



Donovan Richards Jr.
QUEENS BOROUGH PRESIDENT

STATE OF THE BOROUGH 2022

(As prepared for delivery)

INTRODUCTION

Is Queens in the house?! Is Queens back or what?!

Welcome to the 2022 State of the Borough!

It's great to give this speech today at LaGuardia Community College, a crown jewel of this borough. Thank you to President Ken Adams and the entire LaGuardia team for hosting us today.

To my partners in government who you heard from earlier, thank you for being here.

Attorney General Tish James, Mayor Eric Adams, Council Speaker Adrienne Adams and Secretary of State Robert Rodriguez, your words today mean the world to me.

To our performers and faith leaders who participated in this celebration, thank you.

To my 70-person team at Borough Hall who serve Queens with unmatched professionalism and grace, thank you. Let's give it up for them.

To my family, and especially the First Lady of Queens, Tameeka Richards, your unconditional love and support has made all of this possible. You truly are my rocks.

Today is all about celebrating all that we've built over the course of my first 19 months, and all that we will build going forward. It's a record I am deeply proud of.

But I recognize just how bittersweet this moment is for so many of us in Queens — the epicenter of the epicenter of this pandemic.

Today is not a day that came easy or without pain.

For more than 10,000 of our Queens neighbors, today is a day that never came at all.

To honor their memories, please stand if you're able, and join me in observing a moment of silence.

MOMENT OF SILENCE

Thank you.

Their legacies are eternal.

What's also eternal is our gratitude to the health care heroes, first responders and 1199 union workers who got Queens through its darkest days.

HEALTH CARE/COVID RECOVERY

The truth of the matter is that we have nothing if we don't have our health. And never have we faced a health care challenge like COVID-19.

So when we took office, we didn't throw any big parties. **We got to work.**

Those first few months were all about getting shots in arms. And not only were we the first county in New York State to reach 1 million vaccinations, we were the first to reach 2 million as well.

And as of today, Queens has a higher percentage of fully vaccinated residents than **any other borough** at 86 percent. More than 1.9 million of us have gotten those first two shots.

A special shout out goes to the Mets, who worked with my office and others on opening Citi Field as a mass vaccination site. In less than one year, **three hundred thousand** COVID vaccinations were administered at Citi Field — more than any other mass vaccination site in the city.

The Mets stepped up to the plate and hit a home run in our moment of need, and I thank Steve Cohen and the entire organization for that.

Let's give it up for our hometown team, and **let's bring a World Series title home to Queens while we're at it!**

We pushed hard to get as many people vaccinated as we could. We sounded the alarm on dramatically lower vaccination rates in Southeast Queens and Rockaway. We hosted vaccine town halls to dispel misinformation about the shots. We even organized a Vax Week of Action, all while connecting these communities with on-the-ground resources to get those rates up.

Today, at least 75 percent of adults in every Queens ZIP code but one are fully vaccinated. And I want to shout out the entire Queens delegation of the City Council for your tireless advocacy to boost vax rates in your districts. It's been a true team effort.

I'm also working with the Council to get my plan to establish an NYC Office of COVID Recovery passed.

We're more than two years into the pandemic. We shouldn't be making the same missteps we made in 2020. There needs to be one person responsible for coordinating our city's response — one person we can hold accountable — not 10 different commissioners testifying before the Council on the same topic.

Thank you to the Council's Health Committee chair, Lynn Schulman, for your support on this issue. We both know that such an office would help direct resources to our hardest-hit areas, like East Elmhurst and Rockaway, where COVID-19 has done so much damage.

Just in Far Rockaway and Edgemere, we've lost 617 of our neighbors — the second-highest total in Queens and fourth-highest in the city.

Let's not kid ourselves. This is nothing new.

Rockaway residents experience diabetes and hypertension at higher rates than the rest of Queens, while infant mortality, cancer and heart disease are disturbingly higher as well.

But are there enough medical services in Rockaway to care for our families? Not even close.

We need more beds. We need to reverse the decades of disinvestment communities of color like Far Rockaway have experienced for generations.

And that's exactly what we're fighting to achieve.

Just a few weeks ago, we scored a commitment from Health + Hospitals to build out a new Gotham Health facility right in the heart of Far Rockaway.

Finally, our families will have access to the kind of high-quality primary and preventative health care services that so many other communities take for granted.

Finally, Far Rockaway gets what it deserves.

The work continues, but thank you Councilmember Selvena Brooks-Powers for your advocacy and thank you Mayor Adams for helping us get this across the finish line.

When we talk about disparities in health care, there are few communities more impacted than Black women, who in New York City are eight times more likely to die of pregnancy-related causes than white women.

And with Roe vs. Wade on the Supreme Court's chopping block, let's remember that criminalizing abortion in red states will disproportionately impact communities of color and lower-income areas.

People with means would travel to states like New York where abortion care is and will always be legal.

So let's leave no stone unturned to expand access to abortion care for those without privilege.

Let's make New York a sanctuary state for those seeking a safe abortion.

For Rockaway mothers who decide to bring a child into this world, we're making history this summer at St. John's Episcopal Hospital, where work will begin soon on a new labor and delivery unit that I was proud to put \$1.4 million toward.

Because under no circumstances should a Rockaway mom or any mom have to cross a bridge to have her baby.

Every woman deserves to give birth in her own community, and we're fighting to make that a reality for all our Queens moms.

At the end of the day, our hospitals are the true lifelines of our communities. And I couldn't be prouder to have allocated nearly \$19 million in capital dollars to health care facilities across Queens over my first 19 months.

\$7.5 million for Elmhurst Hospital for projects like a new intensive care unit.

\$5.5 million for Queens Hospital, for purchases like a new cancer-treating linear accelerator.

More than \$1.5 million for both Jamaica Hospital and Mount Sinai Queens.

The list goes on and on.

The pandemic did so much damage to our health care system.

But that's exactly where I'm planting the flag of our Queens comeback.

Together, we've delivered.

I will not accept being underfunded and overcrowded. And I will not rest until health care in Queens is more accessible, more affordable and more equitable for all our families, regardless of ZIP code.

HATE CRIMES/PUBLIC SAFETY

But beyond the pandemic, there are growing threats to the health of our families that neither Moderna nor Pfizer can protect us from.

From Black shoppers in Buffalo to Asian spa workers in Atlanta to toddlers in Texas, it feels like we're in a constant state of mourning. And not even Queens has been spared from this trauma.

One year ago this Sunday, 10-year-old Justin Wallace was shot in Far Rockaway, killing him three days shy of his 11th birthday.

Two months earlier, Astoria mother of two Gudelia Vallinas was killed by a stray bullet.

And that cycle of trauma hasn't slowed down at all in 2022.

GuiYing Ma died after being hit with a rock in Corona.

Three Sikh men were attacked in Richmond Hill.

A Korean-American woman was stabbed outside Louie's Pizza in Elmhurst. She might not be here today if it weren't for Louie and Charlie Suljovic stepping in and saving her life.

There's no vaccine for violence, or an inoculation for intolerance, but that doesn't mean we're helpless to hate.

First, let me say loudly and proudly for all of Queens to hear:

Black Lives Matter.

Stop Asian Hate.

End Anti-Semitism.

But it's not enough to just say it. We have to live it.

So today, I'm announcing the creation of a Hate Crimes Task Force — including law enforcement, DA Melinda Katz's office, anti-hate activists, city agencies and community leaders. This group knows that combating hate must be an inclusive effort, not a top-down strategy.

So we're making sure communities most often targeted are at the head of the table. From the Asian American Federation to the Queens Jewish Community Council to Voces Latinas, we are united in our mission to eradicate hate.

Because we will never accept hate of any kind in The World's Borough.

Hate isn't the only thing on the rise, and I know all of us in this room have been troubled by the rise in crime we've seen this year.

To be clear, murders are actually down citywide this year compared to last year. The declines in Queens North and Queens South are outpacing the citywide decline. But that's obviously not enough.

That's why I've established a monthly series of safety forums between my office, NYPD brass and community leadership, because communication is critical to our success.

I know what it's like to lose someone to gun violence. One of my best friends, Darnell Patterson, was killed when he was just 19 years old. And I wish more than ever that the crisis management system we have today existed back then.

Because today, we have some tremendous leaders in our borough who save lives every day.

To K. Bain of Community Capacity Development, Kevin Livingston of 100 Suits, Erica Ford of Life Camp, Rock Safe Streets, the Feurtado brothers, thank you for all that you do.

To save even more lives, it's time we expand the cure violence movement in every corner of Queens.

Efforts like these are exactly how to combat crime effectively. It also helps when the NYPD isn't already stretched thin to begin with. And in Eastern Queens, the 105th Precinct has been strained more than any other in the city.

But no longer will those officers be assigned the impossible task of covering 354 lane miles — the same distance from Rosedale to Rochester.

After **50 years** of community advocacy from folks like Bess DeBetham, the leadership of Congressman Greg Meeks and my efforts to keep funding for the project alive, we **finally** broke ground last fall on the \$104 million dollar 116th Precinct, complete with its own built-in community center.

The people of Eastern Queens are taxpayers like everyone else, and they deserve the same basic promise of safety afforded to everyone else. With faster response times and officers more dedicated to the needs of their block, that's what they will have.

But new police precincts are not the end-all, be-all. Policing is inherently reactive, and we can't just police or prosecute crime away.

That's where investments Speaker Adams and I shepherded, like \$92 million for a new community center in Roy Wilkins Park, come in.

But we need to replicate that 5 and 10 times over, like we're doing with the expansion of the Variety Boys and Girls Club in Astoria.

We need to meaningfully invest in the root causes of crime:

That's how to make our streets safer places to live, work and play.

I understand this. Governor Hochul understands it too.

That's why I couldn't be more excited to stand here today and announce a partnership with the Governor called Queens Forward — a historic, holistic investment in our borough and the families who call it home.

Queens Forward will be a bottom-up approach to community advancement centering open space, food security, education, economic development, violence prevention, health care, affordable housing and resiliency.

Details to come, but the capital investments to be made in each area will expand opportunity, create thousands of jobs, make our communities safer and help erase many of the inequities that our historically overlooked communities have felt for generations.

Instead of deliberate disinvestment, we'll be strengthening existing programs and creating new ones, all with the same goal in mind: Ensuring those closest to the pain are closest to the power.

This is the definition of building back better.

This is the embodiment of the Queens Comeback.

And this is going to prove without a shadow of a doubt that Queens is the future of New York City.

These historic and necessary investments will make Queens safer and fairer than ever.

But there is a place a short drive over a bridge away where fairness simply does not exist.

A place where generations of people have been sent to languish and lapse into an endless cycle of crime and incarceration.

That place is Rikers Island — the living, breathing personification of a system designed to fail communities of color. The new Jim Crow.

Kalief Browder's family knows it. The families of the 6 people who've died on Rikers already this year know it too.

Every time I tour Rikers, like I did two months ago, I see so many brilliant Black and brown men and women who look just like me, come from the communities I came from and share my story.

In them, I see myself.

I was one or two wrong decisions away from ending up in that cage when I was younger. Just like many of them were one or two right decisions away from being on this stage and giving this speech.

So if we're serious about investing in the root causes of crime, we need to be serious about investing in individuals who are already incarcerated to ensure this is the last time they'll ever see the inside of a cell.

It's time we start treating them like human beings.

Detainees at Rikers take college-level classes and participate in other personal growth programs. But when I visited Rikers in the spring, we heard from folks about a lack of advocates who could testify in court to their efforts to better themselves.

That's unacceptable. Let's create a detainee advocacy program that would do just that. If you're determined to walk a different path, that deserves to be known.

How much longer are we going to watch people suffer at Rikers? How many more people have to die before things change?

We're spending \$500,000 per detainee a year, according to the Comptroller's Office. Imagine what we can do with that money?

Before even more New Yorkers die, Rikers needs to close.

SUSTAINABILITY

I've never been more secure in my belief that Rikers must close. But eventually, the question will become what happens with the island once it closes. To me, it's clear:

We have an incredible opportunity to turn Rikers Island into a clean power hub. And guiding what Renewable Rikers should look like is one of the top priorities of Operation Urban Sustainability, a working group of environmentalists, clean energy leaders, transit advocates and others, which I launched this spring.

This group will be tasked with taking a holistic approach toward issues like environmental justice, education, farming, flood prevention and more, with its findings informing my office's efforts to build a more sustainable, resilient Queens.

And never have we needed an organization like this more than we do right now.

This fall marks 10 years since Superstorm Sandy changed the course of history for our borough, killing dozens and inflicting billions of dollars in damage across Queens.

In August, we'll mark one year since Hurricane Ida flooded neighborhoods that had never flooded before, leaving a trail of death and destruction from East Elmhurst to Flushing to Jamaica.

These two storms were two of the most severe examples of extreme weather we have ever experienced, but what's just as dangerous is the reluctance to see sustainability in a holistic manner.

I'm proud of the work my office is doing, but here in Queens, leading on clean energy is nothing new.

As the former Environmental Protection Chairman in the City Council, I helped pave the way for the use of geothermal energy in new developments, which generates clean and cheap power directly from the earth below the building.

And it's only fitting that New York City's geothermal hub is the Rockaway Peninsula, the epicenter of Sandy's fury.

The Beach Green Dune apartment complex is one incredible example of how geothermal energy can be harnessed. And right across the street, we're building out Arverne East, which will be the first net-zero community in the entire city.

Arverne East must be a model for how New York City builds going forward. We need to think far beyond just the number of units or the kind of amenities a building has. We need to think about how each development impacts the very ground it sits on and the sky it reaches into.

Up in North Queens, my office and community leaders in Astoria banded together to defeat NRG's plan to build a peaker plant. No longer will we accept the label Asthma Alley, and let me thank my brother, former Councilmember Costa Constantinides for his work to deliver a cleaner, healthier Astoria.

From now on, Astoria is going to be a causeway of clean energy, thanks to the Champlain Hudson Power Express. Operational in just a few years, the Express will pipe water and wind power from Canada directly into this community, creating jobs, powering homes and helping end our reliance on fossil fuels.

These massive projects are some of the most critical and timely investments we can make as a borough, but when it comes to climate change, every little bit helps.

A handful of Queens schools have hydroponic farms already, centering food justice and urban agriculture in our children's education. And we're plating even more seeds.

Just this year, I've allocated more than \$500,000 to fund three more farms at Richmond Hill High School, Math Science Research and Technology High School in Cambria Heights and PS 223 in Jamaica.

Let's use the influx of federal dollars unlocked through President Biden's Infrastructure Bill to replace our aging sewer and water utilities across Queens, which will not only prevent flooding but ensure our families have clean water to drink.

Southeast Queens, where I helped deliver \$2 billion for infrastructure upgrades, is proof of how important such investments are.

Blocks from St. Albans to Springfield Gardens that frequently flooded during the lightest of showers stayed dry during Hurricane Ida, and that's no accident.

To our partners in DC, we need more federal investment to replicate this kind of success all over Queens. **Let's bring home the bacon.**

Meanwhile, the Queens Solid Waste Advisory Board, which I recognized last year, continues to inform our recycling and resiliency efforts.

Queens leads the city in solar panel installation, but let's build that lead even further and make Queens the solar panel capital of the country.

Council Member Shekar Krishnan, the Parks Committee chair, has a 5-point plan to expand and enhance open space and ensure one percent of the city budget goes to parks. Let's get that passed immediately.

We do all this because our families deserve clean air to breathe and clean water to drink.

Our children deserve to inherit a healthy borough once our time here is done. **That's** what I want for my son and all our kids, and I will do everything in my power to make Queens a global clean energy leader.

TRANSPORTATION

Now, a big part of that mission is rooted in lowering greenhouse gas emissions.

So when the Port Authority came out this spring with its list of proposals to connect LaGuardia Airport with mass transit, it was clear to me what the most promising options were.

Regarding a ferry to LaGuardia, we're a city surrounded on basically all sides by water, and we need to better leverage our waterways.

A ferry is also the most environmentally friendly option. And for a city that has been on the frontlines of the climate change crisis, that has to be a part of the calculus.

So let's make some waves and add a LaGuardia stop to the N-Y-C Ferry's Astoria route, potentially getting thousands of cars off our roads.

We also want light rail and bus rapid transit, which we need to get done immediately.

When it comes to existing service, thank you Governor Hochul for making the Q70 bus free. Now let's make it **permanently** free.

If you're from Queens like I am, you know it's quicker on some days to get to Florida by plane than Manhattan by bus and train. That's especially true for our hard-working families in transit deserts, like Northeast and Southwest Queens.

The first plan a few years ago was rough. It united every part of Queens against it.

But the new draft is a real win for our transit deserts across Queens, and I'm confident it will be a game-changer for families from Ridgewood to Rosedale and beyond.

It's time for transit equity in this borough. And transit equity means ensuring our streets truly and equally belong to everyone.

That's why I put \$1 million into safety improvements along Northern Boulevard in Western Queens.

That's why I'm calling on the City to extend the Queens Boulevard redesign beyond Borough Hall and down to Jamaica, so the full length of the boulevard is safe and accessible for all who use it.

That's why I put \$3 million in capital funding toward enhancing pedestrian and cyclist safety on the Queensboro Bridge last year, **which I'm demanding DOT get to work on ASAP.**

With traffic violence higher than it's been in years, there's no time to waste. Only time to act. And that's exactly what we're doing, because lives are on the line.

Another place where I couldn't be prouder of what we've accomplished is 34th Avenue in Jackson Heights, where we have revolutionized how to develop open space.

The pandemic exposed so much inequity in our system, including an unequal distribution of park land. But my office, elected officials and the 34th Avenue Open Streets Coalition have created an incredible blueprint on how to right that wrong, in the form of the 34th Avenue linear park.

Every time I visit, I'm amazed. From tai chi to hopscotch to a farmer's market each Sunday, Jackson Heights deserves so much praise for how they've utilized this space with such innovation. And I couldn't be prouder to have helped push for the park's extension to Junction Boulevard.

Now let's take that blueprint and build out even more locations. I want Open Streets in every corner of this borough, from Whitestone to Woodhaven to Jamaica, and we are fighting to make that a reality for families across Queens.

MTA, if you're listening, don't think I'm letting you off the hook!

Making the discounted CityTicket available during weekdays instead of just weekends was a really important move to lower costs for families. But if we're serious about getting people onto the rails at low cost, it's time we extend the Atlantic Ticket beyond Atlantic Terminal in Brooklyn.

Let's finally give Southeast Queens families a direct line into Manhattan. One ticket. No transfers.

The program has sold over 2 million tickets and generated more than \$17 million in revenue. I'm willing to bet those numbers will climb higher when we expand it. And speaking of expanding, let's make the Atlantic Ticket available to riders in Rockaway too.

While we're at it, let's bring the Fair Fares program to CUNY students, like those here at LaGuardia, who qualify for financial aid.

Where I will give both the MTA and Governor Hochul credit is the Interborough Express.

By adding passenger service to an old freight rail line connecting Brooklyn and Queens, we can connect thousands of families on either side of the border to new economic opportunities, all while dramatically cutting commute times.

We're talking 40 minutes from Bay Ridge to Jackson Heights, all while giving families in transit deserts like Maspeth and Middle Village another transit option. **You can't beat it.**

When we talk about the Queens Comeback, we're not just talking about getting back to the way things were. Because if you ask almost anyone in Queens, they'd tell you that the old way of getting around never worked in the first place.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

That is why Queens will lead the way when it comes to transit innovation. Ultimately, we have no choice but to lead, especially if we're serious about being open for business.

Because without an efficient transit system, we'll never be able to truly get our economy off the ground.

And after what we've been through, we can't afford any more disruption.

When I took office in December 2020, Queens' unemployment rate was 12.1 percent. Today, it's down to 5.5 percent. But it wasn't easy getting here.

Businesses that managed to stay open through the worst months of the pandemic were struggling to keep the lights on and their doors open.

Innovation was being stifled and dreams were being dashed.

So we got right to work.

In my first week on the job, I partnered with the Economic Development Corporation to create the Queens Small Business Grant Program, funded generously by the Steve and Alexandra Cohen Foundation and made possible by our friends at Pursuit and the Queens Chamber of Commerce.

The \$17 million program to support small businesses in communities hardest-hit by the pandemic was only a few months old when I gave this speech last year, so let me give you the final numbers.

757 businesses, from Nepali restaurants in Elmhurst to beauty boutiques in Jamaica, were approved for no-strings-attached funding, with an average grant size of \$18,500

Of those 757 accepted businesses, 613 are minority owned. 326 are owned by women.

That number includes 36 street vendors as well — hard-working New Yorkers who shouldn't be demonized or criminalized. Instead, the city must expand licensing opportunities for street vendors who help give places like Corona Plaza and Roosevelt Avenue their character.

Our small businesses help give our neighborhoods their identities, and they deserve a city that acts to protect them. That's why I brought Small Business Services out to Jamaica this spring, to hear from the businesses along Jamaica Avenue about the barriers holding them back.

From that tour, I've created the Downtown Jamaica Improvement Council with Councilmember Nantasha Williams, bringing together city agencies, business owners, electeds and others. Together, we'll fast-track improvements like tweaking the Jamaica Avenue busway, fixing the crumbling sidewalks, creating a small business grant program, improving public safety and so much more.

We've already seen success, with the Police Commissioner's announcement last month of permanent posts for officers. And this group is just getting started.

Jamaica is a gateway to Queens. And it should be a true "live, work and play" community. But generations of disinvestment have led to lost jobs and dollars to places like Long Island, when it's Jamaica that should be that prime destination.

That changes now.

But when it comes to the wider Queens economy, our bigger corporate partners have a critical role to play in our comeback, starting with Bartlett Dairy.

Bartlett moved its distribution operation to New Jersey a few years ago, but we're bringing them back to Southeast Queens to the tune of nearly **200 union jobs**, at least 50 percent of which will be set aside for local residents. That facility is being built as we speak, and I couldn't be more excited for that ribbon cutting in the fall.

There is no entity arguably as important to our borough, however, then JetBlue, our hometown airline.

So when rumors started swirling that JetBlue's headquarters was ready to fly south to Florida, it was time to make like an air traffic controller and ground that flight.

After a few months of negotiations between myself, Senator Schumer and JetBlue CEO Robin Hayes, we're proud to say that JetBlue's headquarters is staying right here in Long Island City.

We know it's not good enough for big business to operate in Queens but ignore the community it calls home. So we will be relentless in ensuring any corporation that wants to have a footprint here, hires here.

Queens is open for business.

When it comes to aviation, the successes we've seen at LaGuardia have been nothing short of revolutionary for our borough.

No longer is our airport famous for being so bad, that it's the butt of a future president's joke.

Instead, we have a world-class facility that Queens deserves.

We can sit here all day and talk about the beauty of the airport and how important that first impression we're giving to people is.

But to me, as Borough President, what I care about most is how this historic \$8 billion investment in uplifts North Queens and the borough as a whole.

And I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that LaGuardia's redevelopment has been one of best things to ever happen to this borough.

After all, it's hard to argue with \$850 million in contracts to Queens-based businesses, thousands of solar panels on the roof, hundreds of Queens residents hired and benefits you wouldn't even think of, like the renovation of the Elmjack Little League fields.

The best part, though? LaGuardia is just half the story. The other half is about to take flight at JFK, where we're investing \$15 billion in our future.

We've already broken ground on the new \$1.5 billion expansion of Terminal 4, which will create 1,500 jobs alone, with groundbreaking for Terminals 1 and 6 coming up this year. And when all is said and done, between LaGuardia and JFK, we're talking well over \$1 billion in contracts for Queens businesses and tens of thousands of good-paying jobs for our residents, many of which will be union jobs.

To our union brothers and sisters at 32BJ and New York City Building Trades, know that I will never stop fighting to ensure you reap the pay and the benefits you deserve.

We're resurrecting our airports and rejuvenating our small business community, but how do we build a borough economy that lives on the cutting edge of innovation?

That's what I tasked Deputy Borough President Ebony Young to find out.

Introducing the Queens Tech Challenge, coming up this fall. Think "Shark Tank," but for our local start-ups and anyone with some data and a dream, held in partnership with Microsoft, Facebook and Google.

Pitch your business to a panel of judges. Get approved. Get funding. Simple as that.

After that will come the Queens Tech Fair, our effort to eliminate inequity in our growing tech industry.

29 percent of New York City residents are Latin and 24 percent are Black. But when it comes to the makeup of our city's tech workforce, those numbers fall to just 12 percent and 11 percent, respectively. Women make up half our city, but fill just 35 percent of tech jobs.

This fair will be a down payment on our push for change.

We'll be diving headfirst into connecting Queens residents from disadvantaged communities with workforce development, mentorship and job training programs. That includes a 9-month coding program offered by Pursuit for those facing income insecurity.

The next Apple or Twitter ***will*** be born right here in Queens. And we're fighting to ensure that happens.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

So who among us is going to be the next Tim Cook or Steve Jobs? There's a good chance it's someone in a foreign country right now, planning a move to Queens.

Of the 2.4 million people who call Queens home, half were born in a country other than the United States. It's the story of my own father, Donovan Richards Senior, who came here from Jamaica and became a citizen just a few years ago.

We are nearly 200 countries and more than 350 languages strong. Countless races, religions, ethnicities, sexual orientations, gender identities — all represented right here in our borough, the most diverse place on the planet.

This is our badge of honor to wear proudly on our sleeve. It's not enough to just be diverse, though. We have to have a government as diverse as the people it serves.

Which brings me to our community boards.

Queens' 14 boards are integral to the function of government and the outcomes in our communities. But the fact of the matter is that in many cases, they didn't look like the neighborhoods they represent.

So not only did we get to work, we made our mark.

By digitizing the application and simplifying the process last year, we nearly doubled our old record with almost **950 applications**. Combined with this year's total, more than **1,800 people** have signed up for the chance to be a board member — the majority of whom had never served on a board before.

Last year's class of 110 first-time appointees was 62 percent women and 74 percent under the age of 45.

This year's class of 94 first-timers is 39 percent Black or Latin, 21 percent parents of schoolkids, 20 percent immigrants and 14 percent Asian American.

Making our 14 boards look, sound and feel like their communities is a commitment that is iron clad in my office.

We have to make sure the halls of government, from City Hall to our community boards, are truly inclusive in every sense of the word.

That's how we celebrate diversity. With action. Not lip service.

Beyond our community boards, this past year has been a busy one for new initiatives.

We launched Civics in the Classroom and the Queens Civic Engagement Committee to keep our kids and our communities informed.

We launched the Queens Nonprofit Network to better connect our borough nonprofits with resources. And in the last year, we've secured more than \$300,000 in public and private funding for network members.

We created a working group of NYCHA tenant associations to better address the systemic issues impacting residents from Queensbridge to Carleton Manor. No longer will the city ignore the plight of our public housing families.

We launched a Cannabis Task Force to put Queens on top of the cannabis industry. It's our borough that should be flying the highest in this new economy.

But ultimately, this office is about building relationships with every single person who calls this borough home. And that means going out and meeting them where they are.

It's government that should be coming to you, not the other way around.

That's why I couldn't be prouder to announce Borough Hall on Your Block — our newest and boldest way of doing just that.

Every few months, we'll be taking Borough Hall on the road to a different section of Queens as a way to ensure ***no one*** goes unseen.

All the programming you've come to expect from my office, we're bringing it ***right to your block***.

I don't want you to just see us. I want you to know us. I want you to feel our presence and our dedication to serving you to the best of our ability.

ADDITIONAL INVESTMENTS

I could stand up here all day and talk to you about what we've accomplished, but I've got a borough to run. So here's a few more things I'm proud of.

We're launching a Youth Council to create mentorship and leadership opportunities for our kids. Too many of our young people are being lost down paths of poverty, crime and wasted potential, and it's time we support our youth-centered organizations doing the work on the ground.

We teamed up with the Department of Veterans Services to reopen its satellite office at Queens Borough Hall. For two years, that office was closed because of the pandemic. But more veterans call Queens home than any other borough, and they shouldn't have to leave this borough to get the resources they need.

So that's what they have again.

That's also why we'll be working with the City Council to pass legislation to create a Veteran-Owned Business contracting system, much like the MWBE system.

Those who fought for this country should live in a country that fights for them. And that's the kind of government we're building here in Queens.

For many of our immigrant families building a life in Queens, the work of finding and accessing the resources they need can be grueling.

That's why I promised last year to create an Immigrant Welcome Center and help our neighbors navigate the bureaucracy. That's exactly what we did with the help of Assemblywoman Catalina Cruz, a trail-blazer in her own right.

Since it opened last June, our Welcome Center, ***the first of its kind in New York City***, has directly served more than ***400 people***.

Many of those 400 were looking for help applying to the Excluded Workers Fund.

The demand is clearly there, so I say to the state, let's replenish and reopen the fund. We can't leave anyone behind, regardless of immigration status.

Our land use department has been hard at work helping shape the future of our borough. After creating nearly ***10,000 units*** of affordable housing while in the City Council, we approved nearly ***700*** units across Queens in 2021, while signing off on hundreds of thousands of square feet of new community and commercial space.

So far in 2022, we've approved 500 more affordable housing units, including ***465*** alone down in Rockaway with Resilient Edgemere.

That's all while holding developers to commitments of 30 percent MWBE participation and lofty local hiring standards.

Now is not a time for NIMBYism. Now is the time to say that housing is a fundamental human right. Now is the time to invest even more in programs like Community Land Trusts, which I made possible through legislation in the City Council.

Now is the time to right the wrong of Queens receiving only 13 percent of the City's affordable housing budget.

The city must do better to ensure Queens is much more of a focal point when it comes to housing, for both tenants and property owners who pay far too much in property taxes.

Queens is the spot. More people want to live here than ever before, and with that comes pressure to deliver the housing stock we deserve. So let's make that investment, because our future depends on it.

When it comes to all things capital funding, we've hit a home run over the last year and a half. We've secured nearly \$130 million in funding to distribute across our borough, and here's where your money is going.

We're talking more than \$22 million to our schools, from new STEM labs and technology to new playgrounds. And while I'm on schools, all of our children deserve equal access to gifted and talented programs in all our neighborhoods.

Culture never closed in Queens, and neither did our wallet. For our cultural organizations, we've given nearly \$20 million for projects like the creation of the borough's first Children's Museum at the Queens Museum, the expansion of the Queens County Farm Museum in Little Neck and funding for the Louis Armstrong House.

\$16 million for parks. \$16 million for libraries. \$10 million for our CUNY campuses. \$5 million for transportation projects.

And for our elders, I worked hard to get my office's senior service funds restored, after they were cut two years ago, unlocking even more funding for senior programming.

Queens is getting the money!

CONCLUSION

To serve as your Queens Borough President is the honor of a lifetime. But there are no words to explain what it means to serve at this particular moment in our history.

You know, when I stood in the shadow of the Unisphere in 2019 and launched my campaign for BP, this was not the borough I believed I would inherit.

Who we are as a borough, and who we all are as human beings, has been fundamentally altered.

Our fragility as a society, and mortality as people, have been laid bare by this pandemic.

When doubt starts to seep in, when the days seem to get longer and harder, I think of who was standing by my side in Flushing Meadows that October day: Claire Shulman.

I think of how she also inherited a borough in shock.

I think of how she handled every difficult day with an unmatched dedication and drive.

I think of her undying love of Queens and its people.

She left us in 2020. And there is nothing I wouldn't give to have her here with us today.

But I still feel her presence. When I walk through the doors of the office that used to be hers, I can still hear her voice bouncing off the walls.

She tells me to press on.

To turn our shared pain into shared progress, and forge a path to prosperity for all our families to walk along.

To not just build back, but to build back better than ever.

Because Queens deserves nothing less.

My friends, the State of our Borough is bruised, but not beaten.

Dented, but not defeated.

From the ashes, Queens is rising faster and flying higher than anyone thought was possible just a few years ago.

Because that is what Queens does — *Queens leads.*

Queens takes a back seat to no one.

From Flushing to Forest Hills, Jamaica to Jackson Heights, Ridgewood to Rockaway, Corona to College Point and Queensbridge to Queens Village, we're building a stronger, fairer Queens for all our families.

And there is no limit to what we can achieve when we work together.

Thank you. God bless you, Queens.

I'm Queens Borough President Donovan Richards. Now let's get back to work.