



John Bullard

My name is John Bullard. In 1969, I graduated from college and was trying to figure out what I was going to do with the rest of my life. I thought about it, read a lot of books, and decided that the way I was going to have an impact on the world was to try and fix up my hometown of New Bedford.

I had some time before I was going to go to graduate school in architecture and planning at MIT, so I started work at the city planning department. Ben Baker was the city planner. I also joined the NAACP and became a life member. At nights, I was working with Earl Carter as we built with Peabody Construction Bedford Towers and King Village around Carney Academy. During the day, at the planning department, we were building parks around the city and Bonney Street Playground and Francis Park, and others. I was doing work, making the Waterfront Historic District a Chapter 40C district. I was getting to learn about the city and really recognizing how the city of New Bedford had far more than its fair share of challenges and far fewer than its fair share of resources.

As I entered the four-year program at MIT, I looked at MIT as a big toolbox and started to gather all the tools that I could at that fine institution. If I had to do a study on zoning, I'd do zoning in New Bedford. I did an independent study looking at how Acushnet Avenue in the North End served contradictory functions of a transit corridor and also the center of the North End.

When I got out of MIT, I wrote a thesis on whether I could specialize in a place. Most architects specialize in a type of architecture like hospital architecture or multifamily housing architecture. Then, they go anywhere in the world where they can practice their specialty. I wanted to see if I could specialize in my hometown of New Bedford and then change my technical skills depending on whatever New Bedford needed.

For the first 12 years, I worked in the Waterfront Historic District. I was called the agent for WHALE, Waterfront Historic Area League, for the Whaling Museum, and for the Bedford Landing Taxpayers Association. Three different groups, who didn't get along with each other, but they all could tolerate me. That district was one of the most blighted districts, if not the most blighted district in the entire city.

I went to Mayor Jack Markey and said, "Everyone in the district wants to fix the place up. Would you help us?" He a courageous mayor with vision saw what could happen. We persuaded him. He invested some community development funds. We started cooking. We turned the area from the worst section of town into the best section of town. Then, we started fixing up areas around the district in Foster Hill Neighborhood and South Central, and others. We started taking on bigger projects like the Zeiterion Theater and the Rotch-Jones-Duff House. Really, momentum was getting very exciting.

Scott Lang suggested I run for mayor. I did. The first time I lost. That's not a pleasant experience. I tell you that. Then, the second time I ran, I won. I had to learn different skills. Instead of skills needed for historic preservation, I had to learn skills like negotiating labor contracts with unions or public education or police work, or how you get clean water by building a sewer plant. I did that for six years, three two-year terms. If you like cities, there's no better job than being a mayor because you're expected to get involved in everything that makes a city tick.

That was a wonderful job. But in the end, people did want clean water. But they didn't want a sewer plant, which was necessary to produce clean water. In my third term, I had a decision of where to put a sewer plant. I decided to put it at the South End of the city, a neighborhood that had always voted for me two to one. When I decided to put the plant where the original plant was, the citizens in the South End decided I wasn't such a good mayor anymore. I lost those two precincts, 6A and B, by 680 votes. I lost the entire city by 380. I became the ex-mayor of New Bedford.

Then, I worked for the seafood co-op, learning about fish and fishery management. My mission that my boss, Jerry Wheeler, gave me was to organize fishermen around New England. Fishermen are the most independent people there are. Organizing fishermen is like an impossible job. But fishermen are wonderful people. I did that



for six months. That was my third iteration of working in my hometown. Then, I ran into a problem with my plan. That is, President Bill Clinton got elected President of the United States. Congressman Gerry Studds thought I should join his administration. I did that. My job was twofold. One to run the first federal office of sustainable development, and the other was to help fishermen, not just in New Bedford or New England, but all over the country.

I did that for five years. Then, I pretty much... Lori and I had our Philip Washington and came back home and called up Peter Cressey. I said, "Peter, I think because educational attainment is so important. I'd like to work at UMass Dartmouth." Peter kindly had me work there, which I did. Then, I ran a school in Woods Hole, teaching young people about the ocean, which is very important, of course, to New Bedford because, as I learned, I could describe New Bedford in one word. It's a seaport. We depend on the sea. We send our people to the sea. We always have. I hope we always will.

After I did that for 10 years, teaching young people about the science and the policy and the history of the ocean, I went back to NOAA, managing fisheries from Canada to North Carolina. Did that for six years, and then I retired. Now what I do in retirement is I co-founded New Bedford Light because our local paper, the Standard-Times, is, unfortunately, becoming a ghost paper. We need local journalism to keep all of us accountable. I'm involved on the board of the Buzzards Bay Coalition. I've always been involved in the Ernestina-Morrissey, which is a historic vessel very important to Cape Verdeans especially, but all of us, and been involved in various other things.

I've found ways over 50 years, I'm still involved, still active, to help my hometown continue to evolve and continue to prosper. What have I learned? I learn more and more about New Bedford every day. New Bedford is a complex city. You don't understand New Bedford in a day, a week, a month, or a year. New Bedford makes you work to understand her. But boy, is it rewarding. I think New Bedford has a future whose ceiling is unlimited. I enjoy every day that I get to work to realize that future. Thank you for listening.