



2021 State of the Borough

(As Prepared for Delivery)

Thank you to the Museum of the Moving Image for hosting the 2021 Queens State of the Borough.

Normally, hundreds, if not thousands, of us would gather in person.

Selfishly, as this is my first state of the borough address as your Borough President, I wish we could all be together instead of you watching from the screens.

However, these are not normal times.

This is something we have come to grips with over and over again for the past year.

Who could have predicted that Saturday, February 29, 2020 - almost one year to this day - would have changed New York City and the borough of Queens forever?

On that fateful day, the first case of COVID-19 in New York City was reported -
a gentleman right here in Queens contracted the virus.

We now know that this outbreak started long before that day, and we know that we had ample time to prepare.

In fact we had years.

We were woefully under prepared, and that showed in the first days and weeks of the crisis as we all scrambled for gloves, masks, and face shields – exposing the scandal of our health care delivery systems.

And again we cannot mention this deficit without in the same breath praising our greatest asset, our human capital, our residents of Queens who as they always do, rose to the occasion.

Not just the first responders and healthcare workers who deserve our special praise, but also our transit workers who despite challenges woke up every morning to make our trains and buses run.

As well as our teachers, some who worked remotely and others who still went into the school building.

Our grocery store workers, who ensured we had the items we so desperately needed and still need.

Yet, still, with all that humanity going for us, on that day, February 29, 2020, the last day of Black History Month, the racial disparities, the gender disparities, the economic disparities, the systemic inequities of our society which New Yorkers of color, women, and low-income communities always talk of, would all come crashing down on us.

In the past year, we lost over five hundred thousand people nationwide due to COVID-19, with about seven thousand five hundred of them from Queens – the most of any borough in New York City.

Parents, children, spouses, workers, friends, neighbors, leaders.

People like Jules Taylor, who is survived by his spouse.

Jocelyn Walton, who is survived by her mother.

Corky Lee, who is survived by a community of artists and loved ones.

Lorena Borjas, who is survived by her partner and a community of LGBTQ activists and allies.

But the shame, the scar on us all, is we lost far too many more due to the inequities which plague our systems and institutions.

Those deaths were preventable.

Those deaths were systemic failures, not the science or the challenges of the crisis alone.

We were not prepared.

This past year, the pandemic did not show us anything new, but it did reveal how deep inequity runs right here in the greatest city in the world; and unfortunately, even in the most diverse county in the continental United States - Queens.

The inequities did not just show face through the health disparities; but the inequities showed their face in the penal system, in the business community, in our education system, even in the governmental and civic institutions that impact where and to whom resources are allocated.

One glaring fact that was undeniable as we entered Borough Hall, time was not our friend.

That is why for my first one-hundred days, I launched an aggressive and ambitious plan to address the racial and gender gaps that we see and feel in our systems and institutions.

Thanks to the committed one-hundred twenty plus individuals who volunteered to be part of my transition team, and thanks to the many dedicated public servants in my office - the Queens Borough President's Office - what seemed far-fetched to many, is incrementally being advanced.

Our work often seems insurmountable but we will move Queens forward and with all of you, we will meet our challenges.

So this evening, I lay before you the work which I launched in my first one-hundred days.

This is our beginning, and together we will continue to move our borough forward in the weeks and months ahead.

First and foremost, healthcare.

To move forward, we must first look back.

You all have heard me say Queens was the epicenter of the epicenter.

I say that constantly.

It is true.

Just as the initial days of the crisis exposed our unique vulnerabilities, we continue to face difficult challenges.

To witness the inequity across the board, look no further than our COVID-19 testing and vaccination programs.

Predominantly immigrant neighborhoods like Richmond Hill and South Ozone Park have few testing sites other than the mobile units my office helped bring to the area.

Also, neighborhoods in Northeast Queens went for a long time without having any vaccination sites nearby.

I am grateful for the pop-up vaccination sites which opened throughout Queens, and I am especially grateful to the community-based organizations and public housing developments who host them.

But getting our communities vaccinated starts right here at home, with friends and family encouraging each other to get their shots.

That is why my office continues to work with our partners in city and state government to expand neighborhood sites.

With approximately one hundred forty languages spoken here in Queens, we need an exhaustive, multilingual, bottom-up outreach campaign to connect with folks who would otherwise go unseen.

We also need to wage a campaign of trust, especially in the Black community.

We know that overcoming generations of skepticism toward the government and medicine — going back to the days of the Tuskegee Experiment — is not an easy task.

But we also know that our city's Black and Latinx communities, which make up more than fifty percent of our city's population, constitutes only twenty-eight percent of those who have received the one dose of the vaccine so far.

That fact should offend us; it offends me.

It should mobilize us to break down these barriers because lives hang in the balance.

Mass vaccination centers at York College, Aqueduct Racetrack, Martin Van Buren High School, and Citi Field - which I advocated for alongside my colleagues - are great starts, but they are not enough.

We are optimistic that the Biden-Harris Administration will be productive partners in D.C, but our crisis is still immediate.

Time is not our friend.

My office will continue to work tirelessly with the city, state, and the new administration to immediately expand our testing and vaccine networks.

We will not accept anyone ignoring our unique struggles.

To support these efforts, my office launched regional vaccination town halls to better educate our families on the importance of getting your vaccines.

We can and we must do better – for each other. Not all our answers are elsewhere.

But in a borough with 2.4 million people, we have just 1.72 hospital beds per one thousand people — by far lowest in the city.

That cannot continue.

In a borough with 2.4 million people, we have just nine hospital campuses.

Just in the last twelve years, four of our hospitals have closed, removing more than 840 beds and thousands of medical professionals and leaving communities like Far Rockaway with even less access to healthcare.

To accept this as normal would be to accept that the 2.4 million lives here in Queens are not of equal value to those elsewhere.

That is why my administration is going to fight with the same zeal of our healthcare heroes to greatly expand access to healthcare — especially in communities that have long felt the sting of inequity.

This means pushing for more community-based health centers, offering preventative medicine and keeping non-emergencies out of our crowded emergency rooms.

This means advocating for new hospital construction and increasing funding to our existing hospitals — which are already doing so much with far less than they need.

We need to think big and act bold.

Let's make sure that if and when another pandemic hits our city, we won't be overwhelmed the way we were last year.

This pandemic has not only affected our health and well-being, it also led us into a financial crisis and impacted our economic development.

There is no other way to say it — we are living through an economic pandemic, causing a crisis rivaled only by the Great Depression nearly a century ago.

Nine straight months of double-digit unemployment in Queens, peaking at over twenty-one percent last summer.

Hundreds of small businesses, the heartbeats of our communities, closed, many of them women- and minority-owned.

Thousands more only survive on the margins — each week bringing new challenges and new threats to their very existence.

Countless families are lying awake at night, not knowing if they can afford to live in the community they love — in the borough they proudly call home.

And make no mistake, many of these families are families of color.
They are immigrant families.

They might even be yours.

For myself and many others across Queens, this is not a secret or something abstract.

These are our lived experiences.

Even before the pandemic, we've seen extreme disparities in employment and entrepreneurship.

Black New Yorkers make up twenty-four percent of our city's population.

But just two percent of the city's businesses are Black-owned.

This crisis did not start last year.

These are dark times, and the situation is still darker for our historically underserved communities hardest hit by these intersecting crises.

But this moment in time has also brought about transformative opportunity.

This is our chance to rebuild our borough's economy from the ground up.

This is our chance to right the wrongs of an economy that, for far too long, has favored some and exploited others for no other reason than their ZIP code, their race, or their immigration status.

With that renewed opportunity comes new growth.

What happens in the next several months will define Queens for decades to come.

We can save our struggling small businesses.

We can create thousands of good-paying jobs.

We can make Queens a true post-pandemic destination for cutting-edge innovation.

And every single day, these opportunities will guide my administration as we work to create a dynamic economy rooted in equity and shared prosperity — one in which all of us, regardless of

where we live, what we look like, or where we come from, are uplifted by the investments that shape our neighborhoods.

That is why immediately upon beginning my term, my office partnered with the New York City Economic Development Corporation, New York Mets owner Steve Cohen, and some of our most trusted non-profits and community based organizations to create the Queens Small Business Grant program.

It's simple: \$17.5 million in no-strings-attached grant funding targeted toward businesses that need it most — we're talking minority-owned, in communities hardest hit by COVID-19, or in otherwise low-income areas.

These are the businesses that were too often left empty-handed in the mad dash for the federal Paycheck Protection Program loans last year.

But these are also businesses that together employ thousands of Queens residents, with thousands of families relying on the job opportunities they create.

Helping just one storefront keep the lights on and the doors open is worth it.

But in the program's first month, one hundred twenty-six small businesses across Queens — from Nepali restaurants in Jackson Heights to cosmetic stores in Jamaica — have already been approved for up to \$20,000 in funding.

We urge small business owners who think they are eligible for these grants to contact us, and we will help with the application process.

Queens Borough Hall continues to hold virtual job fairs, a tradition that began last year under Sharon Lee.

Thanks to the vision of the economic development team here at Borough Hall, more than one thousand four hundred connections were made between Queens residents and employers in a wide variety of industries.

That is the kind of progress we need to build upon going forward.

I have carried this series of virtual job fairs into 2021, and I will continue to host regular recruitment events.

The New Year also means new services.

Our office launched immediate assistance for our vast network of entrepreneurs, especially those who have been overlooked and underserved for generations.

This includes:

1. Virtual guides on navigating the maze that is securing PPP loans.
2. Educational workshops on starting a business and creating jobs in our communities.
3. Town halls with the New York City Department of Small Business Services, connecting Queens' businesses with the tools they need to not just survive but thrive.
4. An ombudsman in my office to oversee the quality of our recovery and rebuild.
5. A Director for Nonprofit Opportunities to help our community-based organizations build their infrastructure for new funding opportunities and resources both from the public and private sectors

In my short time as Borough President, I've heard from so many who are struggling to get by.

I've heard so many stories of pain, but also of optimism.

Optimism for a post-pandemic Queens where you don't need to jump through hoops to start or grow a business.

This means closing the digital divide hindering so many businesses, especially those in lower-income communities.

This divide can be closed by expanding broadband access, improving internet literacy, and assisting with digital marketing.

This also means investing in our future as a technology hub and preparing Queens families for the jobs of tomorrow by implementing workforce development programs, revitalizing vacant space, and helping start-ups get off the ground.

Not only must Queens be open for business.

We must be conducive to business.

We must be a destination for business.

Queens is the future for our city's businesses.

We have the potential to become the economic development hub for all the boroughs.

Economic development is also contingent upon having a sufficient supply of places to live.

Housing has become increasingly unaffordable in New York City, and the economic crisis this pandemic has brought is dovetailed with a housing crisis.

I'll get straight to the point: we need to increase the money in emergency relief set aside for both landlords AND tenants.

If we do not take these measures, we will not only have tenants who are compromised but owners of 2 and 3 family homes throughout Queens who will lose their properties.

Most of our landlords here in Queens are working class people, folks who were able to rub some nickels together to get a second property in order to supplement their income, or folks who were able to purchase a multi-family dwelling and live in the house where they rent out other units.

Yes, there are some scrupulous landlords out there and I will work with the Public Advocate and city agencies to root out terrible landlords.

But so many of our landlords have great relationships with their tenants and want to support their tenants. Let us not pit our communities against each other.

Instead, let us give the aid due to both our landlords AND our tenants.

The housing crisis we have is multi-layered and we see issues even when it comes to the creation of affordable housing, senior housing, and veterans housing.

And we must also support our public housing.

I am ready to use my authority to guide rezonings earlier in the process so we ensure real affordable housing and address the following key priorities:

1. Creation of at least two thousand plus new truly affordable senior housing

2. Ensure that all new developments are sustainable and include the greening of city-owned sites in Queens
3. Identify new locations for senior housing, which includes city-owned sites that may be currently used in other ways such as vacant land and parking lots
4. Promote supportive housing for our veterans.

As for our public housing, I created a working group of New York City Housing Authority Tenant Association Presidents to ensure frequent communication between NYCHA residents and my office.

In the weeks and months to come, my office will roll out plans to:

1. Invest in NYCHA campuses using my budget
2. Fight for a Green New Deal for public housing.

Under my direction, my office is reviewing capital procedures at NYCHA for sustainability

If we do not take the issue of housing seriously and start addressing it with our finances and policy, we will have an unprecedented amount of people in our borough who are housing insecure.

We cannot let this happen.

It is our current President, Joe Biden, who said, “Don’t tell me what you care about, show me your budget and I’ll tell you what you care about.”

Part of addressing affordable housing is also addressing the issue of affordable homeownership.

I am calling on the city to work with the federal government in purchasing foreclosed homes and working with our non-profit organizations who can refurbish them and help provide affordable houses to first time home buyers.

This is an effort I advocated for alongside U.S. Senator Elizabeth Warren and Council Member I. Daneek Miller a few years ago, and we must prioritize this effort right now.

Years ago, I led efforts in the city council to pass legislation so we fund Community Land Trusts.

We must double our investment in CLTs to give communities control over their land and keep housing affordable.

By boosting our housing, we enhance our neighborhoods.

We must look to ensure that our neighborhoods are accessible, which means we need to also address transportation issues while we address housing.

Transportation is what connects us to everything and everyone in our world.

And for millions of us, no matter how we get around, not a day goes by where the system does not fail us.

Sometimes, it means being late for work.

But for far too many families, it means a funeral.

So the safety of our streets will always be a top priority of my office.

We owe that much to the 25 pedestrians, 33 motorists, and 1 cyclist who lost their lives on our roads last year alone.

I'm sure I speak for many when I say I am sick of hearing how Northern Boulevard has become the new Boulevard of Death.

I'm tired of hearing excuses year after year about why the redesign of Queens Boulevard STILL isn't done.

Enough is enough.

Lives are on the line with every change of a traffic light.

It's time to reimagine how we get around our borough, and I've got some ideas.

We can transform our bike network into a borough-wide interconnected web for all our families to safely enjoy.

This means engaging our cycling community, directing capital dollars to redesign our streets, and making the bicycle a legitimate mode of transportation, no matter what neighborhood you call home.

You should be able to ride from Forest Hills to the Flushing Bay Promenade or peddle from Glendale to Glen Oaks without fear.

And for our cyclists who want to take in the views from the Queensboro Bridge, we're just as excited as you are to see a bike lane in the works.

But we can still think bigger.

Let's encourage multi-modal transportation by building a network of bike storage hubs outside our subway stations.

Let's bring scooter sharing to Queens, and especially the Rockaways, unlocking even more interest in our beaches and our businesses along the peninsula.

Let's speed up Citi Bike's rollout across Queens.

There's no reason why Eastern Queens should be years behind the rest of the borough.

Let's open more of our bridges to cyclists, establish a true Five-Borough Bikeway and make Queens even more accessible to those beyond our borders.

For those who rely on mass transit, you deserve nothing less than an efficient, reliable commute.

But for us in Southeast Queens, our friends in Northeast Queens, and other transportation deserts across this borough, we have no idea what that even looks like.

This is the administration that helps make that fantasy a reality.

We need the following:

1. Busways along center medians with all-door boarding, speeding up commutes and making our commercial corridors more accessible, starting with Archer Avenue in Jamaica.
2. Going full-electric with our bus fleet.
3. Expand the Jamaica Bus Depot, so the MTA can better serve this borough for decades to come.
4. The complete overhaul of our archaic Queens Bus Network, originally planned before the pandemic, to better connect bus riders with the subways, our cultural institutions, and commercial hubs.

And MTA, yes, we need more community input in the planning process – true community input.

And while we're talking rails, enough messing around with Southeast Queens.

The Long Island Rail Road's Atlantic Ticket program must be made permanent, and it must come with a free subway transfer. We will accept nothing less.

Let us also demand that the Biden-Harris Administration allow us to proceed with congestion pricing, which has the potential to create a billion dollar revenue stream that would be a game changer for the MTA.

The possibilities for transportation improvements that could be funded by this revenue stream are endless.

For our pedestrians, our streets belong as much to you as anyone else.

It's time our policies reflect that.

We must expand our Open Streets program, while creating a model in partnership with the Department of Transportation that does not rely so heavily on community volunteers setting up and breaking down the corridor each day.

And when we expand, we must prioritize schools and communities lacking green space.

Let's work with the Department of Consumer and Worker Protection and the Street Vendor Project to fast-track licenses for food vendors to operate there as well.

If we're going to be socially distancing from one another for the foreseeable future, let's optimize these spaces the ways we know we can and must.

As the largest borough in New York, with a land area of one hundred nine square miles, we need safe and affordable transportation infrastructure that meets our needs down to the last mile.

It's about time we got what we deserved, so let's fight for it together.

Throughout this address, I reiterated the theme of equity versus inequity.

Queens will rise higher and higher once we get closer to achieving true equity.

But Queens does not rise if we are split, we only rise when we come together.

The past few years, we have seen our country divided, and unfortunately we have also seen our borough divided.

This has shown itself with an increase of hate crimes and bias incidents.

And though the pandemic paused many of our lives, we still saw a 99% increase of bias incidents within the past year according to the New York City Commission on Human Rights.

The New York Police Department also reported an increase of anti-Asian and anti-Semitic hate crimes. These forms of hate are rooted in ignorance, and we must stamp them out.

We have much work to do as a city in order to protect communities most susceptible to acts of hate.

Our institutions can do better to protect vulnerable communities and we must strengthen those institutions so they bring justice.

I am demanding that the NYPD revamp the threshold on what we consider hate crimes.

Many people face violence and oftentimes are told it was not a hate crime.

Our communities understand the impact of structural and systemic racism, and implicit bias.

We know when the acts against us are petty nonsense and when they are an attack on our identity and our very existence.

The Commission can also do more.

The city needs to provide more funding to expand the Commission's Bias Response Team and education efforts to help dispel myths and combat these acts of hate.

I am also calling on our law enforcement agencies tasked with combatting these acts of hate and discrimination to create a central database for information sharing, so they work closer together in addressing acts of hate – whether they are bias incidents or hate crimes.

All are welcome in Queens.

So we must work to combat hate crimes, bias incidents, and other acts of hate and discrimination.

This means we must also ensure our vulnerable and underrepresented communities are represented from the halls of our institutions to the boards helping to govern our borough and city.

That is why my office will soon officially open the Immigrant Welcome Center, the first in any borough.

The Immigrant Welcome Center will serve as a hub, a one stop shop of sorts, for our immigrant communities.

All are welcome, and we will never ask about immigration status at my office.

I really want to thank my dear friend and co-chair of my transition team, Assemblywoman Catalina Cruz, for her leadership on this.

As a Dreamer, Assemblywoman Cruz knows the barriers that exist when immigrants make every effort to reach the American dream.

Her knowledge and experiences were invaluable to shaping this welcome center, and I cannot thank her enough.

Not only do we need a more welcoming Queens, we need a more sustainable Queens.

Like all of you, I know climate change is a real, grave threat to not only our borough and our city but our entire planet.

I am determined to put Queens at the forefront as the most sustainable county in the United States.

My office is proud to reestablish the Queens Solid Waste Advisory Board (QSWAB) — a diverse group of residents and industry representatives tasked with advising me on a wide array of issues including, but not limited to waste, recycling, resiliency, and environmental equity.

But we must go further.

We want to plan for a healthy, clean future for our children and grandchildren.

We need to envision a future without fossil fuels and non-renewable energy assets.

These investments will enhance our air quality and public health in the long-run, educate future generations, and create tens of thousands of green jobs.

To get there, I propose we immediately do the following:

1. Partner with higher education institutions, private entities, and the Queens EDC to create sustainability innovation labs
2. Utilize the power of my budget for investment in city-owned buildings in Queens to implement solar power

3. Ensure all new developments are sustainable.
4. Partner with the private sector on public/private partnerships to help make private homes more sustainable

Once we achieve those short-term goals, I then want us to get to a place where we make Queens fully renewable by 2030.

To guide us there, I propose we:

1. Ensure full implementation of Local Law 97, the Climate Mobilization Act.
2. Create renewable energy sites such as Rikers Island, Edgemere Landfill in the Rockaways, and the Creedmoor Campus, to facilitate the closure of fossil fuel plants in Queens.
3. Work to create battery storage coupled with solar on city-owned buildings, making them fully green in Queens by 2030.
4. Partner with federal and state entities to protect Queens from the long-term effects of climate change by fighting for long term investment in resiliency measures.

5. Fighting for a Green New Deal for public housing

I want to acknowledge my dear friend and personal adviser in all things environmental - Council Member Costa Constantinides.

Costa is a champion for a greener city, and we would never have gotten this far without his advocacy and tenaciousness.

From the Climate Mobilization Act to Renewable Rikers, Costa has truly changed the conversation about sustainability.

We could not have this framework without him, so I am deeply grateful.

I also want to thank Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez who has been a pioneer, leading on environmental justice issues on the federal level.

She represents many of the values of Queens.

We also can never forget Queens was among the places hardest hit by Superstorm Sandy.

We need to act fast to better prepare for a future natural disaster.

Lastly, we must talk about our borough's community boards and other appointments.

Our belief in the human capital of Queens calls for involving more residents in our democracy.

We know the more of us who participate, the more likely we are to have success.

That is why my team began transforming our community boards.

Our community boards are vital to ensuring we vigilantly protect and improve our quality of life.

Community board members consistently have been crucial voices at the table.

Our community boards are the “small d” democratic institutions, letting community members have a voice in the decisions that shape their communities.

We are thankful to the leaders in our community who volunteer their time to advance the neighborhoods they love.

But in order for the Queens community boards to excel at greater heights, the boards need to better reflect the diversity of the neighborhoods they serve.

Most of you who have attended a community board meeting know there needs to be a makeover from top to bottom.

My office is spearheading several reforms that will not only empower the borough's boards but will help deliver a level of transparency our boards desperately need.

That is why I am prioritizing four areas.

1. Board Diversity and Representation
2. Member Conduct
3. Public Engagement and Open Meetings
4. The Modernization of Board Bylaws

I will roll out a comprehensive plan in the coming weeks which further details these key areas.

In addition to Queens' community boards, there are other ways for Queens leaders to get involved - like through appointments made by me and engagement in many of the task forces my office oversees.

My office recently completed the process of engaging civic-minded individuals and organizations across Queens to serve on the aforementioned Queens Solid Waste Advisory Board.

I am also looking at my authority to appoint individuals to various organizations throughout Queens and the rest of the city.

As we look at new appointments, I will take the same equity lens mentioned for community boards to ensure we have true diversity and representation of our borough in these different entities.

It is important that the voices of Queens are reflective of the people of Queens – all of us.

I am committed to this effort.

My office also has various task forces which we manage, and we will ensure they better reflect our borough.

Whether it be the Queens General Assembly, the Queens Immigration Task Force, the Queens Civic Engagement Committee, or any other convening body.

We will finally have our board memberships reflect the diversity of our borough's population.

And we will work together to make our community boards more engaging and transparent for all.

The State of our Borough is not where it ought to be.

For we have been decimated by the health pandemic, the economic crisis, and racial injustices.

But these issues do not need to define us.

We, as a Borough, as a people, have an opportunity to choose how we define ourselves.

As a borough, we will not stay down.

Queens, we will rise.

My office is always here to serve you.

We will work diligently to secure a responsible budget that works for all Queens residents, designating funds towards healthcare, supporting career training, combating food insecurity, providing services to domestic violence survivors, aiding our veterans,

protecting our youth and our borough's most vulnerable, and so much more.

We will continue to promote tourism to Queens, support our cultural institutions, stimulate our neighborhood economies, and demonstrate the resilience, vibrancy, and richness of our borough.

And something that I am personally excited for: this Friday, March 5 we will partner with the Queens Drive-In once again to present the premiere of the sequel to "Coming to America ", a quintessential "Queens" movie which features our borough as a major character.

It will be one of only two in-person screenings of the sequel held in the United States!

As we reach the conclusion of my first State of the Borough address, I stand here and think of the titans before me, those who helped shape me and those who aided me on my path to becoming President of the great Borough of Queens - especially as I reflect on Black History Month, which just passed, and Women's History Month, which we are now in.

I think of David Dinkins.

I think of Claire Shulman.

I think of my mom and dad.

My wife, Tameeka, and our son, D3.

And all the hardworking staff members who are among the best public servants I have ever met.

I'll end by saying this:

Yes, I want you to challenge us to do more.

But beyond that, I want you to connect with my office and build with us.

Help us because together we are stronger.

Our message today to all, hear it loud and hear it proud: Queens will lead the way out of this pandemic.

Queens will lead the efforts to address health disparities, economic disparities, and racial and gender disparities.

We will create a more just society, a more just borough, and together we will improve the quality of life for all who call Queens home.

That is what we as the residents and workers of Queens do, we lead.
Queens leads, Queens is rising!

Thank you, God bless you all!

And now I am proud to present our final part of the program, a performance by local musician and small business owner Ashley Keiko.