

JAMES I. COHEN
INAUGURAL SPEECH -- Dec. 5, 2005

What a great city we have. Portland is truly a wonderful place to live, and I cannot begin to tell you how proud I am to stand before you today as Portland's incoming Mayor.

But first, I want to thank all of you for coming, and for the love you too have for this City. It is why we live here. Every time I fly over Casco Bay I am reminded how fortunate we are. In a single glance, one sees a working waterfront, a scenic harbor, an historic downtown, and a forest city -- all within a short commute of beautiful lakes and mountains. Not many cities can claim these natural advantages. We can. So we should look up, celebrate our strengths, and grow them.

I moved to Portland with my parents in 1966 when I was 10 months old. My sister Halley was born here. Quite understandably, I had hoped to be born here too, but after 10 months of making my views known, my parents finally decided to make the move from Philadelphia. We have never looked back. Portland remains our home. And now it is home to my two boys, both of whom were born here.

My parents Irv and Jacki are in these chambers today, and I want to thank them for their love and support over the years. My mother helped instill in me an interest in public service through her many years as chair of Portland's Zoning Board of Appeals, and later as a town planner for the Greater Portland Council of Governments and the Town of Freeport.

My father helped instill in me a love of recreation and the outdoors. When we first moved to Portland, Back Cove was a place to be avoided -- particularly at low tide.

No one ran or walked on the Boulevard. Except one guy. That guy was my father. He was known as “the guy who ran on the Boulevard.” Since then, many others have taken up running on the Boulevard -- including me. The Cove has now been cleaned up and recreation trails now radiate from the hub that is the Boulevard. Portland is a better place because of it.

Also with me today are my sons Devon and Spencer, and my wife Joan, a self-described “recovering lawyer” who shares with me a commitment to public service -- including right now as president of the Lyseth Elementary PTA. I am so proud of each of you, and I thank you for your support and sacrifice as Dad serves this wonderful city.

I also want to thank my partners and colleagues here today from my law firm -- Verrill Dana. Your flexibility and support have contributed greatly to my ability to serve this city.

Finally, I want to thank all my friends and neighbors here today -- some of whom traveled great distances to be here -- for their support and their continued involvement in this City. I thank you all.

A Vision. I want to lay out a vision for Portland, a vision of a vibrant, sustainable, affordable city, and a plan to make Portland stronger.

Portland has outstanding schools, great parks and trails, and spectacular open spaces. We have our own symphony, outstanding museums, and terrific restaurants. We in this room have understood Portland’s appeal for years. Now the national magazines have discovered us. Within the last several years, Portland has

been recognized as a top ten city for historic preservation, for being a “green” city, for being a great place to raise children, and more recently, as a place to start a business. Why is this so important? The fact is, the educated entrepreneurs of today and tomorrow can live anywhere in this nation, but many are choosing to live and start businesses here in Portland because of our quality of life. Portland’s quality of life is the foundation of our growing creative economy, and why we need to ensure that Portland remains a great place to live.

Of course, with success comes new challenges. Growth and development help diversify our economy and tax base and increase the value of our property. But there is also a cost to growth in terms of higher housing costs, reduced state support for our schools, and more cars on our streets. We need to recognize and address these challenges.

Some solutions are already underway and need to continue: finding efficiencies in our government, staying within state-established spending limits, and carefully investing in new infrastructure to keep Portland moving.

But we cannot address our challenges alone. We need to build partnerships to move forward, and that will be one of my principal themes as mayor: Building Partnerships.

Regionalism. One partnership we need to enhance and grow is with our neighboring communities. Three years ago this Council embarked on a year-long effort to figure out HOW we could share services and facilities with other municipalities to lower costs and improve the quality of services. Some of what we learned has been implemented, but we have more to do.

Joining us today are Mayor Chuluda from Westbrook, Chairman Davis from Falmouth and Jeff Jordan, City Manager of South Portland. Also in attendance are Neal Allen, Executive Director of the Greater Portland Council of Governments and the members of the Cumberland County Board of Commissioners. I am delighted that these leaders could join us today as a symbol of our need to work together, and as one of my first acts as mayor, I plan to appoint representatives from Portland to work with our neighbors in a regional coalition tasked with finding ways to work together to save taxpayers money and improve the quality of our services. The work will not be easy, or quick, but in the words of Ben Franklin, “if we don’t hang together, we most surely will hang separately.”

Transportation. We also need to build more partnerships in the area of transportation. As suburbs grow, our streets have become choked with traffic. In Portland, the left turn is rapidly becoming an endangered species. Part of the answer we are already pursuing and it involves sensible traffic calming solutions and growing our bicycle and pedestrian trail network. But we must dig deeper.

We must also look seriously at our public transportation network for this simple reason: we know that every new rider on a bus is a car off our streets, which is what we want to accomplish. But we have a ways to go in this regard.

Looking toward our own METRO system, that system does the best it can with the resources it has, but service is infrequent and routes are sometimes circuitous. To address this deficiency, METRO has embarked on a comprehensive review of its route structure, an effort I have been proud to lead for the past six months. This is the first time routes have been explored on a comprehensive basis in anyone’s

memory, and I challenge the METRO to complete this process within the upcoming year.

Another solution is to grow our various transit providers closer together. Greater Portland has multiple, independent transit providers, but transfers among these systems are complicated and route maps do not overlap. There are few bus shelters. And not enough riders. A recently completed study of our local transit providers concluded that greater coordination was required. This solution has worked effectively in other states, and it can work in Portland.

To get there, I will be asking our Transportation Department to help coordinate a regional task force on public transportation to explore opportunities to improve system interoperability and streamline management. Enhancing this partnership among providers will undoubtedly be complicated, but our transportation future depends on it.

Schools. Portland's future also depends on its schools. I am a graduate of Portland Public Schools, and every year local students are accepted and attend some of the finest colleges in the nation. Our neighborhood elementary schools offer an outstanding education, and I have nothing but praise for the quality education I have seen for my own children.

But we need to maintain this quality -- and improve -- if we are going to ensure an educated workforce and grow as a city, a tall order given that only one in seven adults in Maine has a child in the public schools -- down from one in four only twenty years ago. We are also challenged by the fact that state funding for our local schools is less than what many other communities receive on a per pupil basis.

Part of the solution involves fixing a broken state school funding formula, and some progress has been made in this area. We also need to do a better job finding efficiencies. For the last several months, officials from the city and school department have been meeting to find ways to share services. In the past, these discussions have not resulted in change. This year, we cannot afford to tread water. The reason is simple. Unless we can be smarter about how educational services are delivered, property tax pressures will steadily erode the quality of our schools. And if our schools fail, our workforce will suffer, and job losses and economic decline will surely follow.

But we cannot ask our schools to meet these financial challenges alone. Our City Council must also step up, and to do this, we must ensure an open dialogue between our Council and our school board. To make this happen, I will work with the incoming chair of the school board to develop an agenda for semi-annual meetings between our two panels that will keep our schools in the forefront of our thinking. Very simply, strong cities need strong schools, and we have a responsibility to make this happen. We must make this happen.

Recreation. We also can do more in the area of recreation. Our Parks and Recreation Department offers programs directly to thousands of people each year, and it works indirectly with groups like Little League and Youth Soccer. One only needs to spend a Sunday afternoon at Doherty Field in the Fall to know how many hundreds of families are touched by recreation in Portland. These programs are essential to Portland's quality of life and to keeping families in Portland.

To ensure that recreation stays in the forefront of our thinking as a City, I believe this Council needs to take the step -- for the first time -- of establishing recreation as a standing Council Committee, specifically, by including recreation with our Health and Human Services Committee to form the "Health and Recreation Committee." If we want Portland to be a place that is attractive to families, we must be committed to offering high quality recreation programs.

Volunteerism. We can also improve our parks -- and our schools, our roads, and open spaces -- within existing resources by tapping into the volunteer spirit of our parents, our residents, and our businesses. This is another partnership we must grow.

We are a community that cares about its institutions and that is willing to contribute generously. It is my belief that, if given the opportunity, people will contribute even more to their local schools and parks. I have already heard from many neighbors willing to do just that.

But to tap into this volunteer spirit, we need to do a better job letting people know HOW to help, and WHERE to give. I therefore call upon the City to work with groups like the Portland Education Partnership to develop a web-based database to match volunteers with opportunities within the City and within the Schools. Because working together, we can make Portland an even better place in which to live, and AFFORD to live.

Sustainable Portland. Portland has been incorporated for over 370 years, and it will be around for another 370 years. So as we set out to make Portland a better

place, we need to think beyond the immediate horizon and chart a course for our long term success.

When Portland made a choice fifty years ago to build a school on Munjoy Hill that was not friendly to the environment, it may have saved Portland taxpayers at the time, but it cost Portland taxpayers more over the long haul in higher electric bills and a shorter building life span. Portland has learned from this mistake and is now building a new, sustainable school on the East End. But there are other areas where we can make better, long term choices.

This must include setting aside open space and linking open spaces together with trails. It also includes preserving historic buildings and landscapes that make this city unique. And it means continuing our successful recycling program, supporting METRO as it converts to cleaner burning natural gas buses, and endorsing Portland's effort to reduce the wasteful idling of vehicles.

These choices are obviously good for sustaining Portland's environment, but they are also good for sustaining Portland's economy. The reason is simple. By lowering the city's maintenance and resource costs over time, we save taxpayers money. By investing in our parks and schools and trails, we increase property values, stimulate long term investment, promote tourism, and diversify our tax base.

But building a Sustainable Portland will not happen by accident. It will require careful attention and planning. To meet this challenge, I have asked our two most recent former mayors -- Jill Duson and Nathan Smith -- to continue their efforts in this area by co-chairing a Sustainable Portland Task Force, which group will be charged with identifying existing and recommending new initiatives that contribute

to Portland's economic and environmental sustainability. Quite literally, our future is in their hands.

Conclusion. Portland is a place people want to be, where I want to be, but Portland risks being a victim of its own success as development offers the promise of a diversified tax and economic base, but also the challenge of more traffic, disappearing open space, higher housing costs, and declining support from the state for schools and other programs. We can respond to this challenge by stepping back, letting Portland drift, and eventually decline. Or we can stay ahead of the curve and plan for our future, for an educated workforce, for livable neighborhoods, and for a sustainable economy and environment.

The road will not be easy. We will need to work hard as a city, and we will need to enhance and build new partnerships with our neighbors, with the state, with our county, with our businesses, and with our universities. Because we cannot do it alone.

And so I ask you to join me as we take a strong step forward for Portland, for the region, and for this State. Together, we CAN make a difference.

And so, I thank you all for coming, for bestowing this honor on me to help lead this great City, and for your love of Portland.

Thank you very much.