



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Daniel L. Squadron

Senator Squadron's Remarks at the Fourth Annual 25th Senate District Community Convention

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Thank you for being here today. I'm really glad so many were willing to brave the rain. And I'm glad you were able to join the Community Convention without missing out on a beautiful day around the district. A day like today, this is the perfect place to be.

And it's going to be a great event. That would not have happened without the help of some generous volunteers and community members. Thank you!

Of course, whatever the weather is outside, your presence here today, when there is so much to do and life is so busy, is a big deal. And not just because it's Earth Day.

Four years ago, we decided to try an experiment: offer a forum that is not just open, but truly participatory. An opportunity to share innovative ideas and help identify priorities. But there was a real risk. When you are asking for ideas instead of imposing them; when you are listening to questions instead of answering them; when you are seeking solutions instead of fielding complaints; when you are turning the normal dynamic of politics on its head... Will people come?

In our district, the answer is clear. Yes. We have shown that, given the chance, hundreds of people in our district want to be an active part of the business of government. Not as spectators. Not as critics. But, rather, as engaged citizens, willing to take a few hours from busy lives to roll up your sleeves and make a difference.

And no one should doubt for a moment what a significant difference a room like this can make.

In fact, let me give you an example. Perhaps a little bit of a strange one, but bear with me.

There's another annual gathering. It doesn't happen in the district, or even in the state; but, for a time at least, it was chaired by a New York State Senator. And, at this gathering, hundreds of people meet with the deep conviction that by banding together and working hard for shared goals, they can change things.

The other gathering I'm talking about is the American Legislative Exchange Council, or ALEC.

If you haven't heard of it, ALEC is an organization made up of conservative state legislators and large corporate interests that write legislation and lobby in favor a self-serving and extremist agenda.

If you have heard of ALEC, it is probably because of the tragic and shameful killing of Trayvon Martin and the Florida "stand your ground law" that has been a part of that story.

That law came from ALEC.

And there are a lot more where that came from. According to their website, ALEC has more than 1,000 pieces of so-called model legislation. They have laws on everything from voter suppression -- they support -- to immigrant rights -- they oppose.

In fact, remember that Arizona immigration law? The one that requires the police to lock up anyone who can't prove they entered the country legally? That came from ALEC. It's a big deal for the private prison companies.

Now, of course, ALEC is very different than this group. Many of the so-called "people" in that room are actually corporations. Most of the others are state legislators. Unlike this gathering, ALEC is not made up of citizens eager to make their communities stronger, their city more successful, and their state fairer.

But there is a major similarity: a lot of what has come out of the Community Convention has become a reality, as well.

Four years ago there was a lot of interest in ethics reform. I fought for it. We passed bills to crack down on doing private business with government resources and to reform the system. Today, ethics reform is a reality.

Stabilizing public housing has been major topic in past years. Working with Chuck Schumer and Nydia Velazquez, I passed a bill that gets \$70 million dollars more a year of federal aid to public housing, forever.

Transit is a big issue at the Convention every year. The legislature still has much to do to stabilize the MTA's finances and restore much-needed bus routes, but I have successfully worked with the agency to increase transparency, and improve and increase service on the F and L lines.

Frustrations were raised about the State Liquor Authority by community members and businesses. So we funded a new website that is a game-changer on transparency.

Constituents were here talking about benefit corporations – for-profit corporations that must also do good. Speaker Silver and I passed the bill and now they exist in New York.

Each year, we focus on strengthening rent regulations, and reforming individual apartment improvements. Active recreation at Brooklyn Bridge Park; dollars and a community process for Pier 42; and the commitment to keep Governors Island open every summer.

Every one of these issues, and a whole lot more, have been part of the Convention. And now, they are reality.

Of course, there is a whole lot more that has come up at the Convention that is not yet reality.

There is still a lot to do. Which is why we are going to split up into discussion groups in just a moment.

But before we do, take one more moment to think about how powerful a force this room can be. ALEC is a decades-old organization, a national story. This is the fourth year of an exciting experiment.

Fighting back against groups like ALEC isn't easy, but it is possible. Do not give up. Most people are busy living their lives; when they aren't watching, that's when the government gets stolen by special interests. The Convention is one way to fight back. Of course, there are others. This year, there was participatory budgeting for some City Council capital for the first time. And, for many here, the Convention is not a single day of participation – it is part of spending all year, every year, working hard for a better community and better government.

ALEC does not have a monopoly on getting things done. Whatever form it takes, when you make your voice heard in your community and your government, that's fighting back. And it makes an enormous difference.

If you've been here before, you know the drill. On your programs you will see discussion groups and rooms. Once we break, up we will be in those discussions until 4PM. Then we will reconvene for snacks and another brief hello.

And, please also stop by the 9/11 Memorial table that is set up outside all afternoon. As you know, the Memorial is just a few blocks away. Thousands of people visit each day to pay their respects and honor those who were lost. Stop by the table to volunteer to help accommodate these visitors.

Thank you again for coming, and now let's get to it.