



The United States Conference of Mayors

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REMARKS OF SEATTLE MAYOR GREG NICKELS AT THE U.S. CONFERENCE OF MAYORS MONDAY, JUNE 15, 2009

A New Deal with America's Cities

Thank you, I want to thank our host, Mayor David Cicilline and the great city of Providence for its hospitality. I also want to thank all the volunteers who made this event possible.

It is a great honor to accept the position of president of the U.S. Conference of Mayors. Since 1932, in the midst of the Great Depression the Conference has been the voice of America's Mayors.

When I first became mayor of Seattle, my friend and predecessor Norm Rice (who is here today along with my family and a number of close friends) told me the conference was a great way to stay engaged with other leaders across the country, and I owe him a debt of gratitude for his good advice.

Over the past few years, I've had the honor of learning from Wellington Webb, Tom Menino, Doug Palmer, Beverly O'Neill and so many others. They've all been supported by the excellent work of the outstanding USCM staff. And thanks to Lucinda Crabtree, Everett Bass and the rest of the Business Council, we continue to find ways to support businesses and help our cities grow jobs.

Following Manny Diaz is no easy task. Manny has led us through a difficult time in our nation's history, and done it with dedication and tenacity. The example he's set will guide me in the coming year, and I appreciate his wise advice and good counsel. And to Elizabeth Kautz and Antonio Villaraigosa and the Board of Trustees and Advisory Board – congratulations.

These have not been a stress-free couple of days. Each of us wish Mayor Cicilline and the Fire union well in reaching a speedy resolution to their impasse on this most local of issues.

Vice President Biden and other administration officials missed an opportunity to learn from all of us, and we had looked forward to meeting with them. I know many of you were disappointed by their absence.

Mayors don't look back or linger on bad feelings. Now more than ever, we need clear communication between the federal government and the cities. America needs us.

This is my approach: During the 1930's, FDR created the New Deal to get this country through tough times, re-defining the federal government's power with the states.

Today, facing this Great Recession, I submit that we must forge with the federal government a New Deal with America's Cities. This nation is a network of cities, each with its own promise and potential.

But for too long, we've been trapped in a structure that put the federal government at the top of the chart, followed by the states. It doesn't work today.

We need a New Deal with America's cities that is flexible and focused on achieving goals on which we all agree.

We need a New Deal with America's cities that views the diversity of our metro areas as a strength instead of a burden.

We need a New Deal with America's cities that reflects our power as economic communities able to compete with the very best in the world.

Fundamentally, the New Deal with American cities is this – if the U.S. invests in our metropolitan areas, we will return that investment many times over in new jobs and economic prosperity for all.

Achieving this will be the centerpiece of my time as conference president.

We stand at a crossroads. We can stay with the status quo, and hope for better results by doing the same thing, or we try something new.

Two months ago, President Obama reflected on the first 100 days of his administration and spoke of laying a new foundation for economic growth that will help us compete in the 21st century.

Here in the Conference of Mayors, we know that our nation's urban areas provide more than just the foundation for building a new prosperity.

When you look at the numbers, our strength becomes clear. We are the foundation, pillars and roof of our national economy – the nation's top 100 metro areas generate 75 percent of gross domestic product.

At this pivotal moment in history, we have a unique opportunity to build on the strengths that mayors see every day. In a word, it is the power of innovation.

If anyone knows how to innovate, it is our nation's mayors. Every single one of us in this room has examples we can point to:

- Mayor Joe Riley who has made his passion for Charleston's beauty a national movement;

- Mayor Cornett, who has made weight loss and fitness a community goal;
- Mayors Bloomberg and Menino, who recognized that some issues are too big for one city alone, so they created Mayor's Against Illegal Guns, which now boasts 340 Mayors;
- Mayor Brainard, who found a way to reduce climate pollution by building traffic circles;
- And finally, all 956 of us who joined me in the US Mayors Climate

Protection Agreement, pledging to reduce global warming one city at a time – representing America to the world when our national leaders failed to lead;

We have demonstrated that innovations at the local level can tackle our nation's greatest challenges. And now we must continue, making sure that the work we've done on these and other important issues becomes the foundation upon which we will build our nation's future.

At the White House, they say a crisis is a terrible thing to waste. So I suppose we should be thankful for so many opportunities to try new approaches.

Let's begin with the stimulus. In an effort to jump-start the economy, the federal government relied on old formulas that left behind our metropolitan areas. That was a mistake.

If we consider where patents are issued, where exports are produced, where people learn new skills to take on fresh challenges, then it becomes clear. We need a New Deal with America's cities that invests where we have a bigger bang for the buck than anywhere else – in cities.

My staff keeps telling me that I have to make nicer with the folks in my state capitol, but I feel obliged to share a few numbers with you.

The conference's report on transportation funding in the recovery showed that the Seattle metro-area received about 4 percent of the federal funding allocated to Washington State.

But we account for 68 percent of the state's economic output. So you can see, I take this issue rather personally.

As conference president, the first thing I intend to do is convene leading Mayors to critically review every aspect of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, just as we did for transportation.

I am asking all of you to carefully examine your experiences and provide case studies that can be helpful for future policy. We need to see the stimulus as an opportunity to highlight what worked and what didn't, and to make a case for a New Deal with America's cities.

All our residents are benefitting from the great work the Conference did in ensuring the Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant was funded in the recovery package. However, that euphoria has been short lived, since funding for the block grant was not included in the 2010 budget.

We need to demonstrate the value of this program by creating jobs and reducing climate pollution. But we must also use this program as a rallying cry for our New Deal with America's cities.

For this and other issues of national importance, I propose that we energize the grassroots and bring our federal advocacy to a whole new level. I am going to work with my committee chairs and conference staff to identify critical votes on key legislation, and then work with mayors to be the difference-makers.

We'll use our experience, connections and commitment to make sure Congress hears us loud and clear. Signing your name to a letter isn't enough. I'm talking about old-fashioned shoe-leather, getting out there and making our case to those who have the power to make a New Deal with America's cities.

Front and center will be transportation. With Mayor Hickenlooper's leadership and great staff work from the Conference, we know what our priorities are.

Now we need to ensure our voices rise above the many others vying to be heard in the halls of Congress. We need to use the experience of federal recovery to demonstrate that one size doesn't fit all, that cookie-cutter formulas don't produce the outcomes we all want.

This is a fight we need to take on, and now is the time to do it. Debate is also heating up on energy legislation, and so far, America's Cities have not been invited to the table.

As leaders on this issue, we cannot let this stand – decisions are going to be made on issues of critical importance to cities around funding, the electrical grid, energy efficiency and cap-and-trade, to name a few.

For the next few months, I'll work with the chairs of our Environment and Energy committees to promote our agenda and ensure the voices of America's mayors are heard.

Counting our residents seems like such a basic task, but it is so vitally important. The Census is coming up in 2010, and it is our duty to ensure each and every one of our residents participates. Mayor Mark Mallory and the Census Task Force have been working this issue for the past several years, and I look forward to ensuring that every American is counted!

There is much reason to be optimistic that our New Deal with America's cities will be successful.

I believe President Obama and his team are committed to a new approach. We are already seeing positive signs.

Next year's budget contains a new initiative of the departments of Housing and Urban Development and Transportation called "Sustainable Communities" that calls on cities to bring together our best thinking in housing, environmental and transit policy to create an integrated investment plan.

Another example is Education Secretary Arne Duncan's "Race to the Top" competition. The federal government isn't telling local school districts exactly what to do, but the goals are clear – great schools for every child in America.

All of us know that government can only do so much, that we depend on our neighbors, and our neighbors depend on us.

This is why, as part of my presidency, I'm calling on all mayors to join me in promoting volunteerism, and leading by example.

In Seattle, I've sorted baby clothes at a boutique for homeless families and hammered nails for Habitat for Humanity. Yesterday, a group of us helped improve a playground at Riverside Park. At this time of great need, there is nothing as personally fulfilling as doing something to help someone else.

We know the path we must now take. This much I know for certain: the recession will end. And the New Deal with America's cities we propose today will determine what kind of nation emerges from this storm. Let it be stronger, cleaner, and kinder.

I thank all of you for giving me the opportunity to lead the U.S. Conference of Mayors, and I ask you to join me as together, we lift from this Great Recession and create a better, more just America for ourselves and children.

Thank you and God bless.