

New England's Rising Star

An Interview with **Eddie A. Perez,**
Mayor of Hartford



Eddie A. Perez

EDITORS' NOTE *Eddie Perez is now serving his third term as Mayor of Hartford, Connecticut. Also the Chairman of the Hartford Board of Education, Perez made history by being the first Latino elected as Hartford's Mayor and the first Latino mayor of a U.S. capital city. He was recognized as one of the "Top 100 Most Influential Hispanic Leaders" by Hispanic Business magazine. After spending many successful years as a community organizer, Perez earned his degree in economics at Trinity College and spearheaded the completion of The Learning Corridor, recognized as a national model for comprehensive community revitalization.*

How is Hartford's financial health, and what is your outlook for the future?

We have Fortune 500 companies here that help stabilize our economy, and we're a strong financial insurance sector. We do depend on the state for a significant amount of revenue, but our business community has always stepped up to help us in that regard.

Are you happy with the impact you've had on education?

We have put reform in place, and we have a strategy to sustain it. We're focusing on narrowing the achievement gap, which is significant in our state. We have to improve at four times the rate of the state. If the state improves 1 percent a year, we have to improve 4 percent a year over a decade to become average in Connecticut. And average in Connecticut, which

offers the best education in the country, is a pretty good benchmark.

We've undergone a lot of structural changes. Early on, we spent too much money on the central office and not enough in the classroom. Now, we are providing a lot of autonomy to schools that are improving, intervening in schools that are not, and redesigning schools that have a three-year average of not performing well. We also have a system where parents can leave the school if they don't like it, and the money trails the kid.

I'm also the only Mayor I know of in the state who has an office specifically focused on early childhood education, because that's where we have to make the investment. About 50 percent of our kids arrive in kindergarten behind, and if they start behind, it is tough to catch up, which is why the dropout rate is high. We know we have to tackle that head-on.

What are your public safety initiatives, and why have they been so effective?

First, we made sure we had a community policing strategy. I brought Comstat in from New York and used the data to drive where we would put our resources to be effective in crime fighting and prevention. Our numbers are great, but we want to improve more. We've seen the lowest crime stats in 25 years, and we've increased engagement with the community. We now spend a lot more on resources like foot patrols, bike patrols, and mounted police, which make people feel safe and more engaged with the police. We also enforced a curfew that, while a little controversial, has been very successful. It was embraced by the superintendent because it means kids are rested for school. All of these things are part of the community values that are helping the police department in its efforts.

How have you been working to stimulate residential development in the area?

We're a city of neighborhoods. All of them have their own diversity, pride, and synergy that keep them thriving. We've had significant success in making sure our Central Business District is growing not only for businesses, but also for our residential population. We make sure our major avenues are connected from the Central Business District to the suburbs, which allows a very easy 32-minute commute. We've also spent a lot of time increasing home ownership in those neighborhoods. Our home ownership rate is only 23 percent because we were built as a renter city and a worker city for factories

and insurance companies. But every year, we've been able to increase it.

How has business's perception of economic development changed in Hartford?

There was once flight out of downtown to suburban office markets; now there's a renewed interest in having a Hartford address. Phoenix Wealth Management spun off its asset management group and stayed in downtown Hartford. Northeast Utilities was headquartered with hundreds of people in a suburb and moved its administrative offices and close to 200 people downtown. It's exciting for the city.

How important is it to get out the branding message for the new Hartford?

We made a decision five-plus years ago to take advantage of everything we have here – the quality of life, the workforce, the corporate presence. While we're only 125,000 residents in the city, we continue to look at ourselves as a small but powerful region. Our big challenge now is to continue to recruit and retain young people. Young people need to see there is opportunity here that is just as exciting as in New York, Boston, D.C., and Baltimore. We need to be a midsize city that gives people all the good things of a large city. Our branding, for the state and the region, is still not where it should be. We've only scratched the surface. We have a small effort called the Hartford Young Professionals, which is focused on getting young professionals engaged. One thing we learned is we probably overbuilt housing for empty nesters and did not build enough for young people. We are now developing a housing strategy because once the young people are here, they will get engaged. A challenge is to get some of our bigger corporations to change the traditional ways they recruit. We make very good efforts to bring people in, and we want to do more on selling them on the quality of life they could have if they stayed in Hartford.

Has being Mayor been what you expected?

I never thought I was going to run for Mayor, but Hartford had been so good to me. I felt I owed something to it when I saw it on its back. Being Mayor hasn't been what I expected. I expected to be more engaged in traditional public policy. I never thought it was going to be as exciting as getting involved in education and economic development. We've turned a corner at City Hall and in a lot of our neighborhoods. People are feeling part of what we're doing, but we've got a long way to go. ●