



New Bedford Mayor Jon Mitchell

State of the City Address

Thursday, March 20, 2014

[Remarks as Prepared]

When I first entered office, some so-called experts claimed that the financial crisis of 2008 made it nearly impossible to improve the quality of life in older mid-sized American cities. And there has been no doubt that recent housing foreclosures, job losses and government contraction that piled on to years of shuttering businesses and declining tax revenues made things harder. Whether local government could reliably carry out basic functions has been a question mark in many cities. Here and elsewhere, it was easy to see the glass as half-empty.

But New Bedford didn't buy the conventional wisdom. Together we chose a different course.

We chose not to shy from our challenges, but to take them on.

We chose to not to sit back and hope that others would come to our rescue. We instead chose to take control of our own destiny.

And it has a made a difference.

Stone by stone, we have been laying the foundation for New Bedford's long term success. Our City is growing stronger.

Today, the construction of the South Terminal project, the nation's first purpose built facility for offshore wind development is past the half-way point and through the efforts of our Wind Energy Center, New Bedford has quickly come to be seen as the leading port to capitalize on the offshore wind business as it sets up in the United States.

This year, more cargo has come into the port than in recent memory, creating job opportunities for our longshoremen, and our fishing industry remains tops in the United States, bringing in now a whopping 34% of all the landings in New England.

Our major employers have been hiring, in our business park, along the Upper Harbor, on our waterfront, and in the Downtown, where altogether in the last two years we have witnessed roughly \$100 million in private investment and the creation of hundreds of new jobs.

Meanwhile, we have put the brakes on the long slide in our schools and are laying the foundation for sustained excellence that will make our City a more attractive place to live and will enable us to compete better in a global economy.

We have stepped forward as the leader in municipal renewable energy programs. The City is now purchasing more electricity from solar than any municipality in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and is on track to save taxpayers approximately \$33 million in the next twenty years.

Through the focused efforts of our police department, we have avoided a surge in gun violence that has plagued so many other cities.

The work of our neighborhood improvement task force has reduced the amount of trash on the street and made housing safer for families. Through investments in cutting edge technologies, we're making graffiti vanish across the city.

Through solid financial management, we have done more with less. We reigned in spending, consolidated departments, built a strong managerial team, hired the City's first chief financial officer in seven years, created the City's first capital improvement plan, and built up our rainy day fund. We are proud that through these efforts we secured the City's highest bond rating in at least forty years.

And residents have taken note that our city simply looks better. We have planted hundreds of trees, replaced dozens of highway street lights with pedestrian-scale street lighting, and are upgrading parks and green spaces all over the City. Route 18 and the gateway to Acushnet Avenue have had major facelifts. And Custom House Square has been transformed from a barren asphalt lot to a signature urban park, which has already become a destination for wedding photos.

I'd be the last to say that our work is done. But now we have traction. New Bedford is getting out ahead of its challenges, and running with its opportunities.

There are three keys to our approach.

First, we have not sat back and passively hoped for good things to happen. We have initiated the action. We did not sit idly by and watch the state takeover our schools; we jumped in and took on the challenge ourselves. We didn't remain passive in the face of a handful of absentee landlords undermining our neighborhoods. And we've seized our opportunities when others would have allowed them to pass by. What city of our size in America would dare to take over thirty business and government leaders to Europe to assert ourselves in a new global industry, as we did with our offshore wind trip to Germany last April?

If we remain willing to act, we will continue to punch above our weight.

Second, we remain unified. Our community has long hungered for better, because we've always known we had what it takes to be better. There is strength in our collective desire to improve. It gives us hope; it focuses our efforts.

Unity doesn't mean that we need to agree on everything. That's neither realistic nor necessary. But what is required is that we refuse to let disagreements over minor matters get in the way of tackling our major challenges. In this way, I wish to express my appreciation to our City Council for its expressed desire to work with me to build on the City's recent accomplishments.

Third, our approach is all about the long run. There is intense pressure to govern for the short term, to pivot with every crisis, to yield to the tugging of every constituency – whatever the merits. The right decisions are usually the ones that don't have an immediate payoff. I am determined to keep our focus on the steps necessary to sustain a vibrant community in the long run.

To all our city employees, I thank you for your hard work in forging down the longer road.

I am grateful for the firefighters, police officers, and emergency medical services personnel who respond at a moment's notice to ensure our safety, like those who recently saved the lives of two residents of Dartmouth Street as their house was burning down.

I am grateful to the staff in Community Services that has expanded support for our seniors and runs after school programs that enrich the lives of our children.

I am grateful to the staffs in our libraries and at the zoo for raising the quality of life of our community, often under difficult financial pressures.

There are too many to list; our team is delivering for our residents, day in and day out.

Yet as much as our approach is about producing positive, lasting results, much hasn't changed nearly enough.

Many of our residents who have looked in vain for work remain unrewarded, while others are living from paycheck to paycheck. Some neighborhoods continue to deteriorate as a result of foreclosures, declining housing values, and unscrupulous landlords. City finances remain as tight as ever, despite all the efficiencies we've implemented. And our school district still has to prove itself to parents whose children don't have the luxury of waiting for reform to take hold.

Government doesn't have all the solutions. Some of the problems are out of our immediate reach. But we can, and must, act decisively to remove barriers standing in the way of our citizens' pursuit of a better life.

Economic Development

More than anything else, we must lay the groundwork for economic growth, the kind of growth that reaches all of our citizens. My administration has focused on creating the conditions for jobs to grow in the city. More good jobs mean more residents purchasing homes, more New Bedford kids going to college, more money spent in local businesses and on local charities, and a more confident, vibrant

community. In general, government is not equipped to make the economy grow on its own accord, and local government in particular has little control over the global forces that inform most business decisions.

The mayor of a mid-size American city wields little influence over, for instance, international financial markets, federal tax policy, or even local labor costs. But businesses looking to relocate or expand have to do it *somewhere*, and how well local government interacts with the business community, and how well it builds on the assets the community has to offer, does matter to business.

When it comes to assets, we should take confidence in the knowledge that New Bedford has cards to play – more than most cities our size.

The Port

Chief among these assets is our port. We are already the national leader in commercial fishing and through our aggressive efforts over the last two years, we are now widely seen as the potential epicenter of the American offshore wind industry. We are an established and growing cargo and recreational boating destination as well. In all of these industries there is potential for considerable growth.

The key to making the most out of the Port of New Bedford, and to enable our maritime businesses to create well-paying jobs, is to recognize that the port can, and should, continue to support the success of all of its industries. Rather than favoring one industry to the exclusion of others, our choice should be “all-of-the-above.” The long term strength and stability of the port lies in having a dynamic and diverse set of industries, each creating jobs and supporting an export based economy.

It is vital then that we partner with the state and federal government to advance key investments in our port infrastructure. These investments must include, I believe, a new bridge. The New Bedford-Fairhaven Bridge is a whaling age antique that would be wonderful to save if not for the fact that it inhibits our ability to grow jobs in the North Terminal area and is so old that repairs have become frequent and more costly. Its narrow opening chokes off potential cargo opportunities requiring larger vessels. And, we’ve all suffered through the agonizingly slow openings and closings. It is by far the biggest traffic hassle in Greater New Bedford, and it’s not getting better.

In two weeks, we’ll be faced with another extended shutdown, which has become now an annual event. These closures impose costs on our economy that match the inconvenience to motorists. And the ones who really take it on the chin are the businesses around the bridge, whose bottom lines suffer every time it shuts down. It’s a wonder that they’ve been able to stay open.

Over the last two years, I have pressed the state to launch a study of the bridge’s replacement, and now that study is underway. I believe the time is now for the state to stop shoveling more money into an asset whose time has passed, and to build a new bridge that enables us to grow more harbor jobs, to support the bridge businesses and ends the costly hassles.

The bridge needs to be replaced.

Downtown

While we need to double down on our port, we will continue to build a strong and vibrant downtown. There is no successful city in America that doesn't have a vibrant downtown; a solid core is needed to support everything else. With the recent establishment of our cultural district, numerous construction and restoration projects underway, the homecoming of the Charles W. Morgan around the corner, and more beautification measures to come, our downtown is on the move.

We need to knit together the downtown and the central harbor, which have been disconnected now for half a century, and have spaces by the water that the public can enjoy. The wild success of last year's summer concert series and the festivals that have been moved to Pier 3 is proof positive that our residents want to come down to the waterfront. Let's make it happen for them.

Workforce Development

Our economic development strategy will continue to be founded on our City government's having an open, transparent and reliable relationship with business. And we should help them train their employees.

Let us build a workforce that strengthens the competitiveness of businesses and keeps jobs in our city. We will continue to modernize our workforce development programs in a way that suits the needs of employers, so that we train people for jobs that are likely to be available. And with the severe federal cuts to training programs, we need to find ways to do more with less.

The Regeneration Committee

Our development strategy of building on our physical and human capital assets will be most effective if we are unified. If local government, our citizenry and our business community are on the same page, we will send a powerful message to investors and government officials at the state and federal level that Greater New Bedford knows where it's going, and knows how to get there.

An authoritative, unifying strategy is what is needed, and that is why I have asked a group of CEOs in our region to serve on the New Bedford Regeneration Committee, whose task will be to develop an actionable strategy to strengthen the region's economic competitiveness. I am pleased to announce that the Committee will be chaired by Gerry Kavanaugh, whose diverse experience includes his tenure as Chief of Staff to Senator Ted Kennedy, the founder and CEO of two successful businesses, and senior executive at the Boston Redevelopment Authority. The work of the committee will be facilitated by MassINC and the Urban Initiative at UMass-Dartmouth. And its first meeting will be in two weeks.

Many of the members of the committee are in this room, and I thank you in advance for your important work ahead. I invite everyone to weigh in once the committee's draft is complete so that we have the full benefit of a public vetting in the business community and beyond.

At the end of the day, we will have a unified strategy that each of us can confidently hold up to investors and public officials and say, this what we here in New Bedford are doing to advance our future.

Casinos

The question of whether a resort casino should be part of that future has come to the fore. I have advocated for a cautious, deliberate approach to the casino issue, as casino developments have produced mixed results in cities across America. You can't build a regional economy around a casino of course. The question for us rather is whether a casino development can advance and mesh with our community's goals of building the competitiveness of existing industries, enhancing the city's brand, and helping the city become a more attractive place to live, visit and raise a family.

Over the last several months, my administration has been working hard to assess casino development options. We have sought out experts, visited casinos, assembled a working group of department heads, and listened to the input of citizens. This process has helped us refine our understanding of the elements of a casino development that might make sense for New Bedford. These would include:

- A location that does not undermine the growth of our maritime industries;
- A scale and design that would not detract from the City's heritage and brand;
- Easy highway access to avoid traffic problems;
- In the case of a waterfront casino, recreational boating opportunities to promote New Bedford as a destination recreation port;
- Support for downtown and North End development; and
- Significant resources that would enable the City to invest in the future.

A project proposal that is crafted in cooperation with the City with these and other elements that leaves the City better off in the long run deserves serious consideration.

Education

To cultivate a thriving economy, our redevelopment strategy alone won't be enough. To compete successfully and to enjoy a high quality of life, a city must create pathways for its citizens to reach their full potential. More than anything else, that means we must offer our city's children a public school education that enables them to thrive as adults.

Change is moving forward in our schools. Our schools can, and will, do better – much better. We will build a school system that shines with a culture of achievement, and again be a source of community pride. We will give our kids the education they deserve.

There is no doubt that the changes are difficult, and they are expensive. But they are necessary. Each of us needs to see that the success of our city and region is tethered to our schools. If they flourish, we will flourish.

And I, for one, refuse to accept that New Bedford Schools can't again achieve excellence. Our kids can learn just as well as kids anywhere else.

I wish in particular to acknowledge the vast majority of teachers in our system for stepping up this year, often under very difficult circumstances. Much more is being demanded of them than in the past. They don't do their jobs for the credit, but they certainly deserve it. At the same time, they recognize that the changes taking place are meant to put kids on the right path, and I thank them for their commitment to that worthy cause.

Neighborhoods

Strong cities have strong neighborhoods. And neighborhoods remain strong when residents and City Hall work together to support a quality of life that allows for children to play outdoors, dogs to be walked, and homeowners to enjoy a warm summer evening on the porch. Vibrant neighborhoods draw residents out of their homes to comfortably interact with one another in a way that strengthens their bonds with their neighbors.

While most of our neighborhoods fit this ideal, not all do. Although the city has been successful in reducing gun violence, and our neighborhood task force has been successfully addressing the problems at many properties, too many of our neighborhoods are still struggling.

We will re-double our effort to help them. We will increase the funds in the budget for emergency home repairs. We are implementing the new technologies that help us combat graffiti. And this summer, we will launch a new, modern automated trash collection system that will keep trash off the street, increase recycling, and reduce our landfill costs in the long run.

We will continue to hold absentee landlords accountable for failing to keep up their properties as they would their own homes and for inviting in tenants regardless of their criminal pasts. The modest fines the city can impose now are not enough to prompt absentee landlords to change their habits. We need the City Council's help. Over a year ago, I asked the Council to pass a Problem Property Ordinance that would shift the cost of excessive police responses to landlords who ignore problems on their own properties. Last summer I amended the proposal in response to the Council's concerns, and now I again urge the Council to pass the measure to bring relief to neighborhoods that unfairly have had to tolerate problem properties.

Finances

In this era of tight finances, the successful cities are the ones who are deft enough to adapt with the times and make tough decisions for the long term. Compared to other cities in Massachusetts, we have done very well. Our new, higher bond rating matches up well with virtually every other city in the Commonwealth. And we have

stood out in our ability to avoid tax levy increases for a remarkably long four years, while many other cities raise their tax levy routinely.

But we should not delude ourselves into thinking that this is a permanent condition. It is unrealistic to assume that we can hold the line on taxes in perpetuity. Like everything else, the price of government tends to go up over time, and we still face acute financial pressures such as the expiration of a federal grant that funds nearly a quarter of our fire department, looming environmental liabilities, underfunded retiree benefits, and the price tag of a state-mandated school turnaround plan.

Nevertheless, we owe tax payers this: we will do everything possible to make city government more efficient and higher performing. Asking more of taxpayers is much more acceptable if they have confidence that they are getting their money's worth.

This year we will continue to incorporate performance measurement systems so that we run city government like a private business that knows precisely what it's getting for its money.

Most importantly, we are developing a culture of teamwork in city government that in the long run will improve services, save taxpayer dollars, and raise the job satisfaction of our hard working city employees.

How do we do that? Well, most of you in the audience are in the private sector. You can appreciate that every great organization honors a set of core principles that are understood and embraced by everyone. Organizations that stand for something are better able to motivate and align their members toward common goals, and they command confidence from their customers and competitors alike.

Yet for some reason organizational value statements are far more prevalent in the private sector than in the public sector.

I believe the need for them is even greater in municipal government. In many ways, what we do is not just about dollars and cents. We are in the business of keeping people safe, educating children, and providing services that, for many of our residents, make life worth living. They need to know they can count on us when it matters most.

Several months ago, I asked a team of department heads to identify the set of core values that underlie our approach to serving the residents of our City. The team spent considerable time arriving at a consensus, which was reviewed by all department heads, and has since been distributed to all employees. I am pleased to present the fruit of their work: "The New Bedford Way."

I strongly believe that our residents need to know what their municipal government stands for. They need to have confidence that we honor high ethical standards. In an era when the work ethic and skill of public employees have been maligned, our residents need to be confident that in New Bedford, job performance matters. And they need to know in an era of tight money, that every employee in city government will seek to improve services and increase efficiency. As times change, we need to get better.

The New Bedford Way is not a decree from me. It was the work of career employees who stand ready for the challenge of living up to these values. It's not just a piece of paper to them.

That statement is meant to endure beyond the current mayoral administration. It would have been politically expedient to call it the "Mitchell Administration Values." But we're about the long run here; this is not about me; it's about our hardworking city employees who get the job done and the residents they serve.

From afar, one might look at that name, and say that "The New Bedford Way" sounds mighty confident. We've all heard comments that have put our city down.

What I would say is, Yes, that's right. New Bedford is different.

It is exceptional.

We are capable of breaking from the pack.

Throughout our long and rich history, we've shown that we can be the best.

We were the wealthiest city in America at one time because businessmen here outsmarted their competition and put the toughest and bravest men around on their ships to hunt whales.

In today's toughest business, commercial fishing, we are number one.

It's in New Bedford that the best golf balls and men's suits are made, the best Portuguese food is served, and the best high school robotics team innovates.

The point is, greatness happens here.

Just because we have certain challenges that other communities don't face, doesn't mean we need to resign ourselves to average or just good enough. The difference between being good and being great often is our willingness to extend our reach.

Let us together define ourselves not by our challenges, but how we respond to them.

Let our reach exceed our grasp.

And let's continue to show the world that New Bedford is on the rise.

Thank you. And God bless our great City.

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