

New Bedford Police Department swears in eight new officers, promotes three

On Monday, November 25th, 2019, New Bedford Police held their 10th Promotional Ceremony, along with a Swearing-in and Life-Saving Award Ceremony at Keith Middle School in New Bedford.

The New Bedford Police promoted Sergeant Norman Duchesneau to the rank of Lieutenant, Detective Matthew Rodrigues to the rank of Sergeant, and Officer Donald Williams to the rank of Sergeant.

Honored during the ceremony were Sergeant Kurtis Gonsalves, Officer Patrick Reedy, Officer Jonathan Plourde, and Officer Marc Conley, who were recipients of The Life-Saving Award. They received awards for actions they took to help prevent the loss of human life.

Eight new Officer were also sworn-in by City Clerk Dennis Farias and introduced as the newest members of the New Bedford Police Department. The following officers were officially introduced; Officer Imari Soares, Officer Ross Rodriguez, Officer Hiram Sanchez, Officer Marciano Silva, Officer Jeffrey Fournier, Officer Amber Massa, Officer Daniel Thom, and Officer Nathaniel Almeida.

New Bedford Mayor Jon

Mitchell makes statement regarding closure of City on a Hill Charter School

New Bedford Mayor Jon Mitchell made the following statement regarding the closure of City on a Hill Charter School:

"I am grateful that Commissioner Riley has moved to end the operations of a school whose record of low achievement and high attrition was exactly what many of us predicted when it was first proposed in 2012. I am pleased that the elimination of the city's obligation to fund City on a Hill will partially offset the significant added expense associated with the expanded Alma del Mar Charter School, and we look forward to welcoming those City on a Hill students who will be returning to New Bedford Public Schools next year."

— Statement of New Bedford Public Schools Superintendent Thomas Anderson regarding closure of City on a Hill Charter School

"We strive to ensure that all children receive an excellent education, and we are willing to do what is necessary to assist in this situation. New Bedford Public Schools always was and continues to be the best education option for these students. We look forward to them reentering our public schools and encourage them to visit our Family Engagement Center, located at 455 County Street, to discuss the registration process. For the benefit of these students and their families we will collaborate with City on a Hill to make this transition as smooth as possible. "

— Superintendent Thomas Anderson

OPINION: Shouldn't New Bedford's Assessor live in New Bedford?

Many have noticed their properties being assessed at higher and higher values, especially recently. New Bedford assesses all properties each year by the first day of January. Every three years this information is sent to the Department of Revenue and certified.

The City of New Bedford prides itself on its in-house staff of assessors. The City's website states: "While most communities hire professional appraisal firms to perform this task, we in New Bedford have a full-time in-house staff to conduct this ongoing effort."

While most cities hire professional appraisers, New Bedford relies on staff. But many may be surprised to hear that the department head of New Bedford's assessor's office does not live in New Bedford. The individual in charge of the valuation of all the city's properties, who is essentially responsible for determining the value of each and every property and also each tax bill, does not live in the very city that he is responsible for putting the valuation on.

The only reason I could understand the benefit of having a full-time assessor's office staff, rather than hiring appraisers when needed, is if those employees somehow had a greater understanding of the market within the city because they were privy to the current trends and tribulations experienced by our property owners here. Aside from that benefit, I can't understand why we would ever not want to hire

appraisers when necessary; when contracted out our costs become much less.

Not only do we have to pay the department head's annual salary of over \$91,000 but we are also responsible for his medical insurance and his pension. So, rather than hiring professional appraisers, when necessary, we choose to employ an entire staff of 12 full-time and 3 part-time employees, costing us roughly \$670,000 in salaries alone. That does not include health insurance and pensions, because we need to pay our full-time employees forever.

So Mr. Motta, the head of the assessor's office, who does not live within the city of New Bedford, who determines the value of our homes and thus finalizes the amounts we pay in property taxes, is being paid over \$91,000 a year, and will continue to be paid for the rest of his life.

Yeah, those private appraisers are sounding better and better. It must be nice for Mr. Motta, to never have to pay one of his own tax bills in the city!

OPINION: New Bedford's Subsidized Slumlords

New Bedford is a city with a high rate of rental units. While the average rate of owner-occupied homes in the U.S. is 63.9%, New Bedford's rate of owner-occupancy stands at just 41%. This is a problem for many reasons, but many would agree, properties with absentee landlords present the most challenges for a city. But what, exactly, is an absentee landlord, and who is the largest landlord in New Bedford? The answer just might surprise many: the largest landlord in New Bedford is

actually the New Bedford Housing Authority (NBHA).

Owning 2,459 units, the NBHA is heads and tails above any private landlord. If these units were owned by private landlords, the people would be outraged, as well. Not only are the conditions deplorable in some of these units, but many could also describe the NBHA as an absentee landlord, caring more about the profit of its units than about the health and wellbeing of its residents.

Let's take a look at the numbers: 2459 units, each rented at an average of \$800 per month (a figure that is a very conservative estimate) and operating with a vacancy rate of 5%, would mean that each month the NBHA pulls in \$1,868,840, on average. Nearly \$2 million dollars being collected in rents every month, \$24 million each year! But unlike private landlords, who then must pay for operating expenses, maintenance, debt service and common utilities out of the rents collected, the NBHA gets a pass on the majority of those expenses.

The property taxes on the units are waived, which represents a savings of nearly \$4 million dollars annually for the housing authority. The maintenance on the dwelling has a backlog that is 7 pages long and has been deferred, in some cases, for decades, representing even more savings. The NBHA does pay the city a PILOT, or a payment in lieu of taxes, in an attempt to offset the cost of the resources the housing authority uses, in the way of medical, fire, police and emergency services, but the payment is a very low \$300,000 per year. You might think that with expenses this low, the New Bedford Housing Authority is a large contributor to the revenue of the city, helping our city to grow economically and helping to foster both business and residential members of the community. But what you would find is that none of the profits make their way to the general fund of the city. That's right, none of that \$24 million ever goes toward New Bedford's budget.

You might be thinking that, while the units may not necessarily contribute to the revenue of the city, they are, at the very least, helping families and individuals in need, with one of the most basic human requirements; housing. While it is true that the housing authority does provide many low-income families and individuals with shelter, the fact is that those that have, possibly, the most need, are those on the waitlist. Our waitlist for public housing in New Bedford is extensive, with families and individuals waiting as long as 5 or even 10 years to get needed housing assistance.

Why is the wait so long, you might wonder. Well, the waitlist is upwards of a decade long due to many reasons: not enough units are available for our low income population, decreased landlord education or acceptance of subsidized housing vouchers, and possibly the most frustrating reason for this wait is abuse of the housing assistance by the very people who receive it, combined with complacency of the housing authority itself. Rather than use the assistance as an opportunity to save money to become more financially stable or to gain training or education to secure higher-paying jobs or become more gainfully employed, many individuals who receive housing assistance don't see the assistance as temporary help, they see it as an indefinite entitlement.

The reason that is, possibly, is due to the extensive wait prior to receiving the help, and residents may feel that they have 'put in their time on the waitlist' and now have permanently secured their spot. Another explanation for the thought process is the Housing Authority's policy to not require the residents to maintain their low-income status, once in the system. Income levels and low-income statuses are much less strict, once a family or individual has moved into housing, allowing some residents to take advantage of the low rental prices while making incomes higher than what is allowed when they initially received the assistance.

Another common misconception is that the housing units provide

a rental history for the residents that will better equip them, at a future date, to go on to rent units from private landlords. But with over 6,000 past eviction cases filed against their residents, the NBHA is also the largest plaintiff in eviction cases in the city as well. Having a history of eviction, regardless of outcome or reason, is enough to be denied housing by most landlords, both private and corporate, and these cases, unlike other court proceedings, will stay with a tenant for life and can't be removed from their record.

And let's take a look at the costs. The units are a mixture of state and federally funded units, meaning that a percentage of the rental amount of each unit is paid for either by state or federal funds, with the remainder being paid by the resident. The amount a resident pays is calculated, most times, based on their income and the remainder is paid for with the aforementioned state or federal funding.

For instance; say that a resident has a monthly income of \$1,000, and their project requires they pay no more than 29% of that income toward their housing expenses. Their portion of the rent would then be \$290 per month, and the remainder of the rent would then be paid via state or federal funding. It's important to note, that the funding for these units is not paid solely by the taxpayers of the city, but by the taxpayers of the state and nationwide, as well.

A shift toward the privatization of public housing units has been the goal of HUD for many years, and many programs have been initiated to give builders and developers incentives to both build and manage affordable units, in the private sector. Certainly, this would be a more economically beneficial situation for municipalities as well, as the privately-owned affordable units would contribute to the revenue of the city, by paying property taxes and utility services. This is also a better eventuality, many times, for the individual residents, as the maintenance can not so easily be deferred without

significant fines and penalties being imposed upon the management, as well as other city-level violations being imposed for excess use of police, fire and emergency services.

With so many costs to the city and taxpayers, and such a large expense to bring the public units out of the status of 'deferred maintenance' it may be time to ask, could privatization be the better choice, here in New Bedford. Also, with income levels of \$24 million dollars and expenses so low they could be seen as negligible, together with minimal upkeep and maintenance being performed, where is the revenue going, if not to the very communities where the public units are found?

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Massachusetts bill to ban cell phone use while driving passes Senate

Lawmakers have finally come to a compromise on a bill banning the use of cell-phones while driving – the Senate voted 38-1 in favor of the bill yesterday.

The legislation now heads to Republican Gov. Charlie Baker for his signature. Baker has expressed support for a ban on drivers using hand-held cellphones and filed a bill earlier this year. The bill, which had been stalling time and again, has finally reached its final stages on its way to becoming law. Previously, the Massachusetts House and Senate had approved separate versions.

The bill will prohibit drivers from holding the cell phone at all but does allow hands-free phones. Specifically, that means you cannot send a text or look at a text, peer at videos or images or scroll your social media accounts. Sadly, in a day and age where one would think common sense would dictate not doing those things, however, the practice is almost ubiquitous.

The exceptions are for medical emergencies, reporting accidents, calling the police or using a navigation system that is *mounted*.

90 days after it is signed into law, the police may begin to cite drivers but until March 31, 2020, they must first give the offending driver a warning. Thereafter, a fine of \$100 will then be levied on first-time offenders, \$250 for the second offense, \$500 for the third and subsequent offenses.

Once a person is a habitual offender – the third offense – insurance companies may begin to charge extra on their policies so users will begin to take a serious hit to the wallet, or purse.

One of the reasons that the bill hadn't be approved when it was initially introduced was that legislators wanted to ensure that the law would not lead to more racial profiling by coming up with a way to collect data on the race of drivers. Statistically, black drivers are pulled over more than white drivers are. The disagreement on how to exactly collect that data led to the delays and postponement of the bill's approval.

With the new bill, if police write a ticket they will also have to track the race, gender, and age of the offender and the Registry of Motor Vehicles would send that data to the Massachusetts Secretary of Public Safety and Security. From there, an independent agency would analyze it and issue an annual public report. In addition, the state would hold tri-

annual hearings to present that analysis to the public.

If the analysis indicates a police department is racial profiling, that department would have to receive “implicit bias training” and be placed under further scrutiny in the form of collecting data for an entire year about each and every traffic stop, whether a citation was given or not.

It's time to tie Massachusetts legislator pay to the income of the communities they represent

New Bedford's per capita income is nearly half the state average. That would change if we started to tie Massachusetts legislator pay to the income of the communities they represent.

Two years ago, **I reported** that New Bedford Senator Mark Montigny received a whopping 79% increase, going from a \$82,233 income to \$147,548. New Bedford Representative Tony Cabral saw his total pay go up by 37% from \$82,232 to \$112,547. That's an annual increase of \$30,315. New Bedford/Acushnet Representative Robert Koczera (defeated by Christopher Hendricks in 2018) saw his total pay go from \$62,232 to \$87,747 or 31%. New Bedford/Dartmouth Representative Christopher Markey saw his pay go from \$74,732 to \$97,547 or 31%.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, New Bedford's per capita income is at \$23,866 in 2017. That means Senator Montigny's

income in 2017 was more than 6 times the income of the New Bedford constituents he represents. Cabral earned nearly five times the income of his constituents.

I personally believe that state legislators should earn exactly the per capita income of their constituents with travel expenses and some other fees being reimbursed (just like the military). If we mandated this, they would feel the tax increase they voted on. They would feel the property tax increases year after year. And for certain, they would work hard at raising the income of their constituents because their pay raise would depend on it.

New Bedford School Committee Election Results: All three incumbents re-elected

All three incumbent School Committee members won re-election tonight.

Results:

Christopher Cotter: 5,234

Bruce Oliveira: 4,988

Joaquim Livramento: 4,633

Ross M. Grace Jr: 4,236

Christopher Boerl: 2,876

Voter turn out overall was at 16.4% with 9,785 people casting a vote citywide.

New Bedford Ward 3 Election Results: Dunn easily wins re-election over Larock

Hugh Dunn won re-election for New Bedford Ward 3 City Council defeating Guy Larock 73% to 27%.

Vote count:

Hugh Dunn: 857

Guy Larock: 312

Voter turn out overall was at 16.4% with 9,785 people casting a vote citywide.

New Bedford Ward 1 City Council Results – Markey defeats Costa by 230 votes

William Markey won re-election for Ward 1 City Council defeating Melissa Costa by 230 votes.

William Markey: 1,236 (55%)

Melissa Costa: 1,006 (45%)

Voter turn out overall was at 16.4% with 9,785 people casting a vote citywide.

New Bedford Ward 4 Election Results: Baptiste defeats Fortes

Newcomer Derek Baptiste defeated long-time political candidate Joseph “Jo-Jo” Fortes in New Bedford Ward 4 City Council race. The vote count:

Derek Baptiste: 999 (62%)

Joseph “Jo-Jo” Fortes: 613 (38%)

Voter turn out overall was at 16.4% with 9,785 people casting a vote citywide.