



Office of the Mayor
Thomas W. Bernard

Inaugural Address, “A challenge constantly renewed”

Wednesday, January 1, 2020

Good morning and Happy New Year. As we welcome 2020, both here in the City Council chamber, and remotely via Northern Berkshire Community Television, we begin a new chapter in the history of the City of North Adams. It will be a chapter inspired by our past and focused on our future, and it will be a story we write together.

Thank you to Reverend Mary Frances Curns who offered the invocation, and to Father Dariusz Wudarski who will give the benediction to close today’s proceedings. I’m grateful to you both for your words this morning, as well as for your dedicated leadership to your congregations and our community.

As we begin I want to congratulate the partners in city government who took their oaths of office this morning, including members of the North Adams City Council, and the North Adams and McCann School Committees. I also want to thank and congratulate those councilors and school committee members who end their terms of dedicated service with the swearing in of their successors.

To Council President Hopkins and Vice President LaForest, I look forward to working with you, and with all members of the Council, to conduct the people’s business.

The oath we each took today is a promise we make to ourselves and to our constituents: Every one of us serves every one of you.

That’s a commitment that transcends party affiliation or voter preference. None of us has a monopoly on care and concern for our residents, and our service to you is strengthened by our collaboration with one another.

That doesn’t – and it shouldn’t – mean we always will agree, but it does mean that when we act in good faith and in a spirit of service to our community and each other, we can achieve great things for the City of North Adams.

We are joined in this work by our partners in local, state, and federal government.

I'm pleased to recognize the dignitaries who have joined us this morning, including elected officials and their representatives. Each of you, and the leaders and organizations you represent, are important partners in service. I look forward to working even more closely with you in the coming year.

I especially want to acknowledge our city staff for their dedication and service. The work of our great team in City Hall, in the North Adams Public Schools, in the Police and Fire Departments, in Public Services, in the library, the senior center, and throughout North Adams often goes unsung, but rest assured your work is noticed and appreciated.

Finally, I know none of us here today could do this work without the support of our families. For my part I begin and end every day grateful for the love and sacrifice of my family. Thank you, and I love you.

It's no secret that I take tremendous pride in the great teachers I had in the North Adams Public Schools. They kindled my love of learning, challenged me to reach my potential, and inspired my passion for history, politics, and public service.

Among all these wonderful educators my greatest, and favorite, teacher of all time was and remains my dad, who is watching from home this morning. Over the years I've heard from many of his former students, and their experience mirrors my own: Mr. Bernard made history come alive for them.

One piece of history that came alive for me when thinking about the state of the City of North Adams in the year 2020 was President Lyndon Johnson's 1964 Great Society speech. President Johnson said:

The Great Society rests on abundance and liberty for all. It demands an end to poverty and racial injustice, to which we are totally committed in our time.

That vision and commitment continues to resonate, primarily because much of it remains unfulfilled throughout our nation as well as locally. While we rightly celebrate all the good things happening in North Adams we must never lose sight of the needs of our neighbors, friends, and family members, especially those who are struggling with loneliness, poverty, addiction, domestic violence, racial, religious, or gender-based persecution, mental illness, and other challenges.

The trials they – and we – face aren't unique to North Adams, and we will address them by drawing on our shared strength: by marrying incredible grass roots energy with city support.

We'll use this collaborative spirit to address the needs of the most vulnerable among us, just as we have done to build on the momentum which is fueling our growth.

That's how we honor the principles and values President Johnson espoused 55 years ago when he made it clear the work to build a great society is universal and ongoing. He said,

[T]he Great Society is not a safe harbor, a resting place, a final objective, a finished work. It is a challenge constantly renewed, beckoning us toward a destiny where the meaning of our lives matches the marvelous products of our labor.

As we renew that challenge for the City of North Adams going into 2020 we will do so by focusing on the priorities that President Johnson laid out in the Great Society address: our city, our countryside, and our classrooms.

OUR CITY

In 2014 the City Council adopted the Vision 2030 comprehensive plan. During 2019 staff in the Office of Community Development worked with the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission, our local Community and Economic Development Advisory Board (CEDAB), and community members to review progress and identify priorities and areas of opportunity to address over the next five years. This work will continue in 2020.

What is clear is that the plan has provided an effective blueprint for progress over the past five years, with a number of developments intentionally supporting, or fortuitously aligned with, its goals. These include:

- MASS MoCA, and the more than \$65 million in public and private funding in the Building 6 project which cemented the museum's world-class reputation and which draws an estimated 250,000 visitors per year.
- The vibrant role that Stanley Black & Decker and Crane & Co. play in ensuring that manufacturing remains part of the city's economic foundation, supported by McCann's local and statewide reputation as a vocational education powerhouse.
- The developments at GreylockWORKS, TOURISTS, and the NORAD Mill, which continue to anchor the revitalization of the west end of the city.

These efforts and others are helping to build and promote a robust and diverse economy for North Adams.

The data are impressive. Since 2015:

- The number of business establishments in North Adams grew by 16%
- Average monthly employment rose by 9%
- Wages paid by city employers increased by 18%, while average weekly wages received by North Adams employees rose by 9%
- Rooms tax receipts increased by 37.1%, while meals tax receipts rose by 27.7%

Housing production, another key economic indicator, has been flat for a number of years. However, that appears to be changing, with 86 new high end and market rate housing units being planned by private developers. These investments in residential real estate will increase our tax base, attract new residents, and revitalize city neighborhoods.

While I won't be fully satisfied until we see some of that housing production on Main Street, helping support downtown revitalization, this is an incredibly positive indicator.

Equally important to our revitalization efforts is the attention we have paid, and that we will continue to pay, to how we do business in the city. We recently completed updates to our zoning map and use schedule, work that began in 2016.

The result is a simplified and clarified zoning framework, one that is more protective of the city's residential neighborhoods, which are so central to the quality of life so many people enjoy and prize, but which also brings the overall code up to modern land use standards in the city's commercial and industrial districts.

OUR COUNTRYSIDE

Open space and recreation is a priority within the Vision 2030 plan, with the ambitious goal to "Grow the region as a premier active outdoor recreation destination in the Northeast." We have made good progress toward that goal, and we will continue to do so.

Since 2015 the city and private partners have added new amenities including the skate park, the splash park, and the UNO and Sunshine parks on River Street. We achieved Appalachian Trail designation in 2016, and continue to build an energetic and thriving bicycle culture throughout the city.

Looking forward, the TOURISTS team has laid out a network of 30+ acres of open space and woodlands as part of a plan to create a unique trail system. The city will be a partner in the planning of this ambitious project that will make the hotel and the city a destination for natural resource based tourism, and help create a pathway into the city from the west end.

OUR CLASSROOMS

From its earliest days North Adams has been a place fueled by imagination and innovation, a place where creativity and industry have coexisted and intersected, with education as the foundation for success.

Over the past 125 years, Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts has been one of the cornerstones of that foundation. The college has grown from a Normal School with 53 graduates to one of the top public liberal arts colleges in the country, and an indispensable partner in education, economic development, and community engagement.

With our youngest students I see the power of education firsthand every time I visit our schools and spend time with them and with our dedicated educators.

We saw impressive gains in student performance over the past year, with Colegrove Park Elementary School earning high marks from the state, and with over 70% of Drury graduates going on to postsecondary education.

These results are the product of effective teaching and the leadership of the superintendent and her district team. This is something in which all of us, and especially those of us who serve on the school committee, can and should take great pride.

At the same time we know that students today carry heavier burdens than ever before, and educators are expected to respond to a range of social and emotional needs beyond what previous generations of teachers could have imagined.

We ask a great deal of our teachers, and at a recent School Committee meeting we learned how one school is rising to these challenges.

Brayton and Greylock elementary schools secured a Safe and Supportive Schools grant from the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. The team at Greylock used the grant to help address student needs and to promote a culture of respect, resilience, and responsibility. Early results are encouraging, and what's most impressive to me is the fact that other school districts are looking to North Adams as a model for best practices in meeting similar challenges.

As we focus on student learning and school culture in North Adams we also have the opportunity to begin a conversation about the future of our education facilities. In December, Superintendent Malkas, Principal Cote, and I attended a meeting of the Massachusetts School Building Authority at which the MSBA board approved our district's Statement of Interest for a feasibility study to consider renovating or replacing Greylock Elementary School.

This is the first step in a long process that will be data driven, fiscally responsible, and representative of all voices in the community. Our goal is to examine how our facilities support our education needs based on current conditions and future projections.

CONCLUSION

The state of our city is strong, and it continues to get stronger!

Standing here two years ago, I had the luxury and comfort of being a new mayor. While novelty of being “the new guy” wore off for me during our first snow storm, I continue to learn about this job and our city every day. I know I will continue to do so during every day of the next two years, alongside everyone in this room and people throughout this amazing city we all love so well.

In the Great Society speech, President Johnson offered this challenge, one I reissue to all of us in North Adams today:

We have the power to shape the civilization that we want. But we need your will, your labor, your hearts, if we are to build that kind of society.

So let's get to work. Thank you!