

Inaugural Speech

1/3/2012

I would like to welcome the members of the public, 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 Westfield Vocational Technical High School, and the members of the Westfield Middle School South Jazz Band under the direction of Mr. Luke Baillargeon to the, 2012, City of Westfield Inauguration Ceremony. And a special thank you to our honor guard from American Legion Post 124 for the presentation of the colors.

I would also like to thank our City Clerk, Mrs. Karen Fanion and the inauguration committee for putting our program together today. I would also like to thank Mr. James Laverty, principal of Westfield Vocational Technical High School for being our host today. Mr. Laverty and his staff have put together a great event for us today. I would also like to thank the Mr. Edward Chrzanowski and students of the culinary arts program for preparing our refreshments today. I would also like to thank our member of the Great and General Court of Massachusetts, Representative Donald Humason for attending our event today. I would also like to thank my wife Tricia. For without her and our family, I would not be here today. As all of us know in public office, this is a team effort and their assistance and support are vital to our success.

It is a high honor and a privilege for me to take the oath of office as mayor of the city of Westfield. I continue to be humbled by and grateful for, the trust and confidence that the voters have placed in us, their elected representatives.

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 of 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. We must always remember that we represent the people that have elected us. Though we may disagree at times, we must always remember to keep the people's interest in mind when asking questions, and making decisions.

I thought it appropriate for a number of reasons to hold this year's inauguration ceremony at Westfield Vocational Technical High School. First among those was that 2011 marked the 100th anniversary of this fine institution and this ceremony caps a year of commemorative activities. This school represents our collective community challenge for the future. As we begin 2012, we will enter a phase of unprecedented repair work on our city and school buildings. This building alone, is the recipient of the largest single green repair grant in the state. This needed work addresses long neglected maintenance issues. The cost of this neglect city wide is in the millions of dollars. When we all took office two years

ago, there was no longer a “do nothing” option available to us. We must never let this happen again to our buildings.

As the school repairs get completed, over the next year, our focus for the years ahead must be the upgrading of the academic environment across the school system. This includes a robust technology investment at the elementary school level so that all of our elementary aged children will share a similar experience, the standard of which will be set by the construction of our new elementary school. And as our students progress through the system we must ensure that our middle and high school facilities are able to meet the 21st century standard of a quality education in the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering and Math.

Two years ago, nearly to the day, we assembled at the South Middle School for our 2010 Inauguration Ceremony. At that time, the city’s vision was in disarray, our problems seemed monumental. There was no plan for the future and the fiscal situation certainly could have been called dire. Everywhere I went, I heard people say to not expect to accomplish much. They would say “...after all not much can really be done in two years even with a good economy.” Well, today, two years later, working together with the city council and the school committee, we proved you can do a lot in two years, even in the worst economy since the Great Depression. We did this, with many new faces that joined our city’s government. Today, we welcome another new city councilor, welcome back a former city councilor, three new members of the school committee and one new member of the municipal light board. And like two years ago, there is much more that needs to be accomplished.

At the time, we were faced with the end of a lease at Juniper Park School and the looming closure of Abner Gibbs. My number one priority then was to ensure that the city had a plan to move forward. With the assistance of our state delegation, we successfully secured funding for a new school. As it stands today, it will be open September 2014.

We didn’t stop there, together again with Representative Humason and Senator Knapik, we secured the second highest amount of green repair money in the state for five of our schools. Much needed repairs began last summer on roofs that were leaking for years at Highland and Southampton Road Elementary School. And this summer we will see renovations and repairs on Munger Hill, Paper Mill, WVTHS and Westfield High School.

At my direction, and with funding by the city council, we commissioned a municipal building repair feasibility study. This document has given us a multi-year plan to repair our city buildings. The good news is we now have a plan for the future, the bad news is, every building in the report is in need of repairs and most need new roofs immediately. We have already started to implement the recommendations in the report by starting the much needed and long overdue repairs to city hall. Emergency roof repairs began last month. And in order to help pay for these needed repairs we needed to be creative. So at my direction we took advantage of a state program that allows the city to enter into a contract for energy management services that will allow us to reduce energy consumption and use the savings to pay for many of the needed repairs.

Two years ago, I made it a top priority to hire a chief economic development officer. The poor economy demanded that we do things differently. That instead of lying down like government usually does in poor times and making cuts to our citizens services we needed to think boldly and be aggressive to better control our destiny in the future. This person would be charged with the task of changing the direction of our city's economy from big box warehousing to manufacturing and service businesses that are compatible with our neighborhoods on the north side. And this person would also be the city's point person for an innovative relationship with its businesses. A relationship where the city became a true partner with its business community.

I appointed a Westfield resident, Mr. Jeffery Daley to be our city's first Advancement Officer. Because of his extensive knowledge of local businesses and state economic incentive programs, his experience in business as a former business owner and chamber of commerce director and the relationships he has fostered at the state and Federal level over the years he hit the ground running in the summer of 2010. In short order we saw what his hiring has meant to the city.

With the city council's assistance, we were able to rezone 69 acres of land at Turnpike Industrial Way so that we can begin the process of permitting this vital space for these businesses uses of the future. Along the way, with some very hard work by the Mr. Brian Barnes, the airport manager and Mr. Jeff Daley, we were successful in negotiating an expansion of a premier tenant at the airport that means over a 100 new high skilled high paying jobs for our city and the retention of over 140 existing jobs. In addition, through their efforts, we secured funding to develop additional industrial space at the airport. This will position Barnes Regional Airport to be a major economic engine in the future. Additional investment projects on the north side will add another 100 jobs to our local economy.

Two years ago, I spoke frequently about how the city needs to partner with the Gas & Electric and the business community so that together we can ride out the economic storm we were in. Today, I can tell you, we made good on that promise. Early in 2010, I met with the Chamber of Commerce members and began a series of first of its kind business tours. A common theme came from these tours, that the cost of energy (as there is not a competitive market opportunity in Westfield) and the lack of availability to utility supported conservation programs were making it difficult to be competitive.

I then met with the General Manager, Mr. Dan Howard, and shared with him what I was hearing. Mr. Howard followed up with many of these businesses and shortly thereafter, hired Mr. Sean Fitzgerald to be the G&E liaison to our business community. Today, the G&E is leading the way in providing assistance by initiating ground breaking programs not before seen by a municipal utility. To see how successful this has been, I would invite you to speak with the grant recipients throughout the city.

Additionally, at my direction, we stopped contracting out our community development block grant program. The program over the last few years had lost its focus and was no longer operating in the best interest of the citizens. I hired a Westfield resident, Mrs. Diana Mclean to be our coordinator and through her efforts we have reprogrammed the majority of funding to provide business assistance in the form of technical assistance grants and store improvement grants. Later this year we will initiate our "Restore" program that will allow qualifying merchants to improve their stores. We have also reserved a

significant amount of money to be used for future revitalization efforts in the downtown. The retooled CDBG program along with the G&E efficiency grants have been greatly appreciated. And Mrs. McLean works everyday on our behalf to help our grant recipients be successful. The “downtown” merchants have told me they have never before had assistance opportunities like this from the city. I will continue to fund additional grants in the next two years in an effort to assist our existing merchants and encourage new businesses to come to downtown.

Two years ago, because I felt it was important to create a long term infrastructure improvement plan, I proposed to the city council a bond that would fully fund design work for the Gas Light District, Western Avenue Reconstruction, Route 187, East Mountain Road and The Columbia Greenway. Most of these designs had been stalled for a nearly a decade or more. This effort has led us to be in position to begin construction as soon as this spring on the Greenway, the Gas Light District and the Elm Street Connector. The Connector project when completed will finish the work on Elm Street from the Great River Bridge to Park Square. All of this work and the completion of the Great River Bridge and Main Street/Broad Street projects will change the face of our downtown. We will have a downtown environment that we can all be proud of. Additionally, construction work on Route 187 should begin in 2013 and Western Avenue sometime after that.

We also completed very timely repairs to the Westfield River Levee system and recreated the river walk that connects the Great River Bridge to Chapman Playground. And speaking of Chapman Playground, with our children and neighborhood reinvestment in mind, we secured a \$500,000 grant from the state for the reconstruction of Chapman Playground. This project like many others had been on the drawing board for years. Today, with a city matching funds, construction has begun and a new water park and playground will be open by July of 2012.

Working together we demolished a number of long vacant buildings throughout the city. With the demolition of the former Lampson Furniture warehouse, we were able to renovate and add space to the Thomas Street Parking Facility. This part of downtown is heavily used and had fallen into decay. Today, with this investment, it tells our citizens we are serious about investing in our downtown and our merchants and citizens have been taking notice.

Two years ago, I promised we would select a site for a new senior center and begin work on a design. Today, we have that sight and selection of a design firm should be completed in the coming weeks. During 2012, design work will be completed and shortly thereafter I will seek funding for construction.

Two years ago, without advance notice, Pochassic Street Bridge was closed by MADOT. At the time, the replacement bridge design was not complete and there was not a funding source for this project at DOT. Working with our state delegation, the Governor’s office, and the Secretary of Transportation, we were successful in expediting the design and securing funding. The bridge replacement project will begin later this year one full year ahead of the original proposal from DOT.

We also secured an agreement with a vendor to construct a solar farm on the dormant Twiss Street Landfill. When construction is completed this facility will help to reduce the city’s energy costs.

We also began a multiyear effort to replace obsolete fire apparatus. In 2011, we took delivery of our first new engine in a decade. I also asked for the Fire Department to provide an equipment replacement plan for the next 5 years.

At my direction the department of public works has made a tremendous improvement in the reduction of the backlog in city trees that needed to be removed. With the help of Mother Nature and our efforts, we have removed hundreds of dead and dying trees from our public ways. I will continue this effort in the next two years.

I reinstated the very popular bulk pick up program for our citizens. And by better utilizing our chapter 90 appropriations and city funds we have been able to reinvigorate our road paving program to levels not seen in a decade.

And an accomplishment that often gets overlooked in town, the successful resolve to our long standing problem with animal control. We successfully established a canine shelter in 2010, and to help reduce the burden to our taxpayers, we entered into regional agreements with Agawam and West Springfield in 2011.

As impressive as these accomplishments have been, we still weren't finished.

At the time, two years ago, we were in the midst of the worst recession since the Great Depression and we needed to prepare our city for what lay ahead. I was acutely aware of dwindling state resources available to the city and that we needed to ensure that moving forward our financial operations were sound. Upon taking office, I immediately requested a Massachusetts Department of Revenue Financial Services Review. We generally did well in the report and we continue to improve operations as recommended in the report.

And just to let you know how accurate that statement on the economy was two years ago, a December 7, 2011 report by the Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation claims that cities and towns have weathered the worst two year stretch since the passage of Proposition 2 ½.

However, with sound management of our resources, during this terrible two year stretch, we saw our city receive upgrades in its bond rating by two major ratings agencies. Additionally, our cash reserves have grown from 3.4 million dollars in July of 2009, to 6.2 million in stabilization today with another 2.4 million dollars available in this year's free cash account.

And of course, I couldn't let this all be noted without mentioning the fact that in 2011, our city was hit with four Federally declared natural disasters, two call outs of the National Guard and the establishment of emergency shelters for two events. January and February record snow that saw blizzards and snow accumulation that collapsed roofs in town and across the region, a tornado, an earthquake, a hurricane that caused a flood and a Halloween snowstorm that knocked out power to over 90% of the city, all made 2011 a year to never forget in Westfield. But through it all, we continued to move forward without missing a beat. And if I might say, thanks to our emergency management director, Mr. Jim

Wiggs and our city management team, our employees and community volunteers our prompt response in all of these events was head and shoulders above many of the communities in our region.

What's in store for the future...

The 2011, Massachusetts Taxpayers foundation report goes on to say that, "For the foreseeable future, year to year revenue growth will be constrained, outpaced by the growth in personnel costs and liabilities." That should serve as a warning to us all that employee compensation in the future will be very conservative as we still have much to take care of with our city buildings and infrastructure and unfunded employee liabilities. Because we need to think of the future, in this year's upcoming budget, I will allocate, for the first time in the city's history, a sum of money to begin to address our unfunded employee liabilities.

Additionally, my focus for the next two years will be to ensure completion of the new elementary school and the senior center. And speaking of the senior center, I recently read a planning report on Westfield that talked about the new senior center coming to town. The date of publication was 1984. Well together, nearly 30 years later we will finally get that new senior center.

We will also turn our attention to Elm Street and the long stalled revitalization effort there. This site has sat vacant since 1986, in the heart of our downtown. I was in my second year of college at the time, and I believe councilor Miller was playing park and rec soccer the day of the fire. And both of us never would have imagined at that time, that twenty-six years later still nothing would be done with that site and we would be in a position to finally move a project forward. I think twenty six years is long enough to wait for the private sector to rescue this site. We have secured funding for a feasibility study and have completed the environmental investigation. In 2012 and 2013 we will address the needs of this area and a future public/private project will be proposed.

I will ask for funding from the city council for the design work for two new industrial parks, at Turnpike Way and at the airport. We have already secured state funding to pay for the construction at the airport.

We will continue to work hard to retain and attract new businesses that are compatible with our new vision for the North side.

We will begin construction on the Greenway and look to secure additional funding so that the project can be completed by 2015.

We will continue to repair our schools, city buildings and our infrastructure. A multi-year roadway improvement project for the route 10/202 corridor will begin this year with the reconstruction of Arch Road. In the next few years, improvements will be made to the intersection at the bottom of Clay Hill and the Turnpike Interchange area. This is a continuation of our efforts to date to address traffic congestion on our main arteries. We will also continue in our long overdue repairs to our flood control system.

After many years of talking about centralizing our 911 dispatch operations, we will have done that by July 1, 2012.

I will begin to implement our Fire Equipment Replacement Plan. The first request for vehicles is in front of the city council now. And in the FY 2013 budget, I will allocate funds for the replacement of our platform truck that is approaching 25 years of age and in need of replacement. Additionally, the Fire Department now has a plan to update their apparatus over the next 5 years.

The sanitation fleet is now beyond its operating life span and in dire need of replacement. A request for two new vehicles is now in front of the city council and the FY 2013 budget will allow for two more new vehicles to be purchased. By the end of the next two years, we will have updated the fleet and staggered the purchases so that in the future the next generation of city officials will not be faced with a fleet that ages out at the same time.

We will look to make another substantial investment in our recreational facilities by starting design work on a new state of the art athletic complex to be sited in the city.

We will continue our efforts to construct a solar energy farm at the Twiss Street Transfer Station and look to build an additional farm off of North Road.

We will continue our efforts to modernize our city's information technology operations. We successfully began our paperless efforts earlier this year and soon we should be deploying additional technology that will make accessing our government easier for its citizens.

We will continue our efforts to consolidate school and city functions where possible. Human Resources and Maintenance will be our priorities for the next two years.

And our effort to engage the citizens of Westfield, through bi-monthly newspaper columns, city sponsored newsletters, television shows, coffee hours, business tours and ward meetings will continue.

As I close my remarks today, I would like all of us to take a moment to remember two of our long time city elected officials who passed away this year. Mr. William Buzzee and Mr. Charles Medeiros. We miss them both every day.

As mayor, my promise to you, is to continue to work tirelessly to advance our city. I will continue to enlist every resource that I can at all levels of government to ensure that your voices are heard.

Thank you.