowners Ozone Tudor Civic Assoc. Queensboro Hills Neighborhood Assoc. Queens Colony Civic Assoc. Queens Community Civic Corp. Queens Village Civic Assoc. Ramblersville-Hawtree Civic Assoc. Richmond Hill Historic Assoc. Ridgewood Property Owners Assoc. Robinwood Property Owners Rockaway Action Committee Rockaway Beach Civic Assoc. Rocky Hill Civic Assoc. Rosedale Civic Assoc. Royal Ranch Assoc. Sagamore Douglaston Civic Assoc. Southeast Queens Coalition of Concerned Neighbors South Ozone Park Coalition of Block Associations South Ozone Park West Civic Assoc. Springfield/Rosedale Community Assoc. Sunnyside Gardens Harrison Place Surrey Estates Civic Assoc. The Federation of Civic Associations of Southeast Queens The Property Civic Assoc. Union Turnpike Merchants Assoc. United Forties Civic Assoc. United Neighbors Civic Assoc. of Jamaica Utopia Estates Civic Assoc. Utopia Improvement Assoc. Village Mall at Hillcrest Waldheim Neighborhood Assoc. Wayanda Civic Assoc. West Cunningham Park Civic Assoc. Westmoreland Assoc. Woodside Community Council