

2014 Inaugural Address

**Inaugural Address
Mayor Kimberley Driscoll
Collins Middle School, Salem
January 6, 2014**

Ladies and Gentlemen of the City Council and the School Committee, District Attorney Blodgett, Senator Lovely, and other distinguished guests. Thank you to the students of the Collins Middle School for leading us all in the pledge and the National Anthem.

To every member of our City Council and School Committee who was also sworn in today – especially our new members – let me begin by offering my most sincere congratulations. It truly takes a partnership to make this City go. As the saying goes, there is no I in “team.” Each of you has taken it upon yourself to do something that requires a special degree of commitment and service to our City and for that I and many others thank you.

And to the families - mine includes my husband Nick, our kids Delaney, Ailish and Nicholas - also here from my family are my Dad, two of my three sisters, my Aunt, Uncle and cousin - thank you for being here today and for all that you do day in and day out to help and support us as elected officials.

As we come together I can't help but reflect on my first inaugural address, eight years ago. At that time, I took office as a 39 year old new Mayor and now two terms later.....I'm still a 39 year old Mayor (funny how that works).

That first inaugural address took place at Old Town Hall, and I observed how that building was symbolic of our City: historic and beautiful, but not quite reaching its full promise.

Today, much has changed.

Old Town Hall now plays host to numerous programs, concerts, and events throughout the year. The first floor is home to a history museum and the building serves as the back drop for our very popular Farmers Market.

And just as we've revitalized that building, over the last eight years we've helped to revitalize this City.

We did it by living up to a campaign of promise that rose up from the grassroots of Salem almost a decade ago. It was the promise of an Administration that would be based, not on politics, but on professionalism. That would work hard every day and would embrace creative solutions and innovative ways of doing business. Most importantly, it would be inclusive and open to everyone.

That first year was a trying one for everyone in our city and in our city government. It's easy to forget: we walked into a \$3.5 million deficit that required we spend all of our savings – every cent, just to keep the lights on. For the first time in anyone's memory we had to borrow money to pay our teachers, firefighters, police officers, and other city workers. President Kennedy once said, “When we got into office, the thing that surprised me most was to find that things were just as bad as we'd been saying they were.” Well, in some respects, in 2006 here in Salem, things were worse.

But we didn't despair. We didn't give up. We rolled up our sleeves. We got to work.

In partnership with the City Council and city employees, we made some tough choices, brought in tangible, meaningful, reforms and got our fiscal house in order.

Six months in, we were able to submit and approve a balanced budget, and we ended the year with about a half-million in free cash to replenish our depleted savings. And we managed to do it while, at the same time, keeping the tax increase to the lowest it had been in a decade. In fact, that year Salem had one of the five lowest tax increases in the Commonwealth.

Since 2006 we've written seven balanced budgets, which have been recognized by national government finance watchdogs as models of what a responsible, transparent city budget should look like. In the last eight years, we've aggressively secured about \$130 million in state and federal grant funds – that's the equivalent of one full year's municipal budget. There are not many grants that we seek which we do not obtain. It's a credit to our outstanding staff. We negotiated Payments in Lieu of Taxes agreements with many nonprofits in our community, and a critically important tax agreement with the power plant. We bid contracts that had not been bid in many, many years, realizing substantial savings. We began a reorganization of city government that streamlined and improved how we deliver services. And we reformed our retirement system and our municipal health insurance program, savings millions in tax dollars, without sacrificing our workers' or retirees' access to quality health care and the pension benefits that they've earned.

The positive fiscal practices started 8 years ago continue to this day. In fact, this fiscal year the City budget increased by just 1%. Our tax rate went up by 2.2%, resulting in one of the smallest average tax bill increases on the North Shore. We certified \$5.5 million in free cash - our largest amount ever – our debt ratio is down, our bond ratings are up, and all of our reserve accounts are stronger than they've ever been. Just last month our bond rating was upgraded to AA, the highest credit rating on record ever for our City. Refinancing after that upgrade netted us a savings of a quarter-million dollars.

All of these actions resulted from professionalizing operations. It's just how we do business now. I'm sure that politics will never be completely out of government, but it's not part of how we manage our money...or more correctly your money. We've changed the business model in Salem and we're not going back.

Transforming and improving City government continues and the year ahead will bring exciting new innovations to improve service delivery, increase efficiencies in how we operate, and expand transparency.

A new mobile-friendly City website is in the works, with more functionality and an easier to navigate design. Look for improvements to our web based access with Commonwealth Connect, a web and smartphone tool that allows you to report a problem or issue directly to the right department, and speed up response time. E-Billing is now available, to make it more convenient to schedule and pay bills and to track payment history. Hearing "you've got mail" and getting your property tax bill in your inbox probably doesn't excite anyone, but it will save us tax dollars in mailing it out and save you money in not having to mail it back. We've already begun to use new ViewPermit software in-house, and this year we'll be opening it to public access too, so residents and businesses can file and follow permit and license applications without coming in to City Hall.

Our data-driven SalemStat program tracks and measures a myriad of city functions. This helps us identify and improve efficiency and effectiveness in how we deliver services. It's in full-swing for several of our departments and our goal is to expand it even further by the end of 2014. The Salem Announcements and Information Line or SAIL is now operational 24/7. You can dial 978-745-INFO and hear the latest bulletin or alert from the City – in both English and Spanish. We've hired the City's first Latino Affairs

Coordinator, to better open up our City government to all of our residents.

These tools and technologies will put Salem at the forefront of our Commonwealth's cities and towns when it comes to providing citizen access to information and services.

Many people know that you can connect with me on Facebook or Twitter or Instagram or email or via phone - cell and land line - or the old fashioned way, you can write a letter on a piece of paper – maybe even one you've actually written out by hand – put a stamp on it and mail it to me. The bottom line is communication is king. There is now shortage of ways to connect with your city. Eight years ago we lived in a world that didn't have Twitter, Facebook, or other forms of social media, but now we do and we have to adapt to it. In this new world, communication can be instantaneous and we use it to try and provide updates to residents and business owners about not only city happenings, but information that is vital to the quality of your life or your business.

Because how we run local government is just as important as what we do with it.

It was that same sentiment that inspired us to launch BuildingSalem, a public information initiative to keep you in the loop about the nearly \$1.7 billion in public and private projects happening in our city over the next few years. The list of major investments happening now, or coming soon, is far too lengthy to delve into here; I'm sure many here are already familiar with them. But, it gives us, as local officials, plenty to keep an eye on.

From a large scale electric cable replacement project that we must ensure is done right...To a new, LEED certified natural gas plant to stabilize our tax base, open our waterfront, help combat climate change, and keep the lights on – all at the same time. From a prime opportunity to preserve and revitalize some key currently vacant downtown courts buildings...To major projects at our nonprofit institutions – Salem State, Salem Hospital, and the Peabody Essex Museum. We must see the Mayor Jean Levesque Community Life Center through to completion...And we must implement the North River Canal Corridor plan, to re-invigorate the dormant brownfields sites in Blubber Hollow.

While managing all this investment will be challenging...and dusty, and disruptive, and noisy and downright maddening at times, managing disinvestment in one's community is a problem that I'm glad we're not facing.

The impacts of growth, investment and progress can never be entirely prevented, but they can be planned for. They can be managed. They can be celebrated for bringing jobs and long term stability to our community. In the end, the final result is a better, even greater City.

Think about just some of the outcomes of these initiatives.

A new power plant to lower regional carbon emissions, free up acres of developable property on our waterfront, and improve public access to our harbor. A university residence hall that will take hundreds of students out of our residential neighborhoods, put them on campus, and reduce the number of car trips on the roads in South Salem. An expanded wharf, trading coal ships for cruise ships, and opening up public access to parts of our waterfront that had been closed to us for generations, some that have been closed since the early 19th century. A more accessible hospital facility, with additional services and more jobs to benefit our entire region. A larger PEM Campus to showcase Salem as a center of art and culture and boost our hospitality and visitor industry. Private mixed-use developments to transform brownfields into market-rate housing, adding almost a million dollars to our tax base in the process. Congestion alleviation on some streets – and traffic calming elsewhere. Safer transit opportunities for pedestrians and bicyclists. A beautiful new Community Life Center, of the quality our seniors richly deserve. A major corridor on Canal Street that isn't underwater when it rains at high tide. An upgraded electrical grid with fewer power outages.

We must not lose sight of the upshot for each of these projects.

One of my favorite expressions is that, for our City to thrive, we have to plan the work and work the plan. Great cities don't happen by accident: they take careful, thoughtful planning and a pro-active approach. This year we completed and began implementation of the Point Vision Plan and our City's first Public Art Plan. We continued implementation of our school's Accelerated Improvement Plan and our City-wide paving master plan. In the year ahead, we will continue this commitment to a thoughtful, thorough, and strategic approach to local government, from the smallest details to the big picture.

Let me take a minute to talk with you, though, about perhaps the most critical issue facing Salem today: it's not our buildings or our roads. It's not our infrastructure or even our budget.

We are gathered here, at the Collins Middle School, for the first inauguration in our City's history to take place in this building – we are gathered here, in this place, for a reason: To signify to all, with unmistakable clarity that our primary focus in the years to come will be fixed with unwavering commitment upon Salem's public schools. And this charge is not simply for our School Committee and School leaders. We must all together devote ourselves to this end. This is a community mission.

As a community, we must commit to seeing our Accelerated Improvement Plan through to its conclusion. As a community, we must continue to embrace innovation, pursue excellence, and support our teachers. Whether it is extended learning time or more effective instructional support... Whether it is community partnerships or increased parental engagement... Every tool at our disposal can and should be on the table.

Most importantly, though, we must be serious about reform and continue being positive, pressing leaders for our school district. That means we don't wait for things to improve on their own. We don't chance that we'll be able to close the achievement gap and improve test scores. We don't watch idly if plans don't deliver results. We don't pretend things are better if they're not. We don't forget, that our work is not about the adults, it's about the kids.

Please don't take these words as a criticism. Every day, we transform lives in our schools, but the task has grown harder, accountability standards have increased – but then so, too, must our efforts.

It's about the kids. It's what we owe them: what the last generation provided to us, a chance and an opportunity to succeed. A path to prosperity. No longer will a strong back generate a middle class income, especially not in Massachusetts. Without a quality education we condemn the next generation to fewer choices and more poverty. In Massachusetts, in our knowledge based economy, our students will need to be even more prepared to enter the workforce.

The good news is we can do this. It will not be easy, but in the long term, it is our schools alone that can ensure the next generation of entrepreneurs and laborers, doctors and city officials has the skills and education needed to succeed.

In 2026, just twelve years from now, Salem will celebrate its 400th birthday – just the second community in the Commonwealth to reach that milestone. The Salem kindergartener of today will be a high school senior then. To my colleagues in public service, I put this charge to all of us today: let's shift our focus from the next re-election and put it where it belongs. On Salem, on the day of its 400th anniversary, as today's kindergartener crosses that stage to get his or her diploma.

What kind of City do we want this to be by then? What legacy will we bestow on the young adults of tomorrow – the next generation of this City's workers, entrepreneurs, parents, and leaders? In what state will we hand off our school system, not just to our children, but to their children? I know we all share the

same goals for our schools, and our city - for the two are inextricably linked.

In his inaugural remarks from 1966, one of our most distinguished and longest serving Mayors – Francis Collins, for whom this very school is named – said: “In this coming year, the task of the city government will be to effect a harmonious union of the storied past with the functional future. The task contains both an opportunity and a privilege: The opportunity is to transmit to posterity a city improved for the resident, the visitor, and the businessman. The privilege is to be numbered among those making such notable contribution. One concern only should guide us: the best interest of all the people of Salem in the long run.” Today, nearly five decades after Mayor Collins’ directive to the city officials of that day, our responsibility remains unchanged.

As we begin our work in 2014, we will mark the 100th anniversary of the Great Salem Fire of 1914. The extent of the devastation from that terrible day still resonates: Over 250 acres completely destroyed rendering thousands of Salem families homeless in just 13 short hours. Total losses estimated to be \$350 to \$450 million in today’s dollars. 1,800 buildings – gone – 3,000 people left out of work – and over 15,000 people who lost everything, including three who lost their lives. It’s difficult to imagine a disaster of that magnitude, which could – in less than a day – render nearly one-third of our residents homeless.

This June, in partnership with a number of institutions and local historians, our City will commemorate that tragic event. And we’ll also commemorate the equally remarkable relief effort that followed. A few days after the fire, a Salem newspaper columnist wrote of the people of our City: “We may be bitter in our politics, strong in our opinions [nice to know some things haven’t changed], but when the test comes, we all belong to that brotherhood of man whose first thought is not of himself, but of his less fortunate brother.”

Another writer reflected on the rebuilding of Salem with these words: “The splendid spirit of optimism which has so far carried the people over the hard places, we believe will prevail in the future, and from the ruins rise a city far better than the Salem of the past.”

Today, a century on, that courage, that spirit of optimism, that focus on the future...they have not vanished from Salem. In fact, it’s what we do best. We don’t settle. We set high expectations. And, when pressed, when the chips are down, we come together as a community to overcome our obstacles, and then set out to achieve a new mark, a new accomplishment.

This is the Salem of today. Never has there been such promise or such potential in just eight square miles. It’s one of the things I love most about being Mayor. There’s no closer, more meaningful way to make a positive difference in the daily lives of the people of this city, my neighbors, then by working for you at City Hall.

We’ve accomplished a lot here in Salem over the last eight years...A great lot. But what makes us all the better is that we don’t settle – we strive for more. And as far as I’m concerned, we’re just getting started. Thank you.