

State of the Central Ward Address

The Honorable Darrin S. Sharif, Central Ward Councilman

April 9, 2013

To our State delegation of elected officials; to our County Board of Chosen Freeholders; to our County Executive Joseph DiVincenzo; to Mayor Cory Booker and the senior members of his Administration; to my colleagues on the Newark Municipal Council; to the presidents of our universities: Chancellor Yeagle from Rutgers, Interim President Gibson from Essex County College, Dean Hobbs from Seton Hall Law School, President Rodgers from UMDNJ, President Bloom from NJIT and President Cortes from Berkeley College; to the director of the Newark Housing Authority, Keith Kinard; to the executive director of the Newark Public Library, Wilma Grey; to the executive director of the Newark Museum, Mary Sue Sweeney Price; to the Chief Executive Officers of our major corporations; to the developers whose projects are transforming the very landscape of the Central Ward; to the committed and hard-working leaders of our community-based organizations; to our esteemed religious leaders who provide us with much needed moral and spiritual guidance; to the small and large business owners of the Broad Street, Market Street, Springfield Avenue, Halsey Street, Orange Street and Lower Broadway commercial corridors; to the principals and school leaders charged with educating our youth and preparing them to compete in a global economy; and especially to Principal Thomas, who has opened up this magnificent school to me and has welcomed me as a member of the Science Park High School family. (I also want to congratulate Science Park High School for receiving the prestigious and coveted designation of an International Baccalaureate School – one of only a handful of schools in New Jersey to receive this honor; to an incredible staff that I'm sure I don't deserve: they are hard-working,

smart and committed. And most of all they believe, as I do, that we can engage and touch our community on a deeper and more personal level. And last, but certainly not least, to the amazing Central Ward Residents who, with grace, class, and endurance, continue to press ahead in the face of the difficult challenges they are confronted with on a daily basis.

Tonight, I want to talk to you the only way I know how – honestly, directly and from the heart. Traditionally, state of the union, state of the state, state of the city, and, yes, state of the ward addresses are filled with bold visions and lofty goals, as well as an element of theater, entertainment and excitement designed to fire up and inspire the crowd. And although I will do my best to honor at least a part of that rich tradition, I will be careful not to ignore or gloss over the challenges we face as a community of citizens and stakeholders.

The reason I acknowledged all of you in my introduction is because it will literally take all of us, working together, in partnerships never assembled or imagined before, to create the kind of ward and the kind of city we have been working tirelessly, but separately, to create. It will take all of us, thinking creatively, imaginatively, unconventionally and acting cooperatively, to solve problems with which we have never been confronted. There is no boilerplate solution, or ready-made blueprint to address the challenges we face today. We are truly in uncharted territory and without historical precedent. Therefore, we must map our own course for a better Newark, and, in so doing, make our own history that those who follow will honor and respect. And, in struggling to find solutions to our most serious problems, we must be willing to sacrifice to do those things government can't and isn't designed to do, but that are absolutely essential to creating a city that respects us all and that speaks to all of our aspirations.

I can easily spend the rest of tonight's State of the Ward address talking about the list of things my office has worked on with the Administration to improve the Central Ward. These accomplishments include transformative economic development projects such as the \$100 million Teachers' Village project in the area of Halsey, Williams and Washington Streets, which will provide over 200 units of rental housing and 67,000 square feet of retail space – thank you, Ron Beit; or the 56 units of senior housing, 45 townhouses and two small parks that will replace the former drug and crime-ridden Douglass Harrison housing project - thank you, Michaels Development; or the newly renovated world-class CityPlex-12 movie theater that is breaking attendance records daily and that over the Easter weekend saw an incredible 8,000 patrons come through its doors - thank you Wasseem and Shaquille); or the exquisite 20-unit condominium project on Broad Street and Third Avenue that rivals anything to be found in Hoboken, Jersey City or the Big Apple - thank you, Maria and Maria; or Baxter Park South, an amazing affordable-housing project on the site of the old and troubled Baxter Terrace. I can't wait until the other phases of that project are rolled out - thank you, Director Kinard; or the Plaza at Springfield Village, across the street from Dunkin' Donuts, which will provide affordable housing to those who need it the most – our senior citizens and our homeless population -thank you Ed Martoglio and New Community; or the 11-acre \$100 million development project a little further down the road on Springfield Avenue, which will include two restaurants, 162 units of housing, a bank and a large, well-known anchor tenant, which will not be Wal-Mart – thank you, Rich Tucker. All of these projects will result in several hundred construction and permanent jobs and will add millions of dollars of much-needed revenue in the form of payroll and property taxes to our City's coffers.

And to make sure Newark residents get their fair share of these jobs, I am asking the Mayor, in this year's budget, to enhance the capability of the Office of Affirmative Action by hiring at

least three more Affirmative Action compliance officers. In addition to the projects just mentioned, there are an equal, if not greater, number of projects in the pipeline. All of these projects are in the Central Ward and I am proud to continue working with the Mayor and his Economic and Housing Development team to bring them to fruition.

In the face of the City's limited financial resources, my office has also worked extremely hard to contribute ideas for ways to increase the number of police officers, security cameras, speed bumps, as well as other crime-fighting and traffic-calming measures in areas of the Central Ward that need them the most. Nothing, and I mean nothing, is more frustrating or heartbreaking, than to attend a community meeting and not be able to provide residents with the protection they deserve because the City doesn't have enough money in the budget. But I assure you, as I have assured the residents in those high-risk areas, that I will do everything in my power to identify the necessary resources to address their important public safety and quality-of-life concerns.

Over the last 2½ years, my office has also worked and partnered with more community-based organizations than I can mention in the time that we have tonight. But please allow me to acknowledge some of them for their long-standing and on-going commitment to the residents in our ward. The Newark Housing Authority's Clubhouse (on Spruce Street and Irvine Turner Boulevard); C.U.R.A., Integrity House, the Essex County Urban Issues Institute, Prodigal Sons and Daughters, Arts High School, American History High School, Roberto Clemente Elementary School, Vision Academy Charter School, La Casa De Don Pedro, the Lincoln Park Coast Cultural District, O'iada International Cultural Center, the Piranha Swim Club, the Masters Swim Club, Trilogy Performing Arts Group, Urban Renewal Corporation, the YMCA, Cadillac Alliance, the Greater Newark Conservancy, CityPlex 12 Movie Theater, the Marion P.

Thomas Charter School, Newark Beth Israel Medical Center, YouthBuild, North Star Academy, Cut Creators and Newark Collegiate Academy. The incredible work these organizations do each day benefits the lives of thousands of residents.

As vital as these organizations are in helping to stabilize and bolster the educational, social and cultural foundations of our ward, they represent a very small percentage of the Central Ward's most important stakeholders – our residents. Residents are the lifeblood that runs through the ward and the glue that holds it together. The Central Ward has never been characterized or defined by development projects or social service organizations alone. The Central Ward (or the old Third Ward as it was fondly referred to), was always defined and shaped by the people who lived there; people who valued family, community and each other; people who worked together and sacrificed for each other; people who understood the most important lessons of history and life – the obligation to pay it forward and to give back. This is the Central Ward that I am reminded of when I visit 2 Nevada Street, Court Towers, James C. White Manor, Villa Victoria, Grace West Manor, Baxter Elderly, and Foushee Towers.

When I think about today's Central Ward and our younger generation of residents, I wonder if they feel the same sense of duty and obligation our senior citizens felt over 50 years ago. You see, every action that we take, every decision that we make, all 53,000 of us, contributes to the molding and shaping of our community, and impacts our overall quality of life. To be certain, government absolutely plays a critical role, and you should never let us off the hook. But we, the residents, bear the greatest responsibility. Every person to whom we say "Good morning!", every neighbor to whom we provide assistance, every child we lovingly but firmly chastise for doing the wrong thing shapes our culture in real time. And so, how we treat and relate to each other – being warm and engaging, or being cold, rude and dismissive –

is shaping the kind of city we live in and the kind of city our children will inherit. And please know, there is no piece of legislation I can write to force us to treat each other with the dignity and respect we all deserve as human beings.

I have always been honest with you by saying that government has neither the resources nor the tools to address all of the challenges we face. Politicians who lead you to believe otherwise insult your intelligence and don't have your best interests at heart. So the questions we must answer as a community are: Are we are prepared to be our brothers' keepers? Or are we simply going to reassign that responsibility to someone else?

I think in the hustle and bustle of our daily lives, and with all the crazy things going on around us, we feel powerless...that there is little we can do to change our conditions. But we possess awesome powers – those that don't flow from government or from a foundation grant. These powers that we all possess are the power to act, the power to share and the power to give. Newark is sleeping on its most valuable, yet most underutilized asset – its residents. Every person owns a special talent, skill, or gift they can use to contribute as much as they want to our City. It truly is an inexhaustible resource. And similarly, every institutional stakeholder – such as our corporations and universities – controls not only millions of dollars of financial resources, but also, they have the ability to influence the actions of thousands of their employees, encouraging them to donate their time and their talents to many of the important projects and programs that need their support.

So the question that we should all be asking ourselves and the one that should remain in the forefront of our minds is: “What kind of Newark are we capable of creating, simply by volunteering our time, talent and resources on a consistent basis?” If everyone in the Central Ward woke up tomorrow and made a commitment to volunteer just one hour a week,

we literally would create a revolution and change the Central Ward in a profound and lasting way. If not us, then who? If not now, then when?

Contrary to what some people may think, the Central Ward is blessed with an embarrassment of riches. Many of these services and resources, however, are scattered all over the place, unknown to the residents who need them the most. And even more resources lay dormant, ready and waiting to be reconfigured or reassembled as the result of newly created partnerships and collaborations. So what we have today are residents who need services, not connecting with the organizations that can provide them. These two groups are like ships that continue to pass in the night.

The challenge then, is to design a system and process that can more effectively and efficiently connect the need to the resource. In an effort to accomplish this ambitious goal, I have partnered with a team of computer programmers from NJIT and the private sector, to develop an easy-to-use web-based tool that individuals and families can use to find the services they need. And for families that don't have a computer or internet access in their home, they will be able to use the computers in their neighborhood schools or community organizations. We hope to launch this tool in November of this year. But because families need this information now, we are gearing up to "hit the streets"! We are looking for volunteers to join our growing army of "Community Ambassadors" who, during the spring, summer and fall, will be knocking on as many doors as we can, not for campaign commitments or votes, but to provide information to residents about the important services they might be missing. This is one community engagement opportunity I want to offer to you tonight.

You know, most of what we accomplish in our lives is the result of a partnership. Great developments are built through partnerships between bankers, contractors, architects and engineers. Our kids who graduate from high school and go on to college are able to do so because of partnerships between parents, caregivers, teachers, guidance counselors and supportive communities. And, streets and neighborhoods that become more stable, active, and vibrant over time do so because of partnerships between community organizations, government and most importantly, residents. So if it takes partnerships to do all of these things, it will require the “Mother of All Partnerships” to take our ward to the next level – a partnership of all of the stakeholders I mentioned in the beginning of my remarks.

The problems that we face as a City have been decades, if not generations, in the making. They will not be solved by the wink of an eye or the wave of a magic wand. They will only be unraveled by doing the tedious, unglamorous, but necessary work of strengthening our ward street-by-street and neighborhood-by-neighborhood. The short video you saw tonight highlighted four initiatives my office has worked very hard to create. Combined, they have benefited thousands of residents. None of these programs would have been possible without the volunteer efforts and contributions of committed people and organizations. All of the programs are concrete examples of partnerships. And most importantly of all – in a small but significant way, these programs address one of the most profound challenges of our City and of our time – the human development of an at-risk population that is growing larger and larger by the day.

This includes a population that is comprised of children who are abandoned, abused and discarded by their parents. A population of youth who, without our love, nurturing and guidance, turn into hardened criminals at tender ages and who will take a life without the slightest thought of the consequences. A population of adults who wander on our streets like the “walking dead”, poorly educated and jobless, with no hope for a better life, and no hope for a better future. These are our brothers and we are their keepers. These are the people who stand to benefit from the partnerships we can and must create.

My vision is to establish a Learning Community in every school in the Central Ward, in convenient walking distance of the residents who live in the surrounding area. My vision is to have a computer center in every building like the one we established in New Hope Village, where residents can have access to the computer and internet resources they need. My vision is to convert every single vacant lot in the Central Ward into a beautiful community garden or pocket park, where residents can have a place to socialize, fellowship and talk about the things they can do to improve their community. We did three lots with Kean University and the community last year. Our goal is to do 100 more this spring, summer, and fall.

But my vision will only become a reality with your help. You have the power to volunteer to teach a class in our Learning Community, right here in Science Park High School. And you have the power to fill up every class by registering your family, friends and neighbors. You have the power to volunteer to teach computer literacy classes at our Computer Center at New Hope Village. And you have the power to help us establish new centers at Garden Spires, Oscar Miles, Wynona Lipman Gardens and Saint James Towers. You have the power to adopt a City-owned vacant lot in your neighborhood. And with the help of Kean University,

YouthBuild and the residents on your block, you have the power to transform it into a beautiful pocket-park or community garden.

By God's grace I am allowed to spend another day on this glorious planet. And each day I wake up dreaming about the amazing partnerships that can be created; big partnerships, little partnerships and everything in between. Partnerships between big developers like Teachers' Village and Kean University; partnerships between RPM Development and the Greater Newark Charter School; and partnerships between M&M Development, the Urban Issues Institute at Essex County College, Newark Public Schools and CityPlex-12 Movie Theater. Quietly but systematically, we have created dozens of these partnerships throughout the Central Ward. And these collaborations have provided services to every demographic of our diverse population. We are currently working to establish a partnership between Newark Public Schools, NJIT's department of Bio-Engineering and Panasonic that will help children with physical disabilities. These are the kinds of partnerships, or investments that over time will change the trajectory of our community.

One of my most memorable and gratifying alliances was working with a group of parents, students and administrators at Harriet Tubman School. They had been frustrated for years because they could not get a playground built at their school. They had been going back and forth between the City of Newark and Newark Public Schools trying to find out who was responsible for completing the project. As I listened to their historical account of who was supposed to do what, it reminded me of that famous Abbot and Costello skit "Who's on first and what's on second?" But rather than yelling and screaming, or cursing the dark, Harriet Tubman organized a small group of representatives who contacted my office. Through several

meetings and telephone conversations, we identified the issues and challenges, and put together a plan of action. After several meetings and letters to Newark Public Schools, the money and land to construct the playground was placed under the control of the City. From that point on, the construction of the playground was on track to completion.

Prior to the construction of the playground, we all participated in several project development meetings at City Hall to select the design, surface and playground equipment that would go on the playground. And where the school had been struggling for at least five years to complete the project, we were able to get it done in a few months. I will never forget the ribbon-cutting ceremony. The smiles on the faces of the children almost brought tears to my eyes. And the looks of satisfaction and accomplishment on the faces of the parents and administrators confirmed something I already knew: By having the patience and commitment to see something through from start to finish, there is nothing we can't do by working together.

Even with all of the challenges we face, and what seems at times to be an impossible deck stacked against us, I have no doubts about whether or not we will be successful – for this is our moment in history to think big and to do bigger. Now is not the time to surrender to cynicism or the status quo, or the conventional but misguided political wisdom that says we should continue with “business as usual”. Tonight we must decide whether or not we are going to continue to allow a dysfunctional and broken political system have an undue amount of influence on our daily lives, or whether we will replace it with a system of engaged, active and organized residents and stakeholders, working together to change our current conditions.

If we want a better life for ourselves, our families, and our community, we have to fight for it. There are specific things that each and every one of us can and must do to improve our community. No dramatic event is going to take place to improve our fortunes. No march, no protest, no demonstration, no matter how well attended or energized, will change our reality. No speech, no matter how inspiring or powerful, will create the change only we can bring. Only by getting to know each other and working consistently with each other will we make the Central Ward and the City of Newark a better place.

I have been given more blessings than any one person has the right to receive. And one of those blessings has been the honor and privilege to serve the city of my birth. My greatest hope is that we, as a community of stakeholders, will declare 2013 as “The Year of the Great Awakening of the Silent Majority” and that this silent majority will exert its influence by declaring that civic engagement and public participation will take a front seat to the petty politics that has hijacked a way of life only we the people have the right to define.

We have developed an unhealthy obsession, if not addiction to politics that has become corrosive and destructive. Politics has become a blood sport that, in the pursuit of victory, combatants commit themselves to beating each other down and destroying each other’s reputations. During these hotly contested political campaigns, the community, disgusted and turned off by all the mudslinging and name calling, retreats further from civic life and the public square. And the political losers, after licking their wounds, go into a three-year hibernation, vowing to “settle the score” when the next election comes around. The time has come for us to put aside politics for the sake of politics. The time has come for us to engage each other in a serious discussion about what our commitment to each other should be and

what it should be to the community where we live, work, and serve. The time has come for us to wrest control of our community from the powerful political bosses and king makers that have dominated it for the last forty years.

We must restore fairness and equity to the system if we are to regain the trust, respect and cooperation of our most important partner – the public. So let us create history tonight. Let us prove all the naysayers wrong who think we will fail because we are idealistic and naive. And let us honor the sacrifices our ancestors made in our name by making the same kind of sacrifices for those who follow us. God bless you, God bless America and God bless the incredible Central Ward of this extraordinary City of Newark, New Jersey!