

Mayor Leng's Inaugural Address 2015
(As prepared for delivery.)

Good afternoon:

Mr. Chairman, honored guests, colleagues, Commissioners, family, friends, supporters, and fellow Hamdenites. It is with a profound level of gratitude that I stand before you today, sworn in as your Mayor for a full term, ready to get to work. Winning the special election in May was important and gratifying; I was so very thankful for the trust the community put in me. We were able to keep the trains running on time, launch some new initiatives, and complete some key improvements.

However, 6 months is a short amount of time. A lot of people talk about how a 2 year term is really short; well, after a 6-month term, 2-years is going to seem pretty good. Winning the fall municipal election, and earning victories in all but one of our 9 districts, validates the work we're doing and the ideas and initiatives I've talked about with thousands of our residents. This victory inspires me to work hard for you every day as your Mayor.

I would like to take a moment to recognize Former Council President and friend Judi Kozak, who was kind enough to swear me in. Rarely will you find such a classy lady; one so committed to our community, and a person you can always go to for straight, direct, and many times brutally honest advice. She's been one of my earliest and fiercest supporters, someone I can always go to for help, advice, or to take someone out at the kneecaps. I'm thankful she's my friend and that she's in my corner. Thank you, Judi.

Additionally, I want to thank my fellow elected officials on this stage. This is our team; a team of dedicated, committed, and open minded elected officials that will work together to improve our great town. It is only by working together, with a sense of purpose and a consistent focus on progress and cooperation, that we can accomplish great things. All of us are lucky to have the team we have. I would also like to say thank you to people in this audience. Without your help, kind words, hard work, and support; I would have very little chance of standing here today. I thank you all.

I want to give recognition and thanks to my Mayor's Office team and my extended team of managers in Town Hall. I simply couldn't do it without you.

You know, there are people that allow you to be able to serve; and I mean before a single vote is cast. One of those people is my number one fan and the other has been a very good fan of mine for a long time, and continues to be ... most days. Those two would be my son Cooper and my beautiful wife and better-half Stefanie. Thank you for all that you are and for all the support you give me, both spoken and unspoken. Thank you for making this possible despite the very real time commitment and pressure that running for and serving in office puts on a young family. Most of all thank you for your love that inspires me to be the best I can be. I love you both. I also want to thank my parents and the rest of my family in the audience today; you all mean so much to me.

The honest truth is I'd like to spend about a half hour up here giving deserved recognition to friends and supporters who have helped me along the way, both in ways big and small. Please know that your support, words of encouragement, and efforts on my behalf will never be forgotten. And those of you who know me well know that I don't forget easily. Thank you.

I do have to recognize by name three people on stage with me. First, my governing partner within our Government Center, Town Clerk Vera Morrison; a trusted friend of 20 years, an ally I can count always count on, a moral compass for our government, and one of the hardest working and most caring public servants you'll ever see. Second, my friend former Mayor Scott Jackson; who served with distinction and made lasting positive changes which addressed long-term problems and helped put Hamden back on solid ground. It is because of his vision, dedication, and hard work that we are able to further the betterment of this town as we move forward. We thank you, Mayor Jackson. Finally, I'd like to thank Council President Jim Pascarella; who is such an effective, understanding, and knowledgeable leader. We are lucky to have him as Council President and he deserves all of our appreciation for his service as acting mayor during the spring. His ability, demeanor, and experience helped make the transition seamless and *this didn't happen by itself*. I also appreciate the fact that Jim served as Mayor because that gives him the distinction of being Hamden's 13th Mayor, to which I find being the 14th much more preferable.

Speaking of Mayors; can you believe that Vera has served with 7 out of the 14 Mayors we've ever had? How's that for a record of service? This speech isn't off to the shortest start, but don't be too concerned; I'm going to try to take the advice of an old master orator who said that good speeches are easy to recognize because they keep people on the edge of their seats: The problem is, this can often also be confused for people who are on the edge of their seat because they are trying to build up the nerve to be the first to get up and walk out I'll try to watch for that distinction.

As some of you know, I've been involved public service in our Town for 23 years as an activist, neighborhood revitalization leader, outspoken advocate, director of government operations, community development manager, Councilman at-large, finance committee chairman, chief administrative officer, and most recently as your Mayor since this past May. Working to help strengthen our town and improve our community's quality of life is *something that inspires me*. Working to help people, to help the people of our town, *drives me*. Having a very clear vision of where we are, where we need to be, and what our actions mean for our Town; seeing the great potential of what we can be *gives me focus and unrelenting determination*. We will make mistakes. Mistakes are inevitable when you're ready to make serious changes to the way we do business and implement positive change; it's inevitable.

That reminds me of a story. A few weeks ago, my wife, son and I attended one of our terrific Saturday Arts Programs for Hamden youth held each month throughout the winter at Thornton Wilder Hall. I was out campaigning beforehand and slid in a few moments after the program started; this particular Saturday they were performing a wonderful puppetry presentation of Aladdin. So, with a crowd of children on the floor and seats around the sides of the hall where a lot of adults were sitting, one of the puppets, the princess, looks out at the audience and starts to interact with them.

She said, "I'm from Agrabah, where are you from?" to which the children quickly yell out "Hamden!" The princess replies, "Oh how wonderful! Where I'm from we have a sultan, what do you have?" The children, impressively, exclaim, "We have a Mayor!" The princess then continues, "Our sultan is all knowing. Is your mayor all-knowing?" The children, without skipping a beat, cry, "Yes!" Boy, I love those kids

Needless to say, at this moment I was thinking two things: 1.) I was wishing that they could vote right then and there, and 2.) I was hoping that maybe, just maybe, I heard my wife say "Yes!" along with them. It's unconfirmed, but I don't think she joined them. Then the really fun part happened, a woman sitting in front of my family and I leaned over to her friend sitting next to her and said "well some people think he is". Obviously she is not a huge fan.

I mention the story because while we thought it was pretty hysterical, it's important to note that none of the servants on this stage are all knowing; certainly not me. What you can trust is that when I do make mistakes, I'll work to learn from them, improve on them, and ensure that at the end of the day we always deliver on the goal of helping our people and our Town.

On the local level we work very hard in Hamden to avoid the all too familiar nonsense that we see at the national level. Over the last two years it was a pleasure working with both the council Majority Leader Kath Schomaker, as well as the council Minority Leader Austin Cesare. When it comes down to it there are no Democratic or Republican ways to fix potholes, balance budgets, fix a roof or a playground, or to provide public safety services. There's just a right and a wrong way. Working together without the nonsense seen in other Towns and at other levels of government has indisputably made for a stronger Hamden. I'm very hopeful that this will continue because it's how we can best serve the people we were elected to serve.

So, what do we want our Hamden to be?

- Healthy
- Clean
- Green
- Revitalized
- Protected
- Caring
- Helpful
- Intelligent
- Family friendly
- Business Friendly
- Impressive

None of this would be possible without the Town being on stronger financial footing; that's what we've done and what we will continue to do. Over the last six years, alongside my friend, former Mayor Jackson, **we've strengthened Hamden's finances significantly**. The work accomplished has built a stronger Hamden and our financial house is now in order. Our budgets are balanced, our credit rating is improved, and our dollars are budgeted and spent wisely. We will continue to strengthen Hamden's finances and because of this success, we will now get to

work **stabilizing Hamden's taxes.** This will not be easy; but, we need to do it, we ought to do it, and we can do it.

On the stage with me, we are so very fortunate to have the leader of the Connecticut State Senate, Senator Martin Looney and the Speaker of the House, our very own Representative Brendan Sharkey. They understand how hard Hamden has worked to put ourselves on the right financial path. They know that these improvements were not without pain to each and every one of our wallets, and they know we need their help.

If Hamden can get our fair share of education cost sharing State grant funding, we could lower our taxes tomorrow. I know that they're going to do everything they can to help us get there. Please join me in applauding all of their efforts on our behalf and all the work that they can do to help us in the days ahead.

We will work to make Hamden healthy, clean and green. Hamden will be constantly working to improve parks and playgrounds, plant trees, and beautify our public spaces. I want our residents to be proud when they drive around their Town and I want people who drive through Hamden to immediately be impressed by our community; by the care we take to make our Town a place people want to be. We can't do any of this without the outstanding work of our Public Works and Parks Department and our effective leaders in that Department, Craig Cesare and Mike Siciliano, and their teams.

We owe it to our kids to make our parks safe places to play and enjoy the outdoors by further reducing the use of harmful pesticides at our parks, and by working to ban smoking in our parks so that 5 year olds don't have to be put in the position of inhaling second hand smoke on the jungle gym or while they play baseball.

We will work to make Hamden an even safer place to live. We will be laser focused on our Town safety. Crime is down in Hamden, in significant numbers; but it's never enough and we will work to continue this trend. We're very fortunate in Hamden to have a dedicated, thoughtful and effective Chief of Police in Tom Wydra, an active and dedicated Police Commission led by Commission Chairman Iezzi, and the steadfast support for our police efforts on the Legislative Council, especially from our former Police Chief, Councilman Jack Kennelly. Not every town has such supportive advocates for our Public Safety.

As I said throughout the campaign; we're going to do this with a page from the old and a page from the new. The page from the past includes increased walking beats and bicycle patrols in neighborhoods and on the canal line. My grandfather, Andy Balzano, instilled within me the importance of walking beats; the importance of officers getting to know the members of our community, and of our residents getting to know their police officers. We started the first walking beat in Hamden in nearly 40 years this summer and it was effective and greatly appreciated by neighborhood residents. Our Police Department's focus on outreach and the principles of community policing is a philosophy and practice we will seek to expand wherever it can be effective.

Along with a page from the past, we must ensure that the dedicated men and women in our Police Department have the best equipment, tools and technology to perform their duties and to keep us safe. We will work to make Hamden the model for progressive, forward thinking Police Departments in the State of Connecticut by using new tools and technologies to help make our Town and our officers safer. We owe it to them and we owe it to you. The next step is a natural extension from community policing and outreach, and this focus will be expanding the work we do working with our at-risk youth. Let's stop crime from happening in the first place. Let's work to give kids who are not in the best of situations today, which will likely lead to harmful choices tomorrow, a chance; let's give them opportunity. Opportunities such as youth outreach programs, mentoring programs, summer jobs programs, intervention programs, comprehensive youth case management (as has recently been implemented in New Haven with incredible results), expanded positive volunteer initiatives and more. These are some of the ways we can make immeasurably positive changes in the lives of our at-risk kids and build a stronger Hamden.

Hamden will listen to our residents and work zealously to improve our constituent services. Our residents want to participate and to share their thoughts and opinions; and I want to hear from them. I started focusing on this philosophy with "Mayor's Night Out", an effort to engage with our citizens and listen to their concerns and complaints at times and locations convenient and comfortable to them.

Now, with a full-term, I will expand upon this effort with initiatives such as "Mayor's Day Out" at our northern and southern Community Police Sub-stations, "Mayor's Night In" with opportunities for people to meet one-on-one with both me and department heads they need assistance with, and with "Virtual Town Hall" meetings via the use of our website and social media. These initiatives will give residents convenient opportunities to ask questions and register complaints, or offer ideas right from the comfort of their home.

A Mayor on the West Coast recently said it best when he said that it was time to move past what is too often a rotary phone government and move into the smart phone era. And he's right.

We will work to revitalize and to protect our neighborhoods. This means the creation of Neighborhood Revitalization Zones in several neighborhoods in Town; a process that proved very successful 20 years ago and one with which I was intimately involved and see great potential in returning to.

We will protect our neighborhoods and our residential quality of life. We will do this in many ways; through ensuring neighborhood walkability and by calming traffic, ensuring for neighborhood friendly development, and by expanding our efforts to address the issues that come with off-campus student housing. I have asked President Lahey of Quinnipiac University to help the Town and I have set expectations for what the Town expects from the University. I am confident you will see many cooperative efforts to improve on our serious neighborhood problems from the Town, University, and University students; the vast majority of whom are eager to be good citizens.

We need to make it easier for businesses to come into Town and certainly easier for them to navigate a cumbersome permitting process. We want to show that local government is on both the residents and the businesses side. We will have a local government that will help you navigate the procedures and processes so that businesses are not afraid to invest in our town.

We also need to do more to address a problem that I'm afraid we all wish didn't exist - hunger. We need to acknowledge that we have too many families who are hungry and too many families who are downright struggling to get by. This past week many of us enjoyed a plentiful Thanksgiving feast; at the same time our community services department worked very hard to gather Thanksgiving baskets for over 450 families who, if not for their efforts, could have been without. We need to make sure that we as a community come together and work on, think about, and offer generosity and solutions for every month out of the year; not just around the holidays. I think we can do this. I think we can do better. Real change here can only come with a team effort; change will require forging partnerships and encouraging institutions and corporations to help us by doing the right thing. We can do this. It's the right thing to do.

I wish I had more time, because our Education system, our Fire Department, our Library system and many other Hamden Departments and services deserve recognition; but I'm afraid we've hit the point of people getting ready to look to be the first to exit.

I have outlined today a roadmap of reforms, ideas, commitments, and concepts that can greatly improve our community. I am ready to work for you, and with you, and when needed to fight for you to make Hamden better for each and every one of us. The team on this stage and the people in this auditorium today are ready to be a part of this effort. There is so much we can do. Only together can we accomplish the goal of building a better Hamden.

I stand before you today to commit, that together, we will build a stronger Hamden.

Thank you and God bless.

Curt Balzano Leng
Mayor, Town of Hamden