

Custom House Square Ribbon Cutting

[Remarks as prepared]

Eighteen months ago, in my first State of the City Address, I called for the conversion of Custom House Square into a park.

Back then I asked people to embrace the idea of a welcoming public space in the center of a business district, much like Post Office Square in Boston. I made this park a priority because I strongly believe that you can't have a great city without a great downtown, and no downtown is complete without a well-designed and well-maintained central green space.

I've only become more convinced in the intervening months that this new Custom House Square is an important key to transforming our downtown from really good to excellent.

The goal has been clear and simple: Give downtown New Bedford what it has always been missing: a central, green gathering space. The idea was to create an outdoor magnet for office workers, residents, and tourists alike, and do it in a way that maintained adequate parking for restaurants and shops and ensured that public events would continue to have a home here.

And not just any park would do. It would have been easy to rip up the parking lot, throw down some grass seeds, plant a couple of trees, and call it a park. It would achieve the same functional purpose; people could experience outdoor green space in the downtown.

But it wouldn't be good enough.

A city's vitality is built on many pillars, but one of them is certainly the quality of its public spaces. The beauty of a public space offers opportunities for shared enjoyment that connect people in subtle and profound ways. Think about where you take out-of-town friends when they visit you. No matter where you live in the city or the region, you don't take them to a strip mall or a fast food restaurant. You take them to those places of which you are most proud; the places you most like to be in. We love the downtown because it

has these places: the cobblestone streets, the whaling era buildings, the Jacobs gallery, to name a few. These make us proud to be New Bedford residents.

We picked up a strong contingent of believers of this project along the way, and benefitted from the support of members of the downtown community. Many are with us here tonight, including Jen Nersesian of the Whaling National Historic Park and businessman Jeff Pontiff—both of whom came to really appreciate and embrace what we were trying to accomplish with this project.

Ultimately we developed a broad consensus, but the whole effort really began with a couple of phone calls.

The first phone call was to my old friend Chris Reed, the principal of Stoss Landscape Urbanism. In addition to being a New Bedford native and an old friend, Chris—as a nationally recognized landscape architect—knew right from the start that we had the makings of something special here in Custom House Square. In fact, Chris has admitted he dreamed for years about what this space could be someday.

The other thing people should know about Chris is: He is a very busy guy. His work has taken him to the Clinton Presidential Library and other high-profile projects across the nation. He could be doing projects anywhere—and, I might add, charging for it.

Instead, he chose to contribute to our community and take on a project right here in New Bedford and ask for nothing in return. On behalf of the City and all of us here today, thank you Chris for the tremendous gift that you, Eric Prince, and the entire Stoss team have given the City of New Bedford.

We will always be grateful to you.

The second phone call was to someone whose support was likewise crucial: Environment and Energy Secretary Rick Sullivan who committed \$300,000 in state funding under the Gateway Cities Parc Program for all the materials we needed to build this park.

It is no secret that my Administration has made the creation of high-quality public spaces a top priority and Secretary Sullivan and the Patrick Administration have demonstrated again and again that they are committed to helping us achieve our goals.

Transforming this place from an underutilized parking lot into a welcoming green space was not easy. We had to get creative to figure out ways to make sure seasonal festivals were still viable on this site, and make sure the parking needs of local businesses were addressed.

After several months of dreaming, visioning, drawing, and listening, we had arrived at a creative, thoughtful design that worked for everyone.

So one hopeful day last April shovels broke the ground here. What followed were several more hot summer months of really hard, often messy and time-consuming labor—not to mention painstaking attention to detail on the part of many.

I believe it's safe to say, "Mission accomplished."

So today is about celebrating a new place, and a new era for our downtown, but my deepest thanks are reserved for those who did the actual work to turn an idea into a reality. I want to thank the many, many key contributors to this project:

First, the team from CDM Smith led by Kimberly Drake was a great partner and successfully took the Stoss concept to final design for us.

Second, we had a team of city project managers keeping everything on track, including City Planner Jill Maclean and Preservation Planner Anne Louro from the Planning Department, City Parks Director Mary Rapoza, Christina Connelly from my Office, and of course, Infrastructure Commissioner Ron Labelle, and Facilities Director Ken Blanchard.

Third, people should know that this grass would not look nearly so green without the help of Bruce Delano of Delano Landscaping. When Bruce heard what the City was trying to do, he volunteered to oversee the

installation of the new underground irrigation system and the laying down of the grass sod.

Bruce is an example of what makes New Bedford such a great place to live. His example reminds us that we are a place where people see a worthy project, and ask “How can I help?”

Finally, we owe our thanks to the city workers from the Department of Infrastructure and the Department of Facilities and Fleet Management. They took on the toughest part of the job.

They sweat it out through a long hot summer, and they did it all with tremendous pride and attention to detail. Every one of them deserves special recognition for their efforts, and that is why I am now going to read their names and ask everyone to give them a round of applause....

[Names of employees read aloud]

Thank you, and enjoy your new park.