

Mayor Jon Mitchell State of the City Address Thursday, March 24, 2016

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Live Stream on Facebook

Prepared remarks:

“Thank you to Joe Michaud, Rick Kidder and the Chamber of Commerce for another great job in organizing this important civic event. Rick is off to a fast start at the helm of the Chamber, and there are big things to come for this organization.

Thank you also to Webster Bank for its generous and consistent sponsorship, and of course to Jim O’Brien and Greater New Bedford Regional Vocational-Technical High School for your hospitality.

Any day I get to have lunch with the busiest person in my household is a good day. I am grateful that Annie has joined me today. I am not afraid to admit that I married up, and there’s a part of me that regrets depriving her patients, whose lives she strives everyday to save, of even a little of her time. I can’t thank her enough for all her love and support of me, our three girls and this great City.

Today, thanks to the hard work of the residents, employees and supporters of New Bedford, there is much progress to report.

We’ve seen a sharp drop in our unemployment rate over the last few years, new businesses spring up all over New Bedford, and a record number of construction permits this past year.

In the South End, two new schools and a \$55 million expansion

of the SMAST research facility are being built. In the North End, industrial growth has been so robust that former mills are filling up and we now have the desirable problem that our business park, for the first time in its sixty year history, is nearly full.

On the waterfront, cargo tonnage is growing, new seafood processors are moving in, a new Nantucket ferry service is about to be launched, and resident and visitors are flocking to restaurants and events along the water's edge.

The downtown now has become the center of the region's entertainment and dining scene, which is bound to grow with a new hotel on Union Street in the pipeline.

Test scores in our schools are rising faster than the state average, New Bedford High School is rebounding and is now one of the few schools in the state with the prestigious Advanced Placement Capstone designation, and here at Voc-Tech, students are receiving the technical education that will prepare them to compete in tomorrow's workforce.

In our neighborhoods, violent crime is down some fourteen percent year over year, and our neighborhood task force has not lifted its foot off the pedal in pursuit of irresponsible landlords. Our fire department, through the leadership of Mike Gomes, the skill of our firefighters and the city's investment in fire equipment, joined Boston and Cambridge as the only communities in the state with the insurance industry's "ISO 1" rating.

City services are as effective and efficient as they've been in the city's history – and I'm not just talking about snow removal. Through the multi-year effort of our department heads and our performance analyst, Christina Mills, we now have in place the ability to measure and more effectively manage the performance of government agencies. And as a national leader in renewable energy, New Bedford has saved nearly \$1 million

this year alone in energy costs.

There is no doubt about it. New Bedford has its act together.

I'm not suggesting by any of this that it's time for a victory lap. The point is that for a City that had been down for so long, these and other accomplishments are the evidence that our community is capable of steady, sustained progress. These are the kinds of wins that build the collective confidence necessary to achieve even more.

The question of course is, where do we go from here? Not just tomorrow, not just next year. But what kind of city are we building for our children and grandchildren? What will it take to build a New Bedford that will throw open the doors to their dreams? What do we need to do to make them proud to live in this city?

There's no one-size-fits-all approach to urban revitalization. Cities are complex and different. But successful cities have this in common: they don't sit back and passively hope for things to happen. They make things happen. They initiate the action.

Others are not going to rain assistance down on us, nor would it change matters. You could start running trains from here to Boston tomorrow, and we'd still be faced with the same set of challenges. The state could give us more aid, and the federal government could create new grant programs, and we would still have to chart our own course. The state and federal governments are partners, but they are not saviors.

We in New Bedford are responsible for our own future.

So what will it take for New Bedford to thrive in a competitive world in the long run? I believe there are three pillars on which our future success rests.

The first is that we must continue to strengthen New Bedford's

capacity to govern itself. That means that local government must be able to anticipate, confront and effectively solve the collective challenges the city faces at any given time. It is incumbent upon us to help the future elected leaders of our community to do their job well.

Making sure those leaders have the resources to run government the right way is a critical part of it. Cities, and countries even, sow the seeds of decline when they start making short-sighted budget decisions. Water problems in Flint, Michigan, to take a current example, have their origins, in part, from a failure of municipal government to make prudent investments in its water system over many years. There are plenty of other examples.

We in New Bedford have been living through a period of tight finances in part because of poor decisions or neglect in the past. There are hundreds of millions of dollars of deferred building maintenance, still more unfunded future retiree benefits, and not enough funding for schools and basic services.

Now, there's no better cure for insomnia than a discussion of municipal budgeting, so I will spare you that today.

But it is enough to say that although money remains tight, we have been digging ourselves out. Sacrifices have been made along the way. Certain city departments have been cut to the point where their ability to function has been compromised, and tax payers have been imposed upon. Unfortunately, these sacrifices have been made, and more may need to be made, because more modest sacrifices were foregone in the past.

The good news is that under the skillful guidance of our CFO, Ari Sky, New Bedford's fiscal outlook is growing more stable. We have been able to build our fund balances, conduct effective capital planning for the first time in the city's history, and achieve efficiencies across city agencies. There is good reason why we have secured the highest bond rating in

the city's history, and why taxpayers should be confident that their funds are being carefully spent.

The goal is to get the city on a steadier course still. Together we're making the right moves, but it takes time, and may require some more sacrifices. But, when it comes to finances, we are clearly on a healthier, more sustainable path that will lead to a stronger city government and an easier burden on taxpayers in the long run.

Strengthening New Bedford's ability to chart its own course also requires a government structure that is suited to the city's needs. There's a lot of tinkering that could be done to the structure of city government, but the single biggest institutional impediment to effective governing in this city is the two-year mayoral term.

It places intense pressure on the occupant of the office of mayor to cut corners for political expediency, chills risk taking, displaces the long hours of governing with long hours of campaigning; and discourages talented people from running for the position. It is archaic; it is a millstone around the city's interests, and it should have been fixed a long time ago.

None of this is meant to be self-serving. Two years ago, I filed a petition with the city council to change the term to four years, with a provision that would exclude me eligibility.

I will be resubmitting the ordinance again, and I appreciate the openness to it expressed by Council President Morad and other councilors. When it comes to improving the city's long term prospects, this one is a no brainer. It is time to act on this issue.

What is less straightforward, but just as important, is the need to get qualified people into government. Attracting talent is critical to any organization, and city government is

no exception. As mayor, I have been blessed with a first rate team, and it's been that way partly because we have been committed from the start to a policy of hiring based on merit, not on connections.

Most folks in senior leadership positions in government are willing to take less pay than in the private sector – to a point.

Lately we've had difficulty filling certain leadership positions because our salaries are well below the going rate for similar positions elsewhere. To attract and retain qualified managers, and to have the effective government our residents deserve, we need to offer fair and competitive salaries, and we can do it with a relatively minimal impact on the city budget.

At the same time, we need to acknowledge that during this current period of fiscal austerity, the lowest paid employees in city government have not seen their wages increase in real terms. Out of fairness we must see to it that they get a fair shake. We must commit now, as the city gets on firmer financial footing, to a long term goal of paying a living wage to employees at the bottom of the pay scale.

The second pillar of success is our making the most of the City's assets. Fortunately, New Bedford has more cards to play than most. As you've heard me emphasize so many times before, the highest card in our hand is our connection to the water.

Here's one explanation of why our coastline is so important: On a sunny day last Fall I was walking along the newly completed HarborWalk with one of my daughters, and I was approached by a retired city employee, who was walking by himself, and he said, "Mayor, I really love this new walkway. I'm glad we have this in our city." And I asked, "What do you like most about it?" And he said, it's a short walk from my house, and it's just so beautiful," as he pointed out to the

ocean.

The people of New Bedford deserve to have something as beautiful as that, no less than far wealthier communities. Great neighborhoods have great public spaces, and the most attractive public spaces are often those near the water. That's why we built the HarborWalk, and that's why we aren't stopping there. Through the determination of DPI Commissioner Ron Labelle and his team, I am pleased to report that we designed and secured the permitting for the CoveWalk, on the Clark's Cove side of the hurricane barrier. It is shovel-ready, and we are relentlessly pursuing funding for it from the state. I want to thank both Senator Montigny and Representative Cabral for their supportive phone calls, and State Transportation Secretary Pollock for considering our strong funding pitch.

At the same time, we are moving ahead with the RiverWalk along the Acushnet River in the North End. Although this will take more time as it is proceeding side-by-side with the EPA cleanup of the harbor, we completed the design with ample community input, and the project is moving along steadily, thanks to the hard work of our environmental steward, Michele Paul, and the cooperative approach of the EPA.

Our goal here is an ambitious one: to ring the city with system of waterside trails that will enrich the quality of life in neighborhoods from the North End to the South End, raise property values, and draw visitors to the City. New Bedford will be known as a place known for its unique and extensive connection to the water. To quote a certain presidential candidate, it's going to be HUGE!

The single biggest economic asset in Greater New Bedford is of course the port, which is poised for more growth. If you got this morning's paper, you read about the waterfront planning study that we've been working on for the last year with a broad array of waterfront stakeholders. The planning effort brings into sharper focus our "all-of-the-above" strategy for

our port, whose emphasis is on diversifying the industries that call our port home, supporting the continued success and evolution of the fishing industry, and promoting development that will knit our central waterfront into the downtown for the first time in a half-century.

I want to thank the Harbor Development Commission and the local Steering Committee of more than three dozen waterfront stakeholders who shaped this plan. It is a clear road map for the future of our port, and will lead ultimately to more job opportunities for our residents.

In addition to the port, New Bedford has numerous assets – too many to list. But there is one set of assets that is right in front of us that still hasn't been leveraged nearly as much as it should. I'm talking about the city's cultural and artistic assets. There's the big ones of course: the Whaling Museum, the Z, the Art Museum, the CVPA, the National Park, and the Zoo, each of which is fabulous and enjoying a banner year.

But there's a lot more: it's places like the Rotch-Jones-Duff House, Fort Rodman, and Sargent Carney's house; it's events like the Feast, the Cape Verdean Recognition Parade, and the Fisherman's Memorial Service. And it's the growing arts community that is getting more national attention. And of course, it's our rich story as the center of the whaling, cotton textile and commercial fishing industries, in successive chapters, in a city that is as culturally diverse as any in America.

We need to accentuate all of this. Re-establishing the Office of Marketing and Tourism three years ago was a significant first step. And New Bedford has no more passionate champion than our tourism director, Dagny Ashley, whose work has driven our growing tourism numbers.

It's time in my view to take it a step further. In the coming weeks, I will present a proposal to create a dedicated fund

for the promotion of the cultural and artistic assets, that will be funded by the receipts of the city's hotel tax. With a new hotel in the pipeline, we will amplify our promotion efforts. We need the world to hear our rich story. And just as importantly, we need to be known as a creative place.

The third pillar of long term viability is what I would call building gravity. To succeed, New Bedford must be a place where people who have choices would want to move to and stay in.

Young and old across America are moving back into cities for lots of reasons, not the least of which is the desire to be in the center of things.

We need to start by reinforcing that New Bedford is in the center of things in Southeastern Massachusetts. New Bedford is not just another community along a coastline, nor are we part of a larger metropolitan area. New Bedford after all is farther from Boston than the capitals of the next two states. We have to hold ourselves out as the hub of region.

So what does it take to get people to be drawn here? We've talked about some of them: the economic assets like the port that would cause business clusters like those in the fishing and offshore wind industry to grow here. It's our pursuit of anchor institutions that are a good fit here like the NOAA Science Center. It's the public amenities like our parks and, yes, the HarborWalk. It's all the cultural amenities we talked about that make us unique and interesting. And much more.

Two other prerequisites need particular attention. To retain folks here, our neighborhoods must be safe, and our schools must perform well.

When it comes to public safety, we've made substantial progress. A fourteen percent drop in violent crime in one year is significant and the hard working men and women of our police department deserve tremendous credit.

While most of our neighborhoods are safe, certain ones are not nearly safe enough, and that should bother all of us. It bothers me.

And what we need are not the gimmicks and sound bites that too often pass for public safety initiatives in other cities, but substantive measures that will yield sustainable improvements in public safety.

In the next month, we will hire a new police to fill the shoes of the late David Provencher, who established a foundation of professionalism in the department we will build on. The most important thing we can do to keep our community safe is to install and support an effective leader in our police department. That is exactly what I intend to do.

But this is moment to do more. Ours is a high-performing police department that is respected far beyond New Bedford, but as with every component of city government, we need always look for ways to improve. Among my expectations for the next chief is that he will undertake a strategic plan for the department so that we can answer the basic questions about how the department can meet the needs of a changing community. Such planning efforts commonly take place after a crisis or controversy, including the last one done in New Bedford some twenty years ago now.

There's no reason why we should wait for a crisis to plan well. We're going to use this moment to make an effective police department even better.

In a city of roughly 100,000, it takes but a handful of dangerous criminals to make the community much less safe. Our strategy in recent years has been to identify and focus on our attention on recidivists. And it has worked – mostly. The problem we have faced is that far too often judges, especially in state district court, are unwilling to lock them up despite ample evidence of the danger they pose.

This is a problem I have discussed extensively with District Attorney Quinn, an experienced career prosecutor if there ever was one, who sees it the same way. We believe that the solution is to concentrate time and resources to develop more serious cases against these key offenders so that they end up in Superior Court, where there is a great willingness to remove dangerous criminals from society.

Toward this end, the District Attorney has formed a unit of experienced prosecutors in his office that will focus exclusively on cases based in New Bedford. That way, his office can give the impact players the extra attention necessary to get them into Superior Court. I can't thank Tom enough for his professionalism and collaborative effort with me on this. Frankly, he should be making this announcement, not me, so let's give him a round of applause.

We also need to get at the roots of crime in the city. We've made a lot of progress on the so-called "broken window" roots of crime, such as graffiti and trash, and we won't of course let up on that.

But the most persistent driver of crime in this city and others across the Northeast is opiate dependency. The news continues to pour in that entire state, not just New Bedford, is facing a public health and safety problem like none before. Just yesterday we learned that the state's hospitals saw a two-hundred percent increase heroin-related visits between 2007 and 2014. Together, with our partners at SouthCoast Health Care and others, we will continue to invest in the task force our health director Brenda Weis is ably leading to get addicts into the treatment they need. We will strive to help them get their lives back on track before they resort to criminal behavior.

Safety alone is not enough to make a city attractive. It must also offer pathways to opportunity, and more than anything else, that means that the city has to be a place where a child can get a great education.

In this area, of course, we have been doing some heavy lifting. Four years ago, we were on the brink of state takeover, and since then, the school administration has laid an extensive foundation for reform and renewal. And objective measures of success are appearing. The dropout rate has fallen to the lowest point in fifteen years, and last year, student test scores grew faster than the state average – a remarkable feat given the relative wealth of our community. The superintendant, her team, teachers, and the school committee deserve tremendous credit for setting the district on the right path.

There is still much work to do. As the district moves forward, it can't lose sight of the building blocks of reform. Successful school systems have a culture of respect and high standards of personal conduct, where student safety is not even an issue. A positive school climate is a fundamental prerequisite to educational attainment. All the other improvements that are underway: more rigorous instruction, expanded learning time, new technological tools, and so forth, won't be effective if classrooms are orderly and focused on learning.

The news of disruptive student behavior, or worse, at Keith Middle School, is very troubling. The problem is real, and it reflects poorly not just on Keith, but on the entire school district.

But more importantly, discipline problems should be in the rearview mirror by now. When it comes to discipline, the school administration must not take its eye off the ball. This is a solvable problem, and I say to parents out there the school committee expects it to be fixed. Your children will get the education they deserve – in the environment they deserve.

Strengthening the city's capacity to govern itself, making the most of our assets, and building gravity, these are the three pillars on which New Bedford will thrive in the long run. This

is what it'll take to build a vibrant city in the future.

There's one part I left out in the discussion of governing capacity. It was what John Adams referred to as "skillful and upright" government, and it's what today most would call effective leadership. The quality of people we elect to office matters a whole lot.

We are graced today by the members of the Mayor's Youth Council, who are high school students that provide me with input on issues that affect youth in the city. They are high achievers, and the seniors among them are waiting right now to hear back from the best colleges in America. They are sprinkled across the audience today, and their attendance was made possible because Councilors Morad and Ribeiro had the really thoughtful idea of inviting them here to get a glimpse of government in action.

I am going to address my final remarks directly to them. And the remaining five hundred or so of you are welcome to listen in.

Today, I am concerned about the introduction to politics that younger Americans like you are being treated to these days. Images of a presidential debate descending into school yard name calling before a worldwide audience doesn't exactly inspire your generation to participate in the electoral process. Neither does the hysteria and false information routinely propagated on social media. It all makes tuning out all too easy.

But it doesn't have to be this way. Politics is not a base profession. It's as noble as you choose to make it. Government is about doing for people that which they can't do on their own. If you believe, as I do, that the interests of your country, your community, your family and your friends are worthy of your full devotion, public service can be source of personal fulfillment.

Our future depends on the willingness of talented, honest and hard working people like you to run for office or serve in government. We need to work together to build a political culture of civility and high standards that will draw you, the next generation, to this important work. As a community, let us together be a shining example to the rest of the country of renewal, rebirth and responsible government.

Thank you, and God bless our great City."