

# **A vote for a 4-year New Bedford mayor term is a vote for less democracy**

In August of 2014, **New Bedford Mayor John Mitchell** voiced his support for moving terms for New Bedford mayor from two years to four. The goal was to get the City Council to make the change.

“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 City Council didn't act and more than three years later a citizen's group called **New Bedford Fourward** has gathered enough signatures to put the 4-year mayoral term on the November 7th ballot. **SouthCoast Chamber President & CEO Rick Kidder** voiced his support behind the move.

While current New Bedford mayor Jon Mitchell stated three years ago that he would not be included in a 4-year term, the official ballot question doesn't exempt him from a future 4-year term.

I've yet to see a valid point to have less democracy from the 4-year term supporters. **Former New Bedford Mayor Scott Lang articulated recently** why he doesn't support 4-year terms and should be watched by everyone considering it.

Scott Lang's main points are that New Bedford residents are being asked to give up your right to vote every two years, running for office shouldn't be considered an inconvenience and 4-year terms would continue to decrease an already low voter turn out in New Bedford. Finally, he suggest if you don't see your elected officials enough with 2-year terms, how often do you think you'll see them with 4-year terms?

I tend to agree with all Lang's points. Let's review some **the points from the folks pushing for a 4-year term based on the press release they sent out.**

*"Dr. John Fletcher, a former principal and member of the New Bedford School Committee, said he supports the change to four years because there is a "learning curve, especially in the beginning" when a new mayor takes office.*

"Fortunately, (as a school committee member) I had the advantage of a four-year term to ease into my responsibilities and hit my stride," Fletcher said. "That same comfort zone in the mayoral term would allow for growth into a challenging job."

Really? It takes four years to get a bachelors degree from a university, but it doesn't take four years to understand what a mayor does. You either vote for the candidate with experience (the incumbent) based on his pr her experience or you vote for the opponent saying they can do a better job. In most cases, you are voting for the leadership skill. We have department heads for the expertise in city government.

Also, do we really want new mayors of New Bedford to be comfortable? Personally, I want my leaders to feel like they are always working for me. We have comfortable politicians in Washington D.C. and on Boston, we don't need more of that.

*"The mayor, as the CEO of the city, should be allowed to get to know what makes the city tick without an election hanging over his or her head in year one."*

I don't understand this point because the mayor's term is two years, not one. When you are elected to mayor in New Bedford you have about 22 months before worrying about re-election. You win in November and your next election is in October, 23 months later. Most of the recent incumbent mayors didn't start campaigning until September, 22 months after being elected. That means mayors don't have to worry about re-election in the first year of being election, they worry at the end of their second year.

Let's face it, there is a reason incumbents win 67% of the time – they hold press conferences and send out press releases during their 48 months in office and have name recognition. They already have a significant advantage and it takes a lot to knock out incumbents, so there is no reason to state 2-year terms become a disadvantage because of learning curves, especially for incumbents that have already been re-elected to multiple terms.

*“Victor Pinheiro, owner of Luzo Auto Center, served three terms on the New Bedford City Council.*

“I witnessed firsthand the shortcomings of a two-year mayoral term, where sound governance can take a back seat to political expediency in the heat of an always near election,” he said.

“A four-year term allows the city's mayor to make decisions and implement strategies focused more on the long-term results rather than the electoral pressures of the next and always-near election. Taking this to the voters is the best way to gauge their wishes, it will truly give the voters a voice in this important decision.”

Is two years really a short amount of time? Do mayors stop focusing on the long-term success of a city with 2-year terms? Is it a bad thing to be held accountable every two years? I find it hard to answer yes to any of these questions.

*Christian Farland, president of Farland Corp. is a lifelong*

*resident of the city. He said he also supports the change.*

“One of the advantages of going to a four-year term will be the positive message it will send to those who invest and who want to invest in the City of New Bedford.

A four-year term will allow a mayor to work with the business community on projects from start to completion. We have seen in the past when a mayor has a consistent run, progress is made.

“A two-year term sends a message of instability, which is not what the business community likes to see when considering a city to invest in. Two years simply is not enough time to truly evaluate a mayor, nor is it enough time for the mayor to adequately effect change,” Farland said.

Personally, I don't know a single business that decided NOT to invest in New Bedford, or any city, based on the term length of the mayor. I do know that business decide to move to a city or town based on the state of the economy, the skills of the local work force and tax incentives.

If a mayor that is bad for business is elected to a 4-year term, how does that help attract new businesses to the area? The idea of 4-year terms works when a business-friendly mayor is in office, but what happens if the opposite comes true? Then we are stuck with bad economic policy for four years. If a mayor implements policy that is bad for the economy, it is best to vote them out of office and replace them with a better mayor. If a mayor is doing well for the economy, then they'll be re-elected to another two years. If you hated President Obama or hate President Trump now, how did you feel knowing you have to deal with them for four years?

I'm not 100% against 4-year mayoral terms, but it has to be based on what is best for the city of New Bedford, not what is best for a segment of the city. This push feels like there is a candidate already in mind for 2019, and the goal is to get

that person in for 4-years. Making a mayor comfortable isn't a valid point to extend a mayoral term to four years. We should want our leaders to feel they are accountable more often than not. We should want more democracy, accountability and higher voter turnout, not less.