

Deputy Mayor Maria Torres-Springer Featured Remarks CHPC Annual Luncheon April 18, 2024

Thank you so much to Howard, Richard, and the team from CHPC.

I'd like to congratulate all of today's honorees, many of whom I've had the wild fortune of working with over the years. Thank you for all that you have done and continue to do on behalf of New Yorkers.

I'm here to deliver "special remarks" to cap off this always-fantastic event.

Now, I could drone on and on about:

The depths of our housing crisis and how the city's housing vacancy rate is at the lowest level in more than 55 years, more than half of renters are rent-burdened, and how there are close to 120,000 people living in our city's shelters.

But this is the last crowd that needs a primer on the state of housing in NYC.

I could talk about the work of the Administration in last two years on housing and how the good people at HPD and HDC have reached recording-breaking numbers on financing new construction, homes for formerly homeless and supportive housing.

Or how the good people at NYCHA are turning around a super-tanker with impressive stats on PACT production, by standing up the Trust, and getting free broadband to all NYCHA developments.

Or rattle off a string of new programs like Get Stuff Built, Green Fast Track, MIMI, 24 in 24.

But this crowd knows this and has been part of these successes.

I could talk about the last 7 days where we saw the City Council approve Phase 2 of Willets Pt which will bring 2,500 affordable homes and give rise to a whole new neighborhood in Western Queens.

How we released the 1,000 page text of our City of Yes for Housing Opportunity and saw the 2nd NYCHA site at Bronx River Addition vote for change and overwhelmingly for the Trust.

But this crowd is too in-the-know and is likely asking "what's next?"

I could therefore talk about the City of Yes for Housing Opportunity – the single biggest pro-housing reform in the history of the City's zoning resolution and how we are entering a critical phase of our efforts to ensure every community does its part to bend the curve on the crisis.

But this crowd is very engaged in this work and many of you are already activated to help ensure the successful passage of these reforms at the City Council.

I could of course speculate about the final details of the Albany package includes and be thrilled that despite all that has been hard we are at the cusp of repealing the FAR cap in this city, getting a new tool to incentive office conversions with affordable homes, getting both an extension to the old and a new tax incentive program to spur the creation of new housing, and a pilot program to legalize basements and cellars, together with other tools that support tenants and boost supply.

But I'm very superstitious so I will leave that to the tabloids until the budget passes.

Now I could drone on and on about all those things but I won't.

Instead, I hope you'll indulge me and hear me out about why this moment is so important, what is different about it, and why it matters urgently what we do next.

I'll frame this by saying that my amazing colleague DM Anne Williams-Isom shared with me recently that she did a speech at St. Ignatius Loyola as part of the church's annual lecture series dedicated to the four freedoms as outlined in FDR's historic State of Union address in 1941.

Where he announced a vision for the world grounded in the four essential human freedoms: freedom of speech and expression, freedom of worship, freedom from fear, and freedom from want.

And it's this last one – freedom from want – meaning what we need to do to put individuals, children, and families on a path to thrive in society - that she so beautifully focused on.

And it's also the one that I want to reflect on myself this afternoon because I think so many of us in this room are working every day to achieve this for our fellow New Yorkers.

I'll remind you that the speech was delivered in January 1941. FDR used the address to speak to the American people, but really his voice was meant for a global audience.

He faced a world after all that on the cusp of World War II, coming out of the Great Depression, having just begun to build the social safety net in the United States, and, as we all know, was governing a segregated America.

He faced challenges at home and challenges abroad and that is why his speech was and remains so significant.

He was trying to unify the country and the world.

He was trying to breathe hope into a fractured America and a fracturing world.

To remind us of what our core values are and how we center those in our common humanity.

And when you think about it – we are facing challenges today both at home and abroad as well.

Gun violence across America, the threat to women's rights and to democracy itself, Social fragmentation and political stalemate.

And our challenges don't end at our nation's borders. We face global climate change; conflicts around the world; migration patterns resulting from civil unrest, economic instability, political persecution, or other circumstances, leading people from all over the world to seek a better life.

And the challenges are no less enormous here in New York.

More than 1/5 adults are living in poverty, and roughly 1/4 children suffer the same. More people than ever are accessing food and cash assistance benefits. Stubborn rates of unemployment or underemployment for New Yorkers, especially amongst Black and Brown communities – and strikingly, over the last two decades New York City has seen the exit of some 200,000 Black New Yorkers, largely due to our affordability crisis.

The bottom-line is that — the state of want in the city is great.

I say all of this because I want you to remember that everyone in this room – the builders, the policy makers, the researchers, the developers, the architects, the planners, the bankers, the organizers – all of you are so critical to changing the state of want in our city.

It's not just about and has never been just about housing or housing units. We all have been called to a higher mission.

And for me it's critical that we lift our gaze to remember this higher mission despite the whirlwind that often consumes our day to day.

And back to FDR's speech, it's really critical to remember that we are on this mission at a time of great polarization and conflict.

So, the question for all of us is this: how do we do this work while breathing hope into a fractured city?

How do we do this work focused on our common humanity versus our disagreements?

I don't presume to have any silver bullets, but I will extend a few invitations.

Whether it's the housing package that will hopefully be passed in Albany, or the City or federal policies that are currently being contested, let us not engage in the usual teeth-gnashing, hand-wringing, finger-pointing, Monday morning quarterbacking ...

But let's unite around the common-sense tools that we might now have that we didn't have before.

Let us use them with much energy and urgency in order to help New Yorkers.

And then let's recommit ourselves to improving those programs and getting even more tools for this fight.

I hope we resist the temptation to exercise our own form of horse-race journalism where the focus is on which interest group is winning or losing, where the conflicts exist, or who screwed up which part of the which program.

And focus more on the issues and programs we agree can actually help real human beings.

And then let's hold each other accountable for advancing those programs and getting them right.

Finally, I hope we don't forget that we say and what we do now is particularly important because we have several more battles around the corner.

Battles like the City of Yes for Housing Opportunity where the mission is to ensure the City Council votes for progress.

And let me assure you that this vote – like the vote our state lawmakers have to make on the budget – takes courage.

We may not like this but it's a fact.

And if we kick and scream both when our elected officials don't do anything on housing and as well as when do take action, we make it so that it takes even more courage to overcome the naysayers and fear-mongers and do the right thing.

We make it harder for our leaders to seek more nuanced solutions and reject unproductive extremes.

Afterall, NIMBYism may be a bipartisan disposition in this city but we don't need defeatism to be one as well.

Because we are not living in ordinary times.

We have a once-in-a-generation opportunity, with leaders at the City, State, and Federal level that understand this crisis and are poised to help solve it.

And I truly believe that the wind is at our backs. Especially now that we have New Yorkers across the spectrum speaking up in support of the need to build more housing in our City.

This growing coalition of New Yorkers are sending a message that every community has a responsibility to build quality homes and welcome new neighbors – that those who are already well housed do not have the right to deny others the same opportunity.

But they can't do it alone.

And that's where you all come in.

There is considerable power this room. You have to choose what issues are worth fighting for. I hope you continue to choose this one.

I understand what we're asking from you and from all New Yorkers in these complicated times is more than we've asked before. We are asking for:

An openness to doing things differently.

The willingness to not let the perfect get in the way of progress.

The grace to extend our hands, our good faith and maybe even the benefit of the doubt.

Readiness to rise to the scale of the challenge.

This will take leadership from every person in this room. The state of our housing will only ever be as good as the quality of the leaders we have.

After all, a stream cannot rise above its source.

But I believe our ability to solve the housing crisis, to build new homes and provide the foundations of a decent secure life again – this will be the defining task of our generation.

And we have to lock arms to accomplish this task ...

If we want to live in a city where children don't have to go to school too tired to learn.

Where people with disabilities can live the richer, larger lives they deserve.

Where our elders don't have to fear growing old without dignity or warmth.

Where all New Yorkers can live a life that is free from want.

I know it can be done.

So let's do it!

Let's solve this housing crisis the only way that counts.

Together.