

Mayoral Transitions

How Three Mayors Stepped into the Role, in Their Own Words

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Whenever a new mayor is inaugurated, power is transferred from one city leader to the next. Mayoral transitions could stretch for months from election to inauguration or could be as compact as a couple of weeks—or even days. They could represent jarring shifts from the status quo or firm commitments to continuity. Regardless of the nature of the transition and the specific circumstances in a city, taking office, stepping into the new role, building a team, and preparing to deliver on campaign promises is a daunting challenge.

This case presents the stories of three leaders who took the helm of US cities under varying circumstances: Louisville, Kentucky, Mayor Greg Fischer who took office in 2011; Mount Vernon, New York, Mayor Shawyn Patterson-Howard who took office in 2020; and Miami, Florida, Mayor Francis Suarez who took office in 2017.ⁱ

ⁱ Mayor Fischer’s and Mayor Patterson-Howard’s first-person accounts of their transitions are based on interviews with the case authors. Their accounts have been edited for length and clarity. The account of Mayor Suarez’s transition is based on statements by him obtained from the public record. The short introductions preceding each account were written by the case authors.

Mayor Greg Fischer on Forging One's Own Path

Louisville, Kentucky, Mayor Greg Fischer was elected in 2010. He had a reputation as an accomplished businessman with a penchant for innovation and performance improvement; he had co-founded, built, and sold a global beverage and ice dispensing company in the late 1990s and later co-founded Iceberg Ventures to invest in emerging companies.¹ He succeeded Mayor Jerry Abramson, who went on to become the lieutenant governor of Kentucky, and who had been mayor of the old City of Louisville from 1986 to 1999. Abramson then served another two terms as mayor of the newly formed Louisville Metro (with a population of roughly 741,000 people in 2010), which was a merger of the city of Louisville and Jefferson County. When Fischer was running for mayor, Louisville lagged in economic development among its peers; in January 2010, both the unemployment rate and household income were below the national average.² He had run on—and won on—a platform of “Jobs, Jobs, Jobs.”³

Mayor Fischer reflected on his transition:

“Mayor, What Do You Want?”

In 2011, what I inherited was a competent government. I only had one crisis to deal with right away [the financial recession]. My sense was that the organization was very used to the former mayor telling them what to do. In the early stages, staff would ask, “Mayor, what do you want us to do?” and I would respond, “Look, you’ve been doing this job for a number of years, what are the top three issues, and what are your recommendations to get the biggest return? That’s how we will make decisions; base our actions on data and resident impact.” That quickly became the mantra of our organization. I put in place those foundational questions, and everybody knew I was going to make my decisions based on the answers.

Keeping the Team, Changing the Methods

I didn’t know much about how to run a city government, but from my business background I knew a lot about how to build a high-performance team. To balance my lack of experience in large-scale public service, I needed to bring on people who knew a lot about government. Ideally, to be a chief in the mayor’s office here, you should know all about city government, state government, federal government, have functional knowledge, and know how to manage and lead. It’s really hard to find people like that.

As mayor, I had about 120 appointed positions, and I could have made a lot of changes. Instead, I asked people to write to me and tell me if they wanted to stay and, if so, why? I asked, “What are your top three opportunities that you see in your department and how would you address those?” I wanted to assess the current team and their answers. I planned to bring in a few outsiders in crucial positions. I introduced a team values document that communicated what I expected from people: integrity, honesty, proactive nature, sense of urgency, and transparency. I developed a purpose statement, mission, and values, much like you’d see in a corporate setting. The purpose of my administration was to use city government as a platform for people to achieve their greatness, their human potential. A lot of this was new to government; people were used to reacting and being told what to do. And that’s why it was important to formally train everybody on what their “job” expectation was—the job consists of daily work, continuous improvement work, and innovation work.

From the start of my administration, I planned to focus us on three guiding values: lifelong learning, health, and compassion. Then we'd set goals and develop metrics and targets. LouieStat, a performance management tool we developed, could track progress on these priorities to help us learn and improve. Some folks had to get used to me talking about compassion and asking for data all the time and they were like, "What the hell is that all about?" But most people were curious about it and adapted quickly with joy and purpose in work.

Showmanship

I say a mayor needs to have the head of a CEO and the heart of a social worker. I would add that you also need a bit of showmanship to perform well in the public eye. I was used to being a business presenter and I quickly learned that was not enough. I used to joke that PowerPoints have more charisma than me. So, I had to learn and develop my style. When people said, "Oh, you've got a big pair of shoes to fill," [following Mayor Abramson], I said, "No, it's just a different pair of shoes." It's not about following in somebody's footsteps; it's about making your own footsteps.

Filling Gaps in the Name of Citizen Happiness

When I came into office in 2011, we were in the end stage of the recession and had budget challenges to deal with. We needed to provide measurement and accountability on one hand and develop a compassion orientation on the other. We defined compassion in alignment with our purpose—respect for residents and actions to help them fulfill their human potential. And LouieStat would help us identify our weaknesses in getting there. What's not working well? This was very difficult on city employees who were used to saying, "Hey boss, here are all the great things that are going on, yada, yada." And they felt if you brought a problem to the boss, you were the problem. Versus me saying, "No, I want to do audits and understand why we're 5 percent late in this particular process, not just celebrate if we are 95 percent on time." So that was a culture shift.

At the beginning of my administration, I had each department audited by a group of community experts. I wanted to introduce the concept that audits are good. They expose gaps that are areas of potential dissatisfaction, and if we fill them, we're going to have higher citizen happiness.

Keeping the Joy in the Journey

I think it is important for new mayors to think through their construct or philosophy of leadership and management. Many mayors haven't had an opportunity to do that in their previous jobs. They've just won the campaign and are just kind of showing up. They might have some campaign promises that they want to deliver on, but the methods for doing that are a mystery to a lot of people. And that's why it's important to bring together people with different kinds of expertise and organize them into learning cohorts, both within government and nationally. I would tell people, "Find the best practices, then imitate, then innovate."

As mayor, you also need learning cohorts because the mayor's job is a lonely job. And occasionally you take a lot of grief. But when you talk to other mayors, especially after you have been mayor for a while, it makes you feel better because all mayors experience challenges and catch hell. So, the sharing of challenges and learnings makes you feel like it's not so bad, and you get lots of good ideas. You feel energized by that.

Former Mayor Mike Nutter of Philadelphia once shared: “If you want to feel good every day, run a pet shop.” As a mayor, you’re going to take on tough challenges and make tough decisions, you will get pushback by opponents, and you need to achieve short- and long-term results, knowing sometimes you may not see the results of your initiatives during your term. During tough times—which you will inevitably have—strengthen the team from the experience, always be positive, and keep the morale up in your team and in the city while you’re working on realizing everyone’s full human potential. It is such a privilege to have the platform of the mayor to push toward this noble goal. You’ve got to get internal satisfaction from the fact that you know you’re helping people. Relish the joy in the journey, the ups and the downs of the job, and your ability to make an impact on untold numbers of lives.

A New Dawn with Mayor Shawyn Patterson-Howard?

Mayor of Mount Vernon, New York, Shawyn Patterson-Howard started her professional career as a social worker in public health; she later worked as CEO of a YMCA and leader of the Mount Vernon Urban Renewal Agency. She declared her candidacy for mayor in 2019, and a high-drama mayoral race ensued.

Mount Vernon was roughly sixteen miles (twenty-six kilometers) north of New York City's Central Park and was the eighth-largest city in the state, with a population of nearly 74,000 in 2020. It was a diverse community; its largest demographic groups were Black (63 percent), white (21 percent), and Hispanic or Latino (17 percent).⁴ Its relative affordability and access to New York City had once made it a launching pad for artists, writers, musicians, activists, and athletes.⁵ But, as one reporter wrote, the city was “on the cusp of either a promising rebirth or . . . collapse.”⁶

Mayor Patterson-Howard reflected on her transition:

From Chaos to Calling

In February 2019, I testified for three minutes in a budget hearing and heard people saying, “Why are you not running [for mayor]?” I’ve never been interested in politics; I actually have a very visceral aversion to politics. But I was working in the community next door, and Mount Vernon was the butt of every joke, known for its chaos, its corruption, and for being a total circus. We’re one of the most densely populated cities in the state, the Blackest community north of the Mason Dixon Line,ⁱⁱ the first community in the state to ever have a Black mayor, and we’d never had a woman mayor who was elected.

I made the decision to run two days before the Democratic Convention. Putting my hat in the ring against the long-time Democratic party leaders wouldn’t gain me any friends. Some of the others in the race included the incumbent mayor, who was later indicted; the city council president; a city councilwoman; a four-time former mayor; and a retired police commissioner. That year, for the first time, the state’s primary had been moved from December to June. I had to immediately pull together a team, and it was mostly people who had never really been interested in politics or were really frustrated with where our community was—volunteers who had never really [felt] heard. The hashtag for our campaign was #believeagain. As a person whose family had lived here since the 1860s, I had lost faith in my community, a community that people were openly calling a wreck. I knew it had great potential, but we were never realizing it.ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱⁱ “[T]he Mason-Dixon Line . . . serves figuratively [as the political and social dividing line between the North and the South, although it does not extend west of the Ohio River.” (Source: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Mason-and-Dixon-Line>, accessed October 2022.)

ⁱⁱⁱ Mayor Patterson-Howard elaborated on the potential she saw for the city in her inauguration speech, delivered on January 4, 2020, saying she knew the city had the potential to increase opportunities for students, be wiser about who to partner with for economic development, and to have functioning sewers, roads, and streetlights. (Source: “Mayor Shawyn Patterson-Howard Inauguration 2020,” Mount Vernon Recreation YouTube Channel, posted January 9, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wx_th95TQHY, accessed November 2022.)

Part of my motivation to run came from being a fifth-generation Mount Vernonite, whose grandfather was the first person of color ever to work in City Hall—he was a porter, not even a janitor, and he cleaned the basement. I experienced—the best way I can describe it is—a calling. And I answered the call, even to my own confusion—why am I doing this? Why am I setting myself up to potentially destroy my career?

Three Mayors and Fourteen News Stations

Once mayors were out of office here, they didn't come back to help. Instead, they came back to convince people they were the only ones who could run the city. Because of a spirit of retaliation here, when I was getting my signatures to become eligible for the ballot, I refused to allow any city employee to sign my petitions. I ran with no employee signatures, no endorsements from anywhere. But I won the primary by 209 votes. The incumbent mayor challenged it in court and lost; I prevailed.^{iv}

Just weeks later, the mayor was under indictment and city council removed him from office, but he was still showing up at the mayor's office claiming he was mayor.^v The city council appointed its president as acting mayor, then unappointed him, and made its new president acting mayor.

So, we had three mayors and about fourteen news stations outside of City Hall every day. On top of that, the police commissioner, who had been fired and rehired, was arrested for trespassing when he returned to work. This all went on for about thirty-seven days, until a judge declared that the original acting mayor was now the mayor and that the incumbent mayor had to vacate his position. The acting mayor came in fourth in the Democratic primary, but then decided to run as a Republican. With six months of runway after I won the primaries, I asked him if we could sit down to discuss a possible transition, but he thought I was being presumptuous and planned for no transition.

The city was operating blind financially. We had a controller that came into office in 2018 and never filed any financial reports to the city—never gave financial records to the mayor or the city council. In 2018, we lost our bond rating. We also had been put under a consent decree that year by the Department of Justice on behalf of the EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] for illicit discharge into the surrounding areas. We had not had a capital projects board in over ten years, and our entire fleet of cars was operating on duct tape and welding on a day-to-day basis. We had five bridges that were closed and a sewer system crumbling beneath us, sinkholes, streets that had not been paved, lighting infrastructure that had not been updated. We were in a bad place, and that's why people had no confidence in the city.

^{iv} In Mount Vernon, where registered voters affiliated with the Democratic Party far outnumbered Republican registered voters, the victor in the Democratic primary typically went on to win the general election.

^v The incumbent mayor, Richard Thomas, pled guilty to charges on July 8, 2019, and as part of his sentence was required to resign by September 30th. However, city council removed him from office on July 10th and appointed City Council President Andre Wallace as acting mayor. On August 2nd, city council appointed a new council president, Lisa Copeland, and she was then appointed as acting mayor, but Wallace argued that city council could not remove an acting mayor. On August 15th, a judge ruled that Thomas was no longer mayor and reaffirmed that Wallace would be the mayor until December 31st. (Source: Jonathan Bandler, "Timeline: How did Mount Vernon get into this mess?" *The Journal News*, August 15, 2019, <https://www.lohud.com/story/news/local/westchester/mount-vernon/2019/07/19/timeline-mount-vernon-mayors-thomas-wallace/1764590001/>, accessed October 2022.)

No Rings to Kiss

The day after I won the general election, we started asking for resumes from people interested in any position in the city. I started interviewing people unofficially on the side. We couldn't have formal discussions because we had to sort out various HR issues first. My first few days in, to avoid legal disputes, I even had to rehire some people, because they had been improperly terminated. The city was a litigious nightmare, and millions of dollars of legal bills had mounted. We had no contracts. Our external labor lawyer had been owed almost \$700,000, and so refused to give any advice. The staff were exhausted because of the politics and fighting.

Over those six weeks between my election and swearing-in, I met with the commissioners and deputy commissioners. Each department was granted a full day to meet with me and discuss their challenges, opportunities, the biggest lapses—and that's when I started trying to put the transition plan together. I was meeting both with people who I was thinking about keeping and people who I wasn't. There were some who were very enthusiastic about those conversations because it was the first time they felt they were being heard and not being used as political pawns. Others were resistant, but I was trying to give everyone a fair chance. I'm not an iron-fist person.

Many of the previous mayors had handlers to answer to. I was trying to make sure people were clear that I didn't have one. I didn't kiss rings, and I don't have a ring to kiss. And in this community, that is not believable.

Meanwhile, I had no access to the city's financial records until I walked in on January 1st. There was no budget, so I had to create one. We didn't even know if we had reserves, so we were trying to figure out if we could make payroll. And we had lots of delinquent bills, city property being confiscated because of non-payment—how do you run a city like that?

No Margin of Error

People had given up on our community, not just our residents, but the county, state, and federal government had. We didn't have allies. And so that was my focus: building allies, getting our story out, and getting people to understand that we needed their help. But more importantly, holding myself to a standard of excellence. I personally felt like the credibility of my community now rested solely on my back. I had no margin of error to make a bad appointment, to make a wrong move, to say the wrong thing, because it would just bring the feeding frenzy of the news media back to our community. I felt pressure on day one to show that everything had changed.

Mayor Francis Suarez Follows in Footsteps and Turns a Page

When Miami Mayor Francis Suarez stepped into office on November 15, 2017, it wasn't the first time the forty-year-old had spent time in City Hall. He'd served as a city commissioner for eight years while practicing real estate law full time. He'd run for mayor once before in an abbreviated race in 2013, which he ended before the election.⁷ Moreover, the mayor's office he would occupy was the same one his father, former mayor Xavier Suarez, had inhabited three decades earlier. One election-night newscaster noted that, in 1985, he'd interviewed the older Suarez when he was first elected. "I was eight years old," the younger Suarez quipped in response.⁸ On his own election night, he was beaming after declaring victory—with his father at his side. Facing scant opposition and backed by substantial campaign funds, name recognition, and familial ties, Francis Suarez had been called a "mayor in waiting."⁹ On November 7, he'd been swept into office with 86 percent of the vote,¹⁰ amassing close to 22,000 votes while his nearest competitor earned less than 1,500.¹¹ He was waiting no more.

Suarez took office with ambitious plans for his city of more than 450,000, Florida's second-most populous. Among them was a proposal to alter the way Miami was run. Since 2011, Suarez had supported changing the charter to empower Miami's mayor,¹² as the city was mainly run by a city administrator.^{vi} Suarez argued that high turnover of city managers in the past decades had caused an unstable backdrop for city government, and restrictions on the mayor's decision-making abilities were a barrier to delivering change to voters.¹³ Suarez planned to keep the administrator position even with a strong mayor system, but saw the role as focusing on day-to-day operations, while Suarez could focus on the big picture.¹⁴ Still, at the time of the election, the then-current administrator was interviewing for new jobs, believing his "time would be short" once Suarez took office.¹⁵ The next one would need to be ratified by the city commission, and Suarez would need their partnership on other plans as well. Two new commissioners had been elected. At least one, who'd been a Miami mayor twice before, did not seem ready to cede power to Miami's new one.

In a series of reflections, Mayor Suarez described aspects of his transition:

Born and Raised

"The voters who cast a ballot in [this] election . . . entrusted their city to a young man, born in Miami, cultivated and nurtured in our city's neighborhoods and parks."¹⁶ "I was born and raised here in Miami, grew up here, went to school here. I love this city. I got to see my father serve as its mayor for eight years."¹⁷ "Maybe that gives you some sort of advantage, whether name recognition, donors, a political machine. . . . Ultimately, a person is going to rise and fall on their own merit."¹⁸

^{vi} In Miami, the mayor was "mostly a figurehead, with duties laid out by the [city's] charter. Unlike Miami's five commissioners, the mayor does not have a vote. And the city manager runs operations. The mayor . . . does have the power to hire and fire the city manager, but needs permission from the commission to do so." (Source: David Smiley, "Miami Commissioner Suarez to revive strong-mayor push," *Miami Herald*, November 2, 2014, <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/community/miami-dade/article3500528.html#storylink=cpy>, accessed November 2022.)

A Mandate for Change

“[The vote was] a mandate—a mandate for change, and a mandate for a new beginning.”¹⁹ “It is an incredible mandate . . . for me it is important that I reflect the priorities of our residents. Affordable housing. A transportation system that isn’t in constant gridlock. And making sure that we deal with a poverty pandemic . . . in this city.”²⁰ “Miami should be and must be the most resilient city in the world and there is a mandate for that as well.”²¹

City Charter

“In order to effectively accomplish the goals I have laid out, I believe that the role of the mayor needs to be redefined. Every great city needs a strong leader, and a city like Miami can’t afford to continue experiencing the levels of instability it has seen during the past eight years. The mayor of Miami, and not an unelected city manager, should be the person taking a position, making decisions, taking the initiative, and taking the blame. It’s called accountability.

“For those reasons, I [planned to propose] a new system of government, where the mayor has the power to make administrative decisions and is responsible directly to residents. Some call this a ‘strong mayor’ system, but in reality, it’s a ‘strong voter’ system, because it would give . . . the voters the power to elect and recall the city’s chief executive. I intend[ed] to bring this proposal as a referendum on [the] next year’s ballot so that Miami’s residents [could] decide what form our government [would] take.”²²

“The mayor [would] have to answer directly to [voters], rather than an unelected manager. And with \$400 million in bonds now available to spend on Miami’s needs, accountability and transparency [were] more important than ever. I [was] looking forward to meeting with the commissioners and having a conversation about the strong mayor form of government . . . My goal [was] to introduce a resolution at the December meeting, but no later than the end of my first 100 days as mayor, to put this charter amendment on [the] next year’s ballot.”²³

“The people didn’t elect [the city administrator]. The people elected Francis Suarez. And they expect Francis Suarez to be able to make decisions for their benefit. So, when there is a difference of opinion, for example, between the [administrator] and the mayor or any department director and the mayor, the mayor, who is the only citywide-elected official, should have the final word.”²⁴

“I [hadn’t] yet made up my mind [on a new city administrator]. [I’d] been doing my due diligence on a variety of people. I [was] trying to be sensitive to all those realities and pick a person with an unimpeachable reputation.”²⁵

Next Generation

“This [was] about a change that’s happening in the city of Miami, a generational turning of the page.”²⁶ “[The election] ushered a new generation to the forefront of our city’s civic leadership. I . . . [was] committed to bringing a new approach to address the various issues facing our community. . . . We [were] going to have to be smart, innovative, and creative . . .”²⁷

“Technology must be one of the economic drivers of our city if we want to remain competitive in the global marketplace. We must continue to support start-ups . . . And most important, we must continue to foster a passion for technology in our kids and then find ways to keep them in Miami once they graduate college and are ready to start careers.”²⁸

“During this campaign, as well as during my last three campaigns, I freely gave my cell phone number to everyone who asked for it. I also shared it in my campaign commercials and literature, and encouraged everyone to call or text me . . . it is 305-992-3342. . . . An open-door policy in the digital age is not enough anymore. My office will leverage technology to remain engaged and connected with our residents in order to better serve them.”²⁹

“I believe that we must start by leveraging the power of the office I have been sworn to uphold in new, dynamic ways—taking advantage of technology when possible and of interpersonal relationships when appropriate. Most importantly, I want everyone to know that we will not shy away from the difficult tasks and challenges facing us simply because they are difficult or because some people think they can’t be done.”³⁰

Appendix

Mayor Greg Fischer



Source: Louisville-Jefferson County Metro Government, <https://louisvilleky.gov/government/mayor-greg-fischer>, accessed October 2022.

Mayor Shawyn Patterson-Howard



Source: City of Mount Vernon, <https://cmvny.com/204/Shawyn-Patterson-Howard>, accessed October 2022.

Mayor Francis Suarez



Source: The US Conference of Mayors, <https://www.usmayors.org/mayors/meet-the-mayors>, accessed October 2022.

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