

New Bedford Mayor Jon Mitchell's 2018 Inaugural Address

Mayor Jonathan F. Mitchell

January 1, 2018

Zeiterion Performing Arts Center, New Bedford, Massachusetts

[text as prepared]

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

Let me begin by thanking everyone for braving the cold tonight, and those of you who went the extra mile and recorded today's college bowl games. The rest of us will have to do our part and refrain from sharing the updated scores with you.

Tonight, as we turn the page to a new calendar year and new term of office, we size up the challenges before us with the strength of confidence gained in recent success. And that confidence is well-placed.

In the last few years, New Bedford has achieved unmistakable progress along multiple fronts. The pace of job growth, the condition of the city's physical environment, the stabilization of municipal finances, the purposeful operation of our schools, and the strength of the city's reputation are unlike anything we've seen in a long time. Together we have done things once assumed to be out of New Bedford's reach.

There are more achievements in the pipeline to celebrate – more ribbon cuttings and announcements that affirm the growing recognition that New Bedford is an ascending city.

Shaping the Strategy

But we're not in it for recognition; we don't play the game for the trophy; we don't seek praise for its own sake. Our focus – our devotion – is to build a city that will be fertile ground for our children and grandchildren to live fulfilling lives. Our success will depend on our ability to think strategically in light of what lies ahead of us, and to have the discipline to implement our strategy faithfully – and together.

As we look ahead, we have to take stock in what I believe is the single most important trend in our national economy. America today is enjoying a prolonged period of economic growth that is disproportionately concentrated in its largest cities. America's big cities are living in a golden age right now, driven by the presence of major research universities, international airports, and corporate headquarters. They are home to virtually all of America's venture capital, new office construction, and foreign investment. Unemployment is negligible in these places, real estate prices are skyrocketing, and the gap between the haves and have-nots is growing. These places are marked by construction cranes, fifty-dollar-a-plate meals, and more recently, driverless cars. Boston and New York are the two closest of many examples, and their seemingly unabated growth may have profound implications for the rest of America.

So what does that mean for a mid-size city like us that is not part of a large metropolitan area, and doesn't have the same cards to play?

It means that we have to compete. We operate in the same global economy as these cities after all. At the same time, we shouldn't see ourselves as trying to be like them or beat them at their own game. But we can be something different. In an America where the biggest cities are becoming more congested, expensive and in some cases, more violent, cities our size

offer a more manageable alternative. Here, and in other mid-size cities, one can have those things that people like in cities – the public spaces, the walkable streets, the cultural amenities, and so forth – but without feeling crushed and disconnected at the same time. Portland, Maine and Charleston, South Carolina are good examples of cities – one a little smaller than us and the other little bigger – that are succeeding along these lines.

My point is that a city doesn't have to be a major metropolis to be successful in offering its residents an opportunity for a good life.

So how do we make that happen here?

Quality of Life

First and foremost, we have to focus relentlessly on making New Bedford, quite simply, a really nice place to live. This might sound like stating the obvious. Of course everyone wants to have safe neighborhoods, more pleasant parks, cleaner streets, and higher performing schools. Local government after all is set up to accomplish such things. But the point I'm making is that enhancing the city's quality of life should be seen not simply as an end in itself, but also as a means of sustaining the city in the long run. We will attract more business and excite greater civic participation the more people believe that this is a place they'd like to be in. A high quality of life is a great selling point for any city.

We are proud of how we've been able to elevate the city's quality of life these last few years. But there's more to do.

We will continue to invest in those things that make living in New Bedford pleasant, interesting and rewarding. In the year ahead, we will continue to build and restore our public spaces, which in recent years has included the construction of five new parks and the HarborWalk and CoveWalk. A staple of a good city life is being able to walk to an inviting park, and

that's exactly what we are going to deliver, for everyone in this city.

To exalt New Bedford's glorious past, we will invest in historic preservation more than ever before. To beautify our streets and clean our air, we will continue the most ambitious tree planting program in our lifetime. And to provide relief to shock absorbers, we will dedicate steady funding for road improvement so that they are not allowed to fall into disrepair again as they had for decades.

We will make our city cleaner and more put together than it has been in anyone's memory.

We will make the most of our access to the water by working to connect the downtown and the waterfront, and begin constructing the RiverWalk with the goal of giving the North End what the same kind of waterfront amenities that the South End has had.

We will prioritize public safety. New Bedford is a safe city, but not every neighborhood is nearly safe enough. We will intensify our community policing and code enforcement efforts in our most distressed neighborhoods so they are not left behind as the rest of the city as a whole progresses.

Schools

To be successful, a city also must create pathways for its citizens 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 these last few years, because we refused to sit idly by while our kids were losing out on the education they deserved. The progress has been marked not only by the state's recent decision to end its monitoring of the district but also the steady rise in test scores across many schools, and the significant rise in the four year graduation rate. It is a school district that is far more

accountable to the public and parents alike, as it should be.

But make no mistake, the work is not done. Indeed, we should do everything in our power to accelerate school improvement. Each child has only one chance at a great education, and doesn't have the luxury of waiting long for improvement.

The most important decision we will make for our school children these next few years will be to select a first rate leader for our school district.

In undertaking this task as a community, we must be crystal clear about one thing: the change in leadership should not be understood as an occasion to ease up on the pedal of reform. Our students cannot afford for us to lower the bar.

Similarly, we must resist the temptation to seek a school leader based on opinions about the current school leadership. The selection rather should be based solely on which candidate can lead the district most effectively toward its goals, namely to offer a high quality education to every child and to build a system of schools that attracts families to the city.

Achieving these goals will take energy and persistence. It will require the building and rebuilding of relationships that are necessary to support and nurture a strong school culture. For our kids and our city, we want to build a school system where kids are eager to go to school in the morning, parents are proud to send them there, and teachers and principals derive personal satisfaction from the hard and important work they do.

Finances

All of our efforts to improve our city will depend on our ability to manage our finances. Our heightened bond rating reflects that we have been effective at it, but it has not been easy.

The reality is that money is tight – very tight. We might all

agree on our financial priorities, namely to sustain and improve the level of services our residents expect, invest in the city's physical plant, attract talent to city government by offering competitive salaries, fully fund our schools, and ease the burden on tax payers. Under our current fiscal conditions, however, not all of these can be achieved. None of them can be achieved as much as we'd like.

We have made significant cuts to city government, and city government is considerably smaller and more efficient than it was ten years ago, yet the pressure on taxpayers has only increased.

And this is during a time of relative growth. What will happen when the national economy turns downward, as it inevitably will at some point, and state and local tax receipts start to fall.

Something has to change. I want to make very clear that I will not allow our city to be put in a precarious financial position when this happens.

Other cities might drift toward the waterfall, but not New Bedford. We will continue to make the tough decisions so that our city will be stable in even when the economy slows down.

There aren't many painless options. We will continue to reorganize city government to increase efficiency, as we have done with considerable success. We will make every effort to expand the tax base by encouraging the development of underutilized parcels of public property. This is why the municipal golf course redevelopment project is important.

Unfortunately, these steps alone won't do the trick. Spending has to be reined in.

The budget busters are pension, health care and charter schools costs. And you have heard me criticize the state for making it difficult on municipalities to control these costs because the expenses are largely dictated by state policy.

Although we have few options here, it's harder to criticize state policy when we can't credibly claim that we've exhausted all our options.

That's why last year I proposed to the city council that we pull the one lever available to us that could materially help us reign in health care costs. Under state law, a city or town may adopt a provision that enables it to seek binding arbitration when the public employee unions refuse to accept changes in health care plans. Right now, we have no recourse when the unions say no, and we are effectively stuck paying for the health plans they want. It's an unsustainably expensive approach to managing health care, and it's no wonder the majority of city and towns in the state, including Fall River and just about every other community in Greater New Bedford, have adopted it. Each of these communities has enjoyed significant savings as a result, without compromising the health of their employees.

We can't avoid tough decisions any longer. We must adopt this provision for the financial well-being of our city and for benefit of hard working tax payers.

I look forward to working with the City Council on these matters. I appreciate the thoughtful discussions we've had of late. It is a discussion this city must have.

Economic Competitiveness

A high quality of life is not possible without a diverse and vital regional economy. It bears emphasizing that we are competing in a global economy for investment and jobs, and if we don't compete effectively, they will go elsewhere, as our city has come to realize the hard way over the years, as the city's quality of life suffered.

We will persist in our effort to build a stronger regional economy centered around New Bedford and that makes the most of the region's advantages.

Our top priority remains the full utilization of the Port of New Bedford. The Port is the primary economic driver of the region because for a variety of reasons, it offers the industries that call it home distinct competitive advantages. It generates a full two percent of the state's gross domestic product, and I believe there is room for more growth still.

We will not let up in our support for the fishing industry. As the industry on the East Coast continues to consolidate here, it will be critical for New Bedford to make its voice heard in the halls of Congress and before fisheries regulators, and that is what I will continue to do.

At the same time, our port should continue to diversify the mix of industries that call it home. As we have seen, it is an advantageous place to bring refrigerated cargo, and the expansion of freight will yield considerable job opportunities.

This is especially true for the offshore wind industry. Just a few years ago, there was no shortage of folks who claimed that we were putting too many eggs in one basket by spending so much time on offshore wind, and many thought it would never materialize. Well, it is happening. Less than two weeks ago, the state's three major offshore wind developers – all of whom now with offices here – made public bids to invest billions of dollars in wind farms off our coast, staged right from New Bedford.

As encouraging as this is, we need to continue playing our cards right. We are entering a key phase in our long cultivation of the offshore wind industry here. In the next few years, developers and their business partners will make decisions about where to establish facilities. And we want as much of it here as possible. It'll be incumbent upon to us to anticipate the industry's needs, work closely with the fishing industry so that both industries can thrive alongside one another, and pursue wise investments in port infrastructure.

We also must ensure that investment in these two industries helps to support our city's marine science entrepreneurs, including those associated with the expanded SMAST facility, and enable our city to attract and retain talent, and energize our economy.

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."

Every successful city has a vibrant downtown, and now that is becoming true here in New Bedford. We will continue to cultivate residential development in the downtown that can support the thriving restaurant scene, and nurture and support the growing entrepreneurship class there.

And like any other city, our downtown must have strong anchor institutions. We must support our existing anchor institutions, and seize every opportunity to develop or recruit new ones.

And finally, because it is incumbent upon to improve our links with the rest of the American economy, we will continue to develop the capacity of our airport, which just took a major step forward by restoring commercial air service for the first time in decades.

I have no doubt that we in city government can do our part to help make New Bedford a stronger, more vibrant, and sustainable city. I am eager to work with our City Council to advance the City's long term interests, and I know that they feel the same.

The Imperative of Citizenship

I emphasize that in building a city, municipal government has a part to play. We here who were elected to our positions have an indispensable role in marshalling the power and resources of municipal government to advance the city's interests.

But government cannot do it all, and maybe not even most of it. It should not be seen as the default solution to every problem, however minor. It will take the collective efforts of our community to make New Bedford a city that lives up to its full potential. Something is expected of each of us.

The notion of citizenship is rooted in the idea that we have obligations to others. It requires more than simply expressing an opinion about what someone else should do. Being a responsible citizen requires actual action – even when it's not perfectly convenient, even when it's not easy, and even when you think someone else should be doing it.

What's expected may vary from person to person, but everyone has something to offer. If you are business leader, chances are that you have more to offer than most. Successful cities are invariably ones where business leaders own the problem of urban renewal, and work collaboratively with government toward that end. They recognize that it is their own enlightened personal interest, and as well as that of their organizations, to support the city's long term prosperity. They have not only expertise and leadership skills to offer, but also the resources and prestige of their organizations.

We have had many business leaders who have stepped up to the plate and worked collaboratively with government, but New Bedford needs even more from its regional business community.

To our business leaders, if you aren't on a non-profit board yet, please find one whose mission excites you. There many civic organizations that can use your help.

If you already serve on a board, serve actively. Ask yourself how can I move the needle of the organization?

And I ask every business leader in the region to view their bottom lines more strategically and less tactically. Consider whether a given business decision advances the city's interests. This is not a call for altruism, although that is always welcomed. Nor is it a dismissal of the fact that

businesses pay tax bills that we in government should be striving to lower. It's a way of highlighting the importance of what is often referred to as "self-interest rightly understood." Your organization will benefit in the long run if your city is improving in the long run.

But everybody has a role, not just people who lead big businesses. Everyone can pitch in. Constructive participation in the life of your city isn't about simply venting the city's problems on social media. Citizenship requires us to understand that we may have a role to play in addressing them. It recognizes the difference between posting a picture of a littered sidewalk on Facebook and lamenting the mess, and instead picking the trash and throwing it away.

Your city needs you to get in the game. If you have ideas, bring them forward, but also be prepared to say what you will do to support their implementation. Join a neighborhood organization and work with it to make your corner of the city a better place. Mentor a child; there are many who could sure use your support.

There are ample opportunities to work on a political campaign of someone you believe in, or better yet, run for office yourself. There's no better way to connect with your community. If you believe you have something to offer, jump in with both feet.

My point is that if you've been sitting on the sidelines, I want you to know that your city – our city – needs you.

You will find that it is well worth the time and effort. A city is more than a place on a map. The city shapes and frames our relationships with one another, and is woven into our individual identity. It is part of who we are, and when we devote ourselves to making our city better, we've committed to improving ourselves.

On this New Year's Day, let us resolve together to make New

Bedford a better place for all of us.

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

– New Bedford Mayor Jon Mitchell