

Mayor Mitchell's Inaugural Address – January 6th, 2014

INAUGURAL ADDRESS

Mayor Jonathan F. Mitchell

January 6, 2014

Zeiterion Theater, New Bedford,
Massachusetts



Honored guests, Judges Leighton and Fernandes, members of the City Council and other government officials, citizens and friends of New Bedford:

Like this week's New Year's celebrations, inaugurations are an occasion to take stock of where we have come from and to chart a course ahead.

When I stood before you here two years ago, New Bedford faced uncertainty on many fronts: the school system was threatened with a state takeover; the fate of the proposed South Terminal project was a big question mark; absentee landlords were running our neighborhoods into the ground; and city government, given the financial pressures of our times, urgently needed to become a more efficient, more effective and better managed organization. These were daunting and complex problems.

In the time since, we have done exactly what we said we would do. We have confronted our most important challenges head on. We did not back down when that would have been the easier thing to do. We chose to take on the glaring problems in our schools. We acted boldly, slamming the brakes on years of

decline, and began the re-building of a system that will serve all our children.

When I said in my first inaugural address that we would reform the school system, I meant it.

I also made known my determination to see that the South Terminal project be built because the city's future depends on it, and from that day forward, my administration was unwavering in its advocacy and partnership with the state to kick start the project. Not only is that terminal scheduled to be completed later this year, but now, after two short years, through the unrelenting efforts of the city's talented team, there is no city in America better positioned to support the offshore wind industry than New Bedford.

Two years ago, I promised that we would work to find ways for city government to do more with less. So we reigned in spending, collected unpaid taxes, consolidated departments, built a strong managerial team, hired the City's first chief financial officer in seven years, and created the City's first capital improvement plan.

The list of promises kept stretches across many areas. Two years ago, Custom House Square, in the center of our Downtown Historic District, was dominated by an asphalt parking lot. Through the concerted efforts of a strong team of designers and builders, we have turned an eyesore into a world class urban green space, and did it on time and under budget.

Within the first few months of my term, we established a housing task force to hold irresponsible absentee landlords accountable for neglecting their properties and allowing trash to be strewn across neighborhoods. Since then, our neighborhoods have become cleaner and our housing safer.

By making major investments in our police force and keeping federal law enforcement on the beat here, we pushed the lid down tighter on gun violence to a point at which, compared to

metropolitan areas of our size around the country, a gunshot in New Bedford is a relatively uncommon event.

And we have grown jobs, hundreds of them, all across the city and across industry sectors. We have created fertile conditions for sustained private investment and job growth. Our city employees deserve tremendous credit for the advances we've made. You would be hard pressed to find a more hard-working and skillful municipal workforce anywhere else.

New Bedford is stronger today also because right from the start we decided we would no longer be a community that sat back and passively waited for someone else to help us out. Rather than hoping for good things to happen, we're now making things happen.

We also have accepted the risk that comes with taking a long term view of the future. We have chosen instead to pursue lasting achievements for our city, even if it means having to make difficult decisions in the short term.

This is the harder road to take, but down that road there is a brighter future. As we look down that road, there is a New Bedford that people are starting to believe in again:

a city that is the hub of Southeastern Massachusetts;

a city that is taken seriously beyond the region;

a city with a diverse and innovative economy creating high-paying jobs that enable citizens to buy homes and send their kids to college;

a city whose schools are a reason why families move into town;

a city with a harbor that is not an environmental liability, but a commercial and recreational asset;

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

a city recognized for its physical beauty and cultural richness; and a city in which personal safety isn't even an afterthought, and where all residents take responsibility for their neighborhoods and their neighbors.

To be sure, cities across America and beyond are pursuing similar goals.

But something here is changing.

We are approaching a threshold – a point beyond which we will be no longer seen by others – or ourselves – as a place trying to catch up with the rest of the world.

New Bedford today is poised to become a leader among cities, a place that others model themselves after. That's right, a leader among cities. When you think about it, that statement should not strike any of us as unrealistic or overly ambitious. It fits with what we know about our City.

For years, we've heard people declare that New Bedford has such potential.

You've probably said it yourself.

And they are right, and you are right.

We've all felt that if only New Bedford could pull it all together, we could stand out. It's not to disregard the fact that we'd like to be a wealthier community or that we have many unmet needs. But it is time to recognize what we know in our bones: that New Bedford is different. It is exceptional. Big things can happen here.

Now is the time to match our potential with action.

New Bedford will become a national leader by building on the prodigious assets we have, the very sources of the potential we all recognize.

Chief among these assets is our port. We are already the national leader in commercial fishing and through our aggressive efforts over the last two years, we are now widely seen as the potential epicenter of the American offshore wind industry. We are an established and growing cargo and recreational boating destination as well. In all of these industries there is potential for considerable growth. It is vital then that we partner with the state and federal government to advance key investments in our port infrastructure, manage our harbor skillfully, and market it aggressively.

Our harbor also should be a place where our residents connect with the water. We need to knit together the downtown and the central harbor, which have been disconnected now for half a century, and have spaces by the water where families can stroll or dine or shop. And let's insist that the cleanup of our upper harbor leaves behind a waterway that is every bit the urban jewel as the Charles River in Boston. New Bedford deserves nothing less.

To be a leading city, a strong and growing downtown is paramount. There is no successful city in America that doesn't have a vibrant downtown. Cities the world over have grown in concentric rings, and older cities regenerate themselves in the same way. They must begin with a solid core that supports everything else. The reality is that in every city, residents and visitors alike make their impressions of the entire city based largely on what they see in the downtown.

Our downtown has enjoyed conspicuous growth in the last two years. With the completion of the Route 18 and Wings Court projects, the construction of the park at Custom House Square, the opening of numerous new shops and restaurants, the hiring of a marketing and tourism director, the expansion of BCC, the wild success of the summer concert series on State Pier, and other encouraging developments too numerous to list, our downtown is on the move.

The task now is to take it to the next level. We will build on our recent success to cement our downtown's reputation as a regional cultural and artistic center; to fertilize a vibrant restaurant scene, to bolster the Zeiterion, to extend the downtown to the waterfront, and to accelerate residential development so that the downtown can be a true urban neighborhood.

At the same time, we will work to make the downtown and every neighborhood in the City more beautiful. A city's appearance matters. Neater, cleaner and more beautiful cities tend to have less crime, more private investment, and a heightened sense of civic responsibility. Our purpose is not merely to make things look pretty. By enhancing the built environment of our City, we will make New Bedford feel more like home to us, and make our lives here all the more pleasurable.

In this era of tight finances, the successful cities are the ones who are deft enough to adapt with the times and to make tough decisions for the long term. Compared to other cities in Massachusetts, we have done very well. Despite the financial whirlwind of the last few years, we have maintained our bond rating, avoided hikes to the tax levy, and have been able to invest in important areas.

It is unrealistic to assume that we can hold the line on taxes in perpetuity. Like everything else, the price of government tends to go up over time, and we still face acute financial pressures such as the expiration of a federal grant that funds nearly a quarter of our fire department, as well as looming environmental liabilities and underfunded employee benefits.

Nevertheless, we owe tax payers this: we will do everything possible to increase efficiency across city government. City government has made enormous strides in productivity in the last two years, but we can do better.

This year we will continue to incorporate performance

measurement systems so that we run city government like a private business that knows precisely what it's getting for its money.

We will double down on our energy initiatives. New Bedford is buying more of its electricity from solar than any municipality in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, saving taxpayers approximately \$20 million over the next twenty years. And we've just gotten started.

Most importantly, we will develop a culture in city government that calls upon every employee to return to the same question: how can we get better? To satisfy the expectations of taxpayers and to adapt to changing times – as we must – constant improvement must be the name of our game.

To be successful – to be a model for others – a city 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.

A child has only one shot at a good education, and each deserves the very best we can offer. In recent years, however, our school system has fallen short. While there are pockets of excellence in the system, and the top students still go on to the finest colleges, the harsh reality is that our schools rank at the bottom of the state in terms overall test scores. There's no doubt that the city's demographics play a part, but we still trail communities with comparable concentrations of poverty.

The numbers don't lie.

Change is absolutely necessary, and it is now going in one direction: forward. We will not witness or permit the sliding back of our schools into the old way of doing business. We will give our kids the schools they deserve.

Our schools can, and will, do better – much better. We will build a school system that shines with a culture of achievement, and again be a source of community pride, and enable our City and region to compete effectively in a knowledge-based economy. New Bedford will be a national model of urban school transformation.

To the parents of school age children, I say, that the rapid changes taking place now in our schools will restore your confidence that your child will be well-served in our system. At

the same time, all parents – not just some – must fulfill their obligation to send their children to school ready to learn.

To our teachers, I say, your job is never easy, and what is being demanded of you now can be personally jarring. But you know more than anyone that you don't work in isolation. In your job, being your best requires not only your own maximum effort, but reliable support from the school system. And the reality is that New Bedford's teachers haven't gotten that support in a long time. Understand that the reforms that are being implemented, as discomfoting as they might feel right now, are intended to provide you the tools you need in the classroom to succeed. Our kids deserve a first class school system, and so do you.

Few would honestly dispute the need for reform, but the real question is: will each of us – teachers, administrators, parents, elected officials . . . everybody – ask how we can be part of the solution? If we embrace the change, New Bedford will in time have a school system that fulfills our moral obligation to do right by our children and commands the respect for our teachers that they deserve.

Whether it's reforming our schools, growing jobs, strengthening our neighborhoods, or taking on our other

challenges, everyone has a part to play in our success. New Bedford can return to its status as a leader among cities if we understand that we're all in this together.

Let us maintain a deliberate and respectful political discourse that honors our citizens' expectations of government and enables elected representatives to form thoughtful solutions to the City's challenges. I am eager to work with our City Council to advance the City's long term interests, and I know that they wish to do the same.

Let all of us – everyone who lives in Greater New Bedford – go forward with a shared sense of responsibility. Whether you live in East Freetown, Padanaram or Marion Village, you have a personal stake in the success of our City.

Let us all ask ourselves, "What can we do to move New Bedford ahead?"

We don't need to look far for examples of those who are already answering the question.

This year Angie Vargas answered the call when she decided to organize citizens to give voice to our growing Latino population.

This year, Gerry Pinto answered the call to reinvigorate Neighborhoods United and to strengthen neighborhood organizations across the City.

This year, Mike Shea answered the call by organizing a campaign to refurbish the old high school auditorium and to launch a New Bedford High School alumni association.

These efforts, and others like them across the City, make a difference. What Angie, Gerry and Mike would tell you is that everyone is capable of stepping up in each's own way.

It is so heartening, and indeed a profound privilege, for me to support the efforts of private citizens to make their

community better, and to help New Bedford be recognized not as a place trying to catch up, but as a place that other cities should emulate.

From trailing behind, to leading the pack.

Make no mistake. That's the story we today are writing together.

God bless you. And God bless the great City of New Bedford.