

Inaugural Speech

1/4/2010

I would like to welcome the members of the city council, school committee, the municipal light board, the trustee of the Athenaeum and their families and friends, members of the clergy, faculty and students of both the Abner Gibbs Elementary School and the South Middle School to the 2010, City of Westfield Inauguration Ceremony.

I would also like to thank our city clerk, Karen Fanion and the inauguration committee members including city councilors Brian Sullivan and Mary O'Connell for arranging our event this morning. I would also like to thank Principal Rix for his efforts in once again being our host for the morning. Though, this time in a new location.

I would also like to thank our members of the Great and General Court of Massachusetts, Representative Donald Humason and State Senator Michael Knapik for attending our event today. And a special thank you to our honor guard from American Legion Post 124 for the presentation of the colors and thank you to the students who are providing our music today.

I want to thank my wife Tricia. For without her and our immediate and extended family, I would not be here today. Tricia made sure that our sons, Thomas and Jack, made just about every event on the campaign trail.

Having the Inauguration at the South Middle School, has special meaning to me. Not only did I sit in this same auditorium for many assemblies some 30 years ago, my three brothers did as well. Additionally, our father, Joseph Knapik, was a long time faculty member at the school, serving over 30 years in this building and retiring in 1998. And my mother, Alice Knapik, was a substitute teacher here as my brothers and I came through the grades.

A few weeks ago, I was asked if the children of Abner Gibbs could attend and participate in today's event. Having announced my candidacy in front of the Abner Gibbs School, I thought that their attendance would be most appropriate. Also in the audience from Abner Gibbs are my nephew Jim Knapik and my niece Katie Rose Knapik. Three generations of my family have attended Abner Gibbs and my children are a few short years away from enrolling.

But having these students here today is truly fitting, because as you know, Abner Gibbs faces an uncertain future and maybe closed in a few short years. As elected officials, if this comes on our watch, we will need to chart a new future for some of the children in this auditorium today.

It is a high honor and a privilege for me to take the oath of office as mayor of the city of Westfield. Having been a part of four previous inaugural ceremonies as a city councilor, I have always been humbled by, and grateful for, the trust and confidence that the voters have placed in us, their elected representatives.

Some say, this election, was historic in the city. Historic in that not only for the first time in over thirty years, the name Charles Medeiros was not on the ballot, but also because of the number of departing city councilors and the number of newly elected officials. Today we welcome six new city councilors (of which one has previously served), two new school committee members and one new Athenaeum trustee. To outgoing council president Medeiros, I would like to say thank you for your service to our community. I wish you the best in retirement.

Congratulations to the elected officials here today and to the newly elected officials I say, not only congratulations, but welcome to elected public service. Participation in municipal government as an elected official is one of the purest forms of democracy practiced in our great nation. Men and women from all walks of life, occupations and life experiences, offering themselves to represent their fellow citizens in their government is a great tradition. There are no career politicians in this type of government. Just average, everyday citizens, that have full time jobs and ran for elected public office so they could make a contribution to their community.

As you know, our nation, our state and our city, have experienced an economic calamity of proportions not seen since the great depression. As leaders of our city, our number one challenge is to ensure that our city's core services, education, public safety, and neighborhood services are maintained to the highest possible level. Though these are very difficult economic times, our citizens deserve the highest level of service we can provide.

We must always remember, that we represent the people that have elected us. Though we may disagree at times, we must always keep an open mind in order to continue to move the people's business forward. In keeping with that message, I announce today, that the open door policy has returned to the mayor's office and it is once again open to you, the people.

Always remember as elected officials, one of our most important duties is to ensure that the taxpayers' hard earned money is well spent. That means never being afraid of asking your colleagues or city officers where or how that money will be spent or has been spent. And that means never taking offense when asked that same question. In keeping with that theme, this spring, I will host a series of public budget workshops. The purpose of these workshops is to reach out to the citizens so that they can tell us, what they want to see in their budget. It will also give them an opportunity to see for themselves how we spend our money.

The budget is the document through which a City sets forth its priorities. It is the responsibility of the Mayor to create this document and to sell it as part of a vision for our City. Over the past two years, our City's vision has been blurred. Like all cities and towns across our state, we are facing challenging times financially. We must all work together to keep our city moving forward.

I will not hesitate to make difficult and informed decisions. I will work proactively with the city council and the school committee to ensure that our citizens' tax dollars are invested wisely. As Mayor, I promise that I will take complete responsibility for presenting a truly balanced and responsible budget during my term.

With the state facing a deficit of over 3 billion dollars in the next fiscal year, our city, must become self reliant. As a small business owner, I have been on the front lines of business planning and development for twenty years. My number one priority in the first 90 days will be to immediately reactivate the long-dormant Development and Industrial Commission. In the coming days I will be submitting to the city council for consideration the names of key business leaders to staff this commission.

Together, we will conduct a search for a new economic development director, begin the process of permitting a new business park off of Turnpike Industrial Way and map out a strategy to attract cutting-edge businesses with good paying jobs to our great city. I am committed to making Westfield a premier location and regional leader in attracting environmentally-friendly businesses.

Though these are difficult times, we should also take a moment to celebrate the very good news in our city. On the north side, we are presently experiencing the largest public infrastructure investment in Western Massachusetts. The Great River Bridge Construction Project is transforming our north side gateway entrance. When completed, this 65 million dollar investment will provide a state of the art transportation corridor, scenic parks and be a catalyst for economic development.

Later this month, the state office of transportation, will advertise another public infrastructure project, the Main and Broad Street Reconstruction. This 14 million dollar project will transform our eastern gateway and extend down Main Street around the Green and down Broad Street. When completed, this too will be a state of the art traffic corridor. But most importantly, this investment will enhance the beauty of some of our most historic homes and neighborhoods along these vital roadways. This project, should also provide a stimulus for economic development in our downtown.

With the assistance of the school committee and the city council, I will reactivate the long dormant youth commission. Once in place, this commission will assist in the effort to develop a state of the art athletic complex off of Montgomery Road. I will also task this group with assisting in the planning and development of additional youth oriented facilities and activities within the city.

Recently, the city council completed a long term capital plan for the city. Overall, this plan includes priorities amounting to approximately 31 million dollars. In the very near future, I will be meeting with members of the city council and school committee to begin to prioritize these needs. There is no doubt, that we need to begin reinvesting in our municipal structures and equipment. However, we will also do this thoughtfully. We will need to think differently moving into the future. We can not afford to continue spending money on buildings the way we always have.

One of the planned items in the capital plan is funding for a senior center. My goal in my first year is to assist the council on aging with final site selection for a new center. Once the location has been selected, I will propose to the city council a funding request to build a new center. This is a long overdue project for our seniors.

With effective leadership, our City will endure this economic downturn and emerge stronger. We cannot and will not wait for someone else to solve our problems. We must rely on ourselves- our schools, our families, our business community, and our resolve- to work toward a better Westfield. As your mayor, I will work tirelessly to that end. I will enlist every resource that I can. I will reach out to our Congressman, John Olver and our United States Senator, John Kerry as well as to our Governor, Deval Patrick, and our state delegation to the Great and General Court to ensure that your voices are heard.

Thank you.