STATE OF THE BOROUGH 2026 V7 (FINAL)

Welcome

Good morning, Queens!

I know it's Friday, but I need some more energy than that. Good morning, Queens!

My name is Donovan Richards and I am honored to be your Queens Borough President — the first Black man in the 122-year history of the office.

But I'm up here on this stage, with this title, because James Sanders Jr. gave me a chance.

Senator, thank you for giving 19-year-old Donovan Richards a job back in your Council office.

Thank you for giving me a chance to be a change-maker and showing me how to deliver real results over rhetoric.

Thank you for your mentorship, your guidance and for not firing me.

I am the man I am today because of the First Lady of Queens, Tameeka Richards. Your unconditional love and undying support are what makes all of this possible.

Thank you for your sacrifice, your patience and enduring love.

When I was sworn in as BP, Tameeka and I had a kindergartener at home. We blinked and now we have a middle school student. And that's exactly where D3 is today, in school where he belongs. I'll tell him you all said hello.

Finally, to my staff at Borough Hall, led by our emcee and chief of staff Tariqua Mensah, you're the real MVPs of Queens.

None of the accomplishments we celebrate today happen without your dedication. It's an honor to call you colleagues and friends.

Let's give it up for Team Richards and the work they do to make Queens a better place.

19 Months Later

When I last stood on this stage 19 months ago and gave this speech, our borough was teetering on the edge of a gritty abyss.

Donald Trump had just returned to the White House and was laying waste to our norms, traditions and systems of government.

Diversity, equity and inclusion — dismantled and destroyed.

Our immigrant neighbors, demonized and deported.

Hundreds of millions of dollars allocated to Queens, denied and dismissed.

Donald Trump took a wrecking ball to our borough.

And in the midst of picking up the pieces, we were left with two choices.

Do we just play defense for four years?

Or do we go on offense and tell the man from Queens' past that he will NOT dictate its future?

Queens, we chose correctly.

To quote St. John's University grad J.Cole, I'm pleased to report, after many attempts, we climbed out from the mouth of that gritty abyss.

We Take Care of Our Own

The white supremacists in Washington are working overtime to erase black history and destroy immigrant communities.

But we're memorializing our Black ancestors buried in Elmhurst and breaking down barriers that lock Black families out of good-paying jobs and high-quality housing.

We're investing more than $150 million to support public education and fighting to make sure children of color can walk the halls of our specialized high schools.

We're building community centers across the borough and empowering immigrant rights groups, giving safe spaces and services to those who need them most.

Every man and woman, every trans and non-binary neighbor, every immigrant, documented or not, has a home here in Queens.

Wherever this flag is flown, Bruce Springsteen once sang, we take care of our own.

And in The World's Borough, we live that creed every day by looking out for one another.

That is the mission of my administration.

That is our calling.

My friends, THAT is what it means to be from Queens.

HOUSING

The State of Affairs

In this borough, we take care of our own by making sure every family has a home to call their own.

But there's no greater need facing our city than the need for more affordable housing. And I mean truly affordable, where working-class New Yorkers don't have to choose between meals, medicine or making the rent.

Every day, our homeless shelters continue to fill. More than 84,000 people will sleep in one tonight, including 28,000 children.

Every day, basement apartments like the ones I grew up in are more in demand than ever.

Every day, rents continue to climb like they're making the transfer from the E train to the 7 train at Roosevelt Avenue.

The affordability crisis is not the hoax Donald Trump says it is. It has been the defining feature of this era of unchecked capitalism, runaway rents and obscene income inequality.

But we're proving that we're not powerless here.

That's why I'm so proud to have signed off on tens of thousands of units of housing, invested nearly $20 million to build it, and shaped the Jamaica and Long Island City rezonings — which will create more than 20,000 more units between them.

Willets Point

Speaking of the 7 train, raise your hand if you've ridden it lately.

Now keep your hand raised if you've been blown away by what you see rising next to the Willets Point subway station.

In just a few years' time, the chop shops of old have been replaced by 880 units of new housing, with more than 1,600 still to come.

All told, Willets Point will be home to 2,500 apartments — the largest 100 percent affordable housing development built in New York City since the 1970s.

Not to mention home to two pro soccer teams — more on that later.

A reimagined Willets Point isn't fantasy anymore. The Valley of Ashes has become the Valley of Opportunity.

More than 300 families are already living there, with more than 150 new families moving in this month alone.

Batting next across the street from Citi Field is 220 units of senior housing, which we broke ground on this spring.

Our older adults, many of whom are on fixed incomes, are the most vulnerable to being crushed by the housing crisis.

And these 220 units represent 220 opportunities for our parents and grandparents to enjoy their golden years with grace. That is called taking care of our own.

But Willets Point is not the only Queens neighborhood where we're building housing for those who need it.

Aqueduct Racetrack

We're clearly in the community-building business here in Queens, because down the stretch comes another chance to do just that at the recently closed Aqueduct Racetrack.

Now that its final race has been run, the opportunity to redevelop its 100-acre site into hundreds or even thousands of homes is officially upon us.

So in partnership with Empire State Development, we've spent the last few months engaging South Queens residents on what they'd want to see there.

At these workshops, we've heard everything from housing to schools to parks to community centers and more. All tremendous ideas.

Like any project of this scale, it must be community-led and community-centered. So as the Aqueduct Master Plan takes shape, we'll leave no stone unturned in taking care of our own in South Queens.

Rockaway Wins

Down on the Rockaway Peninsula, looking out for our own is all we've ever known. Because we knew there was no cavalry coming, we took charge of our own destiny and became our own cavalry.

The same people who taught me how to fight were guiding lights in our push to get the Downtown Far Rockaway Rezoning across the finish line a decade ago.

And the dividends of that effort are coming to fruition as we speak.

Rockaway Village

This spring, we cut the ribbon on the final tower in Rockaway Village, where we transformed an abandoned parking lot into 1,700 units of stunning affordable housing.

Every time I walk through that grand canyon we created from scratch, I'm reminded of what's possible when a community comes together.

For years, we fought to make Rockaway Village a reality, because we knew just how many lives we could change for the better.

I don't get emotional on the job very often. But the tears couldn't help but flow that day, knowing what that development will mean for generations of families to come.

Arverne East

Down the peninsula, a decade of planning, negotiating and designing has given way to another groundbreaking — this time on the housing portion of the revolutionary Arverne East project.

Shovels finally met dirt this spring on the first 320 affordable units.

Of those 320 apartments, two-thirds are affordable rentals while one-third are set aside for homeownership. Thank you, Councilmember Selvena Brooks-Powers, for your partnership in making it happen.

That's the winning formula we should be replicating citywide, if you ask me.

Arverne East's 35-acre nature preserve is open. So is the community center. $50 million in new infrastructure has been installed.

And In just a few years' time, we'll have nearly 1,700 units of state-of-the-art housing along the Rockaway waterfront — million dollar views for prices that won't break a working-class wallet.

We are so close, my friends, to realizing our dream of building New York City's first-ever net zero community.

Senior Housing

We're breaking ground and breaking barriers in Jamaica, where we opened the Sutphin Senior Residence this fall.

That site has nearly 175 units of housing, with 120 homes for low-income older adults and 52 set aside for formerly homeless seniors.

We even have a high-quality community health clinic on the ground floor.

Life is already hard enough for our seniors.

So making sure they have all the services they need right in their building is what taking care of our own should look like.

Fast Food Parking Lots

Speaking of communities, all of ours have impeccable food scenes. You can get a taste of the world on just about every street corner.

You can also get a Big Mac, a Baconator or chicken fries on most corners too.

In Queens County, there are 49 McDonald's franchises, 30 Burger Kings and 15 Wendy's.

That's 94 fast food restaurants just between those three giants.

Housing is at such a premium. So how about we build affordable housing on these 94 sites, including the little-used parking lots many of them have?

And if these franchises want to be on the ground floor of a beautiful new building, they're more than welcome.

San Francisco Success

This isn't a radical idea. It's already been done in other cities with housing crises.

Take San Francisco for example.

Sandwiched between the famous Ameba Music record shop and Golden Gate Park, in the heart of (HATE-ASBERY), sat a McDonald's with a giant parking lot.

In that community, one of the fastest-growing in the Bay Area, gentrification is pushing out the working-class residents who have called it home for decades.

Sounds like the perfect place to build real affordable housing.

That's what those neighbors wanted, and they spent years pushing City Hall to make a deal with McDonald's to allow for housing there.

They won.

In 2018, the city bought the site for $15 million.

And this July, the ribbon was cut on 160 units of deeply affordable housing, with apartments set aside for the formerly homeless.

One of its newest residents is Mona Hamilton, a cancer survivor who struggled with homelessness her entire life.

She used to sleep behind that McDonald's.

But today, she's enjoying beautiful views of San Francisco's most famous park for less than $1,000 a month.

We could and SHOULD do the same thing here in New York City.

To the Mamdani Administration, let's talk to these fast food franchises and get our hands on these lots.

Forget the Dollar Menu. Let's put real dollars into building homes for our neighbors!

EDUCATION

Intro

Injustice in any form should compel us to act. Wherever we see it, we have a duty to speak up, call it out for what it is and push for change.

We see it in our housing stock. But nowhere is injustice in our society as blatant as our education system.

Specialized High School Stats

Especially our specialized high schools.

A little over 4,000 students were admitted this fall into one of those schools. Guess how many of them were Hispanic? 261.

Guess how many were Black? 140.

Let that sink in. Out of 4,000 offers, just 401 went to Black and brown kids.

Out of 777 offers made from Stuyvesant High School, for example, just THREE went to Black students.

You can't look at those numbers and tell me our schools aren't segregated.

As a Black father raising a Black child, what I hear is the system saying my son's skin color means he doesn't deserve a great education.

The system is broken. It's time to tear it down and begin again, starting with the SHSAT itself.

Fixing the System

First, the state Legislature must amend or phase out the test entirely.

Never has it been proven to accurately measure a student's abilities. So why do we consider this test to be gospel?

It's not.

No longer can it be the sole determinant on our kids getting into the high school of their dreams.

Second, we must reimagine the Discovery Program.

Of the 795 kids enrolled last year, only 27 percent were Black and Hispanic. We need a total reevaluation of Discovery, in order to ACTUALLY make it work for the communities it was designed to uplift.

Third, the city must develop a five-borough strategy to invest in local test prep groups and afterschool programs in underserved neighborhoods.

Lastly, we just have to do a better job investing in schools that need it the most.

I've lived in Southeast Queens all my life. I know what disinvestment feels like first-hand, literally.

At PS 136, my alma mater, the students and I have bonded over the same scars on our hands that we got from playing on the rusty playground.

During my time as BP, I've routinely been heartbroken by the conditions students from South Jamaica to Corona have to learn in.

That's why I've invested more than $155 million into our schools since I took office — including more than $3 million to rebuild PS 136's playground — because the best way to prepare our students for the test is by making sure their schools meet their needs.

And we need to see our city and state making that same effort with their budgets as well.

The federal government is obsessed with rooting out diversity, equity and inclusion in our society. And we are right for calling it out as racist and hateful.

But we can't pretend that we're not doing the same thing Trump is, because we're allowing the same kind of corrosive discrimination to take hold in our school system.

Let's unlock the doors that keep our kids out of New York City's best schools.

And let's be clear. We're not asking for equity in education.

We're DEMANDING equity in education.

New School Seats

Now what does equity in education look like? What does taking care of our own look like?

It looks exactly like what we've been doing for the past six years, like creating nearly 22,000 new school seats across the borough.

Queens High School for the Sciences has a new home on Hillside Avenue, a site that my office first identified.

PS 95 and PS/IS 116 in Jamaica each have dozens of new classrooms, through recently-built extensions.

We're building one at Forest Hills High School as well, one of the most overcrowded schools in the city.

Western Queens has three new schools in Woodside's West Q Elementary, Astoria's Academy for Innovative Learning and the Academy for Innovative Excellence in Long Island City.

And that's just what we've opened this fall.

August Martin Aviation Lab

It looks like August Martin High School's new aviation lab we christened in May.

Now the aviation program there was already sending students into the sky with their pilot's license. But we're taking it to new heights.

From flight simulators to mock air traffic control towers, this lab is the personification of the school's motto: Where dreams take flight.

August Martin himself, a Tuskegee Airman and America's first-ever Black airline pilot, would be so proud of how high these kids from South Jamaica are soaring.

New Sports Fields

It looks like the brand-new sports fields we've built for our student-athletes, because investing in school sports IS investing in education.

At the Far Rockaway Educational Campus, the Seahorses finally have the field that they have long deserved.

We've built new fields for Bayside High School, Newtown High School, Maspeth High School and August Martin too.

We're turning Leavitts Park in Flushing into a full-blown athletics hub, both for the Red Devils of Flushing High School and for the surrounding community to enjoy.

But closest to my heart is what we've built at the Jamaica Educational Campus.

30 years ago, I was walking the halls as a student there.

Looking back, I wouldn't have gotten in so much trouble if I had the kind of fields that students have today.

This spring, we broke ground on the school's new track and field that will support football, baseball, soccer, softball, lacrosse and, for the first time ever at a New York City public school, cricket.

One of the most popular sports in the world can finally be played at a public school in New York City.

Video Game Lab

Over at HART High School in Cambria Heights, we've helped make them the champs of the world's fastest-growing sport.

However, it's not one that's played on a field with bats and balls.

It's played on screens with controllers and keyboards.

E-sports have captured the imaginations of our young people and an entire corner of the video game industry. And as we speak, thousands of careers are being created in coding, programming and game development.

The strength of the e-sports market is undeniable, and we'd be foolish to not harness its power in our schools.

That's what we've done at HART with the e-sports lab we cut the ribbon on this year.

When students graduate, they'll do so already having years of experience designing and developing their own games, giving them a leg-up on the competition as they go to college and enter the workforce.

STEM in the South + Hydroponics

That e-sports program is just one piece of a wider puzzle though — one we call STEM in the South, a concentrated effort we're making across 16 Queens high schools in Districts 27, 28 and 29.

Shout out to Superintendent Van-Ness for your leadership.

These South Queens schools have been historically disinvested in. But we're creating new opportunities for students to explore science, tech, math and engineering — paving pathways to higher education and rewarding careers.

Every day, kids at HART learn how to build and fly drones.

Students at Thomas Edison High School are taking cybersecurity classes.

And at 35 different schools from Maspeth to Richmond Hill, we've put a combined $7.5 million into building new hydroponics labs.

Because no matter your ZIP code or socioeconomic status, your kids deserve nothing less than a high-quality school.

If our city can spend $550,000 per year to house one detainee on Rikers Island, then our city can fully fund high-quality education for all our kids.

ECONOMY

An Education in Economics

But we don't invest in education just to build new school seats or create new programming.

We invest in education because we know every dollar will live on for decades after we cut those checks.

Every dollar we inject into our education system today fuels our economy tomorrow.

And the early returns, my friends, are astounding.

JFK Airport

We're a few short months away from the grand opening of the New Terminal One at JFK, the $9 billion centerpiece of the airport's historic $19 billion redevelopment.

You saw the progress in the video at the start of the program.

So you can already see it's going to be worth every penny.

Not only will T1 be the largest standalone airport terminal in the country.

But it will be responsible for the creation of 10,000 jobs, including 6,000 union construction jobs.

A few months ago, we cut the ribbon on the $125 million reimagining of Terminal 8, the first terminal to be fully completed at JFK.

In that space are Queens restaurants like Neir's Tavern, shout out Loy Gordon, and the Nourish Spot, shout out Dawn Kelly — two prime examples of local businesses getting to grow through this project.

We refreshed Terminal 5 with more Queens vendors. Terminal 6 is opening in just three weeks.

If you're an aviation head like me, this is our time to take flight.

But beyond the new gates and amenities, the opportunities we've created for our entrepreneurs and our tradespeople are the highlights.

Get this, more than $1.5 billion in contracts have already gone to over 230 Queens-based businesses. In total, $3.5 billion in contracts have gone to over 800 MWBEs.

And let's not forget the 19,000 total jobs created across the airport's entire redevelopment.

Oh, and you don't have to sit in traffic on the way to the airport anymore because **THE VAN WYCK IS DONE**.

Miracles do happen, not just on 34th Street.

But as the co-chair of the JFK Redevelopment Advisory Council, alongside Congress Member Greg Meeks, seeing this project change countless lives will never cease to move me.

My friends, we take care of our own not by creating jobs, but by creating **careers**.

Not by offering a hand-out, but a hand-up, and a ladder into the middle class.

We've spent six years providing exactly that, cutting Queens' unemployment rate from 24 percent at the height of COVID to just 4.7 percent — the lowest in New York City.

That's what happens when you land the biggest economic development project in Queens' history.

Resorts World

Speaking of airports, guess how many people flew through our two airports combined last year.

96 million people.

I can promise you that last year is going to be the last time we don't break 100 million.

Knowing what Queens will have to offer, I bet most of them won't be coming here to see Manhattan.

Now I don't gamble myself.

But Queens went all in for these two casino licenses because we knew how transformational they could be economically. And it's clear we've been dealt a pair of aces

That first ace is down in South Ozone Park, where earlier this year, we cut the ribbon on Phase 1 AND broke ground on Phase 2 of Resorts World's $5.5 billion expansion.

Phase 1 included hundreds of new table games, creating more than 1,200 new jobs and generating more than $170 million in tax revenue over just the first three months.

Make no mistake, this project is already a winning hand for Queens. But it only gets better in Phase 2 with 1,600 new hotel rooms, a 7,000-seat arena and a sports and media complex geared toward our young people, overseen by Queens basketball legend Kenny "the Jet" Smith.

And what comes with all of that, of course, will be 10,000 union jobs.

As Nas once said, Queens get the money! Queens get the jobs! You know what, Queens get it all!

Metropolitan Park

Our second ace is next to Citi Field, where work is getting underway on Metropolitan Park, an $8 billion gaming and entertainment complex that will reshape North Queens for the better.

When it opens in a few years, we'll have 1,000 new hotel rooms, a 6,000-seat arena, a 20-acre public park, a redesigned Willets Point transit hub and the Taste of Queens Food Hall, filled with street vendors and local restaurants, one of many things I negotiated into the plan.

But again, the numbers that matter most to me are 23,000 union jobs and $1.75 billion in community and infrastructure investment.

Think of what that will mean for communities like Elmhurst and Corona — ground zero for not just the pandemic, but ground zero for the economic disaster that ensued.

We still see the scars of that era in the neighborhood today, where survival work is more prevalent than anywhere else in the borough.

Where more residents live below the poverty line than any other neighborhood outside of Far Rockaway.

Flipping that script is what we're betting big on.

This isn't about turning Flushing Meadows into Las Vegas.

It's about funneling investment from a nine-figure community impact fund into local nonprofits, already doing incredible work with insufficient funds.

It's about giving families struggling to get by the career opportunities they deserve.

It's about taking care of our own, and I make no apologies for making sure Metropolitan Park will do just that.

Etihad Park

But I know another park up in North Queens that every one of us in this room is excited about. And that's Etihad Park.

As I stand here, we are just 246 days away from the first whistle, the first touch, the first goal and the first win for NYCFC on that pitch.

Thank you to the 300+ Queens residents who have been working construction on this 25,000-seat, all-electric marvel of engineering. And that's what it is, a marvel.

Dozens of local restaurants and street vendors will have space in the stadium to sell their food.

Every match day, hundreds of Queens residents will head to work at Etihad Park.

Through my office's efforts, thousands of Queens kids will be able to touch that grass each year through a free ticket program, inspiring them to become the next Rose Lavelle or Alonso Martinez.

This stadium isn't worthy of just one title-winning pro soccer team bearing the city's name though.

It's worthy of **two** title-winning pro soccer teams bearing the city's name!

One year after NYCFC moves in, the incredible ladies of Gotham FC will officially make Etihad Park their new home.

Also in 2028, the Los Angeles Summer Olympics will play 9 soccer matches here.

The World's Game belongs in The World's Borough. And that is exactly what we have delivered in bringing two of America's best football teams to Queens!

PARKS/ENVIRONMENT

Forgetting FMCP

Just a short walk away from Etihad Park sits a prime example of disinvestment, disparity and disinterest in taking care of your own.

When we think of the greatest greenspaces in this city, Central Park, the most famous park in the world, naturally comes to mind.

But it's only the fifth-largest park in the five boroughs.

Flushing Meadows Corona Park is 60 acres larger. So why does Central Park receive 227 percent more private funding than Flushing Meadows?

We have a Major League Baseball team, the biggest tennis tournament in the country, one of the biggest musical festivals in the nation and some of the most important cultural institutions in this city.

And yet, the park floods whenever it rains. Spaces like the historic Playground for All Children — the first playground in the nation tailored to kids with disabilities — haven't been upgraded in decades.

We can't even keep the lights or fountains on at the Unisphere.

The eyes of the world are on The World's Borough's best park every year, which makes the underfunding unacceptable.

We refuse to accept the status quo.

My friends, we are going to restore Flushing Meadows to glory.

Flushing Meadows Task Force

This summer, I launched the Flushing Meadows Corona Park Task Force — a working group of more than a dozen city agencies, community groups, cultural organizations, and private entities that operate in the park.

Together, we'll take stock of the issues, push these private partners to increase their investment, and demand that City Hall pay its fair share.

Why?

Because Flushing Meadows is our shared backyard.

Whether you live on 111th Street in Corona, College Point Boulevard in Flushing or as far away as Jamaica like I did — back when my parents would pack sandwiches and bring me to the park — these 900 acres belong to you. To us.

And it's about damn time we got what we deserved.

Playground for All Children

Those getting what they deserve include the kids who use the Playground for All Children.

This summer, I announced my investment of $17.5 million into its wholesale renovation, with Councilmember Shanel Thomas-Henry chipping in another $5 million.

That's how we take care of our own, by taking care of the spaces where families gather, kids play and neighbors come to experience the best of what their community has to offer.

Thank you, Queens Parks Commissioner Jackie Langsam for your advocacy and vision.

But we don't believe in one-offs in my office. We believe in permanent change.

Sensory Parks

So what's one change we want to see?

It's that every single park in this city should be retrofitted with equipment that is not just accessible, but tailored toward children with physical, emotional or mental disabilities.

Like many of you, I have relatives who are disabled or have sensory issues. Society has long stigmatized them and ignored their needs, but no more.

We need to look toward a future where all kids in every community — regardless of ability — have playgrounds and parks that meet their needs.

During my time as BP, I've allocated $107 million to parks in Queens because they are the very lungs of our communities.

They are places where we catch our breath after a hard day, where our kids run out their energy, where we sing and laugh until our chests are sore.

So I will keep using the power of my budget to make that happen, and the city must follow suit.

These spaces belong to all of us. And ALL of us, no matter what you can or can't do, deserve to be taken care of by having a high-quality accessible park right in your community.

A Cleaner Environment

Now when you talk about the lungs of a community, investing in parks means nothing if the fresh air we're trying to enjoy isn't fresh at all.

And for the families of Western Queens, the fundamental human right to clean air is one that has long been denied to them.

That is, until now.

Not only are we retiring Big Allis for good.

Not only are we pushing to create a green jobs hub through our Renewable Ravenswood plan.

Not only are we phasing out that fossil fuel plant that's been sickening public housing families next door for decades.

But we are turning this community into a global center of clean energy.

Look no further than the substation on 20th Avenue in Astoria, where the Champlain Hudson Power Express feeds into our city's energy grid.

The express isn't just a $6 billion idea anymore. It's a 1,200 megawatt reality that's now delivering clean, renewable hydroelectricity generated in Canada directly to The World's Borough.

At full capacity, Chippy will deliver enough electricity to meet 20 percent of the city's energy needs, powering more than 1 million homes.

The reduction in carbon emissions will be equivalent to cutting the number of cars on New York City streets in half.

And all the while, the air over Western Queens and in the lungs of its residents get cleaner.

Generations of environmental racism are finally coming to an end.

Jamaica Bay

Down in Rockaway, our worst enemy is what lurks offshore.

We saw it in Sandy and see it in every nor'easter — the battle we've yet to win is the one against the rising tide.

Now I've seen the solution with my own two eyes up in Stamford, Connecticut, where their hurricane barrier keeps their shorefront dry. It even kept Sandy's record storm surge at bay.

We've had a plan to build the same kind of barrier at the entrance to Jamaica Bay for decades now. But the Army Corps keeps dragging its feet.

Enough studies.

Mother Nature won't wait for us to finish yet another research project.

Families from Hamilton Beach to Arverne to Broad Channel are tired of pumping out their basements.

To our federal elected officials, now that we've taken back Congress, let's fully fund these flood gates and keep South Queens dry.

Flood Buyouts

In the meantime, we need to take a hard look at a permanent buyout program in low-lying areas that are constantly underwater.

To keep rebuilding homes, only for them to flood again, is insanity.

These plots of land are demanding to be returned to nature. And if a homeowner wants to take a buyout, that's exactly what we should be doing.

Now, the $2.5 billion I secured for more than 40 infrastructure projects across Southeast Queens has done wonders.

The new sewer and water mains under Idlewild Park will pump 1 million gallons of water per minute out of our communities and into Jamaica Bay.

That exact kind of investment is what we need in every corner of this borough. But no amount of sewer investment can prevent flooding on some blocks.

So to the city, let's create a straight-forward buyout program that both makes homeowners whole and makes Queens more resilient in the face of climate change.

I'm tired of watching severe storms steal our homes and our lives. I'm tired of entire communities choking on dirty air.

Climate change is real and it's only getting worse. But my friends, I refuse to hand our kids and grandkids a sick borough.

Taking care of our own means taking care of the home that future generations, long after we're gone, will inherit.

So best believe we will stop at nothing to give them a borough that is healthy and thriving.

HEALTHCARE

Jamaica Hospital ER

When it comes to keeping this generation of Queens families healthy, the progress we've made in the last year has been undeniable.

Take Jamaica Hospital for example.

Its emergency department was designed to treat 60,000 people annually. But today, more than 120,000 people walk through its doors each year.

We couldn't be prouder of Jamaica Hospital. Thanks to its heroic doctors, nurses and support staff, it's a mainstay on the list of best hospitals in the nation.

But done are the days of our healthcare heroes having to do more with less.

Just last month, we cut the ribbon on Phase 1 of the hospital's $150 million new Emergency Department — bringing 22 new, state-of-the-art ICU rooms online.

Once the full scope of work is complete next year, we'll have more than doubled the ER's capacity.

We'll have quadrupled the number of trauma bays to accept the most critical patients.

We'll have sent a message to the families of South Queens and beyond who depend on this hospital that their health matters.

Because healthcare is a human right, my friends. Not just for some neighborhoods or for the wealthy.

Healthcare is a human right for ALL, no matter the community you call home, the color of your skin or the size of your bank account.

Jamaica Hospital Cancer Center

And that's exactly why we're making sure no one has to leave this borough in order to battle the most evil disease we know: Cancer.

Last year on this stage, I told you about my grandmother, Olamae Youmans. I talked of how I would travel 2 hours from Southeast Queens, just to hold her hand during her treatments at Memorial Sloan Kettering.

This year, Olamae is not the only one I'm mourning. This spring, I lost two aunts and an uncle, Dolores, Kelly and Kenny, to cancer.

They were beautiful souls who brought so much light to so many lives, and their deaths have weighed heavy on my soul.

But what brings me solace is the fact that families like mine here in Queens might not have to feel that kind of pain, thanks to what else we're building at Jamaica Hospital.

We are just months away from breaking ground on a $180 million standalone cancer care center, the first of its kind in The World's Borough, in conjunction with Memorial Sloan Kettering.

No longer will people like Olamae have to travel two hours on public transportation from Rochdale Village, just to get the life-saving treatment they need.

God willing, no longer will families like mine have to watch their loved ones wither away, because Jamaica Hospital will make them cancer-free.

Thank you, Governor Hochul, for all you've done to support Jamaica Hospital.

Thank you to Congressmember Meeks and all our partners for your advocacy.

And thank you, Aunt Dolores, Aunt Kelly and Uncle Kenny, for showing me what taking care of your own looks like.

I love you and I'll see you again someday.

Far Rockaway Gotham Health

I hope you'd be proud of what we're doing to help our old neighbors in Far Rockaway too.

In June, we'll be cutting the ribbon on the $30 million dollar Gotham Health clinic in Rockaway Village, which will serve more than 19,000 Far Rockaway families each year.

We'll have access to top-notch primary care, vision, dental, podiatry, radiology, women's health and even mental health services right on-site.

Overall Investments

When I took office six years ago, I said rebuilding our healthcare network after COVID was going to be where my administration focuses.

We talked the talk back then. And every day since, we've walked the walk.

With this year's budget, we crossed the $50-million-dollar mark in terms of funding my office has invested into our hospitals and healthcare clinics.

Since the last time I was on this stage, we put $1 million into St. Mary's Hospital for Children in Bayside, where we're building a new inpatient unit to serve kids in need.

We cut a $3 million check for Elmhurst Hospital to buy them new operating room technology.

At Mount Sinai Queens, we proudly delivered $5 million to help fund a new 15-bed intensive care unit.

And that's on top of $2 million we had already invested into that project in the past.

I've said it time and time again, your budget is more than just numbers on a page. It's a statement of your values.

And when I look at our spreadsheets, I see a belief that healthcare really is a human right.

That we are proving that your ZIP code or socioeconomic status will not be a determinant on the care you receive.

From Far Rockaway to Astoria and everywhere in between, we are doing the work of making our families and communities healthier.

Because no matter where you live, you deserve high-quality healthcare right in your own neighborhood!

FOOD INSECURITY

The Crisis at Hand

Thankfully, our healthcare system has recovered post-COVID.

But our food pantries still see lines that rival the worst days of the pandemic.

In our borough of 2.4 million people, more than 350,000 of us are food insecure.

That number is infuriating. And if it doesn't inspire us to do all we can to make food accessible and affordable for all, then nothing will.

Now I certainly support Mayor Mamdani's city-run grocery store initiative. We're working with his team to identify the right site for a Queens store as we speak.

But one store is not the only answer to this crisis.

FRESH Program Expansion

What we can and must do to address it today is expand the FRESH Program.

Created in 2009, FRESH allows property owners to construct slightly larger buildings than zoning allows, as long as they include a supermarket in their building plans.

Over the last 17 years, more than 1 million New Yorkers have had a supermarket open within walking distance of their home, thanks to the FRESH Program.

In our borough, we know first-hand how critical this program has been.

As the former chairman of the City Council Zoning Committee, I was proud to work on its first expansion, growing it beyond just Southeast Queens to include more communities across the borough and city.

And through FRESH, we opened a beautiful new supermarket in the heart of Rockaway Village this summer.

Not only is this store feeding thousands of families at affordable prices, but it's created dozens of good-paying jobs for local residents.

Down the block, we're opening another high-quality supermarket within Edgemere Commons.

Made possible by FRESH and leveraged through the Downtown Far Rockaway Rezoning, which I am proud to have led from day one, these two stores alone will transform how Rockaway residents feed their families.

That success demands that we immediately expand the FRESH program, not just to a handful of other communities at a time, but to every single food desert in our city.

As the cost of groceries and the cost of living continue to rise, more New Yorkers will continue to go hungry. So Mayor Mamdani, let's move with the urgency of now and expand FRESH.

We don't have a minute to waste, so let's get to work and take care of our own.

Food Pantry Investments

During my tenure, I'm proud to have allocated $180,000 in funding directly to food pantries across Queens to help them bolster their resources.

The volunteers who run these sites embody taking care of your own, and they deserve all the help they can get.

So I'm proud to cut these checks, both to support their services and to help them physically expand their sites.

Over at Queens Community House in Forest Hills, we cut the ribbon this fall on its brand-new kitchen, which I put $1 million toward.

In that new kitchen, hundreds more meals per day can be cooked for our seniors who attend and those who are homebound.

Over in Richmond Hill this summer, we wrote a nearly $3 million check to the River Fund, one of the biggest social service and food pantry organizations in Queens.

With that money, the organization will build a brand-new community center, allowing them to expand their programming and offer even more resources to families in need.

Lord knows that expansion is needed. River Fund already distributes 1 million pounds of food per month to about 3,500 families, and that need is only growing.

Organizations like River Fund and Queens Community House are on the front lines of this fight against food insecurity. And it's a fight we'll lose if we take our foot off the gas.

COMMUNITY CENTERS

Protecting our Immigrants

Centers like these don't just feed us, though.

They give our kids a place to go after school.

They give our families a place to bond and stay fit.

They give our immigrant neighbors a place to find the services they need.

We take care of our own by making sure no one ever feels like they're on their own.

And that's why we've made it our mission to expand our network of community centers, so that every population and every neighborhood has their own safe haven.

With ICE raiding streets and shooting up blocks from Minneapolis to Marble Hill, our immigrant communities have been forced back into the shadows.

Now make no mistake, these agents have no business in our city.

Not only does ICE need to get the hell out of town, ICE needs to be defunded and abolished once and for all.

But until that day comes, we'll keep investing in the trusted community groups doing the work on the ground.

This year, we cut a $3.8 million check to South Asian Youth Action and a $1 million check to the Caribbean Equality Project, so they can both build new community centers.

And my Immigrant Welcome Center at Queens Borough Hall will always be a safe space for our immigrant neighbors to get the help they need.

Just this year, our IWC has helped more than 70 people with issues ranging from citizenship applications to work permits to asylum cases.

I know it feels like a risk every time you walk out your door, but to our immigrant brothers and sisters, know that there is no safer place in our borough than the People's House.

Jaden Pierre Center

There should always be no safer place than our parks, too. But that wasn't the case in Jamaica this spring.

On April 16, dozens of teenagers gathered in Roy Wilkins Park after school for what was supposed to be a giant water gun fight.

One of them brought a real gun.

And with that gun, he ended the life of 15-year-old Jaden Pierre.

Dozens of Jaden's classmates witnessed his murder.

Another young life stolen by gun violence. Another family forever broken.

His alleged killer? Just 18 years old.

Gun violence steals souls and destroys families on each side of the trigger. It traumatizes all who hear the crack of the bullet escaping the chamber.

Idle time is the devil's playground. And that day, that's who the playground at Roy Wilkins Park belonged to.

But this community is taking it back.

Because we refuse to let Jaden die in vain. We refuse to allow another family to feel his family's pain.

Our kids need safe places to find community and grow into the leaders they can become. And that's exactly what we're delivering in the form of a $132 million new community and aquatics center in Roy Wilkins Park.

We're breaking ground in a few weeks. And once it opens, our families can enjoy a new public pool, running track, gym, fitness rooms, community spaces and so much more.

I know Jaden will be at the ribbon cutting, because you never truly die until your name stops being spoken.

And we're going to say his name over and over that day, because we should be naming that community center after Jaden Pierre.

Every life this center saves will be because of Jaden, and I can't think of a better legacy than that.

Variety Boys and Girls Club

Over in Astoria, the Variety Boys and Girls Club has been uplifting our kids for decades.

But its clubhouse felt like it hadn't been touched in decades either.

So we decided to replace it with the biggest Boys and Girls clubhouse in the country — a project I'm proud to have invested $10 million toward.

Construction is underway and we're less than two years from opening.

And when families walk through that door for the first time, they'll see courts, a swimming pool, the borough's first planetarium and even 200 units of affordable housing, including units for at-risk homeless youth.

Transformational only just begins to describe what this center will be for Western Queens.

Thank you my brother, Costa Constantinides for your vision.

Arverne East Aquatics Center

And speaking of swimming, the community input process is open for a few more weeks on the Arverne East Aquatics Center next to the Rockaway boardwalk.

For generations, Rockaway kids have had to learn to swim by battling the waves of the Atlantic Ocean.

Like so many other communities of color in our city, they do so because they don't have access to a public pool.

But those days are numbered, because this state-of-the-art center will have not one but TWO public pools — one inside and one outside.

As a family that lost a niece to drowning, this is personal to Tameeka, her mother and I.

That's why we secured $70 million in investment for this project, including $26 million directly from my budget — the largest-single allocation I've made as Borough President.

This is how much I believe in what this center can do and the lives it will save.

CONCLUSION

We're All We Got

There is so much to be proud of here in Queens.

But there's no denying that beyond our border still swirls so much uncertainty.

There's still a black cloud hanging over the horizon — raining down on us new outrage, new threats from the White House and new attacks on our values of diversity, equity and inclusion.

The one thing we can see clearly in the darkness is that there is no cavalry coming.

There is not yet a national effort around climate change, affordable housing, public housing or job creation.

These are fights we have no choice but to take up ourselves.

We are in the eye of the hurricane, but we are not helpless to its headwinds.

We're All We Need

Our futures are not decided by those in office, neither Congressional nor Oval.

They are decided by the MTA bus driver rolling down Roosevelt Avenue, carrying construction workers on their way to Willets Point.

They are decided by the bodega owner on Bell Boulevard, selling sandwiches to students rushing to school.

They are decided by the sisters in soccer jerseys, kicking a ball back and forth, dreaming of the day where they are the co-captains of Gotham FC.

My friends, our tomorrow is not teetering on the edge of that gritty abyss.

Our stock is soaring ever higher. Our destiny is ours to decide.

Because in Queens, we bow to no king.

In Queens, we fight for our families. In Queens, we take care of our own.

We're all we got. And we're all we need.

Thank you, God bless you. Queens is the future!