

Inaugural address, Dec. 7, 2015

Mayor Ethan Strimling

City councilors, distinguished guests, family and friends. Thank you for joining me this evening. The confidence you have shown in me as we face the many challenges confronting our great city fills me with appreciation and determination.

Before the focus of my remarks turns to Portland's future, I'd like to take a moment to note that today is a significant day in our nation's history. Seventy-four years ago Pearl Harbor was bombed. Many members of my family, including both my grandfathers, served in the subsequent war. I want to thank them and all the veterans who have served to protect the freedoms we all enjoy.

And speaking of distinguished service, I also want to acknowledge Mayor Michael Brennan. Mayor Brennan is a man of substance, ideas and a deep compassion for our neediest. From his work as a social worker to his tenure in the State House to his leadership as mayor, he has served Portland with a commitment matched by few. Whatever successes I have as mayor will stand on the foundation he has built. Please join me in thanking Mayor Michael Brennan.

As we make the change to a new mayor, we must remember that Portland has always been a city of change. From our start as a small commercial seaport, to our growth as the key economic engine for the state, Portland has survived wars, fires, recessions and depressions to become recognized as one of most beautiful and desirable places to live and work.

Looking around today, we see changes in almost every corner of our city.

New businesses continue our transformation from a sleepy seaport to a vibrant diversified economy.

New housing projects revitalize areas of Portland that only a few years ago were all but abandoned.

New families from around the world invigorate our schools and our workforce.

We who live by the sea understand that fearing and resisting this change are as futile as trying to hold back the tide.

However, we must also recognize that change often leaves some behind. A factory moves to Asia, leaving unemployed workers at home; a big box store brings consumer discounts, but strains small businesses; home values skyrocket, and seniors get

squeezed out; the loss of entry level jobs that lead to something better, leaves new immigrants stuck in poverty.

So, yes, we must welcome change, but not as our new master. No, we must welcome change like a guest who may become our new neighbor. We must prepare for its arrival and create an environment in which it can thrive, without losing sight of all that has gone before. Without knocking down all that we have built over centuries. Without losing sight of the essence of who we as Portlanders recognize ourselves to be.

Just ten days ago we celebrated thanksgiving. We gathered around tables with family and friends and gave thanks for just being there together. It's a day when everyone agrees that everyone should have a place at the table.

If there was one point I stressed in the campaign, it's that as your mayor I will listen to you. That I will seek in every significant decision to give everyone who wants it a place at the table.

The residents of Portland have to know that their concerns, their hopes, their vision, for themselves, their families, and for the city we all love, are being heard when decisions are made at city hall.

If you're a small business owner struggling to create a job or a grandparent struggling to pay your property tax bill, you will have a place at the table.

If you're a parent with a child at Presumpscot or a single person looking for a place to live, you will have a place at the table.

If you're a newly arrived immigrant or a fifth generation Portland family looking for a job – while I'm mayor you will have a place at the table.

Your voice will be heard. Together we will develop a shared vision for the future of this great city.

There are parts of the vision that are easy, parts we all agree on. And they far outnumber our differences.

We all want good jobs that pay a livable wage.

We all want good schools.

We all want a clean, safe city where homes and apartments are affordable, for young people just starting their careers and for seniors retiring from theirs.

But as we've seen from the recent headlines, too many residents are getting squeezed out of Portland by skyrocketing rents and high housing costs. The vacancy rate in Portland is near zero and the gap between what we can afford and what we earn is over \$500 a month. That is unsustainable.

This lack of quality, affordable housing, especially in the downtown area, has reached crisis proportions.

If we don't have more quality housing for middle-income earners, if we don't have places where people can live comfortably and affordably, there's no way we will attract new business, new jobs and new workers. We can't let that happen.

That's why I've created a council committee whose sole purpose is to confront this crisis. It's why I set a goal during my campaign to permit 2,000 units of market-rate, workforce and affordable housing within the next five years.

I also want to initiate a community conversation on our financial priorities to try to avoid property tax increases that are squeezing home owners.

While portland makes a lot of top 10 lists nationally as a great place to live, we're going to have to work hard, all of us, together, to make sure it's a great place to live for everybody – young people, old people, long-time residents, newly arrived immigrants-- everyone.

As your mayor, that's where I intend to devote my time and my energy.

But as we grow and change, we must also keep in mind the things that make Portland special including its natural, scenic beauty, which is important in attracting people, jobs and tourists to our city.

We are so fortunate to have beautiful and accessible open public spaces -- the Eastern Prom, Baxter Woods, Payson Park, Deering Oaks and yes, Congress Square.

So many of the issues and challenges we face are intrinsically linked to our economy. Whether we are talking about housing or homelessness, parks and open spaces, immigration and tourism, even the growing problems of heroin addiction – all of these issues ultimately hinge on a viable, sustainable economy.

And so it is with our schools.

Public education matters. Our kids deserve a quality education to prepare them to live successfully and happily in this 21st century.

And as any realtor can tell you, good schools are a major factor when families decide where they want to live.

As the largest city in Maine and the center of economic activity, we have to work together with our school board to achieve the best schools in the state. Period.

To do this, I want to see universal pre-K implemented citywide so every child starts school ready to learn.

I want to see our aging elementary schools renovated and rebuilt, so students can move from crumbling infrastructure to state-of-the-art learning environments.

I want a stronger partnership between the city of Portland and the University of Southern Maine so that USM becomes the most sought after and respected public institution of higher education in the state.

None of these things will happen overnight. None of it will be easy. As I've said, Portland is a changing city and it's going to change whether we want it to or not. But change that is positive, progressive, and that builds community is what we must seek.

The best thing we all can do is become part of that change. To listen, to get involved, to be open to new ideas and new points of view.

During the campaign some people even suggested that I might sit and listen to Gov. LePage. You know what? I probably will.

But will I agree with Gov. LePage on most things, or will he agree with me? Probably not.

But that's exactly the point.

There are many competing interests in this city, and there is no way that I or anyone else will agree with every decision that ultimately gets made.

Being Portland's mayor has to be 100% about this city and what the people of Portland want and need. It must be about what all of us dream for our city and what we believe we can build together. It's about building a shared vision of the great things we are now and the great things we still have left to accomplish.

That's why I put so much energy into building as broad a coalition as possible to get us to this moment.

From city councilors to municipal employees. From school board members to teachers. From organized labor to the chamber of commerce. From Democrats to Republicans to Greens. From the Sudanese community to the Somali. From longtime Portlanders who have ancestors that settled this sleepy town to new Portlanders from elsewhere in Maine. Every voice was invited to join.

And they did.

But the coalition we built to get us here was not simply built to win an election. It was built to transform our city.

Many people ask me, "how will you ever please such competing interests?"

The simple answer is I won't. I can't. No one can.

And they ask me, 'what promises did you have to make to get so much support from such diverse groups?'

I made no promises, except one. I told every single group and individual I met with that you will have a voice at the table. You won't get everything you want; but neither will the folks who oppose you. And I certainly won't get everything I want.

But I promise you will be heard and you will feel that your input mattered. Every single one of us has a stake in these decisions.

Let's make sure, as we debate the many challenges we face, that the scales of fairness are balanced. That we never become a city of haves and have nots. That we truly are in search of common ground. And that our focus is always what's best for the city of Portland.

A fellow Portlander, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, once said, "we judge ourselves by what we feel capable of doing, while others judge us by what we have already done."

I look forward to working with you in the years ahead, so that we will be judged not by our words, not by our hopes, not by our dreams, but by our actual deeds and accomplishments. I ask that you hold me accountable to this standard and that you hold each other and yourselves to the same, so that we succeed in making Portland an even greater city than it is today.

Thank you. And have a great night!