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Mayor's message: Looking back, looking forward

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It was a cold, wintry day in January 2011, when I raised my hand and took the oath of office as the 37th mayor of the city of Providence. Not long after I took that oath, my administration uncovered a staggering \$110 million structural deficit - a "Category 5 Fiscal Hurricane," that threatened the very foundation of our city.

I am proud to say that through unprecedented partnerships and shared sacrifice among our unions, retirees, taxpayers and institutions we avoided bankruptcy, eliminated the deficit, built strong alliances and put the capital city on the road to recovery.

We eliminated the outrageous 5 and 6% compounded COLAs that were draining our pension system and reduced the city's unfunded liability by \$186 million. Making changes to our health care system, we lowered our OPEB (other post-employment benefits) unfunded liability by more than \$180 million and reduced retiree health care costs by more than 25%.

Today, our city's finances and pension system are on a better path; we ended the last two fiscal years with small operating surpluses and our credit rating outlook was upgraded to positive.

We are a much stronger city. We tackled Providence's fiscal crisis while providing badly-needed infrastructure improvements and capturing award-winning educational reforms.

Because a quality, public education is the very foundation of economic development, my administration worked hard to address inequities among low-income and minority children in early childhood education and throughout their careers. Just last month, our school superintendent joined Rhode Island College's president at the White House to be recognized among scores of cities nationwide for our educational innovations. We captured more than \$11 million in awards for our reform efforts, including Bloomberg's top \$5 million prize for "Providence Talks" - a unique city initiative to tackle the so-called 30-million word gap that affects low-income children, limits their potential and inhibits their academic and lifetime success. And we have been invited to the White House on several occasions to meet the President and be honored for our work.

In economic development, we have enjoyed hundreds of millions of dollars of new investment and construction citywide, made possible by the faith of private investors and supported by our work to professionalize services and improve the permitting process. By strengthening the fiscal foundation of our city, we sent a clear message to all that Providence is open for business and that we are a sound place in which to invest.

In 2013, I executed a 20-step economic development plan, "Putting Providence Back to Work," that identified such important measures as expediting permitting, adoption of a new zoning ordinance, reinvigorating the Providence Redevelopment Agency, creating a new Kennedy Plaza and establishing a new Storefront Improvement Program.

These concrete measures were essential to our city's economic resurgence, and we thank the many business owners - large and small - for their confidence in our city.

Projects such as the Arcade, the Dean Hotel, the Providence G, G Fox Building, work at the Port of Providence, the George C. Arnold Building, South Street Station and its planned joint URI-RIC Nursing School, Johnson & Wales University's Physician Assistant School and its large new parking lot adjacent to the Knowledge District, Brown University's Warren Alpert Medical School, and Providence College's multi-million investments are many fine examples of the institutional and private sector belief in and commitment to our state's capital city. The proof of this confidence will come to bear in the months and years ahead, especially with the growing I-195 land, connecting the 'eds to meds' and laying an unmatched location for development.

Our work with small businesses, including our merchants associations and business districts was aided by the city's first-ever partnership with the U.S. Small Business Administration: we have hosted more than a dozen free workshops for hundreds of small business to equip them with the tools to start and grow their companies. And we helped businesses find qualified workers and our unemployed find decent jobs in the aftermath of the great recession. Our joint Providence/Cranston Mayors' Job Fairs - 19 of which were held - connected 500+ small businesses with more than 3,000 skilled, available workers.

And through the assistance of our Congressional Delegation and our State Department of Labor and Training, we expanded youth and summer jobs programs, helping area businesses and organizations while providing valued on-the-job experience to our youth. Today, we are pleased to say our unemployment rate is down and more people are working.

Our \$40 million road bond issue - to repair the city's worst roads first - won the support of voters statewide and has led to more than 60 miles of road reconstruction. The temporary inconvenience of reconstruction gave way to significantly improved streets, eliminated many pot holes and supported the other long-overdue improvements made by the Providence Water Supply Board and the Narragansett Bay Commission.

And we began to address our aging schools, some dating back a half a century or more, so all students could have the ability to learn in decent and modern classroom settings. I thank our partners in the Providence City Council, the Rhode Island General Assembly and our Congressional delegation for their support in helping us make these critical investments in our infrastructure.

Our public safety services, too, have earned national accreditation and a New England Police Chiefs Association award for Community Policing. We bought 40 new vehicles and increased the number of police and firefighters in our city, holding two Police and Fire Academies - both firsts in a number of years. And we have made sustainability an everyday experience with a first-ever full-time director, creation of our Big Green Cans for business, and the launch of our Lots of Hope program.

As "America's Favorite City" and recipient of many more awards these past four years, the sky is the limit. I am proud and honored to have been steward of this great city during some of its darkest days and now, in some of its brightest. I am pleased to hand the mantle of leadership over to our incoming mayor and my friend, Mayor-elect Jorge Elorza, that he might make his own mark on our great and every changing city of Providence.

Angel Taveras is the mayor of Providence.