

“Poised For Progress”

An Inaugural Address by Mayor Jonathan F. Mitchell

[text as prepared]

Monday, January 2, 2012

Zeiterion Theater

New Bedford, Massachusetts

Honored guests, Mayor and Mrs. Lang, Judges Casper and Fernandes, members of the City Council and other government officials, citizens and friends of New Bedford.

Today, more than at any point in decades, New Bedford is poised for progress.

To those who have sometimes wondered whether or when our City would begin to turn the corner after decades of struggle, I say this:

Now, more than ever, is our chance to make it happen. We will find ourselves no better opportunity than right now to regain our place as one of America’s great cities.

There is nothing of which I am more certain.

We would never have arrived at this point without the skillful leadership of Mayor Scott Lang. In his six years in office, Mayor Lang established that transparent and above-board government is the cornerstone of a successful city.

Through his tireless advocacy before state and federal leaders, our City is taken seriously in the wider world, and our citizens have renewed confidence in city government.

To take New Bedford to the next level, it is essential that we build on this legacy. Let me state my view as clear as possible on this point:

Like Mayor Lang, I too believe there is simply no substitute for an open government and fact-based decision-making. Policy-makers in City Hall—from the Mayor down—will make decisions based on a careful evaluation of the merits, not on narrow parochial interests.

Our citizens deserve as much, and we cannot build credibility with investors and high government officials if they have doubts about our motives.

While the current approach to governing will remain, we must be ready to offer new answers to the challenges we face if we are to fulfill our City's potential.

The challenges ahead are significant: growing jobs and effectively competing in the global economy, keeping our neighborhoods safe and thriving, delivering efficient government services, and building a first-rate school system.

Economic Growth

The number one priority for my administration is to do everything in my power to help create well-paying jobs. More good jobs means less crime, a broader tax base, more vibrant homes and neighborhoods, and more kids going to college.

Beyond that, the opportunity to put in an honest day's work is the foundation of personal dignity and a sense of self-worth. More good jobs mean a more confident, engaged, and optimistic community.

The way forward begins with the realization that New Bedford is in a fierce competition for jobs that is global in scope. As your Mayor, I pledge to you that I will fight non-stop in that global competition on our City's behalf.

Our starting point will be to support our existing businesses, as well as to protect our fishing industry from unfair regulations.

But to bring new business here, our economic strategy must play to our natural competitive advantages.

The first is our waterfront. Countless other cities remain envious of the waterfront we have. It can and should be the source of new jobs in the areas of fish processing, cargo, and renewable energy.

Like cities such as Newport and Portland, Maine, our waterfront should be a place where our residents and tourists alike can shop, dine, and enjoy first-rate public recreational spaces right by the water.

The largest piece of our waterfront development puzzle is the South Terminal project, which would serve as the center of New Bedford's cargo import operations for decades to come, and unlock space elsewhere along the waterfront for retail, tourism, recreation, and other uses.

We must never take our eyes off that prize, and always be making the case to the state and business leaders that this project is essential to our future as a port and as a City. It should and must go forward.

And I will add this: I stand by this conviction regardless of the status of the Cape Wind renewable energy project. As exciting a prospect as the Cape Wind project may be in the near-term, South Terminal itself is a project with a 100-year return on investment, and that is where our long-term focus must remain.

In seeking out new businesses to set up shop here, we also need to keep in mind that today's most successful companies are constantly on the lookout for places where their workers would want to live.

Our advantage is this:

We are **NOT** like everywhere else. Our authenticity is a huge advantage when the rest of the world is becoming more homogenized, and sterile, and the same.

New Bedford is different.

New Bedford is exceptional.

New Bedford is the real deal.

We have a history like no other mid-size American city. We have a vibrant downtown. We have beaches and water views aplenty. We have a diverse and energetic North End. And we have a deeply-rooted arts and cultural scene.

These things make us—as individuals and as a community--unique and more interesting.

For others considering whether to locate here, these things make our City a much more attractive place to build a future than so many other American cities that have been hollowed out and are left without something special to call their own.

Above all we need to build on our uniqueness and avoid the temptation to develop in ways that erode our most precious possession: our identity.

The cities that will succeed in the knowledge economy of the 21st Century will be those where ideas are generated and freely exchanged. There is no better environment for this than a college campus. Strengthening the higher education infrastructure in the

City makes sense on many levels—from training today’s workers to generating construction jobs.

Over the very long run, if we are truly serious about creating a cultural and business climate that encourages new ideas take hold and flourish, then the increased presence of higher education is an absolute necessity.

To be sure, UMass, Bristol Community College, and Bridgewater State College have already established themselves in our City. The task now is to encourage them to grow their footprint here in the years ahead. From the ranks of their students will come the leaders and employees of the next generation of businesses and non-profits to thrive here.

Safe Neighborhoods

Creating these jobs and improving the quality of life in our City will not be possible unless we keep our streets safe. Parents in every neighborhood should be able to let their kids play outside until it’s time to come in for supper, without thinking twice about it.

While most of our neighborhoods are safe, a select few have alarmingly deteriorated in recent years. In these places a sense of social disorder and danger prevails to an extent unlike anything we have seen before in our City. The situation cannot stand, and it won’t.

We cannot allow crime--and the fear of crime--to corrode these neighborhoods any further—for the sake of those who live in them, and for the rest of the City.

Unless something is done, the City’s reputation for a high quality of life will suffer and eventually discourage companies from building their futures here.

At that point, we all lose. The entire City--every one of us--has a major stake in the long-term stabilization of this small group of deteriorating neighborhoods.

As Mayor, I will work closely with our Police Chief, David Provencher, our District Attorney Sam Sutter, and my former boss, United States Attorney Carmen Ortiz, to ensure their maximum cooperation in removing the most dangerous predators from our streets.

I will take direct steps to deal with other elements of social decay: garbage, graffiti, and run-down properties.

Certain neighborhoods have suffered, in great part, because a few large absentee landlords have purchased tenements out of foreclosure, disregarded housing codes and allowed the properties to become run down.

They have turned a deaf ear to law abiding neighbors who have complained again and again.

My administration will take proactive approach to the problem. I will establish a multi-agency code enforcement task force that will hold negligent absentee landlords accountable when they don't treat their rental properties like their own homes.

Their tenants are entitled to safe and clean living conditions. Neighbors deserve the same kind of respect. If the large landlords cannot fulfill these basic obligations, they don't belong in New Bedford, period.

City Finances

By now it's not news to anyone that we live in an era of diminished resources. The financial meltdown in 2008 has left government at all levels struggling to pay its bills for the foreseeable future.

Here in New Bedford, our hard-working City employees have had to endure layoffs and furloughs. With the expiration of federal grants and continued economic uncertainty, further layoffs in the Fire Department, schools, and elsewhere are unfortunately still within the realm of possibility.

As I stated from the beginning of my campaign, we must strive to deliver more effective and efficient government services. We have no choice. The City has already asked too much of tax payers.

It's not just about doing more with less. We need to scrutinize every activity of city government, and ask whether we need it. Can we do it more cheaply? Is there a different way to do it?

Doing it the way we've always done it is no longer the solution. Nor would it be responsible to cut just for the sake of cutting. We need to think hard about what government can do well, and what taxpayers can afford.

For starters, we will begin to implement Citistat, a modern municipal management tool that has saved cities throughout the United States millions of tax payer dollars.

I also will ask the City Council to approve the establishment and hiring of a Chief Financial Officer so that budget decisions can be subject to careful scrutiny and long-term planning. For a city of our size to be without a CFO, is the equivalent of piloting a boat without a compass in the Buzzards Bay fog. It is a recipe for fiscal surprises that can be avoided with some forethought and strong financial oversight.

Education

Our City's economic competitiveness, and indeed its quality of life, cannot be separated from the quality of the education our schools offer. To compete for the jobs of tomorrow, children must have the intellectual tools for a knowledge-based economy.

There are pockets of true excellence to be found among numerous teachers, principals and students at every level of our school system. Recent graduates have gone on to top colleges and have served with distinction in the military.

But our school system is not where it should be. Barely half of our high school students graduate in four years. Our MCAS scores are among the lowest in the state. Two of our schools have been placed on the state's list of the worst performing schools.

Concerned about the performance--and sometimes the safety--of our schools, some families have lost confidence and are leaving New Bedford. School officials are working to address the problems, but the system is not moving nearly fast enough.

Our school system needs to do better, and do better now. Several months ago, a state education report highlighted critical areas in New Bedford's public schools that need drastic improvement.

In my judgment, it is time for New Bedford to move past its long-standing defensive posture in engaging the state about our schools.

We hold to the current position only at our own long-run peril. The first step in addressing a problem is to recognize that it exists. The officials at the state Department of Education did not arbitrarily single out New Bedford for a harsh assessment. The Department evaluates a school system in light of what it observes in comparison with school systems all over the state.

It rarely issues a report like the one New Bedford received. And while we can quarrel with the report's finer points, its major findings hardly came as a surprise to many of those closest to the system.

At this point, we simply can't afford to take lightly the threat of a state takeover of our system. It happened in Lawrence when the state lost faith in a district's ability to deliver an adequate education to its students.

We do not want that to happen here.

Now, there is no doubt that our city's demographics play a part in our student performance. It is hardly news that less affluent children from unstable homes tend to do less well in school than their peers, here and everywhere else.

For this reason, some of the blame for our lower test scores is rightly laid on federal and state policies that indirectly foster the concentration of poverty in cities like ours.

But demographics are only part of the story. The reality is that we haven't done as well as other Massachusetts cities that face similar challenges. Among the state's so-called "Gateway Cities," New Bedford is at or near the bottom in terms of MCAS scores and the four-year graduation rate. The reality we must acknowledge is that the deficiencies in our schools are, in part, of our own making.

But that also means that many of the "fixes" for our schools should lie in our own hands.

So tonight, I invite my colleagues on the School Committee and other school leaders to pledge that we will not accept the status quo, that we will empower our

education professionals to get the job done, and hold them accountable for the results, mindful that accountability only comes when the people at the top mean what they say.

Fixing our schools is going to require all of us to be open to some new ideas and new ways of doing things.

I want to hear those ideas.

During the campaign, I called for an education summit because I wanted to hear everyone's observations, concerns, and recommendations. In the weeks ahead, I will schedule three public hearings at each of our middle schools so that the entire city can have easy access to the discussion. I want to hear from everyone.

I will ask one thing in return: For every concern you air, you pledge to be part of a solution: It can be something you are willing to do differently, or something you are willing to offer of yourself. It can be simple, or it can be hard to achieve.

My point is this: To improve our system, we need everyone involved and everyone willing to take a positive step to make a difference.

I will be the last person to suggest I have answers to the difficult problems that vex our schools.

But I do know that when teachers and parents are on the same page, students behave better and stay in school.

Successful school systems have a culture of respect and high standards of personal conduct, where student safety is not even an issue. That positive climate is a fundamental prerequisite to educational attainment.

But let's face facts: Good behavior starts at home, and many parents in our City have failed to step up and do their part. There are many causes for our high drop-out rate, but most can be traced back to a disconnect between the home and the school.

We can't legislate good parenting, but we can build a better relationship between schools and parents. Toward this end, I will convene a "Building Bridges" Task Force to advance initiatives that can bridge the gap, including an expanded home visit program, attendance improvement measures, and drop-out prevention programs.

Each child gets one shot at an education. Each deserves the very best this City can offer.

Looking Ahead

Good jobs, safer neighborhoods, efficient government, and high performing schools. These are our challenges.

Success will come only when we recognize that these are not someone else's problems. Even if you don't have school age children, what happens in our schools affects you. Even if you live in the North End, crime problems in a South End neighborhood affect you. Even if you have a steady job, that many of our fellow citizens have looked in vain for employment, affects you.

To borrow a phrase, let us expand the circle of "self-interest rightly understood" so that we all recognize that all of our lives are lived and shared within the same circle.

Our fates and lives, our potential successes or failures are being forever woven together.

Think about it: What if every home owner kept up their yard...how much more attractive the City would be.

What if everyone maintained a close eye over their neighbors' homes, and shared information the police needed to do their jobs...how much safer we'd all be.

And what if every able-bodied citizen volunteered some time to help children, seniors, or veterans...how much stronger our bonds of community and friendship would be.

If everyone who professes a love for our City by the sea bears responsibility for making it a better place, we will draw closer together, and leave a stronger community for our children and grandchildren.

We may look to Boston and Washington for help, but it is up to us to find lasting solutions to our challenges. Each of us must ask: What role can I play?

What should give us hope is that our City's history has been a story of continual adjustment to new challenges. When we really need to change, we do it, and we do it well.

When the discovery of oil in Pennsylvania ushered in the end of the whaling era, New Bedford changed course and became a textile center. When textile production began to move to the South in the 1930's, we re-filled our mills with manufacturers of apparel and other goods. Along the way, our waterfront evolved from the top whaling port in America to the top fishing port.

Now is **NOT** the time to lower our sights, and settle for less. Let's rise to the challenges of 2012.

Today, a new generation is stepping forward to lead our City. Like generations before, we see New Bedford's promise and potential, and have dedicated ourselves to building our community the old fashioned way: through honesty, hard work, and

imagination. This place is where we strive to live out the American Dream, and to build a brighter future.

With our sights raised toward that future, let us begin our work together.

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