



The United States Conference of Mayors

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The U.S. Conference of Mayors President, Long Beach Mayor Beverly O'Neill Addresses the National Press Club Luncheon on Friday, May 19

Focuses on “Cities for a Strong America” Initiative and What Hurricane Katrina Exposed About the Overall Condition of the Country

Washington, D.C. – The U.S. Conference of Mayors President and Long Beach, CA Mayor Beverly O'Neill addressed the National Press Club luncheon on Friday, May 19.

During her speech she reported on her **“Cities for a Strong America”** initiative which she declared as her theme while serving as President of the U.S. Conference of Mayors. “I chose ‘Cities for a Strong America’ because I wanted to draw the nation’s attention to the importance of cities in our national economy, and to stress how the economic health of this nation directly depends on the economic health of our metro economies – which are made up of cities and suburbs,” O’Neill said. Metro Economies are essential to the prosperity and continued health of this nation. The Conference of Mayors’ Metro Economy reports prove beyond a shadow of a doubt the impact that cities and counties, together, have on the well-being of this country.

Mayor O’Neill went on to say how just a short time after becoming President of the Conference of Mayors, she could never have anticipated that one of America’s most celebrated cities, New Orleans, and the Gulf Coast would be hit by the most devastating natural disaster this country has ever seen.

Acknowledging that this tragic disaster could change the face of this country, during her speech, Mayor O’Neill also explored how the devastating hurricanes last year have impacted the overall condition of the country. “Hurricane Katrina exposed some truths about this country that we must all face. It’s no question that New Orleans and the Gulf Coast region must be rebuilt, but this tragedy also shed light on the fact that, in so many ways, this country needs to reinvest in itself and be rebuilt. Which begs the question - **are we truly a strong America?**”

Mayor O’Neill outlined in her speech how this country can not truly be strong unless people get the help they fully deserve; unless issues like poverty, infrastructure investment, effective transportation, and energy conservation are really addressed over the long-term.

“I am here today to tell you that it is imperative and critical that, as a nation, we must wake up and pay attention to all that ails us. Yes, we must rebuild the Gulf Coast cities, but in fact, **we must rebuild America,**” she said.

During her 25 minute speech, Mayor O’Neill discussed several key issues that must be addressed in this country if it is going to truly be a strong America – energy, transportation, infrastructure, poverty, and homeland security/crime.

I. Energy

Without a doubt, a key component to keeping the country's economic engines running is reliable and cost-efficient energy sources. Just last week, the Conference of Mayors held a **National Summit on Energy and Environment** in Chicago which brought together approximately 40 mayors with energy and environment experts, and the business community to sound a national alarm about record level gas prices, rising fuel costs and the energy crisis.

When energy prices go up – whether it is the energy to heat and cool homes, run a business, or fuel vehicles – it has a huge impact on local and national economies.

“Mayors are dealing with this energy crisis on the local level,” O’Neill said. “We cannot wait on the federal government; we must do what mayors do best and act now. This crisis is affecting working families in every city and severely impacting and straining city budgets. The people in our communities are making real financial decisions as they deal with the ripple effect of this crisis in our country.”

The nation's mayors heard President Bush declare that America is “addicted to oil,” and the Conference of Mayors is on the forefront of a national effort to engage mayors, industry experts and the private sector to find comprehensive, long-term solutions to move the country from this energy crisis toward energy independence.

II. Transportation

Mayor O’Neill also stressed the importance of transportation investment in rebuilding America.

“With escalating gas prices, it is time for this country to be committed to investing in public transportation. Across this nation, people are discovering that public transit provides an affordable, comfortable, and energy-efficient way to get to work and reduce the impact of high gas prices,” she said.

Public transportation also promotes energy independence.

“Today, we are calling on Congress and the Administration to invest in a national initiative for a substantial and rapid expansion of public transportation in our cities and suburbs,” she continued.

Additionally, transportation security in this country must also be maintained in the air and on the rails, highways, and waterways.

O’Neill added, “We must commit to working with the Administration, Congress and state leaders nationwide to make sure that our citizens can get on a bus, step onto a train, and go to work knowing that everything that can be done to keep them safe - is being done.”

III. Infrastructure

In continuing the discussion about reinvesting and rebuilding, Mayor O’Neill took a look at the infrastructure in this country.

It's a known fact that New Orleans levees were found to be insufficiently built to withstand strong hurricane-force winds. The levee breach in California a few months ago caused serious flooding in that region. And just last week we saw flooding caused by high water levels in New England.

The Conference of Mayors joined with the American Society of Civil Engineers last year to release their latest report card for America's Infrastructure. The 2005 Report Card for America's Infrastructure, which examined the condition of our nation's roads, bridges, schools, transit, rail, aviation, drinking water, public parks and recreation, security and energy, wastewater, and dams, and other areas, gave the country a cumulative grade of “D”.

“The question is – are we going to improve America’s infrastructure by investing in these areas, or are we going to continue rebuilding other countries and watch our infrastructure needs slide to a failing grade?” O’Neill asked.

IV. Poverty

Hurricane Katrina unmasked a hidden problem not only in New Orleans, but in this country – and that is the issue of poverty and the plight of the working poor.

“Poverty is all around us, yet no one wants to look at it square in the face,” O’Neill said. “We cannot ignore a poverty index that, unrealistically, says that a family of four can live on \$20,000 in this country; nor can we ignore the fact that 3 ½ million men, women, and children are homeless in this country. The truth is - hard working Americans are still struggling to compete and succeed, and are often times failing. That is why the Conference of Mayors is committed to moving this discussion from the margins to the mainstream,” she added.

V. Homeland Security/Crime

Lastly, Mayor O’Neill stressed that almost every mayor in the country would say that their first priority is and must be public safety.

“Safety and security impacts every part of a community’s social and economic fabric. But for every mayor in America, the job of ensuring public safety changed forever on September 11, 2001,” she said.

The nation’s more than 600,000 sworn local police officers must be integrated into the national effort to stop terrorists from destroying our American way of life. That is why mayors have been pushing for equipment, training and deployment resources for police, fire and emergency services personnel to make sure that they have the skills and tools needed in the domestic fight against terrorism.

“We have been fighting to make sure that these funds get to the cities that need them, and are not stuck in state or regional bureaucracies. As we learned following Hurricane Katrina, mayors know that we need to be prepared to help ourselves in the early days, weeks and even months following a devastating attack or natural disaster,” O’Neill added.

At the same time, mayors must also continue to focus on the ongoing need to address crime. There are still major problems with illegal drugs and violence; and newer problems are now emerging such as meth, and growing gang violence in center cities and suburbs.

According to a recent survey by the National Youth Gang Center, there are 21,500 youth gangs in the U.S., with 731,500 gang members. And in Northern Virginia, the MS-13 gang problem has reached suburban communities that thought they were safe from gang violence.

“Now you can see why we must never let up in the ongoing fight to keep our streets safe, our families protected, and our nation secure,” O’Neill said.

“Mayors are moving on all of these key issues that I have discussed like transportation investment, homeland security and crime, energy efficiency, infrastructure, and poverty, and are not waiting on the federal government to act.

“But what about our federal government? Is it acting like a true partner in these efforts?”

O'Neill went on to highlight that key investment programs like the Community Development Block Grant - which creates jobs and opportunity for economic development and housing - continue to be on the chopping block; funding for key police and anti-crime programs has been almost completely eliminated; port and transportation security funding is not nearly where it needs to be; and first responder funding is being reduced because it is tied up in state and regional bureaucracies – just as mayors predicted when they were fighting for direct funding.

“These are not the actions of what I consider to be a full partner,” O'Neill said. “Our communities are the backbone of this country. Our industries and businesses help fill the state and federal coffers, and we have the right to insist that now is the time to invest in our communities and give us the tools we need to strengthen America's economy.

“Now is the time to reinvest in and rebuild this country, and Mayors are on the forefront leading the way.”

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The U.S. Conference of Mayors is the official nonpartisan organization of cities with populations of 30,000 or more. There are 1,139 such cities in the country today, each represented in the Conference by its chief elected official, the Mayor.