



## **INAUGURAL ADDRESS**

**Mayor Jonathan F. Mitchell**

**January 6, 2020**

**Zeiterion Performing Arts Center, New Bedford, Massachusetts**

**[text as prepared]**

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

As hard as it may be to fathom, this week we closed the book on the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The 20-teens will forever be known as a period of rapid technological change that witnessed the near universal adoption of powerful smart phones throughout the developed world, and the emergence of big data and artificial intelligence, whose implications for our daily lives have yet to be fully understood.

The decade also was marked by intense political division across America, and a related inability by our national government to address lingering, though solvable, problems facing the Republic. At the close of the decade, political turmoil in our country has hardly subsided.

New Bedford is a different place, too – and for the better.

At the beginning of the decade, our city was saddled with double digit unemployment, disturbing rates of criminal activity, foreclosure and blight in our neighborhoods, city facilities and parks that had fallen into disrepair, a port struggling to weather the crash of the ground-fish industry, and a school system that had become so dysfunctional as to require state monitoring. All of these were warning signs that New Bedford was on the well-worn path of other older industrial cities toward inexorable decline.

Fast forward to today, and the outlook is far brighter. The city's unemployment rate has dropped by nearly two-thirds, violent crime has plummeted, the school system is back on track, the port is expanding and modernizing, the city's bond rating is the highest it's ever been, and the physical appearance of the city has vastly improved.

The record of our city's achievements has been well-chronicled by now. Suffice it to say that according to the most common objective measures of urban progress, New Bedford has posted a record of success these past years.

But as we look forward, what bears contemplation is not so much what we have accomplished, but how we've done it.

We've gone about the work of renewing our city in a way that sharply departs from what had been practiced in the past.

First and foremost, we stopped thinking of ourselves as a victim of powerful outside forces, and instead established a bias toward action. When faced with challenges, whether they were in our schools, our neighborhoods or on the city's balance sheet, we didn't feel sorry for ourselves, we didn't simply hope the state would bail us out, and we didn't ignore them. No matter how daunting the problem, we confronted it head on.

And when we have acted on the big things, we have acted together. City government cannot go it alone. Whether it was the work of the Regeneration Committee, neighborhood groups, or others, the work on the major matters of the day has been a collective effort.

We established a clear vision for the city, which at its core recognizes New Bedford as the economic, cultural and political center of Southeastern Massachusetts. Everything we have done has reinforced the proposition that our city is an important place, in Massachusetts and in America.

And we have resisted the temptation to govern by the two-year election cycle, and instead have kept our eye on the long-term, knowing that cities aren't built – or rebuilt – overnight.

The adoption of a four-year mayoral term is an explicit endorsement of this approach to governing. New Bedford's residents have expressed their expectation that – regardless of the occupant of the office of mayor – their city government must think long term, plan long term, and even when the political road gets a little bumpy, must stick to those plans.

There's nothing glamorous or flashy about this way of doing business; it doesn't lend itself to the kind of tweet or soundbite that passes for actual governance in Washington.

But our job in municipal government is not to entertain or score cheap political points.

It is to provide our residents with the services and leadership necessary to enable them and their families to live fulfilling lives here.

In the new term ahead, we have an opportunity to institutionalize this approach for the benefit of future generations in our City. It will be our job, to paraphrase George Washington, to raise a standard of governance to which those who follow can be expected to uphold.

We in New Bedford have a chance now to show everyone that with the right approach, applied faithfully over a period of years, a mid-size, older industrial core-city can flourish in a modern, knowledge-based economy.

And that is exactly what we will do.

The pieces are falling into place. We have re-positioned the city to capitalize on its strengths, and we're now cementing an approach that has proven its value, with the confidence gained from our success along the way.

We shouldn't expect our task to be easy. It hasn't been easy up to now, and yet we've managed to defy the odds in a time in which capital and talent are flowing to the major metropolitan areas.

We've understood that despite all the advantages they may have, big cities will not be the only places that can make their way in the new national economy. In an America where the biggest cities are becoming more congested, expensive and in some cases more violent, we can offer a more manageable, more livable alternative. We can be successful without being like them.

So how do we make that happen?

### **Quality of Life**

First of all, we will continue to focus relentlessly on making New Bedford, quite simply, a really nice place to live. 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 facilitate 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 attracting people and investment to the city in the long run.

Our overarching goal as a city government stems directly from this proposition; simply stated, city government shall provide municipal services in ways and to a degree that makes it more likely that people will choose to live here.

From how we police, to the way we offer library services or after school programs, to snow plowing, street sweeping and the provision of drinking water – the whole array of municipal services – we want it all to add up such that people will say, “I have my choices, and I’d rather live in New Bedford.”

### **Public Safety**

Good quality of life starts of course with public safety.

Under Joe Cordeiro’s leadership, the police department has intensified community policing efforts and made better use of data to make deployment decisions. They have made their presence felt in the right places and at the right times, and have developed stronger relationships in our challenged neighborhoods. This approach has worked to reduce violent and property crime, and it is one that we will stick with.

Meanwhile, the neighborhood task force has neutralized many of the sources of crime by eradicating blight and forcing absentee landlords to manage their properties more responsibly. We will not let up in holding irresponsible landlords accountable.

With the pronounced drop in crime, and the superb responsiveness of our fire and EMS personnel, New Bedford has become a much safer city overall, and our job now is to ensure that every neighborhood is just as safe as the rest.

## **Public Spaces**

Cities with a high quality of life are not only safe, but have great public spaces, the kind that makes living in the city pleasant, interesting and rewarding.

A few years ago, we made a conscious decision to seize responsibility for the physical condition and appearance of the city. I believe that our residents deserve to live in a clean city with well-designed and visually appealing public spaces, and effective infrastructure.

We will not waver from this commitment. We will continue to build back our roadways and sidewalks, plant still more street trees, upgrade our parks and beaches, and maintain a standard of cleanliness that more affluent communities take for granted.

## **Schools**

A high quality of life also 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. 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. We are turning the page on years of intense state scrutiny, where the work in the district was as much about complying with directives from Boston, as it was about charting the right course for the children of our city.

In the long run, as a city, we will continue to own the outcomes in our schools. There will always be federal and state mandates in public education, especially in a state where it is effectively impossible to educate students without the benefit of state funding.

What's different now is that we are flying the plane on our own. In that spirit, after over a year of input under Superintendent Thomas Anderson's guidance, we will launch a new district plan that departs from previous efforts, in that is New Bedford's plan for New Bedford's kids. As much as we rely on state and federal support to do the job, the responsibility for educating New Bedford students is primarily ours – the school committee, the district administration, and everyone else in our City.

Our aim is straightforward: to offer a high-quality education to every child and to build a system of schools that attracts families to the city. Our students and our city deserve exactly that.

### **Sustainability**

All of our city-building work must be sustainable. The term “sustainability” these days is ordinarily associated with efforts to address the effects of climate change. And for good reason, it's a meaning that applies to our work. New Bedford, of course, has emerged as a national leader in renewable energy and energy conservation measures, as we seek to do our part to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

But as an East Coast city that is prone to flooding and storm surge, it is incumbent upon us to continue this work, and to prepare for the effects of climate change. After months of analysis, and stakeholder input, we will release our new climate action plan in the coming weeks. The purpose of the plan is to set a course for the physical sustainability of the city in the decades ahead. How we manage storm water, prepare for and respond to storm surges, and protect our residents and critical facilities, must all be priorities.

While it is impossible to predict the future with any degree of certainty, we, in New Bedford, take climate change seriously; and we will prepare with an appropriate level of urgency.

But sustainability isn't only about climate change. To succeed in the long run, we must also be sustainable operationally, fiscally and economically.

The operation of our city government has moved away from the industrial-era organizational model whose central feature is top-down command-and-control, at the expense of adaptability and agility. Nowadays, the work of city government is oriented toward goals set by department heads with input from residents, elected officials, and those who are responsible for the work itself.

Systems thinking, in which goals are set with appropriate input and progress toward those goals are measured candidly, is what we are after. The more ingrained it becomes in the culture of city government, the more effective and sustainable our work will be, and the more confidence the public will have that their interests are being served.

The need for sustainability also must be foremost in our consideration when city government makes spending decisions. You've heard me say it before, but it bears repeating: money is tight. We have made cuts to government programs, and we've saved considerable funds on account of our energy initiatives and other efficiency measures, but the pressure on taxpayers has not let up.

We will continue to seize every opportunity to increase efficiency in the delivery of services, as we have done with considerable success.

Just as importantly, we will make every effort to expand the tax base by encouraging the development of underutilized parcels of public property.

I want to make very clear that I will not allow our city to be put in a precarious financial position, and we will not shy away from making the difficult, but necessary decisions to ensure our financial sustainability. The City Council, I know, sees it the same way, and I



greatly appreciate the dialogue the Council and I have had about matters of municipal finance. New Bedford residents can have confidence that both branches of city government that are exceedingly careful with public dollars.

Finally, we must continue the work of sustaining and enhancing our economic competitiveness.

We are competing in a global economy for investment and jobs, and if we don't do it effectively, they will go elsewhere, as our city has come to realize the hard way over the years.

While our economic fortunes are of course influenced by global markets, we have in our power the ability to improve our chances of success in the long run.

We are committed to long-run sustainable economic development. Our work is grounded in an understanding of our competitive advantages in the markets our businesses operate in, and our commitment to investment that support those advantages.

In other words, to ensure our competitiveness, we, as a city, must think like an entrepreneur.

That is what we have been doing, especially on the waterfront. Our task there is to expand the industrial capacity of the Port of New Bedford to support the growth of existing industries, tighten the connection between the waterfront and the city, and facilitate the development of new industries built on the foundation of what's already succeeding. The Port is poised for more growth, and wise investments in infrastructure, innovation and training will put us in a stronger position to grow more opportunities for our residents.

We will continue to cultivate the growth of advanced manufacturing throughout the City, promote the modernization of our regional airport, and build out our arts, culture and hospitality scenes.

And, finally, we have to support our small businesses through the programs at the Economic Development Council that have worked so well in the last few years. New Bedford will continue to be fertile ground for new businesses.

## **Closing**

In short, a city is constantly being built. And every generation owes it to the next to do everything in its power to make it a better place.

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

Something is expected of each of us. You may work in a non-profit organization; you may volunteer for some worthy cause, you may be a business person who recognizes that the future of your city is part of your bottom line; you may support political candidates that embody your values, or you may lend a hand when your neighbor, or even a stranger, needs you.

Whatever one's role in helping build the city, don't underestimate your ability to have an impact. For a city that had experienced decline over three generations, it is tempting to assume that decline is a permanent state of affairs. It isn't.

For those who profess a love of New Bedford, it's in our hands to build the city we believe New Bedford can be.

Let us reject the idea that there are things that New Bedford is somehow not supposed to have. We've heard it from naysayers, those who are quick to poo-poo new things: beautiful walkways along the water, nicely landscaped public spaces, tree-lined streets, and even a

four-year mayoral term. Well, we now have them. And as it turns out, our city is better for it.

The lesson here is, it's okay to be ambitious. In fact, it's absolutely necessary for us to think big and expect much from our City, and to work for it.

As Emerson said, "Without ambition, one starts nothing. Without work, one finishes nothing. The prize will not be sent to you. You need to win it."

Let us, all of us, together, resolve that our work is to relentlessly pursue what we believe in our hearts everything New Bedford can be.

We will hustle, we will persevere, and we won't let up.

Because the city we want our children and grandchildren to live in, is worthy of nothing less.

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