

New Bedford Mayor Jon Mitchell's State of the City Address 2021

The following is a transcript of New Bedford Mayor Jon Mitchell's Oct 21, 2021, State of the City speech:

"City Council President Lopes, members of the Council, and residents and friends of New Bedford, let me begin by offering my thanks to Rick Kidder and the Chamber of Commerce for hosting this event again, and for their support of small businesses in our region, especially during these trying times. I also wish to thank our sponsors for their reliable support of the Chamber and their commitment to the betterment of Greater New Bedford.

Last year, I came before you to report on an unfolding public health crisis, the likes of which the city and world had not experienced in over a century. In a matter of weeks, nearly every facet of our lives was upended by a rapidly spreading coronavirus. All of a sudden, it was threatening the lives of the most vulnerable in our society, throwing millions out of work, and shuttering schools.

At that point, we were still trying to figure out what exactly was happening. How could we make ourselves and our loved ones safe? When could people get back to work? Are my kids learning? Will there be vaccines available? When will things get back to normal?

All of this uncertainty was intensified by the scale of the loss. To date, over four hundred New Bedford residents have died from Covid-19. They were parents, sisters and brothers, and aunts and uncles. They were public figures like former Mayor Fred Kalisz, and they were friends and work colleagues, and all were part of the fabric of our City. Each of us knows

at least one person who succumbed to the disease. The loss and hardship are impossible to quantify, and will always remain with us.

Given the City's older-than-average population, its higher incidence of underlying health conditions, and our large industrial work force for which working from home was not realistic, the overall challenge here was taller than most.

I am proud of the way our City has responded. Our collective efforts have avoided a far worse outcome.

The key was that we confronted the reality of the situation. We didn't feel sorry for ourselves, or wish the problem away. We responded even before we knew exactly what we were facing, not waiting for the state or anyone else to tell us what we should do.

There was a long list of innovative steps we took that were tailored to the specific needs of New Bedford, some of which garnered national attention. These included our becoming the first city in the country to offer free masks to every resident who wanted one, and establishing workplace regulations that helped stave off major outbreaks in our seafood processing plants.

Suffice it to say, we avoided a much worse scenario because we didn't hesitate, we were creative, and we worked as a team – city employees, health care workers, and residents, altogether.

I am grateful for their efforts. I would like to salute in particular the Health Department, under the leadership of Damon Chaplin; Emergency Management, headed up by Brian Nobrega; and Emergency Medical Services, directed by Mark McGraw, along with Travis Rebello in the Fire Department, who was responsible for testing and protective equipment. They have worked tirelessly to enable us to understand what we've been facing and to form our response. They've done it exceptionally well.

Pressing on with the City's Business

But as I said in last year's address, the task before us was not simply to react to the crisis, but also to press on with our work of building of a stronger, more vibrant City once the pandemic ended. It would have been more natural to simply hunker down and wait for the storm to pass. We didn't do that. We didn't let the pandemic become an excuse for not doing the work we're expected to do.

I'm pleased to report that much has been accomplished.

Thanks to the dedication of our Police Department, Neighborhood Task Force and residents who've taken personal responsibility for their neighborhoods, crime in New Bedford continues to fall. In 2020, as violent crime skyrocketed in cities across the country, it dropped in New Bedford some 5%. Property crime fell 21%. This continues a record of success over the last five years in which crime overall in the city has fallen 39%, one of the sharpest declines in the country.

At a time when pressure on American police departments intensified, our police were able to diffuse potential civil unrest in the City without a major violent incident, in stark contrast to cities across the U.S., and even here in New England. Meanwhile, our Fire Department skillfully responded to a spate of house fires, many attributable to the effects of the pandemic.

The School Department was faced with the unprecedented challenge of ensuring the safety of students and staff, while minimizing the pandemic's disruption of the education of our city's schoolchildren. School districts across America struck the balance in different ways, and in the Northeast, the prevailing wisdom in urban districts was to rely exclusively on remote learning. Superintendent Anderson, with the support of the School Committee, followed the public health advice, which said that the risks could be managed. Of the 10 largest

school districts in Massachusetts, New Bedford was the only one that operated in at least the hybrid format the entire school year. Compared to most of the state's urban school districts, New Bedford did not experience as dramatic a decline in test scores, while still protecting student health.

We were reminded of this commitment to student success when earlier this year, the latest graduation numbers came out, showing that the four-year graduation rate at New Bedford High School had reached 88%, up from 58% less than 10 years ago. This represents one of the largest increases in the country, and the opening of opportunity for thousands of our city's young adults.

That's not all. We pulled together an all-out effort to ensure a full counting of our city's residents for the 2020 Census. Despite swirling uncertainty in Washington about the ground rules of the census, the count identified thousands of additional residents, such that for the first time in over a half century, New Bedford's population is officially over 100,000, confirming what has become increasingly true: New Bedford is a city people want to live in.

Our economy has snapped back. Small businesses suffered most during the early stages of the pandemic, but were backstopped by short term lending from the Economic Development Council and by the commitment of our residents to buy-local. Now things are more stable. The fishing industry has rebounded, and our manufacturers are expanding. Most striking of all, despite the implosion of the nation's restaurant industry, New Bedford has seen seven more restaurants open than close during the pandemic, including Cisco New Bedford, one of the most popular new restaurants in New England.

These would be major accomplishments under any circumstances, never mind in the midst of a global pandemic. I am extremely proud of our city employees, business community, non-profit sector and residents for rising to the challenge.

Together, we have pressed on with our work. We continue to build a city that is more self-sufficient, confident and unified; a city that seizes control of its own destiny and that isn't a ward of the state or a satellite of some far off major metropolitan area; a city that takes itself seriously as a City; one that can handle the challenges of the moment, and one that is constantly planting the seeds of a better future for its children.

Opportunities Before Us

New Bedford is about to enter an important period. The opportunities knocking on our door are more promising than those the City has had perhaps at any point in the last century.

Some of them are visible now. There is a thicket of fishing boats in the harbor because the commercial fishing industry on the East Coast is consolidating here. Over 150 out-of-state vessels now land their catches in New Bedford each year as international demand for scallops grows. Each of them is a small business in its own right.

We are bringing on-line a new industrial park in time for the surging demand for so-called "green field" industrial space by the state's leading industries, opening up the possibility of high-paying jobs.

The EPA's 40-year-long cleanup of our harbor is about 95% complete, and is opening up space for more vessels, and therefore, more jobs on the water, while major port construction projects are about to get underway.

And "for hire" signs dot the City's landscape, something that is so striking for those of us old enough to remember the days of factory closures and mass layoffs.

Then there are the developments that are about to happen.

After years of advocacy by elected officials and businesses

alike, the passenger rail connection to Boston is now under construction in earnest, and the state intends to start running trains in just over two years. The service will offer one more good reason for people to live here.

America's offshore wind industry will launch next year from the Port of New Bedford, when Vineyard Wind begins to stage the country's first commercial-scale project. We've worked over the last decade to seize a leadership role in this new industry, through the development of new infrastructure and workforce programs, and the promotion of everything the City and Port have to offer. In the next decade, the industry will invest tens of billions of dollars on projects down the East Coast, and we are in a terrific position to capitalize on it.

And finally, recent federal legislation has made available more funding to cities than at any point since at least the Great Society programs of the 1960s. With federal infrastructure bills now before Congress, there is the potential for still more funds to come.

All told, New Bedford is better positioned now than at any point in our lifetimes to thrive. Our proud city, with its glorious past, has long sought to create the conditions for a more successful and sustainable future, one that offers opportunities for a good life for our residents, and reaffirms the City's image of itself as an important place. Those opportunities to make this happen are now before us.

Launching Out of the Pandemic

But opportunities don't fall into place on their own. They have to be seized. We in New Bedford know this well. As I've said before, more than most places, we've had to hustle to get what we want. And honestly, I wouldn't have it any other way. It's a lot more gratifying when you succeed.

But I also believe that in order to make the most of our opportunities, there are three steps we must take in the

immediate future.

The first is that we need to get over the hump of the pandemic.

Consider what we're doing today. New Bedford's state-of-the-city address is traditionally held in a large school gymnasium, ordinarily with over 500 people in attendance. It is believed to be the highest-attended event of its kind in New England, second only to Boston. The fact that it is being held remotely again this year is yet another reminder that the pandemic continues to permeate public life.

It remains more difficult here than most places because the vaccination rates across Southeastern Massachusetts remain stubbornly low, and especially so in the City.

The unvaccinated have left themselves vulnerable. We're reminded of this every day, and not just by medical experts. Since the vaccines became widely available, almost everyone in New Bedford who has died of Covid was unvaccinated.

Many chalk up the vaccination decision to a matter of personal choice, like wearing a seat belt. The statistics may say that I'm putting myself at increased risk of harm if I don't do it, but I'm not harming anyone else.

Analogies like these, however, don't stand up. Having large numbers of unvaccinated individuals imposes costs on everyone, ranging from absenteeism from work and school, to the lost productivity and learning time that comes with it. Unnecessary medical costs are imposed on employers and taxpayers. And people with serious underlying health conditions remain vulnerable. Just this week, one of the most admired Americans, General Colin Powell, was the latest example of this, and there have been many others.

I've said a great deal on this topic over the last few months, and my intent is not to preach. But I have a duty to state the facts, and the fact is, that increasing the ranks of the

vaccinated is the way to get Covid-19 under control.

To those who remain unvaccinated, I say, it's understandable to ask questions about the vaccines. But I suggest that you put those questions to your doctor. You trust your doctor for advice about medications to help you stay healthy. The vaccines are just one type of medication. Armed with your doctor's advice, you can make an informed decision.

We all have a part to play in helping all of us over the hump of the pandemic.

As an employer, city government is doing its part. To protect our employees and their families, and those who interact with city government, we've mandated vaccinations for city employees. For very similar reasons, I encourage other employers to follow suit. It's not only a necessary step at this point in the pandemic, but it's good for business. Sick employees are not productive. Sick customers take their business elsewhere.

Those of us who are vaccinated might consider having a word with our friends who are not. You might tell them, "Look, I'm not trying to impose my values on you, but I want you to know that I care about you, and I'm concerned. We all know someone who's died from Covid. I'm just asking you to consider getting vaccinated." Your example may be more powerful than you may suspect.

To launch ourselves from the pandemic, the second thing we need to do is invest our new resources wisely.

Cities that thrive in the long run are cities that are committed to reinvesting in themselves. Upgrading infrastructure, providing schools what they need to improve, strengthening civic institutions, enhancing the appearance of open spaces, and building capacity in economic development and planning agencies, all are what lead to a more livable, competitive and sustainable city.

Making this commitment sometimes has been difficult for New Bedford. The City has long faced the challenges associated with chronic scarcity. Financial decisions too often have been made based entirely on short run implications. Typically, they've been framed in binary terms, a choice between spending a nickel this year or not spending a nickel this year. Missing from those discussions has been how we might invest in the conditions that can generate more revenue so that in the long run more than that nickel can be spent on the services that matter, while the burden on the average taxpayer is lightened.

The funding the City has received through the American Rescue Plan, some \$64 million plus additional aid passed through Bristol County, affords us a chance to grow the pie, and reset the discussion about the importance of the city reinvesting in itself.

Public participation in this discussion is important, and we've benefited from considerable public input on federal stimulus spending through hearings, stakeholder meetings, surveys, written submissions, and media coverage. Although federal regulations restrict the eligible uses of the funds, there are many terrific ideas on the table that can be funded. In light of those ideas, and based on the City's existing plans which themselves were informed by public input, I will soon submit to the City Council an outline of how funds should be invested.

The outline will be founded on certain principles. For starters, because we are receiving this funding just once, it should be spent on one-time items, rather than on the creation or expansion of existing programs that would come with future spending obligations. If we used the funding, for instance, to hire more library assistants, we'd have to continue to pay for them after the federal stimulus funds are exhausted, without the money to do it.

Where possible, we should prioritize investments that are

strategic, that is, they confer new benefits in the long term that are significant enough to elevate the City's general trajectory. A great example of this approach is right in our Downtown. After Congress enacted the Community Block Grant Program in the mid-'70s, cities across the country received large one-time infusions of funds. New Bedford received some \$13 million, equal to more than a third of the city's operating budget at the time. Mayor Markey could have spread the funding around to satisfy many legitimate needs, but upon the advice of WHALE and the City's economic development agencies, he committed the lion's share of the funds to build out the cobblestoned streets of the Historic District.

Many at the time opposed the idea, citing the immediate needs that would not be addressed. But as we look back now, with the benefit of hindsight, it was clearly the right decision. The Historic District is the most photographed neighborhood in Southeastern Massachusetts, a magnet for tourists, and an emblem of New Bedford's heritage. By any definition, that was a strategic investment, and it's paid off handsomely.

As we consider possible investments of American Rescue Plan funds, we also should make sure that they are stretched as far as possible by leveraging other sources of funds. By that I mean, we should expect that investments that can be supported in whole or part by the private sector, should not be paid for entirely by federal stimulus dollars. The City could use its funds as a match for private dollars for upgrades to a cultural facility, for example, but we shouldn't be expected to pay for the entire project.

Similarly, we should spend our American Rescue Plan funds on investments that are not eligible for other public funding. The American Rescue Plan established several new funding streams, including aid to states. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts received \$5.3 billion, and we have been working hard to convince the state to spend some of those funds here. We should make sure we're not spending our money on items for

which the state likely would foot the bill. The same reasoning applies to federal infrastructure funds under legislation now pending before Congress. If that funding becomes available for things we'd like to invest in, we should hold off on spending our money for the same purpose.

The more we can stretch what we've received from the federal government, the greater the return to the city in the long run. We'll only receive the funding once, so we need to make it go as far as it can.

The third and last thing I'd urge everyone to consider is that to emerge stronger from the pandemic than when it began, we have to work together, and that can only happen if we strengthen the trust among ourselves.

Public and private trust has been deteriorating in America for some time, and the pandemic has laid bare many of society's fault lines. Some of it is that we don't see one another face-to-face as much. And I'm not just talking about the pandemic. To borrow a phrase, we've been "bowling alone" for a while now, as membership in clubs and leagues, participation in elections, and church attendance have steadily dwindled since the 1960s. The rapid proliferation of social media and mobile devices in the last decade as a basis for communication have accelerated these trends. The major upshot of it all is that we don't know one another as well as we used to. The less often we can look people in the eye and spend time in their presence, the less we can understand where they're coming from.

The contraction of traditional local media and the growing reliance on social media platforms for news has only made these symptoms worse. It's harder to know what to believe, or what matters most.

It's more difficult not to become calloused with cynicism about the motivations of others, much less to establish common purpose with them.

We of course can just resign ourselves to these trends. We can conclude that it's kind of like the weather; there's nothing we can do about it.

Or we can step back and recognize that there is something we can do. I'm not suggesting that we here in New Bedford can reverse technologically-driven social changes across America and the world over. But we can make a conscience effort to reduce their negative impacts here.

A starting point may be to discipline ourselves and pause for a second, and entertain the possibility that maybe the other person behind the social media profile might not intend me harm. Maybe that person isn't trying to take advantage of me. Maybe those on Facebook who reflexively find fault with everyone have stuff going on in their lives that drive them to say outrageous things. Maybe empathy is a better response than a tirade aimed back at them. After all, the intentions of most people are decent, so maybe there's just an honest disagreement. Maybe we should strive to give one another the benefit of the doubt.

We're never going to agree all the time, nor should we. But there are some things we can all agree on: that we should live in a city that is safe, where our children can develop into responsible citizens, where the opportunity for a rewarding career is widely available, and where everyone feels like they belong.

If we agree on the goals, we can achieve them together, as long as we understand that when we don't agree on the means of getting there, we still need to listen to other points of view. We might learn something along the way, and probably respect one another a little bit more.

That's what builds trust, and trust is the glue that holds us together.

And only together can we succeed.

Thank you, and God bless our great City.”