

Inaugural Address 2016

Building the Walkable City of tomorrow

By: Mayor James J. Fiorentini January 4, 2016

Good morning and welcome.

Thank you all for coming out on this cold winter day! What a great city we have! I am so honored.

Every term should have the same energy as the first term but every term should be a little bit different, and every term should bring with it a new vigor and slightly new vision. Today, I want to describe my vision for the Haverhill of tomorrow.

But first, some thank you to those of you who made it through the cold to be here today.

I'll start with my family, who has stood beside me my entire life. There are several family members here and I would like to recognize them: my sisters Anne and Susan, my son Jay, my niece Kristen, and the first lady of our city, my wife Martha Fiorentini. Thank you!

Thank you Senator Markey. I am deeply honored here by your presence. Thank you for all you have done and continue to do for our State and our city and thank you for your kind words.

To our many public officials who have taken the time to be here today, State Representative Brian Dempsey, State Representative Diana Dizoglio, and State Representative Linda Dean Campbell. I particularly want to thank Rep. Dempsey, the chairman of the House Ways and Means committee, for all he has done for our city.

To our clergy, Father Delaney, Rabbi Korinow, Rev. Fr. Vart Gyoalian, Iman Abdel Samed, marhabaan, welcome and thank you for being here. Whatever your faith, whatever is your native tongue, wherever is your native land, even before my grandfather arrived here a century ago, Haverhill has had a long history of welcoming those who have arrived at our shores. That tradition will continue. So for all of you here today, welcome, or, as they say in Spanish, bienvenida, this land is your land, esta tierra es tu tierra, and this city is your city, esta is su ciudad and we are happy and proud to have you here.

To our great musical groups, the Haverhill High Band and Chorus, the Sons of Italy Drum and Bugle Corps, the Consentino Chorus, thank you!

To Matt Wray who spent months in Iraq and came back wounded, welcome.

I see a number of city employees in the audience and I would like to thank them, and all of our wonderful city employees for their service and dedication.

I particularly want to thank my assistant, Allison Heartquist, for her hard work in putting this inauguration together.

To my fellow elected officials, the members of the city council and school committee—congratulations! I welcome you and look forward to working with you.

And most importantly, thank you for being here and for allowing me to be here! I cannot begin to tell you how proud I am as about to be inaugurated for a 7th term as your Mayor, and how honored and humbled I am by your continued confidence.

When I first addressed you a dozen years ago, Haverhill stood on the brink of receivership. We had the lowest bond rating in our history and we were tied for the lowest bond rating of any city in the State. One of our fire stations was closed. There was talk of closing the library. Our high school was on accreditation probation, and we risked being one of only two high schools in the state that were unaccredited.

Today, a dozen short years later, our bond rating has been raised seven (7) times and today is the highest in our 375 year history. Our fire stations are open, our library has expanded hours, and our newly renovated high school is fully accredited. Today for the first time in our history, five of our schools are level 1 schools.

But the greatest change has been in our downtown. When I first addressed you, I laid out a plan to convert abandoned and polluted shoe factories to modern housing. Today, we have over \$150 million of investment downtown. Over 500 new housing units have been created, and 850 new residents moved into our downtown, many of them young millennials.

New downtown residents have sparked new downtown restaurants and new businesses. Downtown property values have gone up by \$49 million. None of this happened by accident. It happened because we had a plan and we worked the plan. As President Kennedy said, “Things do not happen. Things are made to happen.”

It isn't just downtown that has benefitted from this remarkable turnaround in Haverhill.

Today, the median household income in Haverhill is up by 28% from where it stood a dozen years ago. Today Four thousand more people are employed in Haverhill than were employed 12 years ago, and Northeastern University economist Barry Bluestone said that of all the Gateway cities in the State, Haverhill was second only to Chelsea in terms of job creation.

The downtown boom did not result in the overcrowding of our city or our schools. Our growth is under 1% per year and is less than the State average. Our school population has actually gone down—we have 800 fewer children in our public schools than we did a decade ago.

In short, the slow and steady growth of our city was exactly what was needed then. It is exactly what is needed now to continue our journey forward and build the city of tomorrow.

Haverhill has done well, but the best is yet to come. In a year, the first phase of the Harbor Place project will be completed, and the Hunking School will be open. In a year and half, the first phase of the rail trail will be completed, and the second phase will be started. The vision that I outlined to you four years ago, of a series of parks and playgrounds along the river, that vision is becoming a reality.

And today, there are investors interested in every single one of the few abandoned factories that remain in our city. Within a few short years, abandoned Haverhill shoe factories will exist only in history books.

This is our time! Today we stand no longer at the brink of receivership. Today we stand on the brink of greatness and we ready to build the city of tomorrow. But with every opportunity come challenges.

The city of tomorrow that I see ahead is a city with good parks and playgrounds, a city that is safe, clean and green, a city that keeps our residents here with good schools, an affordable tax rate and a great quality of life and a city that attracts young millennials to move here and stay here.

For decades, young people moved out of Haverhill. It is time for us to attract them back. This is our challenge.

And this is a challenge that we are well positioned to meet.

All throughout the country, young people and empty nesters are rediscovering city living.

One of the world's leading experts on cities, Edward Glaeser of Harvard, put it this way: cities have triumphed. People are re-discovering that cities are healthiest, greenest and richest places to live and they are flocking to them.

Not only are people rediscovering cities, they are rediscovering downtowns. Cities are encouraging downtown residential growth because downtown living has the least impact on our infrastructure—there are no new streets to build, no new water lines to extend, no new sewer pipes to lay.

There is a tremendous pent up demand for downtown housing; so much so that our downtown projects are filled almost as soon as they are put on line.

But the millennials, the people who keep a city vibrant and forever young, are being price out of cities Boston, Cambridge, Somerville and Salem.

This is Haverhill's opportunity! Today, for the first time in decades, we now have a downtown that people can live in and want to live in. We are the affordable alternative.

But if our opportunities are great, so too are our challenges. Our challenge is that there has to be a reason for them to come here, and, once the old factory buildings are filled, there have to be buildings for them to move into.

To make Haverhill the best city that we can be for our existing as well as new residents, we need to make Haverhill what author Jeff Speck calls a "walkable city." A walkable city is a city with good sidewalks, safe and clean streets, where it is a pleasure to walk to work, walk downtown, walk to parks and playgrounds walk to public transportation, or just walk around a nice neighborhood.

Sometimes a walkable city is a bike-able city, and every neighborhood needs a place where children and grownups can ride a bike.

In a way, a walkable city is back to the future. Didn't we all walk when we were growing up? We walked to the playground. We walked to the neighborhood stores and we walked downtown to shop at places like Mitchells, and Geros and Barretts, and my grandfather's store, Gus's Market. We walked to church. We even walked to school.

Now, we cannot make Haverhill a more walkable city overnight. The first step is to make certain that in every neighborhood, every resident is safe and feels safe and our public safety progress must continue.

But beyond that, it will take millions to fix the sidewalks in the city and millions more to build more. That is our challenge. But the Chinese have a saying, the journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step. This year, I'll propose that we take the first step to becoming a more walkable city by investing more in our sidewalks than we have invested for decades.

But having walkable sidewalks isn't enough. There has to be a place to walk to. Over the past few years, with the help of our State partners we've worked hard to restore our parks and playgrounds.

Now we need to do more. Great cities have great parks. My first initiative this new term will be an initiative I will send to the council this winter to add a new park within a walkable distance of downtown and clean up one of our entranceways.

Becoming a more walkable city means encouraging people to live & work downtown. Today we have a challenge we never thought we would have: finding enough places for people to move to when the factory buildings are filled.

That challenge can be met by allowing and encouraging the building of new buildings, particularly on Merrimack St. New buildings on Merrimack Street will bridge the gap between Harbor Place and the developments along Locust St and Locke Street. New buildings will help to bring the vibrancy to the Merrimack street end of downtown that the reused buildings have brought to the Washington street side of downtown. New buildings and new people, of course, bring a new set of challenges, every challenges of parking, and challenges of traffic. These are challenges we cannot ignore, but these challenges cannot stop us from moving forward. We will meet those challenges just as we met the challenges on the west end of downtown.

But not everyone can, or should, live downtown. The heart of Haverhill is in its neighborhoods. It is time for the neighborhoods around downtown to share in the downtown success. We need to work to encourage growth and investment in the areas within walking distance of downtown, the acre, Winter Street, River Street, the Mt. Washington area, and along the river front in Bradford.

This year, we have a tremendous amount of interest in investment along the waterfront. We welcome the interest!

That new investment along the water must always take into account our goals—enable a view and walkway to the waterfront, and create parks and playgrounds along the river.

Building a walkable city means building a city with more jobs to walk to.

For some residents, that means encouraging more jobs downtown. Bringing in housing can lead to jobs, but jobs are always the ultimate goal. We saw what happened in Lawrence when a single investor, Sal Lupoli, was encouraged to create jobs along the waterfront. Today, 1,500 people work in the area of the old Wood Mill. into greatness.

Not everyone can work downtown. For some residents, a walkable city means being able to walk to the train station and it means getting better train service to Boston.

For other residents, a walkable city means encouraging neighborhood job zones, where places like Fantini Bakery can continue to provide neighborhood jobs to neighborhood people just like they have been doing for over a century.

For other residents, better jobs mean expanding our industrial parks. It is time to look at our zoning laws to see if we can expand our industrial parks, and better use the ones we have today. It is also time to expand the capacity of our economic development office.

The city of tomorrow starts by being a walkable city. But it isn't enough to attract people to live here. To be a great city, our challenge is to be a city where will stay when residents will stay when they begin building a family.

Meeting that challenge means continuing progress in our schools. The schools are our future.

We rejoice in having 5 level one schools. But there is more to do. We cannot rest until all of our schools are top performing schools.

We know what works. What works is extended learning time, going to school longer and studying harder. We need to make extended learning time our priority to give all of our children a better chance to succeed.

We also need to work so that we do not become a tale of two cities. We have a beautiful new school going up in Bradford. But every child, in every neighborhood, deserves to go to a good school. The great success that Haverhill has had over the past twelve years did not happen by accident. Building the sustainable, walkable city of the future will not happen by accident either. It will happen only with careful planning, thought and input from our citizens.

The plan we just received from Mass Development is a good starting point for discussion. Just like people sometimes get second chances, sometimes get second chances. Today, the Mass Development plan gives us a second chance to undo the mistakes of urban renewal and to build the city of the future.

But planning has to include every neighborhood. Haverhill needs to continue to grow, but we need to plan for this and make certain that this growth never takes away the character and beauty of Haverhill. It is time to look at our master plan, and it is time for an update.

The vision I have laid out today, the walkable city of tomorrow, will help to attract new residents, new jobs, and help us to improve the quality of life for those residents already here.

In our future, I see a city that is safe, clean and walkable, with good schools, good jobs, good parks and playgrounds. I see a city that we are proud to call home. We have a good city now.

Our challenge is to continue our progress and build a better one. With your help, we will meet that challenge.

More than fifty years ago, John F. Kennedy said that government “is not a set of promises-it is a set of challenges.”

Today I challenge you to join with us to build that cleaner, greener more walkable city. Lend your city your hand, lend us your ideas, and lend us your energy. Working together, we can take the next steps of that journey.

Thank you for listening and for being here today.