



INAUGURAL ADDRESS

Mayor Jonathan F. Mitchell

January 4, 2016

Zeiterion Theater, New Bedford, Massachusetts

[remarks as prepared]

Judges Dupuis and Fernandes, members of the City Council, School Committee and Board of Assessors, honored guests, citizens and friends of New Bedford:

When I came before you here four years ago, I said that New Bedford was “poised for progress.” We were a city ready to act on the potential we all knew we had.

So we set our sights higher. We confronted our challenges. We took action.

In the years since, it has all paid off. Together we have achieved unmistakable progress along multiple fronts.

We have seen new jobs spring up across industries and our unemployment rate has plummeted.

We halted the long slide in our schools, where the dropout rate is now the lowest it’s been in fifteen years, and test scores are climbing faster than in recent memory.

Because of our sound financial management, the city’s bonding rating is the highest in its modern history.

Violent crime dropped fourteen percent in the last year, and thanks to intensified code enforcement, absentee landlords are cleaning up their properties.

Our port is expanding with more cargo, a new ferry service to Nantucket, a new marine terminal, and continued dominance in the fishing industry.

And the physical appearance of the city is changing, with three new parks, over fifteen-hundred new street trees, and a glorious new Harborwalk.

We've doubled recycling, and have become widely seen as a national leader in renewable energy and energy efficiency. We legitimately, and very quickly, have become one of the greenest cities in America.

In four short years, we have gone from a city poised for progress, to a city with momentum.

Together we should take heart in what we have achieved. For so long our city had slumped, and many had come to believe that that was a permanent state of affairs – that was always going to be so. But together we have proven that decline is not inevitable. We have made things better because we believed they could be better– and we were willing to work for it.

But now is not the time to take a bow. Our work is hardly done. Make no mistake about it, the challenges before us today are significant and complicated.

Our schools still have a way to go. We have certain neighborhoods that are not as safe as they should be. And our finances are stretched so thinly that even our recent cuts to vital city services have proven inadequate to relieve the pressure on taxpayers.

There's no bucket of federal or state money that will fix things for us. It doesn't exist. We may seek support from elsewhere, but our challenges are ultimately left up to us to solve.

But that is no different than it's ever been. Each generation has to make its own choices about where it's going.

Recently, we been treated to a number of new and interesting perspectives on New Bedford's history. These have come from film productions like that from the local film group, Reel Serious, and less directly in the Ron Howard movie "In the Heart of the Sea," as well as national magazines like this week's issue of the Economist. And of course there was the most popular Christmas present in the region this year: the second volume of Spinner Publication's pictorial history of the City. (If you didn't buy it as a Christmas present, treat yourself to it. It's terrific.)

As we think of the task before us now, these and other historical perspectives remind us that although national and global events certainly have shaped our city, the New Bedford we know today is in part of the sum total of decisions, both wise and unwise, made in the past here in New Bedford.

There are many examples. New Bedford is a more tolerant city today because the city's abolitionist leaders in the first-half of the nineteenth century set the right tone for generations

to come. Later on, key investments in water supply and infrastructure enabled New Bedford to grow into a modern industrial city. And more recently, historic preservation efforts in the 1970's make us today an attractive tourist destination, but more importantly, a community with a stronger sense of identity.

On the other hand, the shortsightedness of urban renewal projects in 1960's and the chronic neglect in our schools have ramifications to this day. We are still digging out from those decisions.

The point is that people in their day made choices, good and bad, that ripple beyond their time. Every generation has its opportunities and challenges. We're no different.

We, public officials and everyone who professes a love for our city – have to ask ourselves, what will we be known for?

Will later generations say we caved to short term political pressures, or that we instead made the harder choices to advance the city's long term interests?

Will they say we just sat back and felt sorry for ourselves that we weren't getting the attention we believed we deserved from the state and federal governments, or were we willing to seize the initiative and plow ahead anyway?

Will future residents of our city – our children and grandchildren – say we had them in mind, when we put aside petty squabbles and worked together for the common good?

Nobody knows what the future holds. But we do know where we want to go. It's the city we've been building the last four years, now and into the future;

a city that is the gravitational center of Southeastern Massachusetts,

a city that is taken seriously beyond the region;

a city with a diverse economy rich with opportunity;

a city with a highly professional, caring, and efficient city government that commands the confidence of taxpayers; and

a city recognized for its physical beauty, cultural richness and the compassion of its residents.

That's what we want; that's what we've been striving for. That's what we can be.

The progress we have achieved over the last few years gives us a foundation to build on. More importantly, it gives us the confidence in knowing that our persistence will pay off.

Whether it's in growing our economy, improving our schools, strengthening our neighborhoods or managing our finances, persistence indeed will be the key.

The Economy

To expand opportunity for our residents, we will persist in our effort to build a stronger regional economy that is centered around New Bedford.

We will work with the Chamber of Commerce and others to make the city more responsive to small businesses, streamline permitting, and do everything in our power to hold the line on taxes.

New Bedford will be known universally as a place that is friendly to small businesses.

We also will continue to implement the Regeneration Committee's strategy of making the most of the city's assets, especially its top economic asset, the Port of New Bedford.

We will never let up in our support for the fishing industry, and we will continue to position ourselves to be ready for the arrival of the offshore wind industry.

Both industries can catalyze cluster development in the long run. There is already a fishing cluster here, which is poised for growth, and with our geographical advantages and infrastructure, the same can happen with offshore wind.

In the long run, the goal is this: we want businesses that have some connection either to commercial fishing or offshore wind to say, "We need to be in New Bedford."

To get to this point, it will be vital not to let up on our advocacy with the state and federal governments to advance key investments in our port infrastructure, including navigational dredging and the replacement of the New Bedford-Fairhaven Bridge.

Our harbor also should be a place where our residents connect with the water. Over the last two years, we have begun the work of knitting together the downtown and the central waterfront, through landscaping, encouraging new restaurant and recreational boating development, and undertaking comprehensive land use planning. In the years ahead we will accelerate this work so we can enjoy a truly dynamic central waterfront that complements our working port, and a downtown that, for the first time in a half-century, is no longer landlocked.

There is no reason that New Bedford can't have places to dine and shop on the water, and still have a successful industrial port. Every major industrial port in America can do it, and so can we.

Education

All of this is only part of the effort to create opportunity in our city. To be successful, a city must create pathways for its residents to reach their full potential. More than anything else, that means we must offer our city's children a public school education that enables them to thrive as adults.

Our schools have come a long way in the last four years. The days when hiring was based on whom you knew, and when the needs of adults were put before children, are in the rearview mirror.

We have a school system now that is clear in its academic goals, manages taxpayer dollars reliably, and has raised the standard by which we judge academic success. We have two new schools underway, new technology upgrades, new textbooks for the first time in years, and new ways of instructing second language and special education students.

And perhaps most importantly, the school system now holds itself accountable. Just like in the private sector, everyone in the system is expected to perform, and evaluations are very real. Everyone must do their job now, and do it well.

The profound changes in our schools have been difficult, but absolutely necessary, given where we were four years ago. We knew this wasn't going to be an overnight exercise, but it's clear now that the hard work of reform is taking hold. The acceleration of test scores and the falling dropout rate are themselves encouraging, but so is the reaction of the state Department of Education, which was threatening to take over our schools back then, and now is saying they are on the right track.

But the biggest difference is the customer feedback. Surveys show that the overwhelming number of parents believe that the system is heading in the right direction.

There is still much work to do. What's needed is a persistent commitment to the new practices and systems in place. We can't tap brakes on reform. It is working.

That said, sustained improvement will take root only when those technical reforms are combined with a school culture that acknowledges and validates the hard work of teachers. People in every line of work should be expected to work hard. There is no substitute for hard work. But no one can be at their best if they feel constantly pushed. Pressure cooker work environments are prone to backfiring.

Hard work and job satisfaction can co-exist, and if our efforts are ultimately to succeed, they must.

Neighborhoods

Improving the quality of life in our City will not be possible unless we keep our neighborhoods safe. Families in every neighborhood should be able to walk their dogs at night and let their kids play outside, without thinking twice about it. Those are basic requirements of neighborhood living.

While most of our neighborhoods are safe, and the rate of violent crime is falling, certain neighborhoods are not nearly safe enough. Our work is cut out for us in those places, and it will require a sustained effort.

But we are up to the task.

We will identify and pursue the individuals who commit repeated crimes and have yet to be brought to heel. We will work closely with DA Tom Quinn to see to it that cases such as individuals are charged not in District Court, but in Superior Court, where more serious charges lead to real jail time.

Removing dangerous people from the community is only part of the answer. Despite our success in ramping up code enforcement, many of the problems in our neighborhoods continue to stem from properties owned by unscrupulous landlords who run their properties into the ground and recruit tenants from other cities without regard to their criminal pasts.

With recently passed enforcement measures, especially the problem property ordinance, we will have important new tools to be able to hold landlords accountable for contributing to the disorder in our most troubled neighborhoods. We will make them treat their properties as they would their own homes.

Our opiate task force headed by our health director Brenda Weiss also will also play an important role in helping addicts find treatment before they commit crimes.

But the first order of business in the area of public safety is to ensure a smooth leadership transition in the police department.

Chief Provencher's shoes will be hard to fill, and he played an integral role in the reduction of violence over the past year. We will hire nothing less than the best person for the job to carry on his work.

Stability of Finances and Government

All of our efforts will depend on our ability to manage our finances. Our heightened bond rating reflects that we have been effective at it, but it is not easy. We live in a time in which property tax revenue growth has been slow, and the growth of costs like pension and health care, which are essentially outside the control of city government, spiral upward.

We have made significant cuts to city government, yet the pressure on taxpayers has only increased.

Reforms clearly need to happen at the state level. The state mandates an arbitration system to resolve labor disputes with fire and police departments that makes it extremely difficult for cities to control the growth in salaries. Health care and pension eligibility, two other major areas of increasing costs, are subject largely to state control. The costs of underfunded state mandates like charter schools continue to go up. If the state is looking for ways to empower not just New Bedford, but all of the cities outside Boston, it could do well by relieving them of these intractable cost pressures.

But we can't wait for the state to act. We need to continue to make course corrections now. Although we've been widely recognized as a national leader in renewable energy and energy efficiency, we need to keep doing more of the same to achieve savings.

We will work to make sensible changes in the fire department. Our firefighters are highly effective. They are a strong team. But the system they operate in must evolve to reflect the changed nature of the threats to the city's safety, and the city's ability to fund the department's operations.

We must scrutinize our spending from top to bottom, and I believe the public should be able to do the same. Soon we will put the city's spending ledger in a so-called "Open Checkbook" system that will enable residents to see exactly what the city is spending its money on. Residents deserve that kind of transparency, and with it will come a broader consensus around the city's spending decisions.

Reducing costs of course is just half the equation. We also need to expand our tax base, which hasn't always been easy here.

New Bedford is geographically small. Whereas other communities, including some within our region, have been able to bring in more property tax revenue simply by encouraging building on previously undeveloped land, we don't have much physical room to grow. Nevertheless, we will soon undertake a thorough review of potentially buildable land, especially for commercial purposes, to ensure that we make the most of what we have.

In short, we will need to pull out all the stops to preserve and improve basic services, while letting up on the pressure on tax payers.

I look forward to working with the City Council on these matters. I appreciate the thoughtful discussions we've had of late, and I believe that continuing that discussion in the same spirit will enable our City to achieve its goals.

None of it will be easy, of course. But it hasn't been easy to this point. By setting our sights high, and by putting the city's interests first, we have made progress that compares favorably with any similarly sized city in America.

Someday, someone will write the chapter on the New Bedford of today. It could be in Volume 3 or 4 of Spinner's history of New Bedford (and I'm sure the book will make a great Christmas present then, too).

We have a chance now to write that chapter for them.

Let us make the choice now about what they will say.

Let's have them say that we brought a high minded resolve to tough challenges.

Let's have them say we looked past the chorus of reflexive critics and made the hard, right choices.

Let's have them say we put aside our differences and worked together for the benefit of the city we loved.

Our opportunity is now. Let's make the most of it.

Thank you, and God Bless the City of New Bedford.

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