

Queens Borough President Helen Marshall tries to calm financial fears in State of the Borough speech

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By turns a campaigner, cheerleader and comforter, Queens Borough President Helen Marshall tried Tuesday to soothe fears of a crippling, close-to-home financial crisis in her annual State of the Borough address.

"In this ailing economy, we can create jobs, we can build housing and we can boost businesses," Marshall told a crowd of 800 at Queens College's Colden Auditorium. "Naysayers beware, we will move forward."

Though resolute, Marshall also relayed grim news that two ailing hospitals - St. John's Queens in Elmhurst and Mary Immaculate in Jamaica - are "considering bankruptcy" and "on the verge of closure."

But she sprinkled her wide-ranging, 90-minute speech with optimistic outlooks on schools and libraries she funded - and asked constituents to reelect her to a third term in November so she can "get the job done."

Marshall called on the city to reduce fire response times, counteract a "staggering" 65% homicide uptick in southern Queens and maintain community boards' rights to land-use review.

She also took a hard line on preserving senior services, blasting changes to Meals on Wheels - which will go into effect Feb. 2 - that she fears will eliminate hot dishes in favor of frozen food.

Marshall directed her harshest criticisms at "government's failure to provide viable mass transit options," appealing for the re-opening of dormant LIRR stations and the creation of more bus routes in eastern Queens.

She blasted a Metropolitan Transportation Authority plan to abolish toll rebates for locals who drive over the Cross Bay Bridge - which connects Broad Channel to the Rockaways - instead demanding the MTA eradicate the fee for all motorists.

"Charging drivers a toll to travel within the borough? Pfft!" Marshall said in a dismissive tone. "After all, shoppers on Fifth Ave. don't pay a toll to drive to Madison Ave."

But Marshall offered positive thoughts, too - interrupted dozens of times by applause from the likes of City Council Speaker Christine Quinn, ex-Council Speaker Peter Vallone Sr. and former Borough President Claire Shulman.

Marshall introduced Queens-raised crooner Tony Bennett to update developments at the Frank Sinatra School of the Arts in Astoria, a music-focused high school he founded. Opened in 2001, it will move into a new building come September.

Bennett marveled that "the greatest group of artists that ever came to the United States" lived in Queens, from Ella Fitzgerald to Louis Armstrong to Dizzy Gillespie.

Among other highlights of the address - broadcast live on Queens Public Television for the first time - was a video preview of the Mets' new stadium, Citi Field, which will open in April.

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Helen Marshall