



INAUGURAL ADDRESS

Mayor Jonathan F. Mitchell

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Keith Middle School, New Bedford, Massachusetts

[remarks as prepared]

Governor Healey, members of the City Council, School Committee and Board of Assessors, state representatives, honored guests, my beloved family, residents and friends of New Bedford:

When we last held this ceremony four years ago, the world looked different. No one could have guessed then that the vague reports of a viral outbreak in Asia were the distant alarms of the first pandemic in a century. Its arrival weeks later forced us here, like everywhere, to respond to an all-encompassing public health crisis. Across America, the profound loss and disruption of the pandemic, and the economic and political aftermath, would come to define these last few years.

In the face of the pandemic's headwinds, we in New Bedford made a conscious decision not to become a victim of circumstance.

Instead of hunkering down and waiting for the storm to pass, we pressed ahead.

Instead of merely hoping things would improve eventually, we acted.

Instead of slowing down, we accelerated our decade-long effort to build a city worthy of our children and grandchildren.

And the results speak for themselves. Today New Bedford has near record low unemployment, safer neighborhoods, more stable finances, new parks and walkways, a population back over 100,000, and a stronger and growing reputation beyond its borders.

As significant as these markers of urban well-being may be, the visible manifestations of progress are just as telling. New housing is being built, still more restaurants are opening, streets and sidewalks are being repaved, and anchor institutions are expanding. Nearly a billion dollars of port infrastructure has been completed or is under construction. After years of effort, the American offshore wind industry was launched from our port, while inter-city rail service between New Bedford and Boston will begin later this year. And as is evident to anyone driving through the City, there's much, much more.

Our work together over the last decade, and especially the last few years, is a testament to New Bedford's grit and toughness, and to our recognition that our City is capable of standing on its own two feet. We're setting an example for the rest of America that renewal is possible even in a place that is not part of a major metropolitan area and that doesn't have the luxury of riding others' coattails – the kind of place that is often written off.

The confidence we've gained from our recent achievements will be necessary for what lies ahead.

Today we open the calendar to what is shaping up to be a pivotal year in America.

The news of 2024 likely will be dominated by a presidential election like none before, which threatens to intensify political discontent in our country and shake the foundations of our democratic institutions.

It will unfold amid turmoil and uncertainty far and wide: regional wars that could boil over into wider ones, a planet that may be warming faster than the best experts have forecasted, and the rapid emergence of new technologies that are poised to reshape everyday life in ways that even their own developers struggle to predict.

In any ever-interconnected world, New Bedford is hardly an island. We are not insulated from the divisiveness of national politics.

As the ride gets bumpier at the national level, our task here in New Bedford is to keep our eyes on the road we're on. Our opinions about national events may diverge from one another, but we must never lose sight of the fact that there's a whole lot we can do together to strengthen our City and create the conditions for our residents to live fulfilling lives.

The advantage we have at the local level, in sharp contrast to Washington, is that trust still can be established and maintained. Trust is the oxygen of civic engagement. At the local level, those with public or private authority – elected officials, business people, members of the media – have to live in the place and directly interact with one another and the public. You can be more confident about whom you can trust

when you know their friends and family or their back story, or when you have the opportunity to look them straight in the eye.

These direct connections make it possible for a greater degree of government accountability, while allowing room for government officials to make honest mistakes – as who after all doesn't make mistakes.

As long as we trust and rely on one another, there's nothing we can't accomplish. We can continue to build that City we call home:

- a City that is the cultural, economic and political center of a distinct region;
- a City with a diverse economy that offers opportunity for everyone who seeks it;
- a City with a professional, caring, and efficient municipal government that commands the confidence of taxpayers;
- a City recognized for its physical beauty, cultural richness and the compassion of its residents, and where everyone feels like they belong; and
- a City that takes responsibility for its future.

That City rests on three pillars of collective effort.

Quality of Life

The first is that we must nurture a high quality of life, both as an end itself, and as a means of attracting investment. These days this is even more important as more employers allow remote work arrangements, as they expand the options where their employees can live.

The role of city government, therefore, is to provide municipal services in such a way that makes it more likely that people will choose to live and raise a family in the city.

Public Safety

A city's quality of life is built on a foundation of public safety. Without it, public spaces can't be enjoyed, small businesses can't be profitable, and students can't thrive in school. Thanks to our police department, the DA's Office and our neighborhood task force, New Bedford has experienced an over thirty percent drop in crime over the last decade. But our police department has had to keep up with the changing nature of policing in America, and a prolonged labor shortage in the police profession. These are real challenges, and we've had to respond to them with creativity and determination.

To ensure that the department continues to improve public safety, Chief Oliviera has implemented a host of reforms that will strengthen the trust and legitimacy of the police among our City's residents. We will continue to invest in police training, equipment, and facilities, and refine our use of crime data so that officers are able to be in the right place at the right time.

Meanwhile, we will reform our dispatch system so that every emergency gets precisely what it needs without diverting personnel away from other important public safety work. This will make our city safer, and save taxpayer dollars.

And we will continue to invest in the fire department's newly reformed prevention unit, which I am confident will lead over time to a decline in the incidence of structure fires.

While we are becoming more sophisticated in responding to threats to public safety, we can do more to preempt criminal activity. Among the most straightforward steps we can take is to hold the most irresponsible absentee landlords accountable for the blight and disorder they cause. There aren't many of them, but they are all too willing to pay minor fines as a cost of doing business, rather than managing their properties as they would their own homes which is not too much to ask. I will propose to the City Council that recidivist landlords be subject to fines that are more appropriate for the costs they impose on their neighbors. If they haven't gotten with the program by now, they soon will.

Housing and Neighborhoods

There's more to do in our neighborhoods, of course. For one thing, they can't thrive if people can't afford to live in them. The cost of housing used to be only a big city issue, but now it's an every-city issue.

The nature of the housing pressures here are different from those in large metropolitan areas like New York and Boston, where for years upwardly mobile professionals have been moving for work. In contrast, people have tended to migrate to New Bedford for jobs that aren't as high paying, or for housing that costs less than where they came from. Although these trends still have the effect of increasing housing prices, the policy implications are different.

The housing plan we announced last summer is working to address our particular situation by balancing the need to provide housing for those seeking it, while ensuring that New Bedford doesn't become a place of last resort. No city of course can afford to let that happen to itself. The key is to facilitate the development of housing at every income level. Here in Greater New Bedford, our suburbs need to

do their part, as virtually all of the rental housing in our region is situated in the City.

We've been making progress. We have a pipeline of approximately 250 more housing units, but more will be needed. We are streamlining permitting, getting vacant properties back on the market, and expanding incentives for new construction to increase the overall supply of units. We have a strong partner in Governor Healey, who recognizes the urgency of the housing problem in Massachusetts and the need for the solutions to be tailored to regional circumstances.

Public Spaces

Cities with a high quality of life have great public spaces, the kind that make city living pleasant, convenient, and rewarding.

For this reason, a few years ago, we made a conscious decision to take 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 in this commitment. We will increase yet again funding for road construction, plant still more trees on top of the nearly 5,000 we've planted so far, and follow through on millions of dollars of upgrades to our parks and beaches.

Schools

To be a city that people would choose to raise a family, we must offer educational opportunities that enable children to thrive as adults.

As the state's Department of Education has noted, New Bedford Public Schools are a completely different district than they were a decade ago. And that is primarily because we refused to allow the interests of adults in our schools to trump the needs and aspirations of children and their families. It is a school district that is far more accountable to the public and parents alike.

There's no doubt that the learning loss and emotional strain on families caused by the pandemic remains a challenge, but no one is using the pandemic as an excuse. Led by Interim Superintendent Andrew O'Leary and the School Committee's Academic Achievement Subcommittee, our schools have refocused on what matters most: getting kids back in schools, setting clear academic goals, and working relentlessly to achieve them. This is exactly what our students and families deserve, and our City needs.

Sustainability

All of our city-building work must be sustainable in every sense of the word.

As an East Coast city that is prone to Atlantic hurricanes, New Bedford must prepare for the effects of climate change more than most places. Our climate action plan sets a course for the physical sustainability of the City for the decades ahead. Managing storm water to avoid flooding, preparing for and responding to storm surges, and protecting our residents and critical facilities, are top priorities.

But sustainability isn't only about climate change. We must also be sustainable operationally and fiscally.

We no longer manage city government according to an industrial-era, command-and-control, organizational model. In a world that

changes quickly, we strive to be more agile and adaptable. We set annual performance goals in coordination with department heads and empower employees to figure out how to achieve those goals. This approach is making city government more responsive and effective.

But having modern systems in place alone is insufficient. You still need to have the right people to run the enterprise of city government. And that has become harder for us to accomplish. The labor market has been tight for sure, but the City's employee residency requirement has made it extremely difficult to land the best qualified candidates, especially for senior management and technical positions. As much as I've long supported the residency requirement as a way of encouraging the hiring of City residents, it has become unworkable. Most cities have abolished their residency requirements, and it's time now for New Bedford to do it, too.

The need for sustainability also must remain in mind when we decide how taxpayer money is to be spent. Our city government is not flush with cash. We've become far more efficient at the business of government, but we've had to make cuts. The pressure of our pension and health care obligations remains considerable, and our ability to manage those costs is greatly constrained by state law.

I want to make clear that we cannot allow our City to fall into a precarious financial position. We will not shy away from making the difficult, but necessary decisions to ensure our financial sustainability. The City Council, I know, shares these concerns. New Bedford residents can have confidence that both branches of city government are exceedingly careful with public dollars.

Economic Competitiveness

The second pillar of our efforts is to continually strengthen our economic competitiveness. We in Greater New Bedford are competing in a global economy for investment and jobs, and if we don't compete effectively, they will go elsewhere, as we have come to realize the hard way over the years.

Growing our regional economy and the jobs that would come with it requires us to play up our advantages -- that is to say, we need to focus on the things we're already good at.

In New Bedford, more than anything else, that means our maritime economy. The Port is the primary economic driver of the region because it offers advantages to the industries that call it home, including commercial fishing, recreational boating, ferry services, certain lines of international cargo, and now offshore wind.

We will continue to modernize the port's infrastructure, an effort that has been enormously successful in the last decade. On top of this foundation, we will continue to support businesses that need some connection to the ocean, ranging from seafood processing to offshore wind operations.

And we will tighten the connection between the waterfront and the rest of the City, as every successful port the world over has areas where people can enjoy themselves by the water. This is especially important at the State Pier, given its central location facing back to the downtown. I want to thank the Governor specifically for her support of the effort to develop this key parcel.

I also believe the conditions are ripe now for New Bedford to develop into a center for marine technology. The cluster of maritime

businesses, the proximity to marine research institutions, and the emergence of new technologies that can be deployed from here, together make New Bedford the perfect place for marine technology and innovation, especially related to climate and fisheries. The New Bedford Ocean Cluster has made this a priority, and we are moving aggressively to make it a facet of our maritime cluster.

Our overarching goal, simply stated, is to establish New Bedford as the top blue economy city on the East Coast, and we will do that by making the most of our advantages and out-hustling everybody else.

There is plenty of opportunity for economic growth elsewhere in the City of course. Among other efforts, we will continue to help cultivate small business formation and growth, attract advanced manufacturing (including at the municipal golf course site), promote the modernization of the airport, and support our thriving arts, culture and hospitality scenes.

It also should go without saying that every successful city has a vibrant urban core, which is grounded by strong anchor institutions. The recent saga concerning UMass-Dartmouth's Star Store Campus demonstrated the threat posed to a city's economic well-being when an anchor institution is imperiled. We will continue to support our existing anchor institutions, including the Star Store, and pursue every opportunity to develop or recruit new ones, including research institutions and government agencies.

Place-Based Citizenship

The third pillar on which our City's future rests does not consist of government action. Government alone cannot build a city, and especially at the municipal level, government should not be turned to as the default solution to every challenge. As Plato observed some

2,500 years ago, “A City is what is, because its people are what they are.” Ultimately, it takes residents and businesses working together to solve collective problems so that their city can long endure.

Citizenship is rooted in the idea that we have obligations to one another. In a city, these obligations are inherently tied to the place itself, to the interaction of residents, neighborhoods, businesses and institutions around us. The responsibilities that come with place-based citizenship require more than simply expressing an opinion about what someone else should do. They entail 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. They reflect the difference between posting a picture of a littered sidewalk on Facebook and lamenting the mess, versus picking up the trash and throwing it away.

The precise obligations of place-based citizenship may vary from person to person, but everyone has something to offer. If you've been sitting on the sidelines, I want you to know that our City – 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 help implement them.

Volunteer some time. We’re all busy, but there’s always some time you can give. Join a neighborhood organization to help improve your corner of the City, or even start your own. And, of course, vote, and better yet, run for office. If you believe you have something to offer, jump in with both feet.

If you are a business leader, chances are that you have more to offer than most. Successful cities are invariably ones where local business leaders own the problem of urban renewal. Unlike global investors who might regard the city from afar as merely a set of assets to be bought or sold, local business leaders – that is people whose personal stake in the place makes it difficult for them to walk away –

have a special role to protect and preserve their hometown. They have not only the expertise and leadership skills to offer, but the resources and prestige of their organizations as well.

The establishment of the New Bedford Light is a recent example of what's possible. To address the contraction of local media capacity and its implications for the vitality of Greater New Bedford, business and other leaders stepped up to form a new media outlet, and thanks to the persistent efforts of many, now, some two years later, the Light has a devoted following. That's how institutions can be built. More efforts like that can add up to a lot.

But no matter who you are, what sustains us all, what gives us the energy to do the extra it takes for us to succeed together, is love; it's love of the place you call home.

I do what I do because I love New Bedford, and if you are here today, for certain you do, too.

Sometimes we beat ourselves up and are too willing to accept the knee jerk judgments and stereotyping of others. But make no mistake, New Bedford is a special place in America. There's nowhere quite like it. Our city is worthy of our full devotion.

When you commit acts of love on your city's behalf, and make it a better place, you can improve yourself in some small way, too. The City can give back to you.

On this New Year's Day, let us recommit together to the work of making New Bedford all it can be.

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