



**Mayor Jon Mitchell  
State of the City Address**

**Thursday, August 6, 2020  
[remarks as prepared]**

Good afternoon. President Lopes, city councilors, and residents of New Bedford, let me begin by offering my thanks to Rick Kidder and the Chamber of Commerce for hosting this first-ever remote state of the city address, and for all your support of small businesses in Southeastern Massachusetts during these trying times. I also wish to thank our sponsors for their exemplary corporate citizenship and unwavering commitment to the betterment of our region.

In more ordinary years, I come before you to report on the city's progress on a host of fronts, ranging from school performance to fisheries regulations to municipal health care. We cover many topics.

But this year is no ordinary year. Since March, our attention has been consumed by a public health crisis, the likes of which the world has not faced in a century. No one could have imagined that a pandemic would suddenly disrupt virtually every facet of our lives in a matter of a few months, cause over one hundred thousand deaths in the United States, plunge the country into the depths of a recession, and expose deep fault lines of inequality in American society.

There has been tremendous loss and hardship here in New Bedford. As of yesterday, 135 of our residents have died from COVID-19, over twenty-three hundred have tested positive, and hundreds have fallen ill. Our unemployment rate in February was at approximately 5%, and by May it had leapt up to 24%.

Behind these numbers – behind every dot on the graphs we see every day – are our fellow residents. Some have suffered the loss of loved ones, for whom they didn't get a proper opportunity to say goodbye. Others have lost their jobs, and wonder how they will support their families.

Many, especially the elderly, have felt the pangs of loneliness in their isolation. Still more wonder whether their children will have a full opportunity to pursue their education. And everyone has felt the anxiety of not knowing when it'll all end.

There's no sugar-coating it. The pain is real; it is wide, and it is deep.

And it could have been much worse. When COVID-19 arrived, New Bedford was especially vulnerable. Given the city's older-than-average population, the prevalence of underlying health conditions, and our large industrial workforce for which working from home is not a possibility, the predictions were that New Bedford would be among the worst hit places.

The history of pandemics showed that those who waited to confront the threat of disease, or tried to wish it away, suffered the most. So we knew we had to act fast, even before we had all the information we'd like. We began shutting down events like the city's annual half marathon and ordering the closures of activities before there was a single confirmed case in the city.

This may have seemed abrupt at first. But as I said along the way, I'm willing to take the risk of being accused of overreacting if it turns out to have been a false alarm.

At the same time, we raced to gain an understanding of what was happening. We sought out advice from infectious disease experts, and assembled a task force comprised of city departments and the region's major health care providers. We met every morning, and focused on five priorities: (1) supporting the capacity of the healthcare system to manage a surge of patients; (2) protecting vulnerable residents, (3) providing the public with timely information; (4) enforcing and encouraging social distancing; and (5) maintaining the continuity of city government.

We didn't wait around for the state or anyone else to tell us what we had to do. The robust communication among our team and with our residents enabled us to develop and refine over time a comprehensive set of policies and measures to protect the public and slow the spread of the disease. All of it was targeted to the particular circumstances in our city and region, and some of it was groundbreaking.

Consider, for example, the following:

When the state was moving in other parts of Massachusetts to set up dedicated COVID-19 facilities, we couldn't afford simply to wait our turn. Working with Southcoast Health and the Essex Group, we commandeered two recently-closed nursing homes and got them ready to take on patients.

We were one of the first places in the Northeast to establish a contact tracing system.

In light of the outbreaks in Midwestern meat packing plants, we knew that the workers in our enormous cluster of seafood processing plants were vulnerable. In consultation with businesses and labor organizations, we quickly pulled together industrial workplace

protections, which National Public Radio later called a model for the rest of the country, and we were able to stave off a major outbreak in those facilities.

We helped to set up a first-of-its kind testing program for fishing crews, so that they could continue to go out to sea and provide food for the country.

We issued a first-of-its-kind emergency order to protect seniors living in nursing homes and other residential facilities.

We set up a comprehensive system of protections for our police officers, fire fighters and paramedics, which have been responsible for New Bedford's having among the lowest percentage of infected emergency personnel of any city in the Northeast.

And with the help of Joseph Abboud Manufacturing, we became the first city in the country to offer a free mask to every city resident.

The list goes on. Suffice it to say, New Bedford has thus far been spared the worst of it, because we didn't hesitate, we were creative, and we worked as a team.

I am grateful for the dedication of so many along the way: city employees, healthcare workers, first responders and emergency personnel, fishermen, fish house employees, truck drivers, and so many others. While everyone was being told to stay at home, they didn't have that option, and they kept our city functioning.

I am extremely proud of our residents for rising to the challenge. They have been level-headed, disciplined and upbeat. They have modeled the response we'd hope for from the rest of America, and they have been directly responsible for keeping themselves and their loved ones safe.

I appreciate the cooperative spirit in which the city council has responded to the crisis, and the support they've offered the administration and our residents alike.

Let me make clear that none of this should be interpreted as a victory lap. I can't emphasize enough that there's a long way to go.

My point in reviewing the approach of city government and the response of our residents is to underscore that we are capable of dealing with the challenge. It won't be easy. The situation will evolve, and we'll have setbacks. But there's more we know now about COVID-19 than when it arrived, and we've demonstrated to ourselves that we are up to the task.

So how do we make that happen?

It starts with coming to terms with the reality before us. The virus will still be around for a while. If history is any guide, a second wave of cases is inevitable. And we can't assume that a vaccine will arrive by the end of the year. Indeed, the first question about a vaccine rather should be "if," not "when." There are many examples of viral diseases for which no vaccine has ever been developed, including the Spanish Flu and AIDS. Even if one is developed, clinical

trials will take a while, as will the ramp-up in production of enough vaccine to inoculate every American, not to mention billions of others around the world.

Moreover, the scientific consensus is that at most, only ten percent of the American population has contracted the virus, and that herd immunity would not take effect until well over 50% of the population has been infected. There are plenty more people out there right now for the virus potentially to infect.

The arrival of COVID-19 may have changed our lives like the flip of a switch, but it's a switch that doesn't work in reverse. It'll end eventually, but it won't be right away.

This reality is hard to accept, as nothing like it has happened in our lifetimes. It is natural to wish that it were over, and that we could go back to the way things were.

The open-endedness of this crisis makes it different from other calamities like natural disasters whose effect is finite; we know more or less when the damage will stop. Not knowing whether you or a family member will get sick, whether you'll have your job, and when, if ever, you can hug your close friend or engage in countless other "normal" activities, is stressful and anxiety provoking.

The good news is that the way forward has become clearer. The virus can be managed. We've seen other countries do it. We've done it ourselves in the last few months in the effort to flatten the curve. At the root of it is an idea we're all familiar with by now. The aim is to arrest the spread of the disease by depriving it of available hosts. That means that we have to keep people physically apart more than they normally would be, closely monitor the disease through testing, isolate infected individuals, and provide them the medical treatment they need to get better.

It's the same approach as before, and it's becoming easier and more effective. Compared to even two months ago, the availability of tests has greatly expanded, the tests are more accurate, and the results are produced more promptly. Healthcare providers and government agencies meanwhile have become more proficient in analyzing data and reacting to it through contact tracing and other measures.

And the healthcare system has a much greater understanding of how to treat the disease before someone becomes critically ill. You'll recall the feverish concern a few months ago about the supply of ventilators; you don't hear that as much now in part because improved treatments have made it unnecessary to put many patients on ventilators.

City government will continue to do everything in its power to protect our residents by working to get out ahead of the disease. Our decisions will be guided not by misinformation coming out of Washington or elsewhere, or by what might feel most comfortable or expedient in the moment, but on public health data from reputable sources.

Governor Baker's approach has been appropriately grounded in the statewide data, and there is much to be said for establishing city policies that are consistent with the rest of the state. But sometimes, we have had to calibrate our approach in light of public health data specific to Greater New Bedford, and we will continue to do that.

Within our region, the pandemic has not affected every group the same. As with many places, it has had a disproportionate effect on minorities and low income residents, many of whom have had to go work throughout the entire ordeal. Most notably, the infection rate among the city's Latino population is approximately twice that of the rest of our residents. I emphasize that this isn't a political statement; it's just a fact, and it presents a real problem. Our efforts will continue to reflect that we are one city, and that the welfare of one group affects everyone.

And of course we will strive to protect those most vulnerable to the disease, especially the elderly. Our focus has been on nursing homes and long term care facilities, as we've worked closely with those facilities to ensure strict adherence to safety protocols, and to facilitate more testing of patients and staff.

And we will continue to manage the multi-faceted fallout of the pandemic.

Through non-profit agencies, as well as the school department, we are expanding our support for mental health services. The pandemic has caused considerable anxiety, and has forced many into isolation. We must do everything we can to be there for those who are suffering.

Meanwhile, the New Bedford Economic Development Council has been working relentlessly to keep small businesses afloat, by connecting them with the Small Business Administration support programs, and by making short term capital available through our loan program and CARES Act funds.

The pandemic of course has squeezed our city's finances. As I explained in my budget address two weeks ago, we have been forced to make some tough spending decisions based on the recognition that the pandemic's financial impact will not be fleeting. It'll stretch across years. While federal or state relief may be helpful this year, it won't address the challenge in the longer run. We have to make adjustments now so that we don't find ourselves in a real pinch later on.

Tough decisions also will need to be made in how we open our schools. The school administration is developing plans right now, and should have some announcements next week. We are mindful that our children's education has been severely disrupted and that remote instruction, even when the necessary technology is available to all students, is a poor substitute for the real thing. A full reopening of schools at this point, however, would pose in my view an unacceptable risk of an outbreak. The reason is essentially that there isn't enough

room or staff to separate out students sufficiently to lower the risk. Feeding and transporting students also become complicated for similar reasons.

I wish to express my heartfelt appreciation to our school administration, principals, teachers and other school department personnel for all their hard work in educating our students under difficult circumstances this past spring, and in preparing for the upcoming school year. Much will continue to be asked of them, and they are up to the challenge.

To the students in our city, whose formal education and overall school experience has been materially interrupted, I want you to know that it pains us that you have been forced to sacrifice. You've lost a piece of your education, as well as experiences that are an important part of growing up: the proms, the sport seasons, the performances, and so many others.

Know that the adults who made these decisions have done so for the sole purpose of protecting you. It is our hope that you will grow in strength and wisdom from this experience, and we will do everything we can to keep you on track to pursue your aspirations.

So yes, government is working hard to manage the situation. But it can't be stressed enough that the primary responsibility of holding back the disease rests with all of us -- together. It starts simply with this: maintain social distancing and wear a mask when social distancing isn't possible.

We're far enough into the pandemic at this point to know, based on the findings of medical science and our success in flattening the first curve, that these practices work. We'll need to make these habits second-nature, like tying your shoes or brushing your teeth. It's something we should do without thinking twice about it.

Let's just ignore the noise of political posturing about mask wearing. The virus certainly doesn't care about anyone's political opinions.

Instead, let's continue to make mask-wearing a sign of respect for others, especially the more vulnerable among us, and a demonstration of our devotion to friends and family we could not bear to lose. Every time we don a mask in public we are sending a quiet but powerful message that New Bedford residents care about and respect one other.

And there are other ways to support each other. Seemingly minor gestures can go a long way. Check in on friends and family, especially seniors living alone, if for no other reason to convey to them that you were thinking about them. Offer friendly reminders to people who may be a little too casual about social distancing.

And at the risk of sounding paternalistic, don't forget to take care of yourself. Observe a routine. Get some sleep and exercise. Maintain your social connections. And if you need help, don't hesitate to seek it out.

If we stick to these basics, for ourselves and one another, we will assuredly be safer.

Safety is our foundation, but emerging from our current trial as a stronger city will require collective resilience. Resilience means more than just surviving. It means not just withstanding the challenge, but also springing back stronger.

We may not know exactly when the pandemic will end, but rest assured, it will end. When that happens, what kind of city will we have? The world will have changed. Things will be normal, but not the old normal of a few months ago. We will ask ourselves what we did to come back stronger. What will our answer be?

It would be natural right now to simply hunker down, and wait for the storm to pass. It would be easy to declare that the pandemic is a lot to manage right now, and we'll get back to the other stuff later. But building a city worthy of our children and grandchildren requires the gumption to press on, despite the stiff headwinds of the plague.

There are many examples in our nation's history when in a time of tribulation, we chose to press on, rather than curl up in a ball of self-protection. One of the most inspiring is the Doolittle Raids early in World War II. In the immediate aftermath of Pearl Harbor, America's confidence was shaken. We weren't at all prepared for war, much less on a global scale against formidable enemies. There was a looming sense of panic that after their widescale attacks across the Pacific, the Japanese would attack the West Coast. The country was down on itself.

Then an Army Air Corps lieutenant colonel named Jimmy Doolittle stepped up and said that the best way to respond to Pearl Harbor would be to launch a massive bombing attack on the Japanese mainland as soon as possible. It didn't matter that at the time Japan had one of the most advanced and best-equipped militaries in the world, or that the U.S. didn't even have planes that could make the return trip. Knowing that many flight crews would be lost, and that this one attack would hardly debilitate the Japanese, Doolittle and his squadron, with the support of President Roosevelt, launched the attack in April of 1942, hitting industrial facilities all across Japan. The sheer audacity of the attack sent the clear message that while the United States may be down, we are coming back. And it was an enormous psychological boost to the American war effort.

We're dealing with our own crisis now, a very different one, and we in New Bedford do not pretend to act on a national scale. But we can take a page out of Doolittle's book. When things get tough, those who press on despite the headwinds of adversity will thrive in the long run.

So we are pressing on with the work of building a stronger, more vibrant city.

Right now, we are rebuilding our port on a scale not seen here in decades. In the next few years, new or refurbished port facilities will come on-line that will support the continued consolidation of the East Coast's fishing industry here, and the arrival of the offshore wind

industry, creating more job opportunities for our residents. Pandemic or no pandemic, we will become the East Coast's maritime economy leader.

We are rebuilding our city's streets, and making major investments in our public safety facilities and parks.

We are restoring historic treasures like the First Baptist Church, and supporting the comeback of our arts and culture sector.

The SouthCoast Rail project has not hit pause, and in a few years will offer passenger rail service to Boston, creating still more job opportunities for our residents.

We are readying the city for the effects of climate change, and our new climate action plan will help us navigate the new realities of a natural world in flux.

And, we are continuing to remake our schools so our children receive the educational opportunities they deserve.

I offer these as examples of our determination, but also as reminders that the life of our city goes on, and this dynamic place is reinventing itself every day. Indeed each of us contributes to our city's history in ways large and small.

And that is why we should be mindful of how others, perhaps years in the future, will look back on this time, and look back on us. Make no mistake, they will judge whether elected officials and residents alike, acted for the betterment of the city in the long term, even when things were trying in the short term.

So let us leave them no doubt that in 2020, New Bedford was tough; New Bedford was determined; and New Bedford was united, when it mattered most.

Thank you for listening. Be well and be strong.