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Urban Affairs Policy Update

Sunday Best Supper -- *2-Year Progress Report*

By Rick Kriseman,

Mayor of the City of St. Petersburg, Florida, USA

Standing solidly in the midway point of my first term as your mayor, I am encouraged, excited and grateful for all the progress we have made and all the promise that lies ahead. I am also aware, concerned and completely committed to dealing with the persistent challenges that accompany that progress.

Throughout the city my team and I are working to expand avenues of opportunity for the people of St. Petersburg, in a way that really hasn't been done before. From public safety and parks to education and economic development...we are building a city of opportunity.

Nowhere is this more true than right here in south St. Petersburg.

...because nowhere in St. Petersburg is more attention needed.

I come to this work deeply invested in the belief that fair does not always mean equal. Where there is disproportionate need we must invest disproportionately in order to move ahead equitably. Decades of disenfranchisement means there is more need in our city south of Central. And, we are answering that need with more focused resources that are designed to finally shift the trajectory of poverty and disenfranchisement in a way that transcends mayors, and administrations, City Councils and Commissions.

We are working to change the story in a way that can never be undone.

As you know, that work unfolds along many paths. There are long-term initiatives such as the Southside Community Redevelopment Area - a 30 year plan that infuses human, financial and intellectual resources required to make South St. Petersburg one of our community's most vital and viable areas; and there are initiatives that produce immediate results such as our Wrap-Around Services partnership with the 2020 plan, Urban League and Pinellas Opportunity Council that has served to lift 35 families out of poverty since last year. There are targeted initiatives, designed to address specific determinants of challenge in our City, such as the opening of the Pinellas Ex-Offender Re-entry Coalition, an organization that helps returning residents successfully acclimate after paying their debt to society.

And let me pause there for a second. I think you all know that one of the first things I did as mayor was get rid of that harmful box on city employment applications - the one that asks whether you've been convicted of a felony. My view is simple - let's judge people by their ability and their attitude and not by their arrest. And my hope is that other businesses in our city will follow our lead.

We have teamed up with the Tampa Bay Black Business Incubator to help capitalize entrepreneurs looking to pursue their dreams. These and so many other efforts propel us as a community toward a promising future. It is not any one of these, but the sum of all of the work of the City's Urban Affairs department that is making transformative change.

None of which would be nearly as effective without the amazing team we are all fortunate to have serving this purpose. Please help me thank Nikki Gaskin-Capehart for all she does every day. She serves with passion and expertise and brings partners together to make things happen for those who need us most. Nikki, we are all grateful.

And, Nikki is backed up by our fantastic Police Chief Anthony Holloway (Do we have any Chief Holloway fans here?)

Nikki has the full support of our Economic Development, neighborhood, and Parks and Rec teams, and the entire mayor's office.

The work of Urban Affairs rises to the top of our many priorities and always commands our attention and commitment.

There is need enough that this is true every day, but, it's been especially true lately.

The recent string of gun violence that claimed the lives of too many young men ended our city's year on a note that must change in 2016. And, while the headlines have changed, my focus has not.

What you should know is that this is the issue I care the most about; not a pier or a baseball team. I care about people's lives, their quality of life, their safety, and whether opportunities exist for them. That's also what our city council cares the most about. It's our top job.

Together, and with the help of so many in our community, we are addressing many of the risk factors that affect our children and young adults. And, we are determined to do what we can to end this violence - and most importantly, the underlying choices that lead to the violence. Violence that too often leads to an exponential loss of life.

Those killed, and those who have killed...both are promises broken. Both are lives lost. Those are the lives we read about...the stories that stir our souls.

But, there are many other stories that never make the paper. Many other lives that may not end in violent death, but languish in a harsh reality all the same. These stories are the key to change.

In recent weeks I've walked through this neighborhood. I've talked to young men in the middle of the day who were on front stoops instead of at school. At home, instead of work. Babysitting instead of providing for their babies. I was reminded that the issue is much deeper than the headlines explore.

...That the shootings that shake our community the most ring out from a weapon much more menacing than any gun.

Disenfranchisement and despair are the determinants that we must change. While, we have plans to get guns out of the hands of those who would use them illegally, I believe that if we deal with disenfranchisement and despair, then the shootings, robberies, drug dealing and car theft will also diminish.

When we fill the hood with hope and pathways to possibilities, promise will replace problems. Determination will replace danger.

And, while we have many plans in place that are designed to make long term, generational change, our young men don't have that time. We need to make a difference for them today. That is why I have charged Deputy Mayor Tomalin and our City Administrator Gary Cornwell to identify \$1 million to invest in answers to this crisis. \$1 million to chart a course toward solutions that will make a difference for our community's young black men. Deputy Mayor Tomalin, Nikki and I will call on our community, many of you who are here today, to serve on a taskforce to help determine our path forward. The City cannot do it alone. But, we will do it together. And, it is my intent that we have the resources to make the ideas make a difference.

This is a City that invests its resources in reflection of its priorities. Well, this, these young men, their lives...and the lives of all they touch...they are my priority.

We don't have all the answers, and we know money can't solve it alone. But, our collective effort matched with real resources that can serve to target those who need us most and in numbers that actually move the needle...well, it's a start. And, we must start. And, we must keep going until we are done.

Our strategy and our approach to Urban Affairs has been a little different. The first thing we have realized is that if we want to break the cycle of poverty and really lift up South St. Petersburg, it's going to be a long-term approach.

The results of our investment and our work will not all manifest during my administration. We may not even see it all in our lifetime.

It is not politically expedient. But it is the right thing to do. And I have no intention of changing course.

The second part of our strategy is to recognize that we need good partners. Some are showcased in the museum exhibit. These are some of the greatest partnerships our city has ever known.

Our entire approach is just different...by design.

We want to do more than just invest city dollars in buildings and placemaking-- we want to invest in the people who occupy those places. I mean, what good is a nice grocery store if we don't have money to shop at it?

Nikki utilizes four strategic areas to get the job done.

First, there's Opportunity Creation. That is our focus on Education. Skills training. Professional development. Job placement.

We do this with partners like the 2020 Plan and the Pinellas Ex-Offender Re-Entry Coalition.

Next, we want to serve as a Catalyst for Commerce: That means helping build a stable and productive economy in South St. Petersburg. Job recruitment. Entrepreneurship. Retention of business.

Our friend Albert Lee and the Tampa Bay Black Business Investment Corporation are helping make that happen. Thanks to the Deuces Live and the 16th Street Business Association, too. They're making a difference.

St. Petersburg has been known as a city of the arts for a long time. And that includes South St. Petersburg -- that's why we also want to connect through Cultural Affairs. We need to honor the character and culture of South St. Petersburg, and we will continue to do so in my administration.

We will continue to host events like the "St. Pete Stories" series, and Beats by the Bay.

And we are also purchasing the Dr. Carter G. Woodson African American History Museum.

Finally, we need to Nurture our Neighborhoods and Families. That means working closely with Mike Dove and Neighborhood Affairs to nurture and build back our South St. Pete Neighborhoods. We've made amazing strides in just 2 years.

We have reduced boarded properties across this city from 830 to 448. In the South CRA area, we have experienced a 45% reduction in boarded properties. The less boarded and blighted homes we have usually means less crime - and our numbers prove that.

Our strategy is working.

We will continue to work with the 2020 Plan on programs like the Wrap Around Services that directly lift families out of poverty. We'll work with partners like St. Petersburg College on our Early Childhood Partnership. We'll work with partners like the Police Athletic League.

Through great partnerships, and a long-term vision, we are going to get the job done. We are going to fight poverty, and we are going to win.

I want to thank everyone for coming here today and joining us. And, thank you for your contributions to our continued progress.

Now, I'm going to turn it back over to Nikki...