



Mayor Jon Mitchell
State of the City Address
Wednesday, May 3, 2023
[remarks as prepared]

Thank you, Don, for that introduction, and many thanks to Rick Kidder, Mike O’Sullivan, and the Chamber, for another great job in organizing this annual event, and to Webster Bank for its enduring sponsorship.

I also would like to thank Principal Bernadette Coelho for hosting us today, Sue Richard and the New Bedford Cable Access Team for that exciting video introduction, and New Bedford High School’s Select SSA Chorus for that fabulous performance.

I want to acknowledge and thank City Council President Morad, City Councilors, school committee members, District Attorney Tom Quinn, and our state and federal legislative delegations, for the work they do to support New Bedford every day.

I am so pleased that my wife Ann could be with me on this occasion, and I will seize this opportunity to proclaim just how proud I am of the work she does to improve the lives of women diagnosed with breast cancer, through both her direct care of patients and her leading research. She inspires me every day to raise my game.

I regret that my youngest daughter Lauren could not be here. She’s right down the hall now taking a test, and she told me to keep the noise down.

Any assessment of the State of Our City should start with an acknowledgment that we are in a period that continues to defy easy characterization. The times we live in are anything but placid or ordinary. Any number of national, state, and local economic metrics are positive despite our weathering of a 100-year pandemic. Yet, not since the Cold War have we seen geopolitical tensions like those today, and not since the 1970s has the price of gas or interest rates, or inflation come to dominate the everyday conversation as they do now. Then there's all that's going on in our Nation's capital.

Although these trends have implications for life in New Bedford in 2023, they don't explain all that much about our local prospects or direction. Here's what does define us in 2023: A palpable sense that New Bedford is pointed in the right direction and solidly progressing. I have no doubt that in the long history of our City, 2023 will come to be seen as a year marked by the fulfillment of long-standing goals – big goals whose positive consequences will matter for a long time to come.

To be sure, we've talked before about the improvement of the conditions we live in. Looking back a decade ago, the chronic symptoms of post-industrial decline were plain to see: double-digit unemployment, precarious city finances, a school department under state monitoring, and a general sense that the City was unsafe. And here we are today with neighborhoods that are safer and cleaner, schools that are running the way they should, a higher and more stable bonding rating, thousands more people with steady jobs, and a population back over 100,000.

But 2023 is most notable because this year we'll have completed or are about to complete things that long seemed daunting, if not impossible.

First and foremost, there's the offshore wind industry. We've worked tirelessly over the last decade to position New Bedford to become a leader in the industry because I believe it could create jobs here the way it has in port cities in Northern Europe. My assurances that the industry would take hold here, despite all of its highly publicized setbacks in the U.S., increasingly were met with Waiting-for-Godot skepticism – often with a look of, “Yeah, okay, Mayor.”

Well, I am proud to report that later this month, the first components for America's first commercial-scale offshore wind project will arrive at the New

Bedford Marine Commerce Terminal. I salute Klaus Moeller and his team at Vineyard Wind on this historic occasion, and everyone who has supported our efforts to bring this industry to the City. And it's all just getting started.

Later this year, passenger rail service between New Bedford and Boston will resume. Along with every elected official from Southeastern Massachusetts since the 1990s, I have advocated for restoring that rail connection (and no one has been at it longer than Tony Cabral), and now it's finally happening. It will be one more economic asset for the region, and yet another good reason to live here.

This year, too, the finishing touches are being applied to the forty-year cleanup of New Bedford Harbor, America's first marine Superfund site, thanks to \$73 million we received recently from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. Many of us here will recall that the harbor cleanup always seemed to be the front page of the paper throughout the 1980s, and now finally, it's about to be done. I wish to thank the federal delegation for their work in passing the legislation, the dedicated EPA team, and our Resilience Director Michele Paul for her coordinating efforts. Once the cleanup is over, we can proceed with the long-planned Riverwalks project, which will open up the North End to the Acushnet River. And that will be pretty cool.

Then there's the Eversource site. We all saw or heard about the demolition of the power plant in January— the same building that was once going to be an aquarium and then later a casino. You remember. I wish I had a dime for every time I was asked what was going to happen to that site. Well, now we know the answer. Thanks to the investor group headed up by Andrew Saunders, and its partnership with the City, later this year it will be buzzing with activity as an offshore wind deployment site.

How about the State Pier? For at least thirty years, we've stared at that vast parking lot by the water, right across from Downtown, and have lamented, "That site has so much potential." Like most people, I found it unacceptable that the state had allowed it to languish. I strongly believed even if we didn't own it, we should figure out how we could get the state to do something about it.

So we pulled together waterfront stakeholders to come up with a plan that garnered broad support, advocated for it relentlessly, and eventually secured the

backing of the Baker Administration. As was announced in December, a local development team is now filling in the details for a mix-use development in keeping with the plan that will establish a fish offloading site that the public can see, continue ferry service, and create restaurant and retail uses facing across from downtown. It is going to be a fantastic addition to the maritime sector and restaurant scene alike.

So yes, all these strategic initiatives are coming to fruition. Oh, by the way, that's not the whole list for 2023:

The restored First Baptist Church will open as a performing arts venue later this year.

Bristol Community College's National Offshore Wind Institute, America's first offshore wind training institution, will open its doors on the waterfront in late Summer. Nice job, President Laura Douglas.

We secured the funding commitment this year to replace Massachusetts's oldest airport terminal, which will put us in a much stronger position to attract and retain more regular commercial air service.

After five years in dry dock, the *Ernestina*, the official ship of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, just returned to her home port of New Bedford, fully restored.

Then there's the bridge. Who's ever been "stuck on the bridge"? I don't even have to say the name of the bridge; we all know what I'm talking about. The New Bedford-Fairhaven Bridge has been obsolete for decades, causing traffic jams and choking off development in the Northern Harbor. I actually wrote a term paper in college calling for the bridge's replacement, and I note that I am not a recent college grad. It's been that long. But since we last met like this, our advocacy finally worked; the state has begun a "for-real" planning process that puts the bridge on the pathway to replacement.

So that's a long list, but it's kind of the point. This year marks the culmination of years of effort by a whole lot of people, on stuff that will have

changed the trajectory of the City. Any one of these projects in a given year would be a big deal. And it's really exciting to see it all come together.

As mayor, I have been fortunate to have had the support and guidance of people inside and outside of city government of high intelligence and broad experience. But the key to getting all of this done was not brains or expertise. These projects can be complicated, financially and politically, but they're not rocket science. They get done mostly out of persistence, which sometimes is in short supply in government.

Big projects are hard because they can stall or fall apart in any number of ways, and in government circles, responsibility can be deflected more easily than in the private sector. Those who contributed to the success of the projects I just described bought into a vision, worked as a team, and stuck with it. This year, 2023, we have a lot to show for our efforts, from which all of us can and should draw pride and confidence.

But, as I said, this is not an ordinary time, and that's in part because one might also say, well, New Bedford has completed or is nearing completion of much of what it set out to do. So, now what?

The "now what" question is anxiety-provoking, because it implies that what's ahead is unknown, and it's natural to be fearful of the unknown. And there's enough to be anxious about these days. Inflation is not about to end tomorrow, neither is that major European land war or America's political divisions. And we haven't even begun to understand the potentially profound implications of emerging technologies, such that part of me feels compelled to offer a disclaimer that last year at this time would have sounded absurd: that is, this speech was not written by ChatGPT.

So yes, there indeed is much uncertainty in the world. And I don't venture to offer answers to all of it except to say that we have just proven to ourselves in the last decade that there's a whole lot we can do here in Greater New Bedford to improve the lives of residents, even when the rest of the world has become messy.

In an ever-interconnected world where the best ideas are shared freely across vast physical and cultural expanses, it seems almost paradoxical that local decision-making, by the municipal government in partnership with the private sector and residents, has demonstrated itself here in the U.S. and around the world to be more effective at getting results.

The reason why things still can get done at the local level can be summed up in one word: trust. At the local level, government officials, members of the press, and anyone with official or private authority has to interact with everyone else. You can be more confident about whom you can trust when you can look them in the eye, or if you know their friends and family, or where they live. Or if you know which blood pressure medications they're on because you see them in line at CVS. There's no escaping scrutiny.

My point is that with local government, you can know what you're getting. And cities can improve by leveraging opportunities to build trust. Trust is the oxygen of civic engagement. With enough of it, we can establish a common purpose, understand mutual motives, and accomplish a lot together.

So, the answer to the "what now" question is, we should keep doing what we are doing. Together, we're always building that City we've envisioned:

a City that is the cultural, economic, and political center of a distinct region;

a City with a diverse economy that offers an opportunity for everyone who seeks it;

a City with a highly professional, caring, and efficient municipal government that commands the confidence of taxpayers;

a City recognized for its physical beauty, cultural richness, and the compassion of its residents, and where everyone feels like they belong.

Our work toward this common vision entails three lines of collective effort:

First, we must make the most of our competitive advantages to attract and grow capital to create job opportunities for our residents;

Second, we must nurture a high quality of life, both as an end itself and as a means of attracting investment.

Third, we must reinforce our sense of place, which energizes us to do the work to improve it.

Let's take a look at where we are on each one.

Economic Competitiveness

No city can sustain itself in the long run if it isn't economically competitive. It bears emphasizing that we in Greater New Bedford are competing in a global economy for investment and jobs, and if we don't compete effectively, they will go elsewhere, as our City has come to realize the hard way over the years.

Growing our regional economy and the jobs that would come with it requires us to focus on our advantages -- that is to say, we need to double down on the things we're already good at.

On the Waterfront

In New Bedford, more than anything else, that means our maritime economy. The Port is the primary economic driver of the region because it offers advantages to the various industries that call it home, including commercial fishing, recreational boating, ferry service, certain lines of international cargo, and as we are already seeing, offshore wind.

The impending arrival of offshore wind has enabled us in recent years to secure public and private investment in the port the likes of which we have not seen since the whaling era. There have been hundreds of millions of dollars of port investment over the last several years, with more to come, all to support fishing, wind, and other maritime industries. The construction cranes and barges up and down the waterfront these days and for years to come are emblems of growth and job creation. None of this could have happened without the work of the Port Authority, now under the leadership of Gordon Carr, to plan and oversee these projects.

On top of this foundation of port infrastructure, we are building the scaffolding to support a thriving and resilient maritime economy.

As America's top commercial fishing port, we already have the country's best maritime workforce. But thanks to Bristol Community College, Mass Hire Greater New Bedford, and the Greater New Bedford Voc-Tech, we're creating more formal pipelines of workers to support the competitiveness of all our maritime industries.

The Port Authority also helps shape national and state policies relevant to our maritime businesses. It is a leading voice for national fishing policy, and it has been instrumental in the effort to reduce conflict between fishing and offshore wind interests in federal waters. Along with the New Bedford Ocean Cluster, it also has advocated most notably for state policies to promote offshore wind development here through the state's electricity solicitation process. On this front, I want to thank Governor Healey for her announcement yesterday that essentially adopts our position concerning those incentives. I have no doubt it will lead to more investment here.

One of the reasons why the port has been successful, from the whaling days to our present preeminence in fishing, is that it has always been a center of innovation. Through the work of the Ocean Cluster, headed up by Jen Downing and chaired by former Mayor John Bullard, we are helping to create new platforms on which innovation can occur, by connecting operating companies, entrepreneurs, and research institutions, and providing the support necessary for new business formation.

And finally, the Ocean Cluster is promoting New Bedford wherever potential investors may be found. Don't tell anyone, but at the major offshore wind industry conferences, we are often the only American city represented. And investment is starting to arrive.

Again, our goal, simply stated, is to establish New Bedford as the top blue economy city on the East Coast, and we will do that by out-hustling everybody else.

Off the Waterfront

Our effort to support a vibrant, diversified, and inclusive economy is hardly limited to the waterfront.

Our anchor institutions are on solid ground. The Zeiterion Theater and the Whaling Museum are planning major renovations, and we're contributing to long-needed investments at the Zoo, the Rotch-Jones-Duff House, the James Arnold Mansion, and the Madeiran Heritage Museum – all pillars of our cultural economy.

Investing in arts and culture is central to our economic development plan, in part because it has long been one of New Bedford's economic strengths. That's why we've directed over a million dollars in seed funding to individual artists through our cultural fund. And it's no surprise that thanks to the work of our creative strategist Margo Saulnier and the City's numerous working artists, that New Bedford was recognized this year by Americans for the Arts with its National Leadership Award. They've put New Bedford on the map as a place where the arts are everywhere.

The City's artists themselves are small businesses, and to a person, they'd tell you that no local economy can succeed if it isn't fertile ground for small businesses. Using federal relief funds, we've sought to help accelerate the emergence of small businesses from the pandemic and its fallout. In particular, Derek Santos and Ramon Silva of the EDC, with the support of its Chairman Tony Sapienza, have launched two new programs, NBForward and NB100, to help existing businesses get back to normal again, and to provide seed funding to get new ventures off the ground. Both programs are already having an impact.

In addition, the storefront improvement program is beginning to bear fruit. You're seeing new facades like those at Coastal Provisions, Tia Maria's, and the West End Grille come online, with many more on their way. A total of 75 stores across the City are in line to receive funding, whose facelifts will energize the businesses themselves, and also the neighborhoods they operate in.

I want to thank the entire City Council, and in particular, Councilors Ian Abreu, Maria Giesta, Scott Lima, and Brad Markey, for their support of these efforts to cultivate small businesses. It's been said that small businesses are the

spice of city life, and we want our small business community to know that New Bedford is a City where they can thrive.

It bears noting, too, that our largest manufacturers, such as Joseph Abboud, The Acushnet Company, and Precix, are having strong years. Meanwhile, we're getting the Advanced Manufacturing Campus at the municipal golf course on track, as we reconfigure the layout, and review potential zoning changes. Despite its many hurdles along the way, we are going to make that project happen.

On the matter of manufacturing, I wanted to give a special shout-out to Ken Joblon, the CEO of Brittany Dye. Since World War II, his company has been the best in the world at finishing fabrics for the military. When Ken learned last year that the City would be welcoming refugees from Afghanistan, he called me and said, tell them I have a job for them; I want to help. Since then, he has hired no fewer than ten of the refugees, and that steady income has enabled them to get a firmer footing in the United States. And what's also cool is that the company is a defense contractor, so it's another opportunity for them to support America's interests. So please join me in thanking Ken for throwing his doors open to these newest Americans.

And while we're at, I also want to welcome Dabeeri, the wife of one of Ken's employees, along with her brother, Khalid. The family narrowly escaped the Taliban two years ago, and to our great benefit, they were resettled here in New Bedford and are actively contributing to the City. Dabeeri's service as a translator has been instrumental in resettling Afghans across the Northeast, and many in Greater New Bedford were thoroughly impressed with and grateful for her efforts to produce the Afghan Women's Arts Project in February at the Main Library. It was terrific. And I also want to thank her again for that spicy vegetable dish she made me for my birthday, which was very hot. But it was really good.

Quality of Life

The second pillar of our strategy concerns the City's quality of life. Successful cities provide services that enable the well-being of their residents. The starting point of course is to secure their physical safety.

Public Safety

The fallout of the pandemic has posed unusual challenges for public safety agencies across America. In particular, police staffing levels have fallen to their lowest point in decades across urban America, and New Bedford is no exception. The recent backlash against policing has prompted many officers to retire early or to leave for suburban departments, and it has dried the pipeline of new recruits. In many cities, this has contributed to a dramatic surge in gun violence. I am grateful to report that hasn't happened here.

But there is work to be done. The thrust of our efforts going forward will be to increase predictive patrolling in hot spot areas and to intensify our efforts to have the court system hold repeat offenders pending trial, especially those involved in domestic violence. We are grateful for the efforts of our officers and District Attorney Quinn's Office on that front.

The solution to the staffing crunch won't happen overnight, but Chief Oliveira has taken some important steps to recruit new officers, including offering a \$5,000 signing bonus. Current attitudes in some quarters about policing are a real challenge for America's cities, which will take time to run its course. We could all do well by reminding young people that police officers perform work that is fundamental to the preservation of a free society.

On the matter of public safety, I want to salute the work of our fire department under Chief Scott Kruger, which has been exceptional in its rapid and skillful responses to a recent spate of fires. The same can be said for the life-saving work of our EMS department under Mike Thomas, as well as fire victim assistance by Community Services under Cynthia Walquist and Emergency Management under Brian Nobrega. Theirs is a strong team.

For all of our public safety services, we just committed over a million dollars in investments in equipment, facilities, and training. All three are completing strategic planning processes, and with the new investments, they are well-positioned to take on the challenges in the years ahead. Their work will continue to be complemented by the Neighborhood Task Force under John Flor and Lindsay Carter-Monteiro, and Inspectional Services under Danny Romanowicz, whose enforcement together of the building code has ensured that landlords take active responsibility for their properties.

All of these agencies continue to support the work of the Health Department and the Greater New Bedford Opioid Task Force in dealing with the scourge of addiction. As a public health challenge, the pandemic stole the headlines from the opioid epidemic for a while, but the reality is that the isolation caused by the pandemic led to more addiction. We are committed to an approach that will prevent addiction in the first place and get others on track to a better life.

Housing and Neighborhoods

Any conversation about the City's quality of life these days would be incomplete without turning to the issue of housing. It used to be only a big-city issue, but now it's an every-city issue. Far too many people are getting squeezed out of their apartments, and housing prices, even as they've leveled off, are far higher than they were before the pandemic. It's happening all across America.

Although housing prices are being driven largely by national economic forces, we need to promote housing production to help stabilize prices. And that's what the housing plan we announced last month is about. I would like to thank Josh Amaral and his team for putting it together.

We have a pipeline of approximately 250 more housing units, but more will still be needed. We will speed permitting, get vacant properties back on the market, and expand incentives for new housing construction to increase the volume of units coming onto the market.

But everyone should be clear, the housing crunch in Greater New Bedford is a region-wide problem; New Bedford's suburbs need to do their part, as virtually

all of the rental housing in the region is situated in the City. I look forward to a discussion with the towns about how everyone in Greater New Bedford can benefit from a more broad-based approach to housing attainability, and we in the City are prepared to lend our technical expertise to the towns for this purpose.

Relatedly, too many in our region currently struggle with homelessness. We must provide high-quality support for those experiencing these difficulties to make homelessness rare, brief, and non-recurring, and we need to invest in resources that help residents before they find themselves at risk. Recently, we committed to unprecedented levels of funding for emergency rental vouchers, as we continue to upgrade our mental health and opioid outreach work.

But it's not an overnight exercise. I am confident that we will continue to make progress on homelessness primarily because we have such a strong partnership with the City's Homeless Services Provider Network. They work hand-in-glove with the City to get the most desperate among us back on their feet.

Physical Condition and Appearance of the City

To sustain our City, and to help make it a pleasant place to live, one of our top priorities has been to reinvest in the public realm. I believe our residents deserve to live in a clean City with well-designed and visually appealing public spaces and effective infrastructure.

The record shows we've followed through.

For starters, we have been investing mightily in the City's roads. When I got into office, the City had no capital plan. Among other things, this meant that there was no routine investment of city funds in roadways. None. We relied only on state funds, which weren't – and aren't – enough. And eventually, it became evident to everyone that they were in bad shape. Our annual local commitment to road maintenance has gone from where it had been, which was zero, to \$3 million annually. We are playing catch up, but the progress will eventually become plain to see.

We've also invested tens of millions of dollars to make sure that the City's drinking water is safe and affordable, that our wastewater system will continue to function as our residents expect, and that both are resilient to the effects of

climate change. I want to thank Jamie Ponte and his team for their thoughtful and diligent management of these major infrastructure investments, above and below ground.

The City's public spaces also must look good. That's why we've planted 4,000 trees (and are about to start in on a thousand more), enforced the trash laws, wiped out graffiti, and built five new neighborhood parks. The Harborwalk and Covewalk have not only become popular neighborhood amenities, but regional destinations. It's why we've raised design standards, so what gets built looks great, like the new South End Public Safety Center, the Jacobs School, and soon the new pedestrian bridge by the Whale's Tooth parking lot. A City that looks great is one that proclaims to everyone that it cares about itself.

Because our residents deserve a sustained commitment to a level of appearance, we need to institutionalize our approach. Today, we are releasing a Standard of Appearance for the Public Realm, which is a set of policies that seek to maintain the appearance and condition of the City's built environment.

It establishes in clear terms what is expected of city government in managing litter and blight, the upkeep of open space, and elevating design standards. Our goal is to make New Bedford the cleanest center City in New England. I believe we can do it, and we're already pretty far along as it is.

But as the policies make clear, residents need to play an active role. City government after all isn't a maid service; we're not going to mow anyone's lawn or trim their hedges. It isn't too much to expect residents and businesses to keep up their own properties, as in a City nearly everyone's property is conspicuous to everyone else, and it's not too much to ask residents to let the City know when something needs to be addressed. With these mutual obligations in mind, the new policy proposes a covenant between municipal government and residents; each must work with one another to sustain an appearance about which we can all be proud.

To make it easier for residents to discharge their end of the bargain, I am also announcing today that the City will adopt a 311 system. By this time next year, residents will be able to dial 311 and request non-emergency public realm services: potholes, fallen tree branches, and graffiti. I believe that 311 systems

shouldn't be just for big cities; ours will enable residents to work in tandem with City government to sustain an appearance that residents deserve.

To provide these services effectively, we of course need to manage our finances wisely. Despite our being able to maintain a strong bond rating, even though we've been able to ease the pressure temporarily with the use of federal ARPA funds, money remains tight.

There are many reasons for this, and I'll have an opportunity to offer greater detail in my budget address in two weeks. But it should come as no surprise that inflation has hit municipal expenses, especially salaries, and we have struggled to fill important positions as a result.

As we've discussed many times before, the rise of pension and healthcare obligations are crowding out our ability to pay for core city services and they have imposed too much on taxpayers. Together, these two obligations will rise over \$4 million from last year, and those increases are projected to continue over the next several years. It's unsustainable. I am committed to working with the Council so that the City can manage these obligations, but we can't avoid tough choices.

Schools

Central to our City's quality of life, as well as our economic competitiveness, is our ability to offer our children pathways to opportunity through our public schools.

The New Bedford Public Schools have come a long way in the last few years. The days when the needs of adults were put before children have receded in the rearview mirror. We now have a school system that is clear in its academic goals, manages taxpayer dollars reliably, and has raised the standards for academic instruction. There have been long-needed changes to collective bargaining agreements, a revamped curriculum, and major facilities upgrades.

While we have benefited from increased state funding thanks to the passage of the state's Student Opportunity Act, and the infusion of federal dollars that has led to a construction boom of school renovation, the last three years have been trying. More than any other aspect of City operations, the pandemic

disrupted classroom learning. It will take some time to recover from the learning loss and the emotional strain borne by students.

I want to thank Superintendent Anderson's steady leadership throughout his tenure, but especially during the pandemic, for which there was no playbook. He was a stabilizing presence in a most unstable time for faculty, staff, and students, and kept the district moving forward. I likewise want to thank Deputy Superintendent Karen Treadup for her many years of dedicated service to our schools.

We are fortunate to have Assistant Superintendent Andrew O'Leary and former Devalles School Principal Darcy Aungst to step up to lead the transition, as we hasten the district's emergence from the pandemic. The immediate focus will be to deal with chronic absenteeism, which skyrocketed during the pandemic and has not nearly come back down. This is already affecting the graduation rate. We need to get kids plugged back in, and fast.

The work of the School Committee's new Academic Achievement Subcommittee will be key in this effort. The subcommittee's purpose is to facilitate a clearer public understanding of how our schools are performing. With the help of an academic dashboard, parents will be able to get the information they need to support their children, and the school department will be able to share freely how it's working toward the goals it has set for itself.

I wish to note that we are proud of the work being done at the City's two major public high schools. Under Bernadette Coelho's steady leadership at New Bedford High, the passing rate on Advanced Placement tests remains strong, and students continue to complete successfully for admissions to America's top colleges.

Over at Voc-Tech, we've seen tremendous work in preparing students for tomorrow's workforce and collaborating with the business community to keep their programs relevant and competitive. The school will play a big part in our effort to compete for offshore wind investment, and to grow jobs here.

On the subject of Voc-Tech, by the way, I wanted to give a shout-out to Voc-Tech softball coach Craig Soares, whose team won the state championship in dramatic fashion this past Spring – the team's second championship in the last

four years. He and his staff put in the work necessary to develop a strong softball program. It certainly has paid off, and we're proud of what you and your players have accomplished.

Connection to Place

In administering city government, we strive to base our decisions on a careful evaluation of available information, and in light of our understanding of the City's interests. In a time when trust in government institutions is waning, and resources are scarce, this deliberate, evidence-based approach to governing is what I believe our City needs and deserves.

At the same time, we can't lose sight of what also keeps cities going and makes life in them worth living there: which is love of the place itself.

I do what I do because I love New Bedford, and if you are here today, for certain you do, too.

Sometimes we beat ourselves up too much or are too willing to accept the knee-jerk judgment of others. But make no mistake, New Bedford is a special place in America. It is worthy of our full devotion.

And when you love where you live, you'll commit acts of love on its behalf, and make it an even better place, and maybe through that effort, improve yourself in some small way.

Exactly seventy years ago next month, a young man from New Bedford had a moment to consider what he might contribute.

He was dug in behind a wall of sandbags on a jagged ridgeline just north of the Demilitarized Zone on the Korean peninsula. He and his fellow soldiers of the Army's 2nd Infantry Division gazed across the desolate, battle-torn valley below, where hundreds of Chinese and North Korean soldiers were massing. Days of artillery barrages signaled that an attack was coming, as it had on countless other hills where over the previous three years thousands of Americans died in brutal, often hand-to-hand combat.

As he crouched beside his machine gun, he did what so many in similar situations do; he prayed. This is what he said: “God, if you get me out of this, I will go back to New Bedford, and do a whole lot of good.”

Well, as it turned out, seemingly out of the blue then in June of 1953, the armistice was announced before the attack came, ending active hostilities in the Korean War.

Peter Britto went back to New Bedford, and for the last seventy years, he has fulfilled that promise.

His name is synonymous with youth basketball in the City. Mr. Britto, as he is widely known, ran the Monte Park league for over thirty years and the New Bedford Youth United League for years afterward, coached pretty much everywhere else in the City at some point: the Boy’s and Girl’s Club, the CYO, the Bay State League, and various other leagues. His annual tournaments at Monte’s, which continue today on the court that bears his name, have always been a major summer event as they brought teams from New York, Boston, and Cape Verde to match up against New Bedford’s best.

But for him, it’s never been about winning or losing games; it’s been about the kids whose lives he touched; thousands of them over the years, boys and girls. With the support of his wife Avis and the rest of his family, he used basketball as a teaching tool, an instrument through which players, many of whom had little to fall back on at home, could learn perseverance and teamwork, which was much more important than their free throw percentage. He is revered by many in the City across generations because he unfailingly has led by his values and treated every kid like his own.

I ask everyone to join me in thanking Peter for making his City a stronger place, one child at a time.

As Peter set out to do, may each of us find our own way to do a whole lot of good for the City we love.

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