

2015 State of the City Address

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Mayor Kimberley Driscoll
City Council Chambers, Salem City Hall
January 5, 2015**

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen of the Council, School Committee members, District Attorney Blodgett, Senator Lovely, and, of course, in coming Representative Tucker.

It is a privilege to join you all tonight to report on the state of our City.

I feel very lucky to live in Salem and even more fortunate to serve as Mayor of our community. Our Salem, a community that is growing, that is vibrant, that is moving forward.

The past year brought many notable milestones: We welcomed our last coal barge and our first major cruise ship. The demolition of the old power plant and the start of the new, greener, cleaner, more efficient power facility that will take its place. Along with it came a major, forward-looking tax and community benefits agreements that will provide long term financial stability, a smart community benefits package, along with an increased opportunity for economic growth. The long awaited MBTA's intermodal train station and parking garage opened. Renovations and improvements to our historic City Hall building were finished. The first phase of Canal Street's flood control project wrapped up.

New mixed-use developments at both ends of town- 28 Goodhue Street and 135 Lafayette Street opened and both add new, affordable, handicap accessible living accommodations to our city. Numerous new small businesses opened, and many existing ones expanded. Splaine Park and Bertram Field reopened after the completion of the significant improvements at each. We launched our new constituent service tool, SeeClickFix – which has tallied over 1,200 service requests in just its first six months online. And we rolled out ViewPermit, to streamline municipal permitting, making it easier for both inspectors and applicants alike.

City efforts helped to rake in just over \$6.1 million in 34 separate grants in 2014. And the Schools received an additional \$5 million in 29 other grants on top of that. We earned our seventh distinguished annual budget award, for a spending plan that grew by just 2.2%. And Standard & Poor's reaffirmed our record high double-A bond rating for a second year in a row. We enjoyed one of the busiest, but safest, Halloweens in years. And we continued to work hard to improve Salem's schools, giving our kids the resources they deserve to close that achievement gap and our teachers the support they need to make it possible.

In many respects, Salem is doing better than ever before. It's great to hear the numbers and see the improvement, but we are not content to simply stop there. We can't be complacent. We will continue to look for ways to continuously improve what we do and how we do it.

This year, 150 years after the Salem school board hired its very first superintendent, we are embarking on a search for a new leader for our school district. While we have challenges, we have always embraced our diversity in public education. In fact, our classrooms were some of the first permanently integrated classrooms in the nation in 1843. Today we stand committed to continuing the tradition of embracing diversity within our schools, but not only by welcoming students from all backgrounds, but making sure

we provide them with the tools to succeed. Whether it's breakfast in the classroom or new instructional practices, we want a transformational leader to carry forward our mission. Someone both bold and experienced. Those unwilling to embrace innovation need not apply. As our schools are beginning to make good forward progress, our next superintendent must be a strong leader, who will not compromise that progress, but work with our dedicated educators to continue forging ahead. Too much is at stake. Our students and our families are depending on us to get this right.

But the next superintendent will not be the only key new hire in our community.

By the end of this month our assessment center evaluating candidates to be Salem's next Police Chief will be complete. The finalists will meet with a working group that represents a cross-section of our community, who will weigh each candidate's strengths and weaknesses. This form of community involvement was not required by ordinance or by state statute. Indeed, the state civil service law makes no mention of community participation. We, however, value the perspectives, opinions, and input of our residents, our businesses, and our police union. I look forward to hearing their feedback on the candidates.

Our new superintendent and new Police Chief will join other new senior officials in Salem – our new Chief Information Officer, Matt Killen starts in two weeks- this position will unite, for the first time, I.T. operations in our municipal offices, our schools, and police and fire departments, under one strategic and unified vision.

As much as things have not been standing still in 2014, 2015 will surely be a year of even greater change, not just in people, but also in projects. It's truly a year of Building Salem. In fact, I call it the "year of the shovel."

As demolition wraps up at the power plant, Footprint will begin its construction phase.

The surface improvements to Canal Street will commence. National Grid's cable replacement project will get started. Early site work will begin at East Riley Plaza, for RCG's latest exciting mixed-use development in our downtown. Grove Street upgrades and reconfigurations will be complete, vastly improving that transportation corridor.

The Universal Steel building, the district court, and hopefully the superior court property will all be redeveloped and added to the tax rolls. Along the North River Canal Corridor, we expect that Riverview Place and the Grove Street apartments will get underway.

And the next phase of the Salem Wharf project-including the walkway and additions to the pier- will be complete.

And, finally we will not end this year without the commencement of our long awaited and frustrating to the bitter end new senior center. I am committed to seeing this project through as our current building is long past due in servicing our seniors. It simply has to happen.

All of these projects will create some disruptions, yes. But they also create improvements – to our infrastructure, our housing, and our economy. They create jobs, both temporary construction jobs and permanent jobs. Job growth is expected from positive changes at businesses like Jacqueline's Cookies, Alternative Therapies Group, and other exciting private developments forthcoming this year. In Salem, 2015 will be as much the year of new jobs as it will be the year of the shovel.

But even as we talk about the steel in the ground happening in 2015, there is still more to do. We are hard at work, planning the next investments, both public and private, that will make our City even more vibrant.

We will be completing the 2020 master vision plan for public buildings that will include projects like the relocation of City Hall Annex and the Horace Mann school. The expansion of the Peabody Essex Museum, the Waterfront Hotel, and Salem Hospital are on the horizon. And we will be getting ready for major upgrades to public infrastructure, including improvements to our aging water system, to the state owned Route 107/Highland Avenue corridor, to our transfer station site, to Old Town Hall and to Artists Row. Because when our bones are strong, our body is strong.

Working with the Salem Partnership and Salem State University we will renew our advocacy for a South Salem commuter rail stop and commuter rail service upgrades. Working with private property owners, we must take a comprehensive look at improvements to the connection along the North River between Furlong Park and the MBTA station. Let's face it: this North River Basin Corridor – a key entrance way to our city and a vital link between North Salem, the commuter rail station and downtown - can be more than a junk yard and automotive related industries. Let's work with these property owners to figure out how to turn challenges into opportunities.

We will commit to the next steps in the improvement of Winter Island, including moving forward with critical pieces of the Master Plan that preserve and enhance that precious diamond in the rough of our park and open space.

When it comes to City government in 2015, there will be change – not just in what we do – but how we do it. My office will engage in a series of City Walks: over the course of several weeks my staff and I will walk through every neighborhood in Salem. Armed with SeeClickFix, our mobile service request app, we will report issues, speak with residents about conditions in their neighborhood, and get solutions to the on-the-ground problems that we and they identify. We will continue to grow the use of the SalemStat- our performance evaluation program to report and improve what we do.

In 2015 we'll explore other ways to broaden citizens' access to government in Salem: With the relaunch of FYI Salem, our regular Mayor's office newsletter. With our new CIO on board, we'll move forward with an overhaul of the City's website, which will be made mobile-friendly. We will launch a new mobile parking app to make finding and paying for a space that much easier. And we will upgrade our public GIS platform – our online mapping tools – to put even more digital tools into residents' hands.

We will reinvigorate our Youth Commission, to create a true forum for dialogue and feedback, with its membership consisting, for the first time, of Salem youth – so that their voices can be heard directly by city government.

We will work with the City Council and our port professional planners to create a new Port Authority will help lay the groundwork for the professional management, growth and investment of our increasingly vibrant waterfront. Also in tandem with local legislators, we hope to craft a professional Traffic and Parking Commission, to replace the Parking Board and modernize how we evaluate and implement transportation and parking related regulations in Salem.

We are convening a working group to update the City's Open Space and Recreation Plan, the Community Preservation Committee is finalizing the updated Community Preservation Plan, and our Complete Streets Working Group is underway, identifying opportunities to improve our streets, sidewalks, and trails for all users.

2015 will also be a green year in Salem. We will advance the implementation of items in our recently completed Climate Change Vulnerability Assessment and Mitigation Plan, to pro-actively prepare for the consequences of a warming planet, rising sea levels, and more extreme weather events. In addition to code changes recommended by the plan, our next City budget will highlight specific, targeted investments that will be made to prepare for the impacts of climate change. Because for every \$1 spent on hazard

mitigation, we can prevent \$4 in future spending on disaster recovery. We will roll out Salem Power Choice, our electrical aggregation program that holds the promise of reducing both ratepayers' electric bills and our community's carbon footprint. We have already heard from one neighboring community who wants to join us in this effort. In conjunction, we will give ourselves the opportunity to move towards converting most – and potentially all – of our municipal electricity supply to solar and renewables. And we will finalize the conversion of our streetlights to LED fixtures, further reducing our City's electric bills and our impact on climate change. Pretty heady stuff for a city first settled in 1626.

In 2015 we will continue to lift up our schools. We will build on the best practices of our leading schools – appropriating what works best there to those schools that need more support. A teachers' cabinet will provide an additional venue for direct input from those on the front lines of our children's education. As we evaluate an open system model, we aim to increase the ability and flexibility of individual school leaders and teachers to make decisions about what they think is best to achieve success within their buildings.

These reforms are focused on giving our teachers more freedom and more input on how to improve student learning. In the coming year, you can expect increased experiential learning options within our vocational programs; more dual enrollment opportunities for Salem students to earn college credit while in high school and overall more alternatives for ALL students to succeed. I hope to spend more time in our schools – listening, learning and celebrating – both the accomplishments and the challenges....because whatever they are, we will be working on them together.

2014 was a year that proved that Salem is a City of inclusion. Salem is a City of sustainability. Salem is a City of growth. And Salem is a City of progress.

2014 was a year that proved that that which makes one Salem resident different than his or her neighbor doesn't make us poorer as a community. Those are the very qualities that make us stronger. They make us better and make for a more livable city. They are the qualities that make us Salem. The outpouring of compassion after the Dow Street fire, the support shown by nearby businesses for residents displaced during the Meadow Street incident in November, and our community standing together to endorse an ordinance that states Salem will not be silent in the face of discrimination: In 2014, Salem put to rest the old perception that we are a town where people once turned on each other. Today, Salem is a city where we turn toward each other.

In 2015 those values will not change, but much else in our city may. In the year to come we will have to work together constructively, in partnership, to make sure it is positive change, to ensure that forward progress does not mean any diminishment in the quality of life for our residents or the delivery of services that they rely on.

To the members of this Council especially, I look forward to working with you to help make Salem even better. There will be tough decisions in front of us. There will be times when we do not agree on the best path forward. But know that my door is always open. I am always willing to listen to your ideas, answer your questions, and address your concerns. And I will always respect your important role in Salem's governance.

100 years ago this year, Salem chose to abandon what was called the Commission form of government. Instead, we adopted a new form that created a City Council and Chief Executive, the Mayor. A century later the ability of that structure to handle contentious debates, weigh competing interests, and protect the democratic rights of all our residents endures. No matter what this year brings, I am confident we can work together to keep Salem growing, vibrant, and moving forward.

Thank you for the opportunity to address you tonight and may the year to come bring prosperity and good health to us all.

Thank you.