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State of City Address: Full of Ambition, but Light on Details

By [MICHAEL M. GRYNBAUM](#) FEB. 3, 2015



Mayor Bill de Blasio delivered his State of the City address at Baruch College on Tuesday, emphasizing affordable housing. Absent was any mention of reforming police-community relations. Credit Damon Winter/NYT

Express ferries gliding along the waterways. A dusty railyard transformed into a diverse and thriving new neighborhood. Thickets of tall buildings and construction cranes sprouting on waterfronts all over New York City.

On the surface, the ambitious urban blueprint outlined by Mayor [Bill de Blasio](#) in his [State of the City address](#) on Tuesday was not far removed from the glossy visions of his predecessor, Michael R. Bloomberg, a technocrat who relished the idea of a master-planning mayoralty.

But Mr. de Blasio, a Democrat and liberal champion, is determined to harness his civic toolbox of housing programs and zoning rules to an overarching purpose: curbing economic inequality. And in a speech that was large on ambition — if scarce on details — the mayor made clear that he planned to be a very different kind of developer.

“Nothing more expresses the inequality gap, the opportunity gap, than the soaring cost of housing,” the mayor said in his remarks, which lasted 75 minutes. Without a change in housing policy, he said, “New York risks taking on the qualities of a gated community, a place defined by exclusivity rather than opportunity.”



Unlike a typical State of the City address, this speech skipped nitty-gritty policy for broad strokes. Mr. de Blasio called for the construction of hundreds of thousands of new apartments in the next decade, said he could protect tenants from the more malign forces of gentrification, and pledged to start [a citywide ferry network](#) to serve transit-starved areas in every borough.

But the mayor volunteered little insight into how he would pay for and execute his plans, disappointing some industry and city officials who have waited months for the administration to flesh out its housing policy.

“When you talk about affordable housing, you have to figure out a way to pay for it,” said Scott M. Stringer, the city comptroller, outside the Baruch College auditorium in Manhattan where the mayor delivered his remarks.

“The speech was very powerful, because I think it addressed what a lot of people in the city care about,” he added. “The next part is harder. Now we need to put the budget behind the plan.”

What Mr. de Blasio left out of his remarks was as notable as what he included.

Absent was any mention of reforming police-community relations, a top priority for Mr. de Blasio when he took office that became a serious flash point late last year, when a [rank-and-file revolt](#) broke out after the murders of two officers in Brooklyn.

In a sign of self-reliance — or, perhaps, lessons learned — none of the mayor’s centerpiece policies directly involved the State Legislature, after a year in which City Hall struggled to receive Albany’s signoff on its top goal of universal prekindergarten.

Mr. de Blasio eventually received financing for that program, but not the tax surcharge on the wealthy that he hoped would accompany it. And the mayor’s influence in the Capitol has weakened: He alienated state Republicans in last fall’s campaign, and a close ally, [Sheldon Silver](#), resigned from the Assembly speakership amid corruption charges (although [the new speaker](#), Carl E. Heastie, was said to be the mayor’s choice).

In fact, Mr. de Blasio had barely finished his remarks on Tuesday when his upstate troubles roared back.

Two hours after he said he wanted to build thousands of affordable apartments over Sunnyside Yards, a rail depot in Queens, a spokeswoman for Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo seemingly rejected the idea, saying the yards, which are partly controlled by a state agency, were “not available for any other use in the near term.” Mayoral aides protested that Amtrak, which owns much of the depot, was open to Mr. de Blasio’s plan.

The back and forth showed that tension between the two sides had not dissipated. Mr. de Blasio said he wanted the city’s minimum wage to rise to \$13 an hour; Mr. Cuomo’s office called that notion “a nonstarter” in the Legislature.

But Mr. de Blasio — who ultimately counted prekindergarten as a chief success of his early term — may be content to simply focus on what he can control.

He has set a lofty goal for city planners, asking them to calibrate a housing strategy that protects current tenants while encouraging developers to spend millions of dollars to build.

Still, the mayor could not resist a jab at the real-estate industry.

“The city has for decades let the developers write their own rules,” Mr. de Blasio said, to a mixed audience response. “Our growth was guided primarily by the developers’ bottom line.”

Kathryn S. Wylde, president of the [Partnership for New York City](#), said afterward that she hoped the mayor understood “that forging partnerships with the development and financial industries is the only way to accomplish his housing goals.”

How that plan shapes up is now, by the mayor’s design, the defining question of his second year in office. And on Tuesday, the answers still seemed far-off.

In East New York, Brooklyn, [one of the neighborhoods selected](#) for rezoning by the mayor, Bishop David Benke of St. Peter’s Lutheran Church said on Tuesday that he was still seeking answers on how the administration could protect residents from ill effects of a real estate boom.

“The devil is in the details, or the angel is in the details,” the pastor said. “As just normal people living in Brooklyn, we’re saying: ‘How will this be different, how will this be better?’ ”

- Marc Santora, Nikita Stewart and Vivian Yee contributed reporting.