



CITY OF NEW BEDFORD

JONATHAN F. MITCHELL, MAYOR

August 13, 2014

City Council President Joseph Lopes and
Honorable Members of the City Council
133 William Street
New Bedford, MA 02740

Dear Council President Lopes and Honorable Members of the City Council:

I present for your consideration a proposed Special Act that would extend the term of the Mayor from two years to four years. Because it would amend the City's charter, the act also would need to be approved by the state legislature.

I believe that the adoption of a four-year term is necessary because the current two-year term impedes our ability to build the better future we all want for our City, in that it (1) tends to undermine the general effectiveness of the executive branch; (2) skews policy and program initiatives toward narrow or trivial short term interests; (3) diverts time and energy to mobilizing campaign organizations and to campaign fundraising and away from important governmental duties; and puts New Bedford at a competitive disadvantage versus cities with more modern mayoral structures.

The job of Mayor of New Bedford is complex and time consuming, and it comes with vast responsibility. As you well know, the City has population of approximately 100,000, an annual budget of approximately \$300 million, and a workforce of over three-thousand employees. The Mayor is ultimately responsible for the reliable delivery of a wide array of traditional government services in the areas of public safety, education, and municipal finances, as well as other operations as diverse as an airport, a zoo and a major port. As New Bedford is not a satellite of a major city but the core of its own metropolitan area, the Mayor of New Bedford in many respects sets the direction and tone concerning matters that are important to all of Greater New Bedford.

For a job like this, a two-year term of office undermines institutional stability. No matter the background or the ability of the individual that occupies the office, it takes time to learn the job. No one could possibly assume the office fully prepared, as the job of the

mayor, which requires a combination of executive leadership and retail political skills to succeed, is unique in modern American public life. It also takes time to build an administrative team. Filling key positions in an organization as broad as our city government is, of necessity, a deliberate process. It can be difficult to find exactly the right person for any given position of authority. In my experience, and that of mayors across the country, it can take longer than two years for even the best mayors to get a firm handle on the job and to have filled out their team. That a mayor would be subject to a re-election campaign by the time he or she has just gotten up-and-running, in which the outcome may be the election of someone entirely new who would start the process all over again, is inherently destabilizing.

Another shortcoming is that the two year term tends to soften the ability of a mayor to resist short term political considerations at the expense of the long term interests of the city. It is imperative that a mayor govern with the long run in mind. Seizing the opportunities before the city and taking on its most daunting challenges requires a consistent and determined effort. Much of an administration's work can take years to bear fruit. School reform, economic development projects, and the streamlining of government, for example, require careful planning and management that can extend well beyond two years. Administrations serve the public best when they set clear, broad, and achievable long-term goals, and stay the course until they are realized.

Politics is another unfortunate consideration. Elected officials often seek to avoid controversy as an election draws near. With a two-year term, as opposed to a four-year term, this caution kicks in twice as often, slowing down the pace of needed reforms and working against long-term interests. In arguing for a four-year term for President, Alexander Hamilton observed that the chief executive must stay firm in the face of short term political pressures, an admonition that applies with equal force to chief executives at every level of government:

The republican principle demands that the deliberate sense of the community should govern the conduct of those to whom they intrust (sic) the management of their affairs; but it does not require an unqualified complaisance to every sudden breeze of passion, or to every transient impulse which the people may receive from the arts of men, who flatter their prejudices to betray their interests.

Federalist Papers, Number 71. We want our elected officials to be worthy of a "profile in courage," to be able to resist the temptation to blow with the political winds of the moment, but we should not leave in place institutional structures that put the political courage of an elected official to the test more frequently than is necessary to ensure his or

her accountability to the people. Too frequent elections tend to cultivate, as Hamilton put it, “feebleness and irresolution” in our elected leaders.

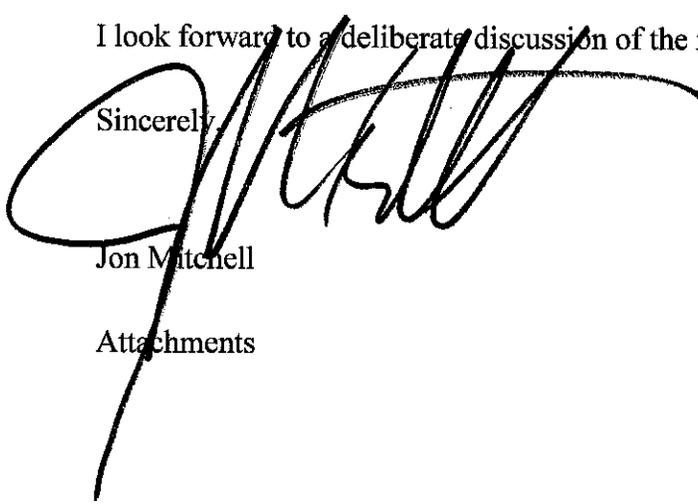
Extending the mayoral term to four years would offer other practical benefits. By halving the number of mayoral elections, the proposed measure would significantly reduce the time necessary to campaign and to raise campaign contributions, which displace time spent governing. A four-year term also would boost the confidence of potential investors in the City by lowering the risk that they may need to deal with a new administration ever two years. The longer term also would tend to increase the administration’s influence on Beacon Hill because it would make it harder for state officials to “wait out” mayoral requests.

Four year mayoral terms are the standard in the United States. Virtually every major city in the U.S. elects its mayor every four years. A 2006 survey by the National League of Cities found that 45% of U.S. cities of every size had four-year mayoral terms, while only 35% had two-year terms (14% had one-year terms, and 6% had three-year terms). An increasing number of cities in the Commonwealth – all smaller than New Bedford – are adopting four-year terms. For instance, just this past fall, voters in Quincy and Pittsfield increased their mayoral terms from two to four years. The two Massachusetts cities that, in addition to New Bedford, are metropolitan centers with strong mayor forms of government, namely Boston and Springfield, both have four year mayoral terms.

For all of these reasons, I strongly believe that with a four-year mayoral term, New Bedford will have a more effective municipal government. To avoid any suggestion that this proposal is motivated by personal political considerations, I am also submitting a proposed amendment that would set the effective date of the act after the current mayor leaves office. In other words, if the council passes the amendment, I would not be eligible to be elected to a four year term. This proposal is not about me, it is about the long term interests of the City we love.

I look forward to a deliberate discussion of the merits of this proposal.

Sincerely,



Jon Mitchell

Attachments



The Commonwealth of Massachusetts

IN THE YEAR TWO THOUSAND FOURTEEN

AN ACT

AUTHORIZING THE CITY OF NEW BEDFORD TO ESTABLISH A FOUR YEAR MAYORAL TERM OF OFFICE

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives in General Court assembled, and by the authority of the same, as follows:

SECTION 1. Section 58 of the charter of the city known as the City of New Bedford, which is on file in the office of the archivist of the Commonwealth, as provided in section 12 of chapter 43B of the General Laws, is hereby amended by striking out the second sentence and inserting in place thereof the following sentence:

The Mayor shall hold office for the term of four years from the first Monday in January following his or her election and until his or her successor is qualified.

SECTION 2. Section 59A of said charter is hereby amended by striking out the first two paragraphs and inserting in place thereof the following paragraphs:

If a vacancy occurs in the office of Mayor by death, removal or resignation prior to or on December thirty first of the second year of the term, the city clerk shall forthwith order an election to fill such vacancy for the remainder of the unexpired term.

If a vacancy occurs after December thirty first of the second year of the term, a meeting of the city council shall be called by the city clerk and the City Council shall elect by majority vote one of its members as mayor for the remainder of the unexpired term. If the City Council fails so to elect at said meeting or within thirty days thereafter, the President of the City Council shall become acting mayor, shall exercise all the rights and powers of Mayor and shall be sworn to the faithful discharge of his or her duties.

SECTION 3. This act shall take effect upon the first regular election for the office of Mayor pursuant to section 58 of the charter of the City of New Bedford after this act's passage.

NOTE. — Use ONE side of paper ONLY. DOUBLE SPACE. Insert additional leaves, if necessary.

Proposed Amendment to Special Act

Section 3 of the proposed Special Act is hereby amended by striking the phrase “after this Act’s passage” and inserting in its place “in which the Mayor serving at the time of the act’s passage is not a candidate.”