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OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

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Mayor Stephanie A. Miner
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Good afternoon. I want to thank committee chairs Senator Catharine Young and Assemblyman Herman Farrell for holding this hearing and all the members of both the Assembly Ways and Means Committee and the Senate Finance Committee for this opportunity to testify today.

Though Syracuse is the smallest of New York's "Big Five" cities, our population has stabilized, a trait virtually unique among Upstate's cities. Syracuse is the anchor of Central New York, the region which stretches from Lake Ontario to Pennsylvania.

I'd like to take a moment to offer some thoughts about the state of our democracy with a particular emphasis on the growing disconnect between the general public and the political class and what that growing disconnect means for our ability to govern and, yes, budget effectively.

Our state's recent past, and especially this past year, has been notably marked by a dark storm cloud of public corruption and self-dealing. This cloud darkens the door of every elected official – the honest and dishonest alike – cheapening public service and discouraging good people from entering into politics. As the cloud's shadow grows, it helps feed a corrosive sense of "us versus them," drives down voter participation and stifles growth.

Corruption, in a word, is toxic to a democracy.

Sadly, even as the appalling toll of that storm's damages to both individuals and institutions continues to mount, its fundamental root causes remain unaddressed.

One of those root causes is the insidious role that money currently plays in our state's politics.

Because of the "LLC loophole," and other chasms in our campaign finance laws, we have a system where an individual or corporation can pour virtually unlimited amounts of money into candidates and causes and do so in a way that effectively masks the true identity of the contributor.

I have taken the step of voluntarily refusing to accept contributions from LLCs and I would urge you to take action to eliminate the loophole statutorily.

Another root cause is the barriers that have been erected to prevent greater voter participation. If voter participation rates are an indicator of the body politic's health, then we have a grave illness that needs our attention. In the 2014 elections, less than one-third of New York state's eligible voting population participated.

We can and must do better.

To that end, I urge you to look at three proposals that have been proven to increase participation rates.

First, allow a 20-day early voting period as there are now 37 states in our country that have adopted some form of early voting with the time frame stretching from three to 45 days.

Second, allow "no excuse" permanent absentee voting. Currently, there are 27 states that permit this type of absentee voting, which allows eligible voters to request a ballot that can be submitted by mail without mandating the voter declare a reason. This reform is a stepping stone to explore a vote by mail policy that has been implemented with great success in Washington, Oregon, and Colorado.

And third, as Oregon has recently done, enact universal voter registration whereby individuals are automatically registered to vote at age 18 unless they choose to opt out. This groundbreaking proposal will almost certainly bolster Oregon's best-in-the-nation turnout rates that exceed 80% in presidential years and provide a clear roadmap for states like ours that have much room for improvement.

It's worth noting that voter participation is closely tied to demographics. Racial and ethnic minorities, the young, and the poor have the lowest participation rates. As a result, some of our most vulnerable populations are left with a diminished voice in their government.

In Syracuse, the numbers are stark. We have one of the highest poverty rates in the United States exceeding 35%. And we have the highest level of poverty concentration among blacks and Hispanics in the one hundred largest metropolitan areas. The Syracuse City School District has the fourth highest poverty rate in New York State with more than three quarters of students qualifying for free lunch.

If we are going to replace poverty with true opportunity, New York State must stand up for children from birth through college.

It begins with pre-natal and early childhood home visits by nurses and family outreach workers, such programs raise high school graduation rates by as much as 30%. Then we need to make quality, affordable childcare available to every family who needs it and New York State must fulfill its promise to provide every four-year old with access to full-day pre-kindergarten.

Based on the Campaign for Fiscal Equity court ruling, New York State was ordered to pay our neediest schools more. Under the ruling, the state currently owes New York State schools \$4.8 billion. Syracuse schools alone are owed a \$63 million.

Our students need and deserve this and it is a smart investment. When our children graduate from high school we must make higher education affordable by expanding the Tuition Assistance Program and ensuring that our SUNY and CUNY systems have the resources they need to provide a great college education. Syracuse has taken measures to address this by implementing and funding the Say Yes to Education program.

New York can afford to invest in creating opportunities for all children to succeed from birth through college. But to get there we must ask the wealthiest New Yorkers—hedge fund managers, billionaires and the one percent to do their part to stand up for our kids.

Economic Opportunity

Another topic I'd like to address in general terms is our approach to economic development. I say "our" in the sense that economic development is often a collaborative process between various private entities and levels of government; each with its own set of tools.

My concern is that our current approach to economic development is uncoordinated and essentially "trickle-down" – relying too heavily on big tax breaks for big developers in exchange for questionable promises of dubious benefits for taxpayers.

Earlier I spoke of the corrosive effect of corruption. I would argue that trickle-down economic development also plays a role in undermining faith in government.

At a time when income inequality and economic insecurity is palpable for many New Yorkers, we continue to pursue failed top-down strategies that only exacerbate the problem.

We need to begin to rethink our approach to place an emphasis on economic development that serves the public good; where taxpayers can see and feel a real return on the investment of their tax dollars.

One of those places is infrastructure.

Infrastructure is vital and the core mission of government. It transcends political parties. The signs of a functioning government to the average citizen are paved roads, clean water, and the ability for trash to be collected. As New Yorkers, we understand investing in infrastructure spurs economic growth.

It's part of our proud history. The Erie Canal, a 19th Century marvel, was a huge, unprecedented infrastructure investment that transformed the Upstate economy and, in the process, our entire county's future. The concept was simple: the Erie Canal was a direct economic investment to move goods and people efficiently. In doing so, it accomplished unthinkable engineering feats and transformed our nation.

A Federal Reserve study found that infrastructure expenditures – in roads, airports, water systems, and telecommunications – have a huge multiplier effect. Every dollar invested yielded an outcome of greater than \$2.

Competing needs for operations and infrastructure are putting local governments at a breaking point. The Office of the State Comptroller released a report in September 2014 stating New York's municipalities are falling behind in maintaining and improving infrastructure, and without significant changes in policy and resources, they will be constrained to meet future infrastructure investment needs. There is little question local governments are in desperate need of partners to ensure the infrastructure we were once so proud of is fixed, updated and maintained.

The dangers of ignoring critical infrastructure needs are playing out tragically before our eyes in Flint, Michigan. One would be hard pressed to find a greater cautionary tale of the toll that budgetary neglect can wreak on a community. What's happening in Flint is a stunning indictment of the 'Age of Deferred Maintenance' and its' disproportionate impact on communities of color. I urge you to do everything in your power to ensure that the necessary investments are made to help ensure that no New York community suffers the same fate as Flint.

Thank you for your time and for allowing me the opportunity to testify before you today. I look forward to working with you to make the promise of opportunity more attainable for all New Yorkers.