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“This is New York City:” Mayor Draws a Reaction

By Karen Loew

"This is New York City" was the celebratory refrain of Mayor Michael Bloomberg's seventh State of the City [speech](#), delivered at the new Flushing Meadows-Corona Park ice skating rink last week. Bloomberg ticked off the year's achievements in crime-fighting, citizen services, health, technology and much more. *City Limits* asked a varied group of experts to respond. Below are our questions, and answers from:

Hope Cohen, Deputy Director, Center for Rethinking Development, Manhattan Institute for Policy Research

Mike Fishman, President, Local 32BJ Service Employees International Union

Sarah Ludwig, Co-Director, Neighborhood Economic Development Advocacy Project

Zakiyah Ansari, Parent Leader, Coalition For Educational Justice

Javier H. Valdés, Director of Special Projects, The New York Immigration Coalition

Did the mayor’s speech effectively address the major issues you work on and care about most deeply?

HOPE COHEN: The speech was a really upbeat, positive statement about what New York is and means. The mayor pointedly refused to characterize the city’s condition in a single adjective, choosing instead to look to the qualities of the diverse Flushing families on the dais with him: “The State of the City is as energetic as Julian Chen at the playground and as vibrant as a holiday dinner with the Snreenivasans. It is as inspiring as John Bias, as strong as the pride inside Luís and Yolanda Ramón; and as full of promise as beautiful little Sienna Farruggio. Energetic. Vibrant. Inspiring. Strong. Full of promise. This really is New York City.”

The final section of the speech was on economic development. The Bloomberg administration has pursued a “five-borough economic development strategy,” which the mayor consistently ties into his discussions of land use and infrastructure planning and development – as he did again here. He cited major achievements, like rezoning one-sixth of the city’s land mass and PlaNYC, and efforts under way, such as Willets Point, Manhattan’s 125th Street, congestion pricing, extension of the No. 7 subway line – but did not break any new ground, or news, in this speech.

While the specific topics I work on – urban planning, development, housing, and infrastructure – were left to the last few minutes, the mayor repeatedly hit the key note of New York’s vibrancy, success, and promise of further growth.

MIKE FISHMAN: Whether families have recently immigrated or have been here for generations, the promise of reaching the American Dream through hard work has brought and kept people in New York City for hundreds of years. Surrounded by families who have come to New York with just that hope, Mayor Bloomberg showed his understanding and appreciation for our city's diverse population – a position we wish more elected officials would embrace.

The mayor's pronounced commitment to "immigration and innovation," combined with his emphasis on creating good jobs and affordable housing options, will ensure our city's vibrancy and its ability to continue to attract new residents, including hard-working immigrant populations, and millions of tourists a year.

But the constant battle with poverty, particularly the growing number of working poor, puts our city's healthy future in jeopardy. The problem is many of the city's new jobs, including those in the growing private security industry that pay less than \$10 per hour, do not provide the wages and benefits necessary to keep families afloat, let alone help them to realize the American Dream. Creating good jobs that come with living wages and health care are necessary to lift the working poor out of poverty. As recommended by the Mayor's Poverty Commission (of which I was a member), labor, government and business working together can help bring about this change.

SARAH LUDWIG: New York City is in the midst of an unprecedented foreclosure crisis that is affecting homeowners, renters, neighborhoods, and the local economy. It was therefore encouraging to hear Mayor Bloomberg cite the Center for NYC Neighborhoods in his address. The Center is a new, non-governmental organization that will coordinate foreclosure prevention outreach and education, counseling, and legal services, citywide.

The Center is expected to be launched in coming weeks and months, and is the product of intensive, collaborative planning among community and citywide not-for-profit organizations, local government, private foundations, financial institutions and other stakeholders, which together have sought to address the foreclosure crisis in a unified, comprehensive, forward-looking manner.

The plan is to add more than 50 new foreclosure prevention specialists to the staffs of qualified community, counseling and legal services organizations, and through ongoing training and capacity-building, significantly improve the quality and consistency of foreclosure prevention services offered to aggrieved homeowners and renters. The Center also will be well-positioned to press for broad policy changes, and can systematically gather evidence of discriminatory and abusive lending patterns and practices for referral to state and federal enforcement agencies. The designers of the new initiative envision that it will not only help thousands of New Yorkers but also serve as a national foreclosure prevention model.

ZAKIYAH ANSARI: The Coalition for Educational Justice (CEJ) feels that it's not enough to just end social promotion if nothing changes inside the schools. We want to work with the Department of Education to make this a reality. When we have one-third of black and Latino eighth-grade students reading at the standard level, compared to two-thirds of white students, there is definitely a sense of urgency. We need to reach them when they walk in the middle-school door.

JAVIER VALDES: The mayor spoke very positively of immigrants, in terms of the diversity they bring, how they represent the dreams of this city, their positive economic impact, and in general, how they are part of what makes our city so great. It's nice to hear this kind of positive language about immigrants, especially given our current political climate, but this positive rhetoric still does not address any of the specific policy and budget issues we spend our days working on.

If you had delivered the speech, what else would you have said? What did the mayor leave out – and why?

HOPE COHEN: I would have liked to hear a lot more about infrastructure. As I mentioned above, the mayor talked about congestion pricing and about the city's funding of an extension of the No. 7 subway line to ensure transportation infrastructure for the brave new far west side being developed over the Hudson Yards. These are well-known and oft-repeated examples. I would love to hear someone talk about the transportation improvements to be paid for by the \$354 million federal grant at stake in the congestion-pricing debate. Almost all of that money is to be used for new bus routes, more frequent bus service, and better transferring options for city neighborhoods now underserved by public transportation and therefore the disproportionate sources of car commutation. Mayor Bloomberg would really help his case by highlighting the value of that grant.

The mayor deserves great credit for PlaNYC, which identifies investments needed to restore critical infrastructure – for transportation, energy, water, parks – to a state of good repair. PlaNYC also calls for expansions of all of those systems to support the growth of the city over the next generation or so. But once restored or built from scratch, all this infrastructure will need to be maintained. And so far, there really has been no discussion about how the city will pay for that.

MIKE FISHMAN: During Mayor Bloomberg's tenure, economic development in the city has reached new heights. Projects that create more green space, affordable housing options and better utilize land have all contributed to the revitalization of neighborhoods. Rezoning on Manhattan's West Side has spawned new housing and business opportunities. Surely, similar re-envisioning and rezoning in areas around 125th Street in Manhattan and Willets Point in Queens will lead to equally substantial growth.

However, rezoning is only the first step in making these projects a reality, and the same system of accountability that Mayor Bloomberg brings to other parts of the government must be incorporated in these development projects as well. These new developments will not fully serve the community unless the jobs they create provide family-sustaining wages and benefits. Requiring developers to provide good jobs, not just new jobs, should be a requirement for new projects throughout the city.

SARAH LUDWIG: Unfortunately, the Mayor did not acknowledge the severity of the crisis in New York City, where the number of foreclosure actions filed more than doubled in the last two years, and is expected to increase this year, with overwhelming concentration in the city's neighborhoods of color. The foreclosure crisis is destabilizing entire neighborhoods and placing great burden on the city's health and social services, not to mention our local economy. As thousands of New Yorkers risk losing their homes to foreclosure, seniors and other homeowners

have become ready targets for pernicious foreclosure rescue and refinancing scams that now abound in southeast Queens, central Brooklyn, the north Bronx, and the north shore of Staten Island. A large segment of the foreclosure actions filed are on two- to four-family properties, leading to precarious housing conditions for and evictions of thousands of renters as well.

ZAKIYAH ANSARI: Mayor Bloomberg left out a concrete and comprehensive plan to really address the middle schools crisis. He should have been more specific because it seemed to me that he didn't have a plan in place. It also lacked the sense of urgency that is needed to really address the achievement gap. By both state and national tests, the eighth-grade achievement gap hasn't closed in five years. I think he left out the real statistics of what is really happening in middle school. CEJ has a plan that we believe will work and we've talked to experts, visited schools and done the homework.

JAVIER VALDES: The mayor didn't refer to any policies or initiatives that would specifically address immigrant communities' unique concerns and needs. For example, expanding access to city services by addressing the language barriers faced by one quarter of the city's residents—that's 1.7 million people—is a huge issue that cuts across all city agencies. The issue of English Language Learners in our city's schools is another huge issue—ELLs face the highest dropout rate of all students, yet there's little accountability and transparency in the way ELL funds are used and ELL programs are delivered. Another important issue—one in which the city is lagging behind other comparable cities—is support for day-laborer job centers.

It looks like New York City may be on the brink of a fiscal downturn that affects us all. What's your take on the mayor's description of the fiscal situation?

HOPE COHEN: The mayor seemed cautiously optimistic about the fiscal situation. He acknowledged that the national downturn will affect New York, but reminded listeners that the city had been preparing for the rainy times ahead over the past "sunny days." The mayor is rightly proud of prepaying debt over the past several years. But what about the unfunded liabilities in city workers' health and pension programs?

Mayor Bloomberg is hopeful enough about the economy to be sticking with his property-tax rebates and rate reductions for now – but warns that they could be lost in the fiscal year 2009 budgeting process if the fiscal situation worsens.

Cautious optimism seems about right to me. Something is definitely going on and financing is more expensive and harder to get, but New York continues to build like crazy in every sector. Immigrants and tourists and college kids keep coming. New York's challenge is going to continue to be balancing wealth and affordability. It's still a real city of real neighborhoods, and we want to keep it that way – while still attracting our share of jetsetters.

MIKE FISHMAN: Mayor Bloomberg's plans for the upcoming year reflect the innovative projects that have brought the city's budget into balance – and even surplus – in recent years.

Although the future of the economic climate is still uncertain, it is already clear that basic living expenses from gas to groceries and transportation have already been increasing faster than many people's salaries. Even the recent upswing brought only modest gains to many middle and low-

income New Yorkers who are in no position to bear the burden of tax increases or budget cuts that could be instituted to balance the city's budget.

The disappearance of affordable housing for middle- and low-income families has also become a major problem for the city. The Mayor's resolve to redevelop Long Island City into middle-income housing and to continue the program to build 165,000 affordable units for 500,000 people must remain a priority during the upcoming year. Skyrocketing rents on top of other expenses have forced many working families to leave the city.

ZAKIYAH ANSARI: The fiscal issue in regards to funding a real comprehensive middle school plan can be addressed through the Contract For Excellence money. This is funding from the state targeted to struggling schools. Our platform meets all of its criteria. We need Governor Spitzer to stand by his promise to our children to give the full amount to New York City students – \$530 million dollars this year, and not a penny less.

JAVIER VALDES: He talked about it in a fairly indirect way, without making reference to any specifics about belt-tightening. Of course, the city needs to be fiscally responsible, but when he starts having to make cuts, we hope that New York's underserved communities will not be the first to feel the impact. These communities are already facing a lack of resources. Let's hope that the underrepresented are not the ones who take the biggest hit, which unfortunately, is often the case.

On the issues important to you, what progress do you hope next year's State of the City will reflect?

HOPE COHEN: The mayor used examples from education and public safety and health in discussing how to make government work better – using new technologies, strengthening management responsibility, streamlining work processes. Next year I'd like him to include examples related to planning, development, and infrastructure.

New Yorkers should be able to access zoning maps dynamically; right now maps are available online only as static PDF documents. Databases used by the departments of city planning, buildings, and finance, among others, have to be integrated. Electronic filing capability should be enabled for a wide range of permit applications.

The congestion pricing debate has demonstrated the fragmentation in management of the transportation system: the city and state Departments of Transportation, MTA (including the LIRR and MetroNorth commuter railroads, NYC Transit's subways and buses, and nine river crossings knitting together the archipelago and tying into the city's street network), the Port Authority (PATH, bus terminals, and Hudson River crossings), New Jersey Transit's trains and buses. It's an alphabet soup of competing interests and wildly varied operating protocols. Having taken on the Board of Education mess, the mayor should at least mention the need to rationalize transportation management.

Finally, it is completely within the city's power both to streamline its environmental review process and to reorient it from legalistic "disclosure" to a useful planning activity. Among other problems with the requirements today: projects that include an affordable-housing component

must undergo the time and expense of environmental reviews because they receive government funding, while equivalent as-of-right market-rate developments don't.

MIKE FISHMAN: At next year's State of the City, families who are benefiting from the creation of new family-sustaining jobs and living in newly created affordable housing will surround the mayor.

In place of the projections of the affordable housing units to be created, the mayor will report on the number of families living in new homes within the city.

Because the city is not only attracting new jobs but demanding that they pay a living wage, the mayor will report a reversal in the number of working people who are living in poverty.

Developments in Long Island City and at Willets Point will be underway with guarantees of family-sustaining jobs that will keep working families in the neighborhood.

SARAH LUDWIG: Given the extent of the foreclosure crisis in New York, and its expected worsening in 2008, we cannot afford to downplay the situation or let those who should be held accountable off the hook. Wouldn't it be refreshing to hear the Mayor tell us in next year's address how he brought his tremendous clout to bear on Wall Street investment houses – which for years made untold billions of dollars through the securitization of abusive and discriminatory subprime loans – and urged them to step up and be part of the solution? He will tell us how, through his urging, Wall Street capitalized loan remediation funds that helped New Yorkers avert foreclosure, and convinced investors that mortgage servicers should modify unaffordable hybrid loans into affordable, sound mortgages.

ZAKIYAH ANSARI: Our hops for next year's State of the City is that it will reflect the progress of our middle-grade action plan, and the conversation about adding more middle schools with next year's Contracts for Excellence money – which includes Extended Day Student Success Centers and Teacher/Principal Quality. The school day is longer so that there is time for everything else, like music, art and gym.

JAVIER VALDES: Because next year's State of the City will be Mayor Bloomberg's last, he'll need to think about what legacy he leaves behind for New York's immigrant communities. As mayor, he could do a lot to ensure that current and future generations of immigrants have an easier time integrating into the life of the city. For example, it would be amazing if he finally decided to fund adult English classes at the level needed to satisfy the huge demand for them among immigrants. Right now, immigrant New Yorkers face long waiting lists for these—only five percent of the demand is being met.

And because immigrants are not going to stop moving to the city any time soon, it may be time to create "Welcome to New York" centers. The idea is that there would be sites throughout the city, staffed by government and non-profit service providers, that would triage, orient, and connect immigrants with the information and services they need. It's a way to help new immigrants get settled and learn to navigate the maze of government, institutions, and other systems in the city. As a manager, the mayor should appreciate how much more efficient that would make our city.

Finally, the mayor has pinned his legacy on education, and the high dropout rates facing English-language-learner students is an important part of that. His legacy will be incomplete without addressing the dropout crisis facing ELLs.

What is your overall reaction ... did anything in the speech inspire, surprise or anger you?

HOPE COHEN: Mayor Bloomberg put inspirational planning and development material in his PlaNYC speeches of Dec. 2006 and April 2007. The State of the City was fairly perfunctory on those topics, although he did get a good round of applause when he called for using rezoning to save Coney Island.

The mayor's opening and closing statements on the role of immigrants in New York and the nation were uplifting, however. I felt reinvigorated as a New Yorker when he said: "We believe in all of the possibilities. A city that constantly pushes the boundaries of innovation. A city that's open to everybody from around the world. A city that can compete with any place on Earth. A city where "hope breaks out."

MIKE FISHMAN: Too often, plans that unfold in the annual State of the City are heard and discussed only in policy-oriented circles, when in fact, the impact of the proposals affect all New Yorkers.

Mayor Bloomberg's decision to give his State of the City surrounded by New York families from every corner of the world humanized his policy discussion. As he spoke about schools, emergency responders, and city services, his words were highlighted by parents, children and seniors standing behind him who are impacted by city policies. His pride in showing the many faces of New Yorkers – and of Americans – solidified his stance against anti-immigrant politics and opinions that have no place in our city.

ZAKIYAH ANSARI: In regard to the educational part of the speech, I was really surprised that even though there were recommendations from the City Council Middle School Task Force, there was still no mention of any more recommendations being implemented. What we all have to understand is that schools today are designed the same as they were more than 100 years ago, when only 10 percent of students were expected to finish high school and graduate from college. Today we know that all young people need to do this.

JAVIER VALDES: In an environment where most politicians are shying away from talking about immigration, or even worse, trying to sound the toughest, at least Mayor Bloomberg is willing to stand up and tell people to open their eyes to reality. But to really help immigrants succeed, it takes a lot more than talk. He needs to show his commitment to immigrant New Yorkers by proposing concrete policy and budget initiatives in the coming weeks.

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