

Inaugural Address

Mayor Kimberley Driscoll's Inaugural Address

**Monday January 2, 2006
Old Town Hall**

Ladies and Gentlemen of the City Council and School Committee, Congressman Tierney, Representative Keenan, my two former colleagues, Chelsea City Manager Jay Ash and Swampscott Town Administrator Andrew Maylor...and other distinguished guests.

Let me begin by offering my heartfelt congratulations to each member of the City Council and School Committee sworn in today, especially the new members. ~Your willingness to involve yourself in public service is to be commended and your participation bolsters my profound sense of optimism about what can be accomplished if we work together in the years ahead.

I want to welcome everyone to historic Old Town Hall.

In 1815 the land upon which this building was built was donated to the City by John Derby III and Benjamin Pickman Jr. with the condition that a new brick town hall and market place be built.

In 1816 the first floor opened as a market place and this wonderful room was first used on the occasion of President James Munroe's visit to Salem in 1817.

For the ensuing 20 years this floor housed Town Government until Salem City Hall was opened in 1836.

Some may be more aware of the prominence that this building played as the centerpiece of Salem's nationally acclaimed historic preservation efforts of the 1970's.

In many ways this building, historic and beautiful, but over that past 30 years never quite reaching its full promise as a center of activity, is symbolic of Salem itself.

Anyone who followed last fall's campaign knows that our's was not a campaign of promises but rather a campaign of promise.

The promise of a Mayoral administration that would be based on professionalism not politics, that is hardworking and creative, and that is inclusive and open to all.

An administration that, when confronted with the challenges of governing, will communicate with straight talk and open dialogue.

And yes, we will face challenges.

We will be tested by fiscal crisis in the very infancy of our terms in office. And this will demand that we do more with less for the foreseeable future.

And, I add today, the challenge of providing a new, professional and open government for all Salem residents.

Well how about we start with straight talk right now?

You are likely aware of our financial woes.

Let me state clearly and directly that our money problems are real.

The City Council and School Committee sworn in just a short time ago, members of my administration and, every citizen of the City of Salem are facing a bruising fiscal crisis that is far worse than what was anticipated throughout the campaign season.

Blame?

Sure we can point fingers and assess blame. But having spent the better part of the past seven weeks working on this issue I know that we cannot afford the time or effort to do that. To do so would simply not be productive, as it would not create one additional dollar to be placed against the deficit that we face.

So we turn the page.

But we turn the page with an understanding of what we are facing:

The depth of this crisis is significant enough so that several weeks ago this City depleted virtually all of our reserve accounts to pay past due bills.

There are no rainy-day savings left.

The fiscal mess is significant enough so that for the first time in recent memory we had to borrow money to be sure that we could pay our teachers, police officers, firefighters and other city employees.

Plainly stated, we've been borrowing money to pay our monthly bills. This is a bad habit and it's caught up to us.

But make no mistake, dire though our situation is, we will get through it.

And we will do so not by being secretive but by communicating openly.

We will get through this not by pitting branches of government against each other, but by working cooperatively.

And finally, we will do our level best to not let this very real crisis become the reason that we refrain from transforming this government and this City into all that Salem residents expect and deserve.

As we get to work later today we will continue to quantify the extent of this problem.

Working closely with the City Council we will determine a course of action that will put this shortfall behind us and we will move expeditiously to implement the plan.

Though our financial situation is paramount in our early plans, I want to spend some time today offering my thoughts on some of the more positive and exciting opportunities ahead of us.

It is my belief that the economic well-being of a community can be gauged by the health of its' downtown - - so Downtown Salem is front and center in any discussion about economic development.

I am sure that we've all heard it. It typically sounds something like...

"When I was young the sidewalks in Salem would be so busy that you had to walk in the street on weekend nights".

Or maybe you've noticed that even today - some 20 years after Almy's Department Store closed - many Salem residents - myself included - still refer to the municipal parking lot on Church Street as "the Almy's Lot".

While there is always a tendency to look back to times gone we can't simply keep talking about Salem's potential - we need to realize it.

There are a number of questions and opportunities...

Additional structured parking - where and how do we pay for it?

Can we find a way for Salem State College to provide a greater economic benefit to the downtown?

The MBTA has promised improvements to the Salem Train Station for as long as I can remember. Yet - - even as I speak - commuters are standing on a cold and windy train platform, having likely parked blocks away in order to secure a parking space.

While the new residential growth in our downtown has been significant, how do we compliment that with a more successful retail core?

And of course, the Salem Courthouse - the mainstay of our downtown economy. ~This development must be kept on track, as the legal community is such a significant part of our daily stock and trade.

Most cities of our size would be happy with just one or two of these opportunities but they are all available to us for a reason. People want to be a part of what is happening in Salem. We are the jewel of the North Shore. As such, we have an opportunity and an obligation to redefine our Central Business District in a manner that will - if correctly guided - bolster Salem's position as the economic and cultural center north of Boston.

Keep in mind that though we often focus on the downtown, Salem has economic opportunity in other areas as well.

We need to create a City and resident friendly development policy for those areas that can handle additional commercial growth.

The Swampscott Road Corridor, entranceways such as Boston and Bridge Streets, Jefferson Avenue and Canal Street - all of these are areas in which we should be encouraging investment.

We can't be held hostage by lack of access and we shouldn't let that fact continue to be used as an excuse.

In addition, some of our development opportunities can occur in city-owned assets.

This building is an excellent example of an underutilized city asset.

The reuses of the former Flynntan Site and Endicott School on Boston Street have both languished for far too long. Each of these disposition processes will now move ahead with all deliberate speed.

We must also look to our public institutions.

How fortunate we are to have Salem State College, North Shore Medical Center and the Peabody Essex Museum all within our borders.

The PEM's grand new addition, Salem State's redevelopment of the former GTE Sylvania Plant and the new Cardiac Care Center at North Shore Medical Center are each indicative of the confidence that these institutions have in our community. I will call on each of these institutions to be even more involved by drawing on their expertise and by encouraging an even stronger line of communication about City and institutional needs.

Turning now to schools...

Every day I drop my two daughters off at the Saltonstall Elementary School – sometimes we are even there on time.

There is nothing that I could do to better express my confidence in the school system.

Throughout the past campaign I heard from parents who spoke glowingly and with confidence about our Elementary Schools. While this is extremely encouraging, I want that same confidence to extend to the upper grades so that as a community we can continue to attract and keep good families in Salem schools.

And let me add a word about public safety.

Despite our financial woes we are fortunate to have a fire department that is the absolute best at fighting fires and a police force that allows us to sleep easy at night.

This is no small accomplishment in these uncertain times and it should not go unnoticed. Though resources will be spare it will be incumbent on us to make sure that each of these departments are provided the tools necessary to continue to do their jobs.

I end today with a call to each resident of this City to become more involved.

One of the things that I took out of my seemingly unending door knocking all spring, summer and fall - besides worn out shoes, sore feet and a trimmer waistline - is that Salem is very much a city of neighborhoods.

While neighborhood groups have been started and neighborhood activism is evident across our City, we can't stop there.

You are our eyes and our ears.

From traffic issues, to public safety, to infrastructure needs, democracy works best when you – each of you – get involved. And this involvement should be rewarded and acknowledged by City government.

For example:

creating a one-stop system at inspectional services,

-regular solicitation for open board appointments,

-and public services – the basic core of what we do in government - being provided based on need - and not on politics.

All are ways to encourage expanded public involvement.

I began today by talking about the promise of this building, this government and this City.

Let's hope that:

- today is not the last time that this building is brimming with activity,

- not the last time this government is poised to meet the challenges that lie ahead, and, certainly

-not the last time this city is steeped in optimism.

I offer my humble and sincere thank you for your confidence in me.

I pray that we are blessed with good fortune and I give you my unwavering promise that we will bring professional, open and inclusive government to City Hall.

Thank you and God bless.