Remarks as Prepared for Delivery by The Honorable Steven M. Fulop
Mayor of Jersey City, New Jersey

At Columbia University
School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA) Alumni Day
New York, NY
Saturday, April 12, 2014

Dean Janow, members of the SIPA community, fellow graduates and students:

Thank you for the opportunity to join with you today and share my reflections.

SIPA is a remarkable institution. In a world, which, as Thomas Freeland describes as getting not only smaller, but also flatter, SIPA’s student body, faculty, and curriculum aggressively embraces a sense of global identity. As has been frequently noted, almost fifty percent of SIPA students were not born in the United States, the result of which provides a more interesting classroom and university experience. While I was attracted to SIPA, in part, because of its belonging to Columbia University, the most profound impact of SIPA was its international community.

I remember the first few classes when the students were getting to know each other, one of the first questions was always where are you're from, and I would listen to what I then thought were exotic answers: Shanghai, Bogota, Heidelberg. My soon-to-be answer to the other students reminded me of a comment by New Jersey’s own, Bruce Springsteen, who said at his induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, “Rise up, my fellow New Jerseyans, for we are all members of a confused but noble race. We, of the state that will never get any respect, we, who bear the cruelty of the forever un-cool. A chip on the shoulders of those with forever something to prove.” That is New Jersey.

Today, I stand here proud as ever to be representing a city in New Jersey. And, while I remain forever un-cool, I am comfortable with it, and more importantly with the things that are happening across the river.

Jersey City is a Global City

I’m extremely fortunate to have gone to school at SIPA because Jersey City, where I serve as Mayor, is a global city.

I never thought, as the Mayor of a two hundred and fifty thousand person town in New Jersey, that I would be dealing with issues such as: immigration, international shipping, typhoon relief, commanding a police department whose members speak ten languages, or interfacing with security agencies around the globe.
Jersey City, in the shadow of the Statue of Liberty, served as America’s entryway during the nineteenth century. Welcoming largely European immigrants to the United States, Jersey City was often referred to as the “Golden Door” because it provided an access point to the American Dream.

This really hasn’t changed. Today, the immigrant pool is different, but their dreams are not; Pakistanis, Egyptians, Indians, Africans, Filipinos, and Dominicans come to our city in pursuit of those things that immigrants have always sought in the United States.

Jersey City is dense, urban, growing, and arguably the most diverse city in the country. It may be relatively unique among cities now, but as you know, the face of Jersey City today is a harbinger of what’s to come for much of the United States and the world.

The future is urban. For the first time in a hundred years, the majority of the earth’s population lives in cities.

We are seeing across-the-board increases in the density, population and diversity of cities on every continent on the planet. As Jersey City becomes the rule rather than the exception, we increasingly find that the siloed, localist approach to public policy education does not adequately equip leaders and public servants to address contemporary challenges. This is something SIPA has known since its inception.

It’s time to acknowledge that the world doesn’t work that way anymore in a siloed, local way.

Global Local Policy

The broader point here is this: given the way information and people move today, there’s no such thing as local policy. All policy is global. Said another way, for policy to be effective, it has to take into consideration the dwindling importance of locality. I know this sounds like a tall order for policy makers. In some ways it is.

Running the second largest city in New Jersey would be hard enough without examining each policy from a global perspective. But in another way, I think we have nothing to fear from the globalizing of the challenges we face in the field of public policy.

There are terrific opportunities in the ever-increasing interconnectedness of our world. Dwight Eisenhower said: “if you can’t solve a problem, enlarge it.” Globalization is enlarging all of our problems for us; it’s making them more complex, more multifaceted, but not necessarily worse or more difficult. In some cases, I think increased interconnectivity is making our problems more workable -- it yields new synergies, new economies, and a greater capacity for collaboration.
We have nothing to fear from these changes, as long as we follow SIPA’s example and acknowledge them in our work.
I want to share a couple of examples of what I consider global local policy that we’re working on in Jersey City.

Gun Reform

Gun reform is a critical issue in Jersey City and in many big cities across the country. Our work on gun reform is a perfect example of how our interconnected world—and the potential for collaboration that comes along with it—can empower government rather than hinder it.

As you know, the gun lobby, with its campaign contributions, large media presence, and political scare tactics, has historically ruled the dialogue around this issue with an iron first. The one-sidedness of conversation was never demonstrated more clearly than in the aftermath of the Sandy Hook massacre: a measure to require background checks for purchases at gun shows, with a 90 percent approval rating, failed to pass Congress.

I can’t imagine a clearer mandate, but despite the demand from the American people, our legislature bowed to the whims of the gun lobby.

So, we can’t depend on the federal legislation to stem the flow of guns into our cities. Legislation on the state and municipal level can’t address the issue because state and city borders are permeable—people can easily move guns from places with looser restrictions into our cities.

Instead of approaching the issue legislatively, we approached it economically. Police departments are by far the largest purchasers of guns and ammo in the United States, so we have considerable power in the marketplace. In Jersey City, it is now a requirement for gun and ammunition manufacturers who seek to do business with the city to answer a questionnaire regarding their positions on gun safety.

Jersey City alone doesn’t have enough marketplace leverage to singlehandedly change the policies of gun and ammo manufacturers, but other cities will take similar measures, and the pressure on gun manufacturers to be transparent and socially responsible will mount.

This is global local policy—policy which can be implemented on a local level in many different places to address a larger issue. Local governments, if they can harness global synergies, can move the needle on a national issue like gun control.

Climate Change

Even more than for gun reform, there is the need for globally minded local policy on the issues surrounding climate change. The International Energy Agency estimates that cities are
responsible for more than eighty percent of U.S. energy consumption, meaning that they are also likely the greatest sources of green house gasses. With this comes a responsibility to lead the charge in addressing climate change.

Just as with gun control, Congress is paralyzed by politics, and just as with gun control, city leaders with vision and a global mindset can make progress. Through the U.S. Mayors’ Climate Protection Agreement, of which Jersey City is now a member, more than one thousand mayors have agreed to meet or exceed Kyoto Protocol targets, even though the federal government has not ratified the Protocol.

Some cities are doing even more; New York, London, Paris, Tokyo, and Seoul have all set more aggressive green house gas reduction targets than those outlined in the Kyoto Protocol, and implemented detailed plans to achieve those targets.

This kind of global understanding of the duties of a leader stems from a personal sense of world citizenship. It’s no coincidence that the leaders on global local policy all govern highly international cities. They can walk their streets, talk to their constituents, and see that the cultural, economic, and geographical gulfs that historically isolated nations, continents, and peoples from one another are shrinking, and that their policies can positively reinforce and amplify the policies of likeminded leaders everywhere.

**Immigration**

Historically, immigrants have shaped the economic and cultural landscape of our cities, and today, influence of immigration in this country has never been greater. As always, Congress is out of touch with the actual impact of these issues, consumed with partisanship, and unable to see beyond the beltway. Mayors, by contrast, are on the ground.

Immigration reform isn’t just a talking point to me, a bargaining chip I can use to secure reelection. There are seventy-five languages spoken in Jersey City schools. If you take two Jersey City residents at random, there’s an 83 percent chance they won’t be of the same race. Immigration reform has a face to me; it’s connected to actual people who I actually know. This is true for many big city mayors, so it’s a very important issue, and one we’ve got to address on our own.

Jersey City, along with 31 other cities around the United States and Canada, are sanctuary cities, which means that Jersey City employees and police officers are by municipal ordinance not to inquire as to immigration status, and not to devote city resources to any investigation of the immigration status.

More than half of Jersey City’s population is foreign born. We can’t have such a large percentage of our residents feel as though their and their families’ position, as members of our
society, is in jeopardy while waiting indefinitely for a federal immigration overhaul which seems to be always politically out of reach.

Unfortunately, the national discussion of immigration reform has focused almost exclusively on illegal immigration, Mexico-United States border control, and drug trafficking. To frame the conversation in this way is counter-productive and alarmist. These are only a few small components of the issue, and this certainly does not reflect a national perspective on it.

What’s more important to me and to my constituents is how to empower immigrants, how to equip them to start businesses and create jobs, get educated, and contribute to the growth of our economy.

Conclusion

I started with a quote from Bruce Springsteen on New Jersey, and I will end my comments with a more traditional comment from 250 years ago by Alexander Hamilton, who simply said while looking at Jersey City that “on the west bank of the Hudson River a great city shall rise”.

I couldn’t be prouder of the opportunity and progress in Jersey City. Immigration, climate change and gun reform are all issues which are traditionally considered outside the purview of local government, despite the fact that local leaders are finding innovative ways to address them. They take a local approach to global problems. It’s an internationalist method, but it’s also quintessentially American in that it’s entrepreneurial, practical, forward thinking, and optimistic.

This is the approach I try to take, and it’s the approach I learned at SIPA.

To practice global local policy is to know that no matter how great the distance between two cities, no matter how different their histories, no matter how disparate their languages, the challenges they face are often common.

Thank you.

###