

Text of Mayor Rawlings-Blake's State of the City Address

Posted: February 22, 2010

Mr. President, Members of the City Council, colleagues and friends in government, honorable clergy, citizens of Baltimore, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to report to you on the state of our City and to share a proud path to a new beginning.

Together, we have focused on better schools for our children, a safer City for all of our citizens, businesses and neighborhoods. We are focused on coming together in unity to build a better future.

Mr. President, I want to congratulate you on your new role as the top legislative representative for all of the citizens of Baltimore. You can count on me as a true partner and honest friend. Members of the Council, thank you for steadfastly representing the constituents of your districts, while coming together to do what is good, necessary and right, for our City.

Together we have made great progress over the years.

The overwhelming and undisputable truth is that Baltimore is much safer in the first nine years of this century than it has been in many years. In fact, January marked one of least violent months since 1970.

We have worked together to improve public education and we are proud of our students. Over the past 7 years, Elementary and Middle school test scores continue to rise, in almost every grade, in both reading and math. First and second-graders, for the first time ever, are meeting or exceeding the national average on the "Stanford 10" tests. And, for the first time since 1969, student enrollment in Baltimore City Public Schools has increased.

We worked together to make Baltimore a more livable City for families and homeowners. The current property tax rate is at its lowest level since 1972. And, since 1989, the property tax rate has been cut 7 times. Last year, we extended the Newly Constructed Dwelling Property Tax Credit—an important incentive that encourages people to build and renovate homes for families in Baltimore.

Together, we survived and conquered the Great Blizzard of 2010 – not just by the work of government, but also through the work of private citizens and neighbors helping one another.

Mr. President, members of the City Council, the make-up of this chamber has changed in recent weeks, but we are not strangers. We have worked together, trusted each other in good faith and shared a belief that "compromise is not a dirty word." This will not change. Join me in continuing our relationship of mutual respect, trust and progress.

I want to thank Congressman Cummings for being here today. You have been a true mentor and friend. I admire your dedication to solving the toughest issues, including your tireless efforts to save homeowners from foreclosure. I thank you and our entire federal delegation's efforts to obtain assistance for Baltimore to recover from the storms. I am humbled by your confidence in me and I am thankful for your profound dedication to the people of Baltimore.

I want to also thank Governor O'Malley. Baltimore thanks you for the resources you provided to keep our City safe and functioning. Having a Governor dedicated to our well being and committed to our progress is essential to our renewal.

I want to thank Baltimore's heroes.

Just days ago, in historic blizzard conditions, our firefighters dug out hydrants by hand, ran hoses through feet of snow to save lives. Our police officers stood on icy streets round the clock keeping our homes and businesses safe and secure. Our Medics worked closely with the Maryland National Guard to transport critically ill patients to hospitals. City government responded to every single emergency call.

Our City workers—truck drivers, mechanics and operators—worked to keep these critical services going, despite unprecedented weather conditions and long shifts.

On February 11th, at 1:14am, firefighters responded to a 2-alarm fire in the 1700 block of Montpelier. A woman was trapped in a rowhouse and overwhelmed by smoke. A slow response would have set the whole block ablaze and caused certain death. Instead, our firefighters battled the blaze in 3 feet of snow and Truck 5 rescued a woman off of a second story porch roof.. The Firefighters of Truck 5 are here today. From the bottom of my heart, and on behalf of every single person in Baltimore, thank you.

With us today is Mr. Eric Berry. He is one of our 230 snow plow operators. He is a proud, hardworking family man with a wife and two kids. When the storms came, he didn't wince at working the midnight shifts. While many families in Baltimore were sound asleep, Eric was in high gear, plowing streets in low visibility and cold darkness so that our emergency responders could help those in need. Join me in thanking Mr. Berry and all the City employees he is here to represent.

Each year the Chief Executive Officer of this great City is charged to report the City Council and to the citizens on the state of our City.

Friends and citizens, I have had the honor to serve as your Mayor for 19 days. In this brief period, I have learned that no one can ignore the enormous challenge we face with this historic budget deficit and the opportunities we have to succeed in public safety and public education. While the challenges are daunting, opportunities remain and the State of the City is strong.

Together, we are slowly recovering from a sobering economic crash that crushed confidence, jobs and stifled reinvestment in our neighborhoods.

Together, we are moving forward after difficult and sad circumstances required a transfer of leadership at City Hall.

Together, we are recovering from a once-in-a life-time storm that tested our City's delivery of essential services and the spirit of our workforce.

We did not choose these tough times. But we do choose, as a strong City, to take action, move forward and recover quickly so that we are better and stronger because of this time of endurance.

Our City is in a time of healing. Now more than ever, we are challenged to come together, rededicate ourselves to a common cause and make needed reforms. Baltimore, we are poised for a proud renewal.

After the great fire of 1904, we rose from the ashes to become an industrial powerhouse for the nation. We built new neighborhoods, schools and factories. Today, we are home to a thriving port and we are a national leader in biotechnology and healthcare innovation.

After the assassination of Martin Luther King, our City burned. Businesses and families fled. Today, our nation is healing from that hatred and anger—and we affirmed our country's progress by electing our first president who is African American. In Baltimore, decades after the blockbusting and redlining, our City grows again—Black, White, Asian, Hispanic—one City living together and creating strong neighborhoods. Our communities are now more vibrant and diverse than ever before.

Today we face a new and difficult challenge.

The Great Recession has created the most difficult budget environment in memory. City tax revenues have been hit hard. The cost of delivering basic City services continues to rise.

By making everything a priority, nothing is a priority. Our limited resources have been spread too thin, in too many areas. As a result, we now inherit a devastating \$120 million deficit.

Let me tell you what \$120 million means to Baltimore: It is seventeen-hundred Police Officer Positions – half of our police force. It is 100% of our firefighting force. It is the combined general fund budgets of Health, Recreation and Parks, Housing and Libraries. \$120 million equals twenty-two-hundred City employees or 55% of our civilian workforce.

Mark these words, remember them and factor them into our actions and decisions in the coming days: This \$120 million deficit is brutal and will hit all of our citizens hard. I speak plainly and bluntly. If we sugar coat our problems, we will never rise above and solve them.

But mark these words as well: We must work together to solve this crisis.

Winston Churchill said "Difficulties mastered are opportunities won."

When confronted with problems, William Donald Schaefer gave clear advice, "Do it now." And so, we will.

Together, we can transform our government to be smaller, more nimble and responsive to the needs of our citizens, even in the face of budgetary misfortune. Like the great fire and the riots, this is a true test of our City—a matter of survival but also renewal. We are called now more than ever to elevate the debate and discourse and work together as statesmen and innovators.

Understand that division and discord are friends with failure, and will only invite calamity. This path is not an option. Instead of choosing collapse and dysfunction, we must choose reform. We've been handed these circumstances and must own the opportunity to keep what works and change what doesn't.

Yes, we can disagree about specific issues. That is to be expected. But if we fail to cooperate we will collapse into dysfunction.

As elected officials, at this time of extreme budget challenges, we must work together for the greater good. It is the only choice if Baltimore is to move forward and remain strong.

A balanced budget means that government is working. An honest budget focuses on priorities and cuts waste. With a balanced budget, our schools remain open and teachers teach. Police officers and firefighters have the tools to keep their oath to protect our citizens. Sanitation crews remove trash and clean alleys. Citizens get job training and career counseling.

Council members and my fellow citizens, I pledge to present an honest, balanced budget that renews hope in our great City.

Here's what we will accomplish if we work together and stay focused on our shared priorities.

Better

Schools:

We can support our public school students.

Despite having a budget deficit greater than 60% of our total obligation to City schools, together, we can fully fund our City's obligation to public education. And, we will not seek a state waiver from paying our share.

This investment will allow our school system to continue the drive to educational excellence—supporting Dr. Alonso and the school board's effort to create student choice for high schools and middle schools. This school year, 97 percent of all 8th-graders chose their high school. By fully funding our obligation, we are supporting our talented teachers, who have such a deep and positive impact on the lives of students. Join me in offering them our respect and admiration.

If we work together, we can invest in innovative programs that have demonstrated success in improving public education. Programs like Teach For America, which brings the best and brightest college graduates from around the country to teach in Baltimore's toughest and most challenging classrooms.

Ms. Rita Page, who is with us today, graduated with a perfect GPA from the University of Virginia. As a pre-med student, she scored in the 97th percentile on the medical school admissions test—a guaranteed ticket to anywhere. Because of Teach For America, she chose to serve our students by teaching 8th grade science at Baltimore Freedom Academy. Thank you, Rita. Baltimore is better because of you and your students.

Together, we can continue our commitment to education innovation by investing in Experience Corps, a program that helps elementary students by increasing the number of older adult tutors and mentors in the classroom. Independent research shows that Experience Corps works: Third-grade reading and math scores are rising and students feel safer at school.

Safer Streets:

If we work together, we can continue to make our City safer.

Despite a deficit equal to half of our police force, we can maintain every single street patrol officer, keeping cops on the street and patrolling our neighborhoods.

We can increase efforts to target Baltimore's most violent and dangerous criminals in order to dismantle gang networks and reduce gun violence.

We can continue to invest in crime-camera technology, a force multiplier that reduces crime in business districts and neighborhoods.

Despite a deficit equal to our entire Fire Department, if we work together, we can reduce rotating closures of fire companies. This will decrease emergency response times to more consistently meet the National Fire Protection standard.

Stronger Neighborhoods:

We can make Baltimore a better place for families young and old.

Despite a deficit equal to a thirty-six cent increase on the property tax rate, if we work together, we can pledge we will not raise property taxes to fix this budget gap.

Together, we can keep all of our community libraries open. We can fund after school programs.

Together, despite this budget deficit, we can provide job training and career counseling for citizens and continue to revitalize main streets and support small businesses. My administration will foster an environment that enables existing businesses to thrive not just survive.

Mr. President, Members of the Council, we can accomplish all of this by working together.

But, before we share hope, we must make hard choices. I will begin these tough choices by slashing costs within the Mayor's Office.

- I will reduce the Mayor's Office passenger vehicle fleet by 37% and reassign the cars to other agencies.
- The Mayor's Office of International Affairs will be abolished and international trips for Mayor's Office personnel cancelled.
- Beginning June 30th, the Mayor's Office of Cable and Communication will no longer be supported by general funds.
- Finally, I'm cutting the entire Mayor's Office budget by 10%. We will do more with less.

This is just the beginning. My transition team of more than 150 community and business leaders will soon complete a comprehensive review of all City agencies to ensure that all taxpayer funds are used in the most effective and efficient manner. Ms. Nina Harper, Executive Director of the Oliver Community and Economic Development Corporation, is a transition co-chair. She is with us today to represent the team. Thank you, Nina.

We will consolidate City services and agencies, cut government bureaucracy, create new public/private partnerships and ensure transparency and ethical conduct. We will ask all of our City employees to do more with less and make new sacrifices in order to preserve core priorities and keep City government going.

Chief among these sacrifices is pension reform for police officers and firefighters. They are brave and put their lives at risk to keep us safe. We all agree that these heroes deserve a dignified and secure retirement, but it must be one that the City can afford.

In addition to the \$120 million budget deficit, there is a ticking \$64 million pension "time bomb". It must be defused by June 30th. Failure to act would be catastrophic for our City. We need to be honest and ask ourselves, what good is a retirement promise that only exists on paper.

The Greater Baltimore Committee is completing its final report on the F&P pension system, providing a set of independent recommendations for the City Council to consider and act upon. I want to thank our Fire & Police union presidents for participating in the process. I hope we can all work together to address this unsustainable mandate that threatens their retirement and the City's solvency.

And, while the City Council addresses Fire & Police pensions, we will not ignore our own. Last month, I asked Councilman Bill Cole to research best practices for elected officials' pensions and draft legislation to reform our system. I look forward to supporting this legislation.

At the same time, we have begun the process of ushering-in a new era of ethics in City government. I want to thank each of you who co-sponsored my last bill as Council President to restructure the City Ethics Board, to make it more independent; to mandate more training and disclosure; and to allow for annual review and recommendations for improvements.

Under this bill, I'm relinquishing the power to appoint the ethics board chairman and two board members. It is rare for any elected official to forfeit power. But for me, this decision was easy because it was the right and decent thing to do. So thank you, Councilman Jim Kraft for pledging to promptly move this bill through your committee so it is among the first bills I sign as Mayor.

I am also pleased to announce today that in the next few days, I'm hiring a new Inspector General charged with delivering a more results-driven approach to investigating potential fraud, waste and abuse in City Government.

While we reform City Government, we will continue to fight for what is right in Annapolis, especially for the safety of our citizens. For too long, our state has ignored Baltimore's need for tougher penalties for criminals who use illegal guns. Since becoming Mayor I have already testified in support of two state bills to close loopholes and add tougher penalties for felons who carry guns on our streets.

But, we cannot wait for the General Assembly to attack gun violence. I am proposing increased funding for the Violent Crime Impact Section to strengthen our ability to investigate and arrest gun offenders. I have also asked Commissioner Bealefeld to work with the United States Attorney and the State's Attorney to review Project Exile and to develop new strategies that will result in more federal prosecutions of gun cases, ensuring consistent tough sentences for repeat offenders.

Criminals are on notice: We will not tolerate you or your illegal guns in Baltimore.

After just 3 weeks as your new Mayor, my goal is to share from the bottom of my heart a clear vision for Baltimore and our decisive renewal. With modesty and humility, I ask you to embrace this vision and join me in this effort.

This is a new day. Those of us who manage the public's dollars must recognize this simple truth – these dollars are not our personal play things, they come from and belong to the people.

Across our City and indeed across our country, people demand and deserve honesty and responsibility from their elected officials.

Citizens of Baltimore: Your City is strong. We have heard you and we will restore trust and make City government serve you. We begin today by talking honestly and preparing to make many hard choices. This is the great, enduring spirit of our City. It is who we are. We never give up. And that is how we will ensure that Baltimore remains strong for our children and future generations who call this great City home.

Thank you, God bless you and God bless Baltimore.