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QUEENS CIVIC COMMENTS ON CITY PRELIMINARY BUDGET

In testimony presented today (Tuesday, February 6, 2001) to the Queens Borough Board, the Queens Civic Congress [QCC] called for a fair share of the City's budget for Education, Youth, Seniors and Parks to be allocated to Queens, additional building and housing inspectors, funding for traffic studies and sign replacement, routine staffing of community police beats, increased use of civilians in the NYPD, funding to increase school maintenance. The statement, prepared by QCC Executive Vice President Corey Bearak (North Bellerose) and presented at Borough Hall by Vice President and Infrastructure Chair Margo Hill (South Ozone Park), follows:

Borough President Shulman and Borough Board Members:

Thank you for affording the Queens Civic Congress the opportunity to comment on the City's Preliminary Expense and Capital Budget. As an umbrella group of 100 civic organizations, our membership represents almost every community in the borough.

The number one topic of Queens civics in 2001 remains Education. Education in our borough offers an example of what can be done when teachers, parents and children work together. Overall education funding needs to continue at a level necessary to ensure that our children are receiving the best education possible. In addition, the budget must include resources to drive class sizes down and restore music, sports and art programs. Funding for new books, Project Smart Schools, restoration of SWAT teams for school maintenance and accelerating the elimination of coal-fired furnaces are high priorities. There also exists a need to formalize community input in siting new schools before proceeding presenting fait accompli Sports remains an important part of the school experience but new schools lack playgrounds and playing fields and where they get included in plans, they are woefully inadequate. The monies anticipated as a result of the Campaign for Fiscal Equity lawsuit must supplement, not replace any current funding.

The Congress opposes cuts to youth programs. There also exists a need to build on the regional beacons; the city must open more neighborhood schools at night and on weekends for youth programs to supplement Beacons and to keep our children off the street. Queens needs this because Beacons tend to be separated by great distances--a function of its lower density nature. Keeping an after school programs open costs much less than incarceration.

Likewise the library budget must be increased, not cut. Cuts at the Preliminary Budget often result in Summer hour reductions that do not get restored until some three months after the City budget's adoption in early June.

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City Hall should know better than to take an action that reduces library hours -- even if the budget cut gets restored by the Council in June -- at the time of year many children are off from school and should have the benefit of more not fewer library hours. Branches built in 60's and 70's have outgrown their quarters. For Queens Libraries to meet the challenge of the information age and population growth, residents need new and/ or enlarged buildings.

One of the best attributes of our borough are our parks. Since Queens has the largest amount of parkland, it is important that Queens receive its fair share of the Department of Parks and Recreation budget. While private funding sources and workfare participants have had a positive impact on the conditions of our parks, much more needs to be done. The Parks Council study indicates the need to better resource parks and how New York underfunds its parks compared to other urban centers. Funding for more trees and expanded maintenance and pruning promotes a healthy urban "forest." Funding must be allocated to restore park attendants. Stationing a park worker in a park or playground provides better and more efficient maintenance; it also improves security for parents and their children and helps to reduce vandalism and graffiti

Efforts to further recycling and expand participation rates in low-performing districts must be explored with the closing of Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island. The enormous cost and the adverse impact from additional trucks make exporting trash something the City ought to minimize, not rely upon.

Many communities in the borough still need street reconstruction and sewer projects to address flooding. This includes many older combined sewer and storm lines that require replacement.

Water rates increase out of reach of single family homeowners, the coops, and the small businessman. Recent administrative changes that cap rates for large buildings threaten to shift the cost burdens of the system to homeowners. The Congress urges equalization efforts to that extend relief equally to all ratepayers. Capital costs must be removed from the calculation of the water rate. In no other portion of the city budgeting process are capital items funded by a regressive use tax. In addition why must rates be increased prior to the determination of agency expenses. This system was to be changed. We cannot tolerate any further delays in making public officials directly accountable. In fact, be on notice, change the system or not, we are holding you accountable.

Continuing television and newspaper accounts of building collapses and structural weaknesses only point to a lack of proper enforcement and supervision. Additional building inspectors for both the Departments of Buildings and Housing Preservation and Development must be hired immediately to ensure that our housing stocks and new construction meet all codes. Funding must also allow for immediate and meaningful follow-up enforcement and coordination with the Environmental Control Board. No excuse about resources for this need: use the monies generated by building permit and other fees. At this time, we again take a moment to urge your support to pass legislation to extend the Pheffer bill's authority to convert ECB judgements to tax liens for one to three family homes to three to six family homes this year.

Funding for traffic studies still needs to be increased to ensure prompt turnaround times for dangerous locations. Sign replacement is almost nonexistent.

The Police Department deserves our congratulations for continuing achieving significant reductions in crime. However, we have three areas of concerns that need to be strengthened.

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The New York City Police Department has consistently decreased the number of uniformed patrol strength in Queens. Queens gets less than 1/5 of the NYPD's uniform man power while it has about 1/4 of the reported city wide crime. The budget discussions must address this disparity of manpower allocation

Queens again this year has the highest response times in the city. We also would like to suggest a study to review the effectiveness of precincts in the larger community board districts. Many residents feel some districts are too large to ensure prompt response time. Moreover, this points to a need to provide staffing for Radio Motor Patrols in sufficient number.

This staffing disparity has also resulted in cuts and, in many cases, elimination of the Community Policing Program, formerly known as C-POP; it must be re-instituted. Nothing reduces crime more than a beat officer. Many quality of life concerns could be addressed by the presence of a foot patrol officer. Police visibility is an important element of any crime prevention program. Efforts must be made to free police officers doing tasks that civilians can do.

Our cultural institutions, youth and seniors all require the continuation and strengthening of their respective programs. We need ensure all communities that need assistance receive it and outreach must be expanded so that all eligible seniors sign up for the benefits they may qualify for.

The 1999 rejection of Community Board 11's 197A Plan by the City Planning Commission suggests a need for funding planners to prepare a plan to protect the low-density neighborhoods of our city from out of character development. Queens need a Row House zone that would preserve this major one-family use that often falls preys to out of scale development schemes. There seems a mind set in that agency to seek large scale developments along all of the Queens' east west thoroughfares, even where it would upset the integrity of neighborhoods. You must stand firm against over-development schemes.

A word about Creedmoor: The QCC holds our public officials responsible to abide by plan to site three schools and add athletic facilities on 26 acres at Creedmoor. To do anything less would be unsound educationally and a betrayal. We stand by our original master plan that was later incorporated in the Borough President's Working Group on Creedmoor.

Finally, the Mayor's Financial Plan correctly leaves the funding for the Independent Budget Office intact -- as required by the City Charter. An independent budget analysis is key to an informed public and crucial to hearings such as this one.

Thank you for your time and consideration.