



**Mayor Jon Mitchell  
State of the City Address  
Thursday, March 26, 2015  
[Remarks as prepared]**

Thank you to the Chamber of Commerce for another great job in organizing this annual event, to Webster Bank for its generous sponsorship, and to Superintendent Linda Enos and New Bedford Voc-Tech for their customary hospitality and exceptional food. It's easy to see why Voc-Tech is shining on many levels.

Elected officials, residents and friends of New Bedford:

I wish to begin remarks today by welcoming my wife, Annie. I am only the second busiest person in my house and it's been a while since we had lunch together. So we relish this opportunity to have time together, and it's made even that we could be joined five hundred our friends.

In a year that we will remember most for its snow drifts, the residents of our City have hung tough, strived on, believed in a better city, and have worked for it. I am here today to report that the collective effort of our residents and city employees has produced real, unqualified successes.

Let's take stock for a moment:

We have experienced robust, across-the-board economic growth. Our major businesses, especially our manufacturers, have generated a rising tide of job creation. Joseph Abboud, for instance, alone has added over two hundred jobs in the last year. But it's also been the new businesses, like the Black Whale and DNB Burger, and new business incubators, that mark a surge in entrepreneurial activity that is expanding our economy from the ground up.

The growth has been less dramatic than if it had resulted from a single major project; homeruns are great, but singles and doubles will do just as well.

And they've added up. Really added up. One of more accurate measures of municipal growth, the number of building permits issued, is up forty percent since 2011. But it's the jobs, too. Since 2011, according to the Massachusetts Department of Labor, the labor force in New Bedford has grown enormously, adding over 5,000 jobs. That is a staggering number for a city of 100,000. The growth in employment has been so rapid that in July, the Wall Street Journal reported that of all U.S. cities, New Bedford experienced the sharpest drop in unemployment rate over the previous year. We are in the midst of a jobs expansion that this city has not seen in decades.

These indeed are impressive statistics, but what's far more important is that it has meant more people taking home paychecks to support their families.

And that's not the only real progress we've seen in our City's quality of life.

We are steadily chipping away at crime. The overall crime has fallen two percent since the previous year, thanks in large part to our high performing police department under the leadership of David Provencher.

School reform is moving forward on all fronts. In a school system which three years ago was on the brink of a state takeover, and I am pleased to report now that thanks to the effort of Dr. Pia Durkin and our hard working teachers, the four year graduation rate is now at its highest level in nearly fifteen years, and more New Bedford High School students are taking Advanced Placement classes than ever before.

City services have been upgraded across the board through the continued implementation of performance management systems and our adherence to the New Bedford Way, the statement of our city government's commitment to high quality service that I announced last year. The most conspicuous of these improvements in the last year were the overhaul of New Bedford's trash collection system, which has resulted in the dramatic doubling of the City's recycling rate and a reduction of trash on our streets, and the replacement our old street lights with energy-saving LED bulbs, measures that will save New Bedford tax payers tens of millions of dollars over the next twenty years.

Our solar program that uses city owned properties for solar farms has garnered national attention, including, again, in the Wall Street Journal, which reported that the City of New Bedford now derives more electricity from solar per capita than any U.S. city except Honolulu, which I submit doesn't get snow like we just did. Our proactive efforts in green energy will save taxpayers over twenty million dollars in the next twenty years.

In the last eighteen months, we built three new, one-of-kind new parks: Custom House Square, River's End Park, and the Allen Haskell Public Gardens.

Last year, I promised that we would plant five hundred trees a year for the next five years. We exceeded that goal in year one, and we'll do it again this year. Those trees will slow down traffic, clean our air, raise property values, and make our City more beautiful still.

And over the last year we embraced our City's rich heritage.

We showed that New Bedford is serious about historic preservation when we became one of the few cities in the state to pass the Community Preservation Act;

We threw the best -- the most reverent -- veterans parades the City had seen in a generation;

We celebrated the 100<sup>th</sup> Feast of the Blessed Sacrament, the best ethnic festival in the country;

And when the *Charles W. Morgan* made her homecoming to our shores last summer drawing the largest crowds of tourists to downtown in decades, New Bedford put on a welcoming party that made our residents swell with pride for our glorious past, and showed America that New Bedford is on a path to a better tomorrow.

These, and others too many to list, are real successes. They are real wins.

And they didn't happen by luck.

They happened because we rejected the fatalism that says that because New Bedford, like other older industrial cities, had experienced persistent decline over many decades, decline is somehow inevitable; that it is pre-ordained.

No, we believed in better; and we have worked for it.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not suggesting that our work is done or all the challenges have been wiped away. There are still too many people out of work and too many absentee landlords wreaking havoc in our neighborhoods, making them less safe. We still have a ways to go in our schools, and finances continue to be as tight as ever.

But in the last three years, we have proven that we have the right approach. Our way is not to sit back, and passively hoped for the best. We haven't waited for others to do something for us.

We have initiated the action; we have stood up for ourselves, we have chosen to be the authors of our own story.

It is a story of how a mid-sized American city pursued a vision of itself, and was willing to make difficult long term decisions.

It is a vision of a city that is the commercial and cultural hub of Southeastern Massachusetts; a city that is taken seriously beyond the region; a city with a diverse economy that creates high-paying jobs for residents to build homes and send their kids to college; a city whose schools are a primary reason why families move *into* town; a city with a highly professional, caring, and efficient city government that commands the confidence of taxpayers; and a city in which personal safety is only an afterthought, and where all residents take responsibility for their neighborhoods and their neighbors.

From our economic development efforts to school reform to stewardship of neighborhoods to the management of our finances, we are making the hard, long term decisions so that the story we write will be one of success.

## **Economic Development**

In the area of economic development, my administration has focused on creating the conditions sustainable job growth. More good jobs means more residents purchasing homes, more New Bedford kids going to college, more money spent in local businesses, and a more confident, vibrant community.

The success we had have in creating the right conditions for job growth is encouraging, but sustaining growth in the long term requires careful planning, a vision, and unity among community leadership.

That is why in my State of the City speech last year, I called for the formation of a committee of business and non-profit leaders to answer more or less the following question: what will it take to regenerate Greater New Bedford's economy sustainably in the long run? The City needed a definitive economic develop strategy, and who better to formulate that strategy than the region's business leadership?

I wish now to thank the Committee members and its chairman, Gerry Kavanaugh, for their months of hard, thoughtful work to produce this plan, which will guide our economic development efforts in the years ahead. When state or federal officials or outside investors ask, does New Bedford have a plan, we can confidently say yes, and a very good one at that.

The plan is based on a few key ideas. The first is that it is a regional economic plan that is New Bedford-centric. The city is the hub of a culturally, economically, and physically distinct metropolitan area. We are not just one of series of communities strung along the southern coastline of Massachusetts. New Bedford, and particularly the downtown, is the gravitational center of the region. We all recognize this. Many, if

not most of you in this room, live in the communities surrounding New Bedford, but you are here today, concerning yourself with the state of the City of New Bedford, because New Bedford is your city. You recognize that as New Bedford goes, so goes every nearby community.

As our own metropolitan economy, our focus should not be on how the Greater Boston economy might benefit us, but on how we can build on our own assets. The Regeneration Committee's plan is all about developing our strengths.

## **The Port**

Chief among our assets of course is our Port. 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: fishing, cargo, and recreational boating. Opportunities lie ahead in each one of these industries, and the long term strength and stability of the port lies in having a dynamic and diverse set of industries. Our strategy should be to stick with the historic approach of making our harbor available to businesses that can gain a competitive advantage by operating here. Rather than favoring one industry to the exclusion of others, our choice has been "all-of-the-above."

I am pleased to report another successful year in the Port of New Bedford. We of course remain the preeminent commercial fishing port in America, and although the total catch in the Northeast continues to shrink, our slice of the pie is growing. According to the most recent NOAA data, New Bedford's landings now comprise 34% of all New England and nine percent of the entire country. I will continue my fight to level the regulatory playing field for the industry, not just at the Fisheries Council hearings, but also on Capitol Hill, where this year Congress will take up the reauthorization of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, the legislation that governs the industry.

At the same time, we have worked closely with Maritime International around the expansion of cargo in our harbor. This has been a real success story. This season we had a record number of freighters call on the port, and have doubled the tonnage. Every one of those port calls injects about \$250,000 into the local economy, creating real work opportunities for our longshoremen.

It also bears noting that the recreational boating sector, which drawing millions of dollars into the Port each year, is growing, too. Last year we started a launch service that brings boaters moored in the harbor to our central waterfront in the hope that an easier connection from the water to the downtown would bring in more business. In its first year, the launch served over 1,300 riders, and mooring rentals in our harbor nearly tripled.

People are coming down in droves to the harbor to see concerts and festivals, all of which experienced record attendance this year.

The completion of the New Bedford Marine Commerce Terminal in the months ahead will offer more opportunities for more cargo vessels and maritime jobs. With the expansion of the Panama Canal in the coming years and the establishment of large cargo hubs on the East Coast, there will be opportunities for ports of our size to serve as re-distribution spokes for those hubs. The new terminal sets us up well for that new business.

The terminal also will help us become the premier offshore wind port in the Northeast. Windmills may not appear in our harbor as soon as we would have liked, but the opportunity to become the center of the offshore wind industry remains well within our reach, and we need to be ready.

Consider this: off the coast of Northern Europe there are now some sixty-five utility scale wind farms that are lighting homes from Germany to Great Britain, and serve our offshore wind industry. With some of the best winds on the planet just south of Martha's Vineyard, and with a growing demand for electricity in the Northeast, it is simply a matter of time before they start investing here. We might not see Cape Wind, but just around the corner is the Deepwater Wind project off of Block Island. Major European players in the industry are also staking their claim to the federal waters off Martha's Vineyard. They are coming, and they will find a strong partner in New Bedford.

The next important step is to pass legislation that provides reasonable market incentives for the industry. These incentives, if coupled with an expansion of natural gas supply to the state, will help diversify our energy sources and stabilize prices, without unduly burdening rate payers. The City, along with Representative Tony Cabral and our legislative delegation, are supporting the legislation proposed by Representative Pat Haddad that would do just that. I urge the business community to get behind this bill if we are to have a more stable energy policy in the state and enables the offshore wind industry to create jobs here.

To capture all of the opportunities that lie ahead, the Port of New Bedford must continue down the road of modernization. We will continue to advocate vigorously for capital investment in the port. To be competitive, we need to upgrade our port facilities, dredge the harbor and replace the old bridge so that we can open up the northern harbor to development and new jobs.

As our growth continues, we must also hold ourselves out as the serious port we really are. As it stands now, there are only two general-purpose industrial ports in the state: Boston and New Bedford. Major American ports generally are governed by port authorities, governmental bodies that promote development of maritime industries, whose powers vary from place to place. It's time that we raise the profile of our port and begin referring to our harbor management organization in the same way as major ports. So I will ask our legislative delegation to amend the enabling act of the Harbor Development Commission to define to the New Bedford Port Authority as our port's governing agency. A name change alone would go far to reflect appropriately the stature of the Port of New Bedford.

## **Downtown**

The Downtown of course is another of Greater New Bedford's primary economic assets. It is the urban core of the region, the center of our economy and cultural life, the first place we take friends visiting from other places, and the primary place of common experience in our region. Downtown is the label on the New Bedford product.

We continue to invest in the downtown because we know that there is no successful city in America that doesn't have vibrant downtown. The core has to be strong to hold the rest in place.

It is why we continue to plant trees, improve the landscaping, and put up signs like the Pier 3 and Port of New Bedford signs to celebrate our heritage. It is why we put down more cobblestone and bricks, organize summer concerts on the water, and promote public art. And it is why, when building public spaces like Custom House Square and refurbishing the Z, we set high design standards. To attract investment, the place has to look and feel great.

And the residents of the city deserve no less, because whether live in the South End, the North End or the West End, the downtown belongs to everyone. I want families to be able to walk to the downtown, and take in show at the Z, dine at one of our restaurants, and spend a moment in a public environment that they can be proud of.

As we're making public investments in the downtown, we're seeing private investment pick up. The new shops and restaurants that have set up shop in the last few years have lowered the downtown vacancy rate to less than ten percent. The spectacular addition to the Whaling Museum now underway is itself a validation of the growth of the downtown and the city more generally.

Looking ahead, for the downtown to realize its full potential, a few things have to happen. And these are steps that the Regeneration Committee included in its plan. The first is that more people need to live in the downtown. The reason is pretty simple. The more people walking along downtown sidewalks, the more people will venture into downtown businesses. For businesses to thrive in an urban environment, where strip mall style parking doesn't exist, pedestrian circulation must be robust.

Second, the downtown must become un-landlocked (yes, I just invented a new word). We've got a great downtown, and a great harbor, and although we have taken significant steps to connect the two, we still have a ways to go. A downtown that extends to the State Pier, as called for in the Regeneration Committee report, will make our downtown something special. Being an industrial port doesn't mean that the public must be cut completely off from the water as is the case now. Virtually every major industrial port in the country finds ways to connect people to the water, and it hardly a radical idea that we could do the same here without imposing on commercial fishing and other maritime industries.

In the years ahead, expansion of higher education in the city and particularly in the downtown is a must. Universities are driving the American economy right now. They are the sources of research that spur innovation; they are economic hubs in their communities, and they attract educated professionals. The success of cities like Boston and other major metros these days can be explained in part by the role universities and other research institutions play in their regional economies.

And it's not just big cities. Take Worcester, Portland and New London, all mid-size New England cities that are enjoying growth around their universities. The best example may be Lowell, where investments by the University of Massachusetts are rapidly modernizing that city's traditional manufacturing economy. New Bedford and Lowell are often cited as two New England cities are on the upswing, but the part of the story that must be told is that while the UMass system has made a whopping \$600 million in new capital investments in Lowell since 2009, during that same period it has made not spent a dollar in new capital investment in New Bedford.

Any serious discussion of economic development in this city has to come to terms with this fact: New Bedford is one of the few urban centers in America – that is, cities

that are not satellites of larger cities – without a university headquartered in the city limits. In order for us to compete effectively in the global economy and retain educated professional in the city, this has to change. I'm not suggesting that we import a new university to establish itself here. The place to turn is UMass, which has programs, though not large ones, already here. We need UMass to be a partner in the city's resurgence and grow its physical presence in the city, for the city's sake or for its own sake.

There have been encouraging signs of late. Chancellor Divina Grossman has worked with the city to kick start the long-stalled SMAST expansion in the South End, and now that project has traction. UMass-Dartmouth is now actively looking for opportunities in the downtown as well. And the university is supporting some of the new technology incubators that are setting up in the city. This is just a start; there's a long way to go, but the effort is now moving in the right direction.

## **Casino**

We have a sound economic development plan that we are relentlessly implementing which is based on what the city does well.

So, one might ask, why roll the dice on a casino? Are we going all in on a business without a track record in Massachusetts, when we should be doubling down on our maritime and manufacturing sectors? Or, by pursuing a casino, are we wisely hedging our bets on these other industries? After all, this is a high stakes decision.

You've heard me say that for the last couple of years that I would be willing to enter into an agreement with a casino developer, only if it were a good deal for New Bedford. Whereas in other communities, municipal leaders have said simply, "Where do I sign?", I believed that any deal would have to be done on our terms.

The deal we fought for and struck with KG Urban is a good one for New Bedford. It is on New Bedford's terms. The direct benefits are hard to deny. The project will create over 2,000 permanent jobs. That would make it twice as large as the Acushnet Company, the current largest for-profit employer in the region. The direct annual payments to the City would enable us to stabilize our finances. The project would clean up a massive brownfield site that will otherwise remain as is for the foreseeable future -- perhaps for decades. It would spend considerably on local businesses.

Some might point out that other casinos projects make similar claims, and we know that casino developers have often failed to deliver on their vaunted promises. So why is this different? I shared the concerns voiced by many that a casino might diminish the appeal of the downtown, the availability of waterfront land, and the City's image.

So I fought for terms that directly address these issues. The agreement limits the number of shops, restaurants and hotel rooms so casino patrons will spill over into the downtown. We put in a conference center could hold two thousand people, not all of whom will want to gamble, but would rather spend time at our cultural attractions. We've protected the Zeiterion, created a voucher program to encourage tourist spending in New Bedford, and required the operator to procure a minimum of \$10,000,000 goods and services from New Bedford businesses. We made sure the harbor bulkhead is put

to good use, creating as much new space of commercial fishing berthing as possible and using the remaining area for a marina.

Perhaps as importantly, this won't be a site that screams "casino." I insisted on a number of limitations on the project that will make it fit in. We required the developer to scale down the buildings, and imposed height restrictions on casino signage, so you won't see them on rooftops. The buildings will reflect the same design elements as the downtown, with brick facades and pedestrian lighting. We also have forbidden casino billboards throughout the city. We don't want our city to look like a casino town, and because of these protections, it won't.

Having fought for and secured an agreement on New Bedford's terms, my job is now to support KG Urban's effort to secure a license from the Massachusetts Gaming Commission. If KG is successful, my job also will be to help this development fit into our community's future. What's important for us think about now, well before any license is issued, that while this project represents a unique opportunity for New Bedford, we should not regard the project as the goose that laid the golden egg.

We have been disciplined in how we spend the public's funds; that's why we've been able to make more with less, and achieve the highest bond rating in the city's history. The annual payments should not be viewed as an opportunity to loosen up the purse strings and spend freely. This money needs to be reinvested wisely to further our existing economic development agenda and stabilize the city's long term finances. The priorities are all spelled out explicitly in the Host Community Agreement: funds should be reinvested in economic development, port development, community preservation, and be used to improve city services and stabilize the city's finances.

In this vein, the casino should not be seen as an end in itself, but as another means to create opportunity for our residents. That is what this city, this very American city, is all about. We are a place where the American dream has been realized over and over again. This is a city where people have made the most of the chances they've been given.

My grandfather came to this country – to this city – with a third grade education. He came here fish. I never had the chance to meet him, but I can safely assume that he never imagined that his grandson would become the City's mayor.

What is striking about this story is that it isn't unusual at all in our City. Despite all the reasons that others have come to doubt New Bedford, it has remained a place where people have come to find work – whether it be on the water or in the factory – in the hope of giving themselves and their children a chance to pursue -- and even exceed -- their dreams.

What gets me out of bed in the morning is the knowledge that it is possible, through the work of the administration I lead, to help open up opportunities for our residents. Everyone should get a chance. It is this ideal that motivates me to expand opportunity through our economic development work. It is why I have encouraged local hiring throughout my tenure, and fought for the strongest possible local hiring requirements in the casino host community agreement.

And that is why today, I am proud to announce a set of principles for public and private investments in the City called "New Bedford Works." These principles will be rolled out in the weeks ahead, but the basic idea is a set of mutual commitments by the City and anyone wishing to invest here concerning the hiring of City residents and

contracting with City businesses. The expectation is simple and reasonable, if you are doing business in New Bedford, you should give our people and our businesses a chance to compete. That's not too much to ask. And at time when major investments like the casino, the harbor clean up, and other projects are or could be coming on line, we need to establish an understanding of what obligations are owed to this community. I wish to thank the entire team that is working hard to finalize this policy, including Matt Morrissey, Buddy Andrade and Gus Santos and many others. We can't make employers hire local residents or contract with local businesses. But we can certainly expect them to understand that our residents and businesses are ready to pounce on any opportunity that is granted them.

## **Education**

Our work to expand opportunity extends to our school children of course. At this point, we need no reminding that our schools had been in a state of decline for several years, and had reached the brink of state takeover when I entered office. At the time, many suggested that we simply let the state takeover, and wash our hands of the problem. We chose the hard work of leading our own reform, knowing that it came with the risk of responsibility; we would own it. That was the right decision then, as the work is now moving ahead in earnest, and the results are beginning to show.

I mention the past only to highlight that it was through the persistent focus on the New Bedford Public School system by the Standard-Times, under the leadership of Bob Unger, that the magnitude of the challenge, and the need to address it head on, became clear. Bob elevated the issue of education reform because he knew that our region couldn't pull itself forward if its children lacked the skills to compete in a global economy. Bob of course has moved on from the paper, but the reform effort has long left the station and isn't stopping. Bob, thank you, for setting the bar higher for our schools; that's exactly where it should be.

So reform is proceeding under the tireless leadership of Pia Durkin. There is nothing easy about the work. Change is hard, but necessary. Turning around any organization of some 2,000 employees takes time. The entire enterprise that is the New Bedford School Department is undergoing a dramatic overhaul. You name it; it is changing: from organizational structure, to personnel and recruitment practices, to finances, to busing, to special education services, to the school schedule, to the curriculum, to information technology systems, and instructional practices in the classroom. It's all being made over. Our teachers are shouldering the load; the public needs to know that they are working extremely hard.

Some of the effort is already showing up on the scoreboards we tend to focus on: MCAS scores are inching upward, more students are taking Advanced Placement courses, and the dropout rate, as I noted earlier, has made a marked improvement. The progress will become more evident as time goes on. No one should be under the illusion that this is an overnight exercise.

The direction of reform is the right one, but it won't be fully successful in the absence of trust. Change can be threatening. People become defensive when threatened; they stop listening; they turn inward. It makes effective teamwork less achievable.

As we move forward, let's all remind ourselves, all of us – elected officials, school administrators, teachers, parents and members of our community – that we are all after the same goal: to build a school system that provides our children with the tools they need to flourish as adults. We might not agree on precisely the same next step all the time, but need to communicate and listen to one another. We'll be surprised how much more we can get accomplished together. We've moved mountains in our school system already. Let's finish what we've started for our kids.

## **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 outside, 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 spend time 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 keeping the lid on gun violence, and crime over all is down two percent, I believe there is more work to be done. We will continue to hire new police officers and upgrade police vehicles. We will continue to refine our analysis of crime data in ways that will enable us to anticipate trouble and put police in position to get out ahead of it.

We will continue to address the blight that attracts criminal behavior. We will continue to erase graffiti across the city and clean up vacant lots. Our neighborhood task force will continue its aggressive enforcement of the building and sanitary codes, and our housing stock is safer and neater as a result.

Tonight, the City Council has an opportunity at last to pass the Problem Property Ordinance, the most important crime prevention measure that has come before the Council in recent memory. This measure, which I filed over two years ago, would shift the cost of excessive police responses to landlords who ignore problems on their own property. We have some properties in this city where the police have been summoned over 100 times in a year. We know that landlords can't control their tenants' every move, but at some point a landlord who turns a blind eye to the problems his tenant creates for neighbors, bears some responsibility for those problems.

I thank and applaud the seven city councilors that voted the measure out of committee on Tuesday. Let's get it done tonight for the neighbors that have been living next to these properties.

## **Finances**

The biggest challenge to our progress, as it is for many cities these days, is to find the money to address our needs. Since the financial meltdown of 2008, government at all levels is still struggling to pay the bills. We are still navigating through dangerous financial currents with no safe harbor on the horizon. That's not news.

The days of healthy property tax revenue growth are not in sight. The precise level of state local aid is uncertain. Meanwhile, the cost of operating government is not

getting any cheaper. We are still dealing with difficult budget decisions made in the past that constrain our options.

That's not news. What is news is that these conditions persist despite the efficiencies we've achieved. City government is leaner and more efficient than in our lifetimes. Wall Street gave us the highest bond rating in the city's history because of our sound financial management. We have been nationally recognized for our municipal solar program and energy efficiency measures that is saving us millions in energy costs. We have saved millions more by restructuring our debt, managing a conservative capital improvement program, and switching our phone system to voice over internet service. And in the last few months, we shaved off a quarter of our retiree health care liability, which will save a whopping \$138 million over the next 30 years.

These are huge successes that have produced enormous savings, and yet we are still looking at structural challenges in our budget. Much of the problem can be attributed to costs of retiree benefits whose terms and eligibility are dictated by the state. Another big chunk is the decline in state charter school reimbursements.

We are also going to be faced with how to pick up the salaries of many of the fire fighters coming off of the federal SAFER grant when it expires later this year. We have applied for a new grant to fund a lower number of positions, in the hope of avoiding layoffs in the department.

What all of this means is that the city will have to trim this year. I've instructed department heads that we need to trim back. And so we can expect spending reductions that will not be easy. But these are the tough decisions that are necessary to maintain a steady course.

Until we see more growth in property valuations, we must maintain a disciplined approach to financial management.

Writing the story of our city's future to which we aspire, in the face of these financial challenges, is a tall challenge. It's hard. But nothing worthwhile in life is easy. We take on the challenges to make our community a better place because if that isn't a cause worthy of our devotion, what is? This is our home, the home of our friends, children and maybe grandchildren. It a big part of all of us.

Writing our own story means that we get the opportunity to define ourselves not by our challenges, but how we respond to them.

For all who profess a love for our city, we need to ask ourselves how we can play a role in that story; how can we contribute the long term success of the community.

The answers are all around us. It's people like David Lima, who has stepped forward to lead a community dialogue on teen suicide, that, thank God, has given teenagers in dire need the confidence to talk about their problems. It's Reverend Russ Chamberlain, who found a way to keep his shelter doors open and put a roof over the heads for those left out in a brutal winter. It's the plow drivers who strained to stay awake over multiple days to clear own roadways.

None of these people are going through the motions. They, along with many others, have put themselves out there, not for reward or recognition, but simply to make our community stronger.

We all love New Bedford, but love requires action.

If care about the education, sign up to tutor a child.

If you care about the look of the city, volunteer for Operation Clean Sweep or a garden club.

If you want to advance important civic goals, serve on a board.

There are many ways to serve, but what matters is if extend ourselves even a little bit, our bonds of friendship and community will cement themselves.

Together we can leave New Bedford a better place for our children.

Thank you, and God bless the City of New Bedford.