

Remarks by Seattle City Councilmember Tim Burgess,
Ballard Rotary Club

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The People of Seattle

Good afternoon. Thank you for inviting me to speak with you today.

It's great to be in Ballard. I know this is hard for some of you. After all, I'm an elected official of the City of Seattle standing in occupied Ballard. Someone left the gates open!

Seriously, I love being out in our neighborhoods . . . listening to your expectations of your city government . . . learning about your dreams for our good city. Being with you reinforces what a privilege it is to represent you on the City Council.

I'd like to share a few thoughts about what Harvard economist Edward Glaeser considers the greatest asset of a City: its people.

In talking about the people of Seattle I hope to remind all of us just how fortunate we are . . . individually and as neighbors. We truly do live in an amazing place.

Just six months into my first year as a Council member—the summer of 2008—I sat at my desk in City Hall and read a report by social anthropologist Debra Boyer. It was about child sex trafficking . . . right here in Seattle and King County.

What I read was shocking . . . 300 to 500 children coerced into street and Internet prostitution, faced daily with unbelievable levels of violence and intimidation, horrific exploitation by predator pimps and predator johns.

It made me angry and I knew right then that we had to do something to rescue and protect these kids.

One of the recommendations in Boyer's report was that we open a residential treatment program for these terribly abused and violated children, some as young as 12.

We were able to cobble together funds from the City budget and from King County to establish a safe haven. Then the great recession hit and almost all of our government funds were withdrawn. I was devastated . . . we were so close.

But that isn't the end of this story. We didn't give up. *The Seattle Times* published stories and editorials about the problem, and word spread about the need. A private citizen called out of the blue, offering a generous donation to help get the program going. We

expected others would want to help, too, so the City set up an account to receive private contributions.

Wow, did the people of Seattle respond! Checks poured into the program fund, most for ten or twenty dollars, some for a couple hundred dollars, even a few for a hundred thousand dollars.

Over one million dollars was contributed by people just like you and me and a few local foundations.

Today, our safe-haven is open for business. Its beds are full and there's a waiting list of young girls who want to get in.

The Bridge is only the fourth residential treatment center in the United States designed specifically for kids involved in street and Internet prostitution. The center provides loving care, education, counseling, medical services . . . everything these precious kids need to reclaim their childhood, to start fresh, to chart a new course.

The girls living at The Bridge are on a long and very difficult journey to overcome the deep, deep scars inflicted on them. I know there are lots of people in Seattle who want them to succeed, perhaps none so profoundly as the police officers and detectives who encounter trafficked kids on the street. Our police now view these children as victims, not criminals, and they are focused intensely on bringing to justice those who prey on these kids and abuse them so terribly.

I'm so proud of the people of Seattle. I believe this story demonstrates clearly how much we accept our responsibility to protect our most vulnerable.

Let me tell you about another group of vulnerable children in Seattle who also need our protection. This is a much larger group.

This group includes about half of the 47,000 schoolchildren who attend Seattle public schools. These are the kids who are most vulnerable to academic failure. They are our children living in poverty and our African-American, Latino and Native American children.

If we agree that people are a city's greatest asset, we need to make sure that our children receive a good education which promises to prepare them for the future. My wife and I, and all three of our daughters, are products of Seattle Public Schools. We received a solid education. Unfortunately, many families in Seattle can't say that.

Consider this. If you are a child living in poverty—say you're five years old and will enter kindergarten this fall—the evidence suggests that by the time you reach third grade, you only have a slightly better than 50-50 chance of reading at grade level. And if you're not reading at grade level in third grade we know your chances of ever catching up are very, very low.

If you're one of these kids, from the time you enter kindergarten you have only a 60% chance of graduating from high school on time.

But, it gets worse. If you fail a core subject in 6th grade, your high school graduation chances fall below 50%.

Your odds of making the grades you need in high school to be ready to enter college are a slim 1 in 7.

It's not a pretty future, but that's the reality for half the students in the Seattle Public Schools—about twenty-three thousands of our children.

The barriers to success seem formidable for these vulnerable kids. I'll admit, it's easy to look at the facts, feel overwhelmed and—as we have for decades—quietly look the other way and accept the status quo.

But, without a solid education, young people lose out on their future . . . and some are losing more than others. Across the country, black men between 20 and 34 without a high school diploma are more likely to be behind bars than employed.

What makes this even worse is the emerging reality that graduating from high school no longer ensures success and a family-wage job in today's global, knowledge-driven economy. Sixty-seven percent of all jobs in Washington State will require some form of post-secondary education by 2018. That's just seven short years from now. We are not preparing all of our children for this reality.

Their facts and circumstances are very different, but these Seattle students are vulnerable just like prostituted children are vulnerable. They need champions like you and me.

We knew what to do about children forced into prostitution, and we are doing it.

We know what we need to do for children at risk of falling behind in school, and we need to do it, too.

Our own efforts here in Seattle, and in other cities around the country, have proven what works—early interventions and learning opportunities before a child even gets to kindergarten . . . extended learning time, yes, longer school days . . . mental and physical health services . . . high academic expectations . . . and highly effective teachers and principals who believe every child can learn.

These factors provide the basis for the success of all schoolchildren.

We provide many of these services through the City's Families and Education Levy. My colleagues and I will consider later this month whether to place a Levy renewal on the ballot this November. We welcome your feedback on the proposal recommended to us by a 24-member citizen advisory committee.

If approved by voters, the proposed Levy will raise 231 million dollars over seven years to help pay for the interventions I've described. That would cost the typical Seattle homeowner about 10 dollars a month in the first year of the Levy.

What's most important about this proposed Levy is the overarching goal it establishes. This Levy sets the bar high, very high.

It sets the bar high for our kids. The entire proposal is based on the belief that every child in every school in every neighborhood can learn and graduate from high school prepared for college and the career of their choice. That's a belief I think we should embrace for all of our kids, but especially for the many public schoolchildren who face a bleak future unless they receive the best education possible.

The Levy also sets the bar high for its programs. The City will award funds through performance-based contracts. If some programs aren't meeting the goals set by the City, we will invest in other programs that do.

It's our responsibility to protect vulnerable kids, and one of the ways we can do that is when we vote and when we pay our property taxes.

Finally, I want to briefly mention another group of very important people in our city—those who invent, create, manufacture and take risks to start a business.

Edward Glaeser, the economist I mentioned at the beginning, has written a new book titled *Triumph of the City*. I hope you find the time to read it. Glaeser argues that cities triumph because of the creative interaction and sharing of ideas that occurs between people who are densely packed together in cities.

He refers to this as the interplay that occurs when people rub together, when your ideas compete with a competitor's ideas, when educated people cluster together and move from job to job. Glaeser's theories make intuitive sense, don't they?

We've seen this happen right here in our aerospace industry. There are hundreds of small businesses scattered throughout Seattle and our region that got their start because of Boeing. These are the businesses that supply the parts, the tools, and the technology that allow Boeing to build some of the best and most efficient airplanes in the world. Many are spinoffs from other companies. Many got their start when someone had an idea, left Boeing, took a risk and became an entrepreneur.

We've seen this with the growth of our biotech and health sciences companies. Many of these businesses started here because similar companies were already here, clustered together. The human capital was present. Our city invited innovation in the health sciences and this reputation spread quickly. It attracted more like-minded people.

There is not a city or a metro region in this country that can match our productivity, our influence, or our innovation when it comes to global health. And that's because we have developed and attracted people who are driven by their mission to fight global disease, to create medical breakthroughs, to make life easier for all of us.

Edward Glaeser tells us in his book that successful cities have three common characteristics—lots of educated workers, lots of small entrepreneurs, and creative interplay among different industries. Seattle has these characteristics—we have highly educated workers, we have many entrepreneurs and want more, and we have a culture of innovation that allows ideas to germinate and take hold.

I think Edward Glaeser has it right—cities are the people who live, work and play together. That's you and me and all our neighbors.

And I believe Seattle understands the importance of honoring and protecting our most valuable asset—our people.

We care for children caught up in sex trafficking by knowing they are victims and finding the will and means to provide them shelter and services.

We recognize the moral and economic imperative of ensuring all our children obtain a good education and graduate from high school prepared for college regardless of the color of their skin or the neighborhood they live in.

We value the entrepreneurial spirit of those who create jobs, who innovate and make things; we appreciate the diversity of interests and imagination we see throughout our city.

And the list of how “putting people first” affects our policy making doesn't stop there.

It means we expect our police officers to treat every individual they stop with fairness and respect. It explains why we have the infamous “Seattle process” and neighborhood planning that begins at the sidewalk level. It leads to a transportation policy that accounts for all users of the road—be they in a truck, on a bicycle or on foot. It necessitates that we pay attention to our accountability to you, making sure every dollar of yours that we invest is spent wisely and effectively.

Viewing people as our greatest asset should guide every decision of City government. Thank you for the contributions you make to our great city, Seattle.

We are privileged to live, work and play here. We are privileged to share responsibility for one another. And that's why I believe our future together is bright.

Thank you.