

State of the City -- Transitions

Introduction

Thank you Mr. President and members of the City Council for giving me a chance to say a few words about the State of the City tonight. I have submitted to you a brief report which is also posted on our website.

My goal tonight is just to highlight a few of the items in that report and to give you a sense as to where my priorities and attention will be focused over the course of this next Calendar Year.

A City in Transition

I know that it is customary to sum up the state of one's city or state or nation in one pithy word, usually something like "strong" or "secure" or "safe" (I'll come back to that word "safe" in a moment), but for me, the best way that I could describe Chelsea right now is to say that it is in a state of "Transition."

Certainly, its governing body has gone through a transition, with a major turnover and new City Councilor that have brought a great deal of energy and optimism to the City.

Obviously, my office is transitioning from a long time charismatic leader to – something different.

And, the makeup of the City itself is in transition. In its urban redevelopment district and along the new Silver Line Corridor, there is this enormous development pressure bringing with it professional employees and professional residents, but at same time in other parts of city we have pockets of poverty and violence and lots of social ills.

Even the schools I look at as being in something of a transitional stage.

I believe they have always overachieved academically, especially given the incredibly challenging demographics that exist here, but I don't feel that the schools have always been front and center here when it came to budget priorities.

I hope to change that.

Transitions aren't necessarily to be feared. Transitions occur all the time. It's what emerges that matters. And, my challenge is to ensure that what emerges here in Chelsea over the course of the next few years is a City whose state is safe, healthy, thriving and still very diverse.

Public Safety

Let me focus on that word safe for a moment and talk about public safety first.

Other than the substance abuse problems in the Square, you haven't really heard me talk a whole lot about public safety generally since I've been here. And, honestly, until the events of this weekend, I wasn't planning to make it a subject of this speech.

But, the absence of regular discussion about public safety shouldn't be taken as a lack of interest. Public safety is critically important to me as it is to every urban municipal leader.

And, people's perception of public safety is something we I must be concerned about if I hope to improve this City.

But, you as a City Council have devoted so many resources to this issue over the past few years, and we have such a top notch and well regarded command staff at our Police Dept., starting with our Police Chief, that for a City Manager like me, the most effective thing I can do is commit to maintaining those resources -- and then stepping out of the way.

But, it is probably worth a reminder to all of us of what those significant resources are:

First, you have committed to a contingent of 111 Police Officers. That's more than Everett, Revere, Malden or Medford. For a city of this size, that reflects a significant emphasis on public safety.

That has enabled you to have a permanent Street Robbery Task Force.

It also ensures that we have the resources to engage in joint regional efforts like the recent one that decimated the major street gang known as MS-13.

It allows us to provide dedicated officers to the state's Safe and Successful Youth Initiative, a partnership with ROCA designed to target at risk young adults between 17 and 24.

There are other efforts as well:

We have instituted a HUB & Cor roundtable to try to predict and intercede with at risk youth and families before crime or violence or other harm occurs.

I've also committed, and have a Chief who is committed, to dedicated walking patrols, and those will start back up soon in Bellingham Square, the Broadway Corridor and in and around this City Hall neighborhood.

We even fund a prostitution prevention effort, which this year has been dedicated to periodic stings but next year I hope will support some dedicated services for those caught up in this terrible life of sexual exploitation.

Now, all of these resources can never totally eliminate what we saw early Sunday morning – another incident of senseless gun violence ending in tragedy.

But, until this Country and its national leaders are is going to take seriously the appalling number of guns on the streets of America, guns that often end up in the hands of young men under 20 whose brains haven't even developed enough to control their worst emotional impulses, guns whose toll is felt most acutely in minority communities like Chelsea, we could add a hundred more police to our streets, and we still couldn't end this violence.

All we can do, and what I and you are committed to do, is continue with the efforts that I mentioned in the hope that we will, over time, slowly reduce crime in our community, ensure that incidents like Sundays are isolated, and hopefully bring our residents a feeling of safety and comfort that they deserve.

It's hard to look at the "big picture" when incidents like Sundays occur. Trying to convince someone whose friend or loved one was just shot that we are making progress on crime is not merely an exercise in futility, it's almost disrespectful.

But, in a calmer moment, you should take a look at crime over time in this City. It is trending in the right direction. And, your efforts have made a difference.

Economic Development

So now let me transition to a more positive story that this City has to offer. Because, there is indeed another story about Chelsea, one that is a true success. And, it starts with the state of Economic Development.

I'm not sure I can overstate how extraordinarily successful the City's efforts have been in the past few years in attracting first class development.

- The One North development;
- The new FBI Headquarters;
- The two new hotels, with a third under construction.

That's gold standard development for a community of this size. And, it's not some fluke. It's a reflection of the great interest in Chelsea from developers.

- * It's your proximity to Boston;
- Your proximity to Logan;
- The transportation network that is about to take a substantial leap forward with the opening of the Silver Line.

I'm not sure there another City with better geographic advantages than Chelsea.

It's these attributes that:

- * generated the interest in redevelopment of the junk yards adjacent to the old Chelsea Clock;

* It's what's driving hotel developers to look seriously at waterfront parcels adjacent to the Chelsea Street Bridge.

* And, it's what motivating the anticipated development at the Forbes site.

The Challenge:

The challenge for the City, in this transition, is no longer attracting development – the interest is almost overwhelming.

The challenge is making sure that development happens in a way which benefits Chelsea residents.

- That is going to require some careful planning.
- That is going to require that we demand public benefits when we do grant development rights;
- And it's going to require that we pay some careful attention to putting policies in place so we don't price out and displace our own residents.

Let's look at the three of those items for a moment.

We have been doing some planning.

- We are in the midst of a Silver Line Corridor Study, which should be completed this Spring;
- We have just begun a Waterfront Visioning Process, that will have a lot of public input; and

- We are making arrangements for a comprehensive Harbor Plan that we intend to commence in early 2017.

I'm hoping all of these efforts will lead to some meeting of the minds about how we wish this development to occur.

I'll also commit to you that I am very conscious, and will demand fidelity to, public benefits in any development. Just as an example, in our discussions with developers seeking hotels on the waterfront, we have been adamant that such development would only be supported by the City if it were accompanied by significant public access to the Creek area and the elimination of barriers that have hindered public access to that very interesting port area.

And, finally, as part of our efforts to counteract gentrification pressures, I am preparing an Affordable Housing Zoning Ordinance, often called an Inclusionary Zoning Ordinance, which will require any significant development to either dedicate a substantial percentage of units to affordability or make a contribution to the City's Affordable Housing Trust Fund. I expect to submit that Ordinance to the City Council later this Spring.

Not saying this will solve the potential gentrification problem, but it is at least a step in the right direction.

The Square and Broadway Corridor

I can't talk about economic development in this City without talking about plans for the Square and the Broadway Corridor.

I often say that my office doesn't need to have a critical role in development of the Silver Line Corridor or the Urban Redevelopment District. Those areas have such development demand that no matter what I do, or even me doing nothing, will not stop that development from happening the demand so great.

But, if we want to see improvements to this area, the Square and the Business Corridor, that really is going to take our collective effort – a lot of municipal attention and municipal investment. And, with your help, I hope to do both.

I do plan on investing in significant aesthetic improvement of the area. The goal is not so much a transition as it is a transformation:

- new streetscape;
- new sidewalks;
- new lighting;
- perhaps some façade improvements subsidized by the City.

I even want to study the traffic and bus patterns in the Square, with the possibility of reconfiguring such pattern to open up the Square and improve the pedestrian flow.

Now, none of that is inexpensive. In the most recent Capital Improvement Plan that is before you, I have \$400,000 in there for planning these improvements in FY17, and \$5 million in there

for construction in FY18. So, I am asking for a strong commitment from the City and its taxpayers to make this transformation a reality.

The Social Problems

Now, you can't successfully improve the Square and Business Corridor without paying some attention to, and making some investments in, the social ills that exist there. But, thankfully, the Council has been willing to do just that.

I don't want to spend a lot of time on this because this Council very familiar with these efforts, and has in fact been instrumental in making them come about due to your strong financial commitment.

But, it is important for our residents to know how much we are doing in that Square, because while other communities might get publicity about their homegrown efforts to combat this nationwide substance abuse epidemic, I'm not sure anyone is doing the quality kind of work we are doing here in the Square.

So, what are we doing exactly?

Well, first is a continuation of something Jay Ash introduced – the Navigators program. That is just a fancy word for street workers. We have a \$125,000 annual contract with North Suffolk Mental Health for two of these street workers. What they do is not complicated. They engage people in the Square and along the Broadway Corridor who look as though they are in need of help and services, and try to “navigate” them to those resources.

Helpful, but alone insufficient. What was clear to me when I started is that these Navigators lacked easily accessible services. They were spending inordinate amounts of time, sometimes unsuccessfully,

- chasing down detox beds
- trying to get emergency housing or food resources or something else.

So, we built resources around them. With your support, we funded and approved two contracts which I hope over time are going to prove effective. It's too early to tell, because these took effect only on Jan. 1 of 16. But, they are:

- a. A \$115,000 annual contract with CAPIC to have available for the Navigators, for those with substance abuse problems, some emergency housing and some emergency food.
- b. And, an \$85,000 contract with BayCove for immediate clinician services and some dedicated detox beds in a Boston facility.

I'm hopeful that, with these services, we can make a dent in this problem population.

Keep in mind where not talking about hundreds of people. Yes, there are hundreds of people in the Square and on the Corridor every day, but the overwhelming majority are engaged in daily business and commerce and adding to the vitality of this area.

Unfortunately, there is a relatively small number, maybe its 20, maybe its 30, but their presence detracts from the ambiance of the Square, and they have a real outsized impact on the comfort and perception of the Square.

These are the ones we need to engage with services. These are the ones that need help in restoring their dignity and redeeming their lives. And, these efforts help them do just that.

Infrastructure Generally

This investment in the Square isn't, for me, an isolated initiative. It's part of a much broader goal, really the essence of my philosophy of government, to invest in neighborhoods and in programs that benefit residents.

That's what my goal is over the next 4 years, and that is what is reflected in my Capital Improvement Plan which I recently presented to the City Council.

So, you will see that this plan has lots of money invested

- streets and sidewalks.
- Water and sewer work.
- School buildings
- Flooding problems

In next two years alone, I'm proposing over \$27 million in capital improvements, and that doesn't even include the \$20 million the City is spending for its share of the New Clark Avenue Middle School.

This really does represent another transition, from an era where you were building up reserves and being extremely conservative in spending to one where we are now taking advantage of that financial strength and investing heavily in our residents.

The School System:

So, I've talked about the Square, I've talked about Infrastructure, I've talked about Economic Development. The final place where I see a transition occurring is in the School System.

When I interviewed for this job, I made clear to everyone that I was a firm believer in the public school system and was likely to invest heavily in it were I selected.

In Revere, some criticized me for spending too much time, attention and money on the School System, but I firmly believe that good school system is what attracts good people and good families to your city and keeps them here.

So, you should be prepared to see from me proposals for a lot of investment in our Chelsea Public School System and in its buildings.

What specifically am I thinking about? Mostly it is in investments that will improve upon what we are offering for students beyond the traditional school day, during those time after normal school day when children and young adults tend to be a most risk.

- First effort is to expand the Citizens School program, which is now in some of the middle school grades but which I have committed to the Superintendent to extend, at the City's expense to all of no later than FY19.
- I'm also working to institute and expand afterschool and out of school time programming in the elementary schools. As part of that initiative, I'm asking this Council to approve tonight a Summer Program for at risk elementary students. And, with some help from the City, the

Superintendent will be launching a pilot afterschool program in the Mary C. Burke Elementary Complex for the 2016-2017 school year.

- Recently, we been meeting with ROCA about the possibility of some additional afterschool anti-gang programming in the High School, and, if we can work out the details, I may have some funds in my FY17 Budget for that initiative.

- And, finally, you will definitely see in my proposed FY17 budget a major expansion of the City's own Community Schools, probably part of an entirely new and robust Recreation and Cultural Affairs Division within our Health & Human Services Dept., that will enhance educational and recreational opportunities not only within our school buildings but throughout the entire community.

Conclusion

Now, that may seem like a lot, but I'll repeat what I said at the Council Inauguration.

This City has been blessed with great leadership over the past 20 years, and where that leadership was most effective and successful was in building financial strength for the City. Its finances are rock solid.

Having spent the past 2 decades creating this financial stability, it is now time to put it to work. To start investing these strong reserves into projects that make a real difference in people's lives.

That's what I intend to do. That is where my focus will be over the next year and the remaining years of my contract with you. And, that is what is going to allow us to emerge from this Transition with a safe, healthy and vibrant community.

Thank You.