



“A City of Choice”

MAYOR JON MITCHELL

State of the City Address

Thursday, March 22, 2012

[Remarks as Prepared]

Today marks the 80th day of my Administration. Some might contend that offering an assessment of the state of the City is premature. After all, I just got here. My own view is that – whether 80 days or 800 – citizens deserve to hear where their city is going.

Across America, cities face many of the same primary challenges that we confront here: 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.

In the next fifty years, many cities, lacking the resources or the know-how to solve these problems, may well fall by the wayside, abandoned like larger versions of Western ghost towns, having lost the economic rationale that propelled businesses and the community around them to grow in the first place. Whether it was a riverfront for mills or a train stop along an important rail line, these cities will cease to function in the absence of enormous infusions of state and federal aid. Aid that, frankly, isn't coming. Cities simply go away when they don't offer people a good reason to choose to live there. Modern day Detroit is a tragic example.

As I have said before, and will say again and again, I firmly believe New Bedford is different. New Bedford isn't going anywhere.

Despite its share of challenges, New Bedford has assets that other cities lack. These assets position us well to remain a city of choice in the future, and become an even more desirable place to live.

A deep water port, extensive highway and freight rail capacity, and major educational, civic and cultural institutions. These things really matter.

So does the story we have to tell about ourselves. Our story is unmatched by any mid-sized city in America. As the capital of Yankee whaling, New Bedford's culture was forged by the most American of industries, at whose heart was the audacious task of using wooden boats to hunt the largest creatures in the sea with hand weapons. This made New Bedford the fascinating place it is today.

But just being dealt a better hand than many of our so-called "peer cities" doesn't guarantee success. We need to capitalize on our assets if we are to become a city where people who could leave, instead choose to remain, and where others who could be somewhere else choose to come. To become a city of choice, we have to work hard on what matters to people in the long run: schools, safety, economic opportunity, and efficient, above-board government. My Administration is pressing forward on each of these fronts.

Education

Building a city of choice begins in our schools. New Bedford won't return to its place as one of America's great cities unless we build a great school system.

It is not news to anyone at this point that our school system is not where it should be. For many New Bedford families who love our City and its way of life, the school system has become a deal breaker. Concerned about the performance--and sometimes the safety--of our schools, many parents with children have lost confidence and are leaving New Bedford. Worse still, hundreds of our City's children are dropping out of school, each one a personal tragedy. The situation is intolerable, period.

As a first step in confronting our collective problem, I held three public forums in recent weeks to discuss the state of our schools. My hope for these sessions was to offer everyone the opportunity to weigh in – to raise ideas that they may not have been comfortable sharing before. With open dialogue about our schools, the public can be confident that there's no hidden agenda.

The response to the forums was something to behold. The sessions lasted nearly twice as long as scheduled, and the crowds grew larger on each occasion. Meanwhile, comments poured in via email and regular mail. The observations of teachers were especially helpful. In our education system, the classroom is where the rubber hits the road. Teachers, many of whom are parents themselves, are uniquely positioned to assess what is working well, and what isn't.

The level of engagement in the process shows that New Bedford's residents are just as concerned about the state of their school system, as the residents of the most affluent communities.

New Bedford wants great schools. Parents want great classroom instruction, like the kind Simone Bourgeois, last year's teacher of the year, has been delivering to students in our system and at Sea Lab for over forty years. Just ask her, she'll tell you what parents want from their kids' schools.

The observations at the forums and in letters to my office came from a variety of perspectives; parents shared the individual experiences of their children; teachers, current and retired, offered their thoughts about classroom instruction and school operations, and local business people weighed in on the performance of the school system as an organization. While the ideas varied, there was one consistent thread, one unifying theme across many voices: *change*. The overriding message was that our schools can, and must, do better.

The status quo is not option; we owe it to our children, and we owe it to our City, to alter the way we deliver education here in New Bedford.

This is not to say that everyone agrees. We heard from some that nothing should change because we're already on the right track. Any expression of doubt about whether we are in fact on track is dismissed out of hand.

The opponents of change in our system have a right to express their opinions. There were no restrictions on what anyone could say at the forums. I believe that their opinions are honestly held. But not all opinions are of equal weight. And some just don't measure up to reality.

One cannot look at the state of our schools, and reasonably claim that there is nothing to fix. While there are pockets of true excellence in our school system, it is not news to anyone now that our school system ranks at the bottom of the state in terms of MCAS scores and the four-year graduation rate. Two of our schools have been placed on the state's list of the worst performing schools. We just learned last week that if the school year ended today, more than a third of the freshman class at the high school would not pass to the tenth grade:

1 in 3 is failing English;

1 in 3 is failing Math;

1 in 4 is failing social studies; and

1 in 4 is failing science.

Everyone is entitled to their opinion, but they are not entitled to their own facts. And the facts show that we have a long way to go.

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 housing 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.

Not all the numbers are new. But what is new is what happened less than a month after I took office: The state has threatened to take over our system if the way the school system does business is not changed “dramatically” (their word, not mine). A state takeover of our schools would be a huge black eye for our schools, and would devastate our City’s reputation generally. It would make it far more difficult for my Administration to attract businesses to our City, and would give credence to those who believe that New Bedford is not a desirable place to live.

Astonishingly, as the clock ticks down on the state’s threat, some still cling to the status quo, questioning the seriousness of the threat, as though the state were in the business of bluffing. To dismiss the need for change in light of the facts, and in the face of state takeover, is to play Russian Roulette with our schools. It is not a position grounded in the facts of our system’s performance. It stems from an irrational resistance to change.

I believe in following the facts wherever they lead. And in this case, I believe the facts demand that change must be broad and deep.

Successful school systems have a culture of respect and high standards of personal conduct, where student safety is not even an issue. That positive learning climate is a fundamental prerequisite to educational attainment. Good behavior starts at home, and many parents in our City have failed to step up and do their part. To those parents I say this: Your child is being provided a free education delivered by hard working teachers. You can’t turn a blind eye to your child’s absences or ignore the fact that he watches television all hours of the night, and then blame teachers when your child is not performing in school.

Let me be clear: Teachers are not the problem. We need a system that supports teachers in their effort to establish order and cultivate learning environments that engage children. This is possible only when teachers are empowered to maintain discipline by the administrators and leaders of the system. For far too many teachers in our system, support from above is inadequate. We need a system that has teachers’ backs. And teachers should know that they have a Mayor who has their backs.

Above all, we should demand effective leadership at every level of the system. Effective leadership is the foundation upon which any high functioning organization is built. If leaders are not performing to expectations, they should be held accountable.

In recent weeks, questions have arisen about the present leadership in the central office. Alarm bells have sounded over the inability of the central office to produce an acceptable turnaround plan despite months of intense guidance from the state, or to communicate effectively with principals concerning either the development of the plan or its implementation. More recently, school committee members had to demand high school failure rate data from the central office that cast doubt about our prospects for significantly reducing the system's dropout rate anytime soon. These developments raise questions about the central office's ability to identify the problems in the system, and to successfully execute solutions. Our school system, and our City, is entitled to better from the central office.

Change sometimes is not easy, and it always feels hardest before the commitment to change is made. But change must be embraced if the status quo only make matters worse. Our school system is full of talented teachers and students. Let us embrace the change necessary to unlock their potential – for our children's sake and for our City.

Economic Growth

Since taking office, my Administration has focused intensely on creating well-paying jobs. Our efforts have included support for existing businesses, such as American Pride Seafood, which through a tax relief package offered by my Administration, will expand its North Terminal operations by upwards of fifty jobs in the coming year.

I am proud to fight for our fishing industry against unfair regulations. As the mayor of the number one fishing port in the United States, I see it as my job to advocate for the industry, just as I did yesterday at an industry rally in Washington. The fishing industry contributes over a billion dollars to our local economy annually, and embodies the culture soul of a region that has gone to sea for centuries.

We are also building our cultural assets in the City. The vibrancy of our Downtown was on full display for record-setting crowds last Sunday during our Half-Marathon. Citizens can expect new businesses to come on line in the weeks ahead, including a wine boutique on Purchase Street, along with the continued renovation

of the former Standard Times Building. Our efforts will make the queen of Downtown, my friend Elaine Lima, very proud.

We're also working to improve the appearance of our business districts to attract more business. Our skilled laborers in the Department of Public Infrastructure, under the focused leadership of Ron Labelle, will be putting the finishing touches on Wings Court, which would allow for café seating, and a more interesting urban night life.

Right around the corner, my Administration will begin with converting Custom House Square into a park. Like Post Office Square in Boston, it will be a welcoming green space in the center of a business district, framed nicely by surrounding buildings. It will be a magnet for office workers and tourists alike. We are going to make absolutely sure we maintain adequate parking for patrons of our restaurants and shops. But we are going to give Downtown what it has always been missing: a central gathering space.

Efforts to improve the look of neighborhoods are underway elsewhere. Most notably, we are about to begin work on Phase 1 of the Acushnet Avenue International Marketplace Project, which will transform the entry into the North End from Route 18. The construction will catalyze business investment that is already underway.

While we are improving the look of our City as a way of attracting business, our strategy to bring new businesses here focuses, as it must, on our City's natural competitive advantages. The greatest of these is of course our waterfront, and the largest piece of the waterfront development puzzle is the South Terminal project. From the day I took office, this project has been, and will continue to be, on my front burner. I believe that the prospect of building a modern marine terminal on our waterfront that would support America's new offshore wind industry and unlock the City's potential as a hub of international trade, is by far the single most important business opportunity for New Bedford and the surrounding region in my lifetime.

This is no exaggeration. Consider the experience of Bremerhaven, Germany, an old fishing port on the Baltic Sea that fell on hard times in the 1990s as a result of tightening European Union fishing regulations. About ten years ago, with the advent of offshore wind in Europe, Bremerhaven was selected as the assembly point for offshore wind farms consisting of hundreds of windmills.

With an industrial waterfront, proximity to the wind farm sites, and a workforce comprised of experienced seafarers and waterfront laborers, Bremerhaven was a good fit for offshore wind. And offshore wind has been good to Bremerhaven. Very, very good. In the seven years since Bremerhaven got into the business, the industry has generated over two thousand jobs, and is still growing. The industry has electrified the local economy, filling shops and restaurants, and enabling the municipal government to build new schools.

The same thing can happen here. Offshore wind farms are coming to America. They've been in Europe for twenty years and are already under construction in China. For a nation that seeks to reduce its carbon emissions and dependence on oil produced by unstable or hostile countries, the Obama Administration has made clear that offshore wind is central to America's long term energy strategy.

So where in the United States will offshore wind farms be located? Right in our own backyard. A full twenty-five percent of America's wind reserves are located in the area of ocean just south of Martha's Vineyard. It's one of the most consistently windy places on the planet. The United States Department of the Interior has designated the area for thousands of wind mills that will power large swaths of the Northeast.

This is where New Bedford comes in. Along the southern coast of New England, we are one of the few deepwater ports with the industrial space to stage windmills – each costing millions of dollars – and ship them to their placement sites. We have highway and rail access, and our residents have the seafaring and manufacturing skills that the industry needs. From the industry's standpoint, New Bedford makes perfect sense.

But we're not the only ones in the game. Ports in Rhode Island and Connecticut, and perhaps elsewhere, will vie for the same lucrative business. Whether we get a leg up on these ports, and just how quickly offshore wind projects get moving, are matters that we here in New Bedford can't entirely control. Federal and state regulations, the price of wind power relative to oil and gas generated power, and the availability of affordable financing for wind projects, are among the many factors that may dictate whether and when New Bedford will reap the benefits of wind power.

For our part, we need to make sure we are educating the public, opinion-leaders and decision-makers about the South Terminal project's role in serving offshore wind farms. And making the case is exactly what I've been doing. Since taking office, I have met with numerous state and federal officials and business leaders

to explain why the South Terminal project ought to go forward. It's not just about New Bedford; it's in the Commonwealth's broad strategic interest that this project be realized.

Signs are that the project is moving in the right direction. The project is now budgeted in the state's capital plan, and the Environmental Protection Agency and the state are making progress on the necessary permits. Thanks to the strong support of Governor Patrick and Lieutenant Governor Murray, the state is partnering effectively to push the project along.

Citizens of New Bedford should know that we will do everything in our power to seize the unique opportunity that offshore wind represents.

Safe Neighborhoods

Job creation is not possible in a community that is not safe.

While most of New Bedford's 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.

Throughout my campaign for Mayor, I made clear my belief that the first order of business in public safety is to ensure that the relatively small number of individuals who are responsible for a disproportionate amount of crime in our City are removed from our streets. The surest way to accomplish this is through prosecution in the federal system, where jail time is longer and more certain. Beginning before I took office, I have pressed my former colleagues in the federal law enforcement to focus their attention on our City. I believe that these efforts will in time bear fruit, and that our City will not return to the days when it was a blind spot for federal agencies in Boston. Close coordination between the City, federal agencies, and our District Attorney, Sam Sutter, will permit our residents to sleep easier at night. Support from the City Council is also important to crime fighting, and I am pleased to join the effort of Councilor Brian Gomes, who has consistently been a strong voice for neighborhood safety.

But we also need to focus on the root causes of crime, and deal with the seeds of disorder: garbage, graffiti, and run-down properties. Toward this end, as I promised during the campaign, we will soon launch a task force aimed at improving conditions in our neighborhoods. The task force will be drawn from departments across city government and will be headed by a former state prosecutor, whom I appointed as an Assistant

City Solicitor. The task force's job is simple: to enforce the city code, especially in places where code enforcement has been lax. 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. The task force is meant to deal directly with this problem.

The task force is a short term measure. In the long term, we need to incorporate the task force into the regular operation of city government so that consistent code enforcement becomes a permanent feature of what we do. This may require some changes to the city code that enhance the City's ability to collect fines and to demolish abandoned properties. In my Administration's efforts to develop a long term plan to address problem properties, I am grateful for the insightful contributions of City Council President Steve Martins and Councilor Joe Lopes, to whom I know these matters are extremely important.

City Finances

Our work to build a better New Bedford requires thoughtful decision making regarding city finances. Every new initiative, every new policy, every new idea, are only as possible as our ability to fund them. By now it's not news to anyone that we live in an era of diminished resources. Four years after the financial meltdown in 2008, government at all levels is still struggling. As our hard working city employees, who've had to endure layoffs and furloughs, will tell you, New Bedford is no exception.

The prospects for next year's budget are more of what has become the new norm. The days of healthy revenue growth are not in sight, and state aid remains ever uncertain. Nevertheless, the cost of operating government is not getting any cheaper, and growing our rainy day fund is a need awaiting attention.

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

We need to scrutinize every activity of city government, and ask, what are we paying for it? Do our priorities match up with available resources?

Thanks to the collaborative efforts of the City Council, the City can now offer a competitive salary to attract a top notch chief financial officer to help answer these questions. This is a significant step. By applying

Careful scrutiny to budget decisions and undertaking long-term financial planning, a CFO will ensure that money is allocated more precisely according to need across all city departments, and spent more carefully.

Finally, given the continuing uncertainty of revenues and state aid, we need to have the discipline to keep adding to our stabilization fund whenever an opportunity presents itself. Our stabilization fund is like a savings account, a cushion against contingencies we cannot predict. Right now, with a balance of \$4.4 million, it is hardly a cushion at all. We must strive to build up this account at the earliest opportunity so that we don't handicap the City in the future when the unexpected happens. It's the responsible thing to do. We'll be glad we did on the day we need it.

Moving Forward

Good jobs, safer neighborhoods, efficient government, and high-performing schools. These are the areas we must master if we are to re-establish a quality of life that draws people to our City, and keeps people who might otherwise go elsewhere.

In our quest to become a city of choice, New Bedford is pressing forward on all fronts. Our journey will not be without obstacles; it won't be easy. The skeptics may say that mid-sized cities like ours cannot transform themselves. But this city is tough, resilient and determined. We will not lower our sights. We have abundant strengths, and the will to make them work for us.

We will become a shining example for the rest of urban America. I look forward to the days when our children and grandchildren will say, "I live in New Bedford. Why would I want to live anywhere else?"

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