

## **Workforce Skills and Education Needed to Match our Strong Work Ethic**

1.31.17

As we begin 2017, our city is continuing a ten-year trend of solid economic progress. Leading indicators such as labor force, business start-ups, average wages, nation-leading fishing port activity, and dropping unemployment rates all reflect steady improvement with particular acceleration over the past three years. While these numbers make for good headlines, they don't tell the whole story.

Even with our recent successes, one painful reality remains—until the education and professional skill level of the community improves, the strong and durable economy we want for all New Bedford families will continue to be frustratingly out of reach. New Bedford is not alone in this regard; many cities and states across America are becoming increasingly concerned about not having enough skilled workers to fulfill the needs of companies ready for growth. While this is a national issue, we can, and should, take on the responsibility of making our change, for our own benefit.

Helping to bring about that kind of change is what the Regeneration Project is all about. It began in the spring of 2014 when Mayor Mitchell asked many of Greater New Bedford's business and community leaders to serve as members of the New Bedford Regeneration Committee. The task the Mayor put before this diverse group was to articulate a strategy for the city's economic regeneration that builds on the committee's collective experience in leading successful enterprises. The committee's final report, *Uniting in Pursuit of Growth and Opportunity*, is a statement intended to attract broad popular buy-in, shape economic development strategy, and signal to both private investors and government officials outside the region that New Bedford has a clear set of objectives.

The report highlights four main strategies:

- Bolstering local capacity to promote economic development;
- Fostering the development of Downtown New Bedford;
- Enhancing workforce development in advanced manufacturing; and
- Modernizing and growing our greatest asset—the Port of New Bedford.

To continue this work, in 2015 many of the leaders from the original group agreed to form the standing committee of the New Bedford Economic Development Council's Regeneration Project. Since then, many of the committee's original recommendations have been acted on, resulting in tangible progress in port development, driving new downtown investment and vibrancy, and in the ways that economic and workforce development services are delivered. A good start to be sure, but not yet game changing.

To help create systematic change to our too familiar pattern of an up and down economy, we wanted to take a closer look at one area of focus from our original report—the workforce readiness of our community. During this past six months, we engaged with the local stakeholders and agencies tasked with this mission; the Workforce Investment Board, New Directions, Bristol Community College,

University of Massachusetts Dartmouth's Center for Policy Analysis, New Bedford Public Schools, Greater New Bedford Voc-Tech, and the region's largest employer, SouthCoast Health.

All of these conversations and interactions lead to the overarching conclusion that this is not something city government can just fix like a pothole—All partners must do their share to be sure every tool is ready and accessible to those who are most in need. The citizens of New Bedford must also be committed to the hard work that lies ahead. Our workforce can no longer get by on a strong back and solid work ethic. Those attributes will continue to be of great value, but it is no longer enough, and we must adapt if we wish to thrive.

While there are big things that need to be done by all, we would offer that there are several early actions that can be started by the stakeholder agencies and organizations to help build momentum for larger tasks:

- Co-locate the workforce training programs with administration functions to assure the greatest possible delivery of services;
- Focus efforts on sectors with immediate growth potential, such as advanced manufacturing, healthcare services, trade skills (specifically waterfront related), and hospitality;
- Advocate for policy changes that remove unnecessarily burdensome hurdles to job training or placement;
- Emphasize job readiness skills for all—regardless of educational level or background;
- Boost local investment in education—both in the New Bedford school system and for those students seeking a vocational style education—to provide the necessary tools to maximize student engagement and the ever increasing demands and requirements for workforce and higher education;
- Work in regional partnerships to the greatest extent possible, since the labor market is not generally concerned with local municipal borders.

Building a highly skilled and well-educated workforce is a hard thing for any community to do and it will not happen overnight. However, taking some important first steps is critical to our future success. Education and workforce training levels are tied to crime, physical health, and so much more. More than any other determining factor in the well being of a community is its level of educational attainment.

We will continue to do our part to engage the public and private sector leadership of the community and advocate for this and other strategies that will increase the growth and prosperity of our city and region. As we first reported in 2014, the collaborative spirit of the community is alive and well. Our city will not only need that spirit, but the action and commitment of its citizens.

The best way for us to take greatest advantage of the good times and lessen the impacts of slower periods is to have a well balanced and diverse local economy built on the foundation of a skilled, well trained workforce in a community that is as committed to education as much as it values hard work.

**Gerry Kavanaugh, Co-Chair**  
Senior Vice-Chancellor for Strategic Management  
University of Massachusetts Dartmouth

**Anthony Sapienza, Co-Chair**  
President JA Apparel Corp.  
President New Bedford EDC

**Rick Kidder**

President & CEO  
New Bedford Area Chamber of Commerce

**Maureen Sylvia Armstrong**

President, CEO and owner  
Sylvia Group Insurance

**Nicholas Christ**

President and CEO  
BayCoast Bank

**Elizabeth Isherwood**

Chairman  
Greater New Bedford Industrial Foundation

**Dr. John Sbrega**

President  
Bristol Community College

**James Russell**

President and CEO  
New Bedford Whaling Museum

**James Lopes**

Law Offices of James J. Lopes  
New Bedford Historical Commission

**David Wechsler**

President and CEO  
Maritime International

**Keith Hovan**

President and CEO  
SouthCoast Health System

**David Slutz**

Managing Director  
Potentia Business Solutions

**Patrick Murray**

President and CEO  
Bristol County Savings Bank

**Helena DaSilva Hughes**

Executive Director  
Immigrants' Assistance Center

**Bob Unger**

Chairman  
Leadership SouthCoast