



Key Takeaways

- Cleaning and greening the city isn't just about aesthetics. The conditions of our streets and neighborhoods can have big impacts on crime and public safety, public health and the economic vibrancy of our city.
- In order to tackle the litter problem, the city should consider innovating and pilot programs successful in other cities.
- There are also legislative opportunities to reduce the amount of waste being created on a daily basis. The city's plastic bag ban is an example of waste reduction that has eliminated an estimated 200 million plastic bags from the city's waste stream.
- Philadelphia plays an important role in ensuring the fiscal stability and success of the region's transportation system, SEPTA. Local dollars help leverage state funds, both of which are necessary to ensure frequent and reliable service.
- Public safety affects residents and businesses alike. Crime affects a business' hours and costs of operation, and its ability to recruit employees and attract customers.

Column 6 - Second City Council Transition Session

Imagine you're a Philadelphia City Council member starting a new term, perhaps completely new to City Hall. You'll be expected to play a role in confronting a host of important challenges facing the city – crime, litter, public transit, job creation and more.

Councilmembers sworn in January 2nd had the benefit of a full day of informational briefings by experts and leaders from a variety of fields in a session organized by the Committee of Seventy, the Chamber of Commerce for Greater Philadelphia, the Philadelphia Council AFL-CIO, and the Urban Affairs Coalition. The purpose of the briefing was to provide incoming council members with an overview of the diverse issues they will encounter.

Mayor Chelle Parker has set out to make Philadelphia a “cleaner, greener, safer city,” which was the focus of one of the panels.

Prema Gupta, president of the Center City District, said making the city cleaner isn't just a matter of aesthetics—it helps with safety and job creation also. “These things affect your mood and affect your attitude about moving about the city,” she said. More people on the streets makes them safer, and makes the city more appealing to businesses and residents thinking about relocating.

Rick Sauer, executive director of the Philadelphia Association of Community Development Corporations, said Council could provide more support to existing programs enabling neighborhood organizations to improve physical spaces.

“There are studies that show if you clean up vacant lots, address short dumping and things like that, residents are more willing to walk the streets,” Sauer said. “They get better exercise and health outcomes, and it's been shown to reduce crime and increase property values as well.”

Gupta said the city could take a new look at existing litter control practices, such as the use of BigBelly trash receptacles with handles that many don't find appealing to pull, an issue the city has been trying to address through the installation of foot pedals. She cited innovative technology for street litter and household trash collection now in use in Europe that are aesthetically pleasing and more effective.

Gupta also said better regulation of dumpsters is needed, noting that they're supposed to be locked. “When they're not locked and the more vulnerable among us can go into them and get stuff out of them, the whole area around it is affected,” she said.

Members also heard from Nic Esposito, Director of Policy and Engagement for the group Circular Philadelphia. He argued for thinking of longer term, fundamental solutions.

“Our whole premise at Circular Philadelphia is that you're not going to get the city clean by cleaning,” Esposito said. “We have to stop waste at its source.” He said real progress comes when you identify a problem and employ a combination of public education, well-crafted legislation and phased-in enforcement.

Esposito was director of the city's Zero Waste and Litter Cabinet under former Mayor Jim Kenney. The group made several important strides, including working to reduce illegal dumping and helping to enact a ban on single-use plastic bags, which has eliminated an estimated 200 million plastic bags from the city's waste stream.

Esposito said he's excited by Mayor Parker's interest in a greener city, and sees great potential for City Council to be a partner in the effort.

At an afternoon session on jobs and economic growth, SEPTA General Manager Leslie Richards discussed the agency's financial challenges, driven by a ridership decline during the pandemic and the expiration of federal COVID relief funds.

As of January, 2024 Septa was facing a \$244 million annual funding gap in its operating budget, presenting the agency with a stark choice. “It's simple,” Richards said. “If we don't fill in our gap by July 1st, we have to cut service significantly — 20 percent — and raise fares significantly, up to 30 percent.”

Richards said failure would be bad news not just for SEPTA, but for the city and the regional economy. “When we provide frequent, reliable service, it means more people can be connected to opportunities, whether it's their job, their education, or connecting them to family members,” Richards said.

She said research shows a strong correlation between healthy cities and healthy transit systems. SEPTA is funded through a variety of sources, including state and federal resources. Philadelphia and the four suburban counties served by SEPTA also make annual contributions to the agency's operations. Richards noted every dollar of increased local funding can leverage \$7 in state funds, so it's important that Philadelphia and the four suburban counties make an effort to help.

Governor Josh Shapiro proposed a major increase in transit funding in his February 6th budget address. He'll have to work out an agreement on SEPTA and other priorities with the state legislature by the June 30th deadline for approving a state budget.

A session on public safety featured Everett Gillison, a former deputy mayor for public safety, Estelle Richman, executive director of the Civic Coalition to Save Lives, Jack Chen of the Asian American Chamber of Commerce, and Jennifer Rodríguez, President of the Greater Philadelphia Hispanic Chamber of Commerce.

Rodríguez spoke about “the heartbreak business owners feel ... because it is so difficult to succeed in the city due to the cost and complexity of doing business, and the crime and safety issues that have become so prevalent over the last few years.”

Rodríguez said surveys of her members show a dramatic increase in concern about crime, and increasingly negative feelings about the city as a result. “Businesses have to invest in additional security measures,” she said. “They have to curtail their hours of business. It becomes harder to recruit employees, and they lose [their] customer base because people don't feel safe walking or going into their business.”

Rodríguez agreed with Mayor Parker that the city suffers from a sense of disorder and lawlessness, and she hopes the city can return to some effective crime-fighting strategies employed in the past.

Council members received insight from experts on a variety of issues. Throughout the session, speakers named resources that may be helpful to the Council members as they shape their policy priorities, including Criminal Justice Advisory Boards, the Community Development Financial Institutions Fund and Drexel's Infrastructure Funding Tracker. In addition to passing specific policy and programming legislation, Council will have to work with the Mayor after the budget is proposed in March to establish the City's funding priorities.

"It was truly an honor to be able to bring together experts that are invested in the future of Philadelphia for both new and established council members to learn from," said Committee of Seventy President and CEO Lauren Cristella. "We hope it was valuable for the Council members, as well as the speakers, and we look forward to building on the relationships formed and the knowledge shared in these sessions. The Committee of Seventy is prepared and excited to continue serving as a resource for our elected officials and their staff because when they thrive in these roles, our city thrives."

Additional Resources:

- [The Mayor and City Finances Infographic](#)
- [Reducing Crime by Changing Places: Assessing the Benefits of Abating Vacant and Abandoned Land in Urban Spaces](#)
- [Effect of Greening Vacant Land on Mental Health of Community-Dwelling Adults](#)
- [Circular Philadelphia's Policy Guide on Single-Use Plastic Legislation for Philadelphia](#)
- [Criminal Justice Advisory Boards](#)
- [Philadelphia Taking Care of Business \(PHL TCB\) Clean Corridors Program](#)
- [PHS Transforming Vacant Land](#)
- [Community Development Financial Institutions Fund \(CDFI Fund\)](#)
- [Drexel's Infrastructure Funding Tracker](#)