

Believe
IN DISTRICT B



Councilmember | **LATOYA CANTRELL**

Inaugural State of the District Address
Councilmember LaToya Cantrell
4/30/2013

Well, I'd like to thank everyone for taking the time to come out tonight. I'm sure each of you could find something to do other than spend an evening with an elected official; so I believe your attendance this evening is a testament to the fact that we must be doing something important here tonight.

I've invited all of you here to talk about the state of District B in much the same way the governor speaks of the state of the state and the mayor speaks of the state of the city because we have big challenges facing us in the district and even bigger opportunities for success if we address those challenges together—as one district; and with the help of the administration, as one city; and with the help of our state legislators, as one state.

Since assuming office in December of last year, I am happy to say that I have, with the help of my staff and concerned constituents, hit the ground running to address the challenges facing the district. In that time, I have become a member of the Cable and Telecommunications Committee, the Economic Development and Special Projects Committee, the Housing and Human Needs Committee, and the Youth and Recreation Committee.

I am also an alternate on a number of other committees, including the Criminal Justice Committee, and I am the chair of the Health, Education and Social Services Committee.

Over the past few months, I have met with residents from Downtown to Gert Town, from Mid-City to Zion City, and everywhere in between. I've led roundtable discussions with educational leaders, ministers and with members of our city's LGBT and Latino communities, some of whom, thanks to Puentes and Vanessa Flores at Translate NOLA, are able to listen to tonight's address in Spanish. Welcome!

The Central Business District, under the watchful eye of partners like Mr. Kurt Weigle at the Downtown Development District, is experiencing a renaissance, with recent figures indicating that New Orleans leads major metropolitan areas in the number of downtown private sector jobs; while Jeffrey Schwartz and our friends at Broad Community Connections are revitalizing the Broad Street corridor and will play an integral role in the million-dollar redevelopment of the old Schwegmann's supermarket; and the construction of new medical facilities in the district will add jobs to our local and regional economies and promises to be a boon for the entire city.

This year, Warren Easton High School will celebrate 100 years of providing outstanding education to students at its Mid-City location and recent figures indicate that New Orleans students are graduating high school at a rate that exceeds the state average; and our district continues to play host to many world-class events, contributing more than \$6 billion in revenue to our state and local economies.

Success stories like these indicate that in many respects the state of our district is good!

But District B, like other areas of the city, faces a number of challenges—or what I prefer to call, opportunities for success—so, tonight I want to talk to you about four shared aspirations that unite our district: vibrant neighborhoods; economic opportunity; safe and healthy communities; and youth engagement.

First among these is the creation of strong, vibrant neighborhoods.

On Freret Street, thanks to the cooperation of residents, businesses, and sound governance, a renaissance is underway; and O.C. Haley Boulevard has become a hub of art, food, and culture in a key part of Central City, with streetscape improvements on the way.

Yet when it comes to building strong neighborhood communities, our work is incomplete.

In District B, blight still poses a serious challenge to building vibrant communities. Too often, commercial and residential properties are left to stand as hazards to our safety and sense of neighborhood.

We must take action.

In the coming months, I look forward to working with Councilmember Kristin Gisleson Palmer and Council President Stacy Head in strengthening the current code enforcement law and expanding minimum housing standards to commercial properties.

Slum lords affect the quality of life in District B and adversely impact our health and safety. For over three decades, a number of commercial properties have stood unused in the CBD and district-wide hundreds of properties remain blighted.

For too long, we've allowed property owners to let infrastructure languish—sometimes for years—and not demand that these properties be returned to commerce and civic life. It's time that we get our district moving again; it's time that we resurrect its commercial corridors; and there's no time—ladies and gentlemen—like the present.

Beyond the commercial level, the solution to blight needs to come from neighborhood residents. To this end, I have been working closely with neighborhood leaders to identify blighted properties with code enforcement and safety and permits for proper enforcement and inspections.

As we address blight, we must also address a sobering reality: Today, almost eight years after Hurricane Katrina, many District B residents remain displaced and unable to return to their homes and neighborhoods. For them, the so-called "road home" has been a rough one indeed and I am committed to helping my constituents secure gap financing, assistance with the hazard mitigation program, and Road Home funds prior to the July 2013 deadline.

Let me say that again; I am committed to helping constituents find the assistance they need to reenter their homes.

For me, neighborhood life also means a carnival season that everyone can enjoy. That's why I am working with the administration—having met with community members—to introduce a comprehensive parade enforcement ordinance for Mardi Gras 2014. Uptown residents reported a number of successes this year that improved the parade-going experience and I look forward to ensuring that next year's carnival is even better!

As we work toward rebuilding stronger communities, we must also recognize the priceless historical legacy that our neighborhoods have to offer. To this end, our office has worked hand-in-hand with the HDLC and with neighborhood leaders to ensure that any new development is responsible, and in keeping with the historic character of our communities.

Yet, even as we protect and develop those neighborhoods that have experienced great progress, I am working to ensure that no community in District B is left behind.

For this reason, since taking office one of my top priorities has been to address the lack of progress in Gert Town, Zion City and Hoffman Triangle and advocate for residents who've felt left out of conversations about the future of their own communities. These neighborhoods cannot be forgotten; have not been forgotten; and will not be forgotten—and that is my promise to my constituents.

Over the past few months, I've worked with Gert Town residents and Xavier University to address neighborhood redevelopment. This will not be an easy process, and I can't say that all sides will emerge with what they want. Yet tonight, I am proud to say that all of the key stakeholders involved will be invited to the table and have their voices heard.

Our second shared aspiration is for economic opportunity. These are exciting times for our city. Thanks to the tireless work of business leaders, the administration, and the City Council, our economy is getting stronger by the day. Within District B, companies large and small have made outstanding contributions to creating economic growth and the efforts of tourism experts like Mark Romig of the New Orleans Tourism Marketing Corporation continue to be outstanding.

But far too many of our residents earn less than 150 percent of the federal poverty line and attempt to participate in our city's economy without a high school diploma or its equivalent; and too many of our residents have done the right things and want to work, but find that jobs just aren't there.

When it comes to building economic opportunity, I believe that our City Council has a vital role to play. In recent weeks, I've worked to inform constituents about economic opportunities from good jobs at Costco's new development, to summer employment for youth, to training for careers in the taxi industry.

In the coming months, I will make it a priority to ensure that no one in District B is excluded from equal opportunity and, working with Councilmember Cynthia Hedge-Morrell, I look forward to increased participation in the city's contracting process by disadvantaged business enterprises through a stronger DBE ordinance. I also plan to work with stakeholders to address the challenge of offender-re-entry; providing for those who have served their time and who want to do the right thing.

Our third great challenge is in creating safe and healthy communities. In many ways, our city is healthier than ever. I am pleased to say that through the efforts of many stakeholders we are making progress. Health commissioner, Dr. Karen DeSalvo, and her team are making strides toward the city's goal of becoming one of the top 10 fittest cities in America by 2018, the 300th anniversary of the founding of the Big Easy!

Our district, however, faces obstacles. Some communities are challenged by low life expectancy rates; high rates of cardiovascular mortality; low birth weights; increased stroke mortality; and elevated deaths from diabetes.

In portions of District B, we are experiencing elevated rates of HIV/AIDS transmission and New Orleans, as a whole, ranks among cities with the highest rates of transmission in the country, something that has come to disproportionately affect women of color, and, overall, our city has experienced a significant decrease in the number emergency psychiatric hospital admissions, but the length of stay for these patients is increasing.

We cannot deny the need for increased mental health services.

In some cases, a lack of mental health services can be a contributing factor in the occurrence of avoidable criminal behavior and allow undiagnosed residents to fall through the cracks; and given the low literacy rate in portions of our district, we must recommit ourselves to improving adult education, through ESL classes and other resources, and believing that books, not bars, are the solution to what ails us.

Today, homeless service providers in District B like St. Joseph's Rebuild Center and the New Orleans Mission continue to be a resource for those in need and soon District B will benefit from the opening of two new health clinics providing a wide range of medical services in underserved communities.

Given the health care disparities already mentioned, expanding health services in District B by providing annual wellness exams, HPV treatment, pregnancy testing, breast exams, STI and HIV screening and treatment is vitally important. That's why I am pleased to welcome the South Broad Community Health Clinic to Broadmoor in the coming weeks and a new Planned Parenthood health facility to Claiborne Avenue in 2014.

Partnering with new medical clinics, the city's health department, the Rebuild Center and New Orleans Mission creates win-win scenarios for all of the residents and community stakeholders who have chosen to call District B their home.

We've also seen innovative models of school-based health care, in places like Walter L. Cohen High School, where students are now able to have their health needs met in unprecedented ways. And through the tireless work of leaders like Phyllis Landrieu and Connie Bellone at the Early Childhood and Family Learning Foundation, more and more of our young people are getting the care they need when they need it.

Providing great healthcare also means being willing to roll up our sleeves. Earlier this year, my office instituted a neighborhood-wide canvass to enroll uninsured residents in the Greater New Orleans Community Health Connection. We walked door-to-door to over 3000 households, providing them with information to access free and reduced healthcare.

Of course, no discussion of safety is complete without the question of crime.

We must constantly work to address the ever-present issue of crime in our district and return the streets to law-abiding citizens. That's why I'm committing \$5,000 to the placement of crime cameras at the intersection of Broad and Washington avenues and working with residents in the Irish Channel to develop a similar initiative. Along with the brave men and women of the 1st, 2nd, 6th and 8th police districts, we will continue to work for a safer and stronger city and district.

Together, we can build a healthy and safe community for every resident of District B.

Finally, I wanted to talk to you tonight about education and our young people. Since the storm, our city has seen tremendous changes in our school system. We've achieved encouraging results in many ways.

We are also blessed to have many strong partners in education.

Partners like Pearlie Elloie of Total Community Action continue to play a key role in providing much-needed services to our young people. Just this past week, Ms. Elloie and hundreds of Central City residents marked the opening of the Priscilla R. Edwards Head Start Center. Please, let's give Ms. Elloie a round of applause—thank you Ms. Elloie!

Yet we are still far from the day where every child in New Orleans gets the education they need to truly compete in the workplace.

As a member of our City Council, I know we have limited formal control over our schools. But that cannot be an excuse for inaction. And so throughout my term, I pledge to commit myself to bringing more and better opportunities to our young people.

Sometimes, this means taking the concrete, direct actions that lead to fast results. Recently, I had the pleasure of working with the RTA and ReNEW schools after more than \$11,000 in bus passes were stolen from a local high school that would have otherwise gone to students needing transportation assistance.

Normally, refunds for this kind of theft are not granted by the RTA, but I asked if an exception could be made in this case and thanks to the efforts of the RTA's Justin Augustine and Barbara Major, the children of ReNEW schools will once again have the passes they need.

Direct action also means recognizing the greatness and potential of our young people. To this end, I have launched a citizenship awards program for students in District B who have demonstrated an outstanding commitment to their communities like Jerome Russell and Courtney Williams who are completing their studies through local Job Corps programs.

Recently, federal cuts threatened enrollment in Job Corps for future applicants and I am proud to say that my office and the staff of Congressman Cedric Richmond worked to roll back these cuts and tonight, as we meet, new enrollees are eligible to participate in Job Corps.

In the coming months, I plan to launch a litter-abatement education program, aimed at showing our kids the importance of keeping our city clean. Working closely with the administration's "Don't Trash Dat" initiative, we will strive to build a new culture around this critical cause.

In the longer term, we must continue to work relentlessly toward a quality education for all students. This is a long road, but I am ready to walk it with you.

It is no secret that these four aspirations—vibrant neighborhoods, economic opportunity, healthy and safe communities, and doing what's right for our children—are predicated on one another. Students who do not have basic healthcare will struggle in their studies. Neighborhoods that lack vitality will struggle with providing great jobs.

This mutual dependence is no coincidence. We know that building a great district – and a great city – demands that we take a truly holistic approach; that we work across boundaries; across disciplines; and across neighborhoods. But tonight, I know that we are ready to do that work, and that in this room, and in this district, we have the leaders to see us through. I'm ready to get started, and with your help, we will truly build a District B that we can believe in. So, as we close tonight, I ask that each of you believe in our collective possibility...and to "Believe in District B." Please, say it with me, "Believe in District B, Believe in District B." Thank you so much—let's get started.