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THE PEOPLE SPEAK

Bostonians reflect on Menino's tenure

By **Brian MacQuarrie** | GLOBE STAFF MARCH 29, 2013

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KAYANA SZYMCZAK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

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From Hyde Park to East Boston, from corporate suites to gritty bus stops, Bostonians credited their five-term “urban mechanic” Thursday with fixing more than potholes in the past 20 years.

The city has become cleaner and safer under Mayor Thomas M. Menino, residents said, but has also changed in myriad ways that cannot be quantified by cold data, like inclusiveness, vibrancy, and optimism.

Still, many said the time is right for Menino to step aside. At 70, he has been slowed by health problems that hospitalized him for eight weeks.

“He’s a regular guy just like the rest of us, you know, and that’s how he approached the job of mayor,” said Judy Pais, 64, one of Menino’s neighbors in Hyde Park. “I’m not so politically active, but I think the city’s better off for having him these past 20 years. It’s the little things that count, in a big way.”

Those “little things” include the grunt work expected of any big-city mayor, such as street maintenance and summer

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jobs. But Menino also showed a broad vision that belied his reputation as a simple man of limited reach, Bostonians said.

From homelessness to English-language courses, park improvements to gun control, the mayor built a legacy, residents said, that extends beyond the countless miles he spent roaming the neighborhoods of what had long been regarded as a fiercely tribal city.

"I think Boston is one of the most welcoming cities now, and I think the mayor has made a big difference on that," said John Willshire Carrera, a Jamaica Plain resident and board president of the Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition. "He's been very, very clear that the city is a city of immigrants."

Willshire Carrera cited Menino's decision to create the Mayor's Office of New Bostonians in 1998 as an important statement. The office helps fund English-language programs that serve about 1,100 immigrants a year, he said.

The mayor's commitment to inclusiveness is also demonstrated by his longtime support for the gay community, said Dr. Stephen Boswell, president of Fenway Health, which reaches out to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender residents.

"In my view, he's been one of the most important mayors this city has ever seen, especially from the standpoint of the LGBT community," Boswell said. "From his first term, he demonstrated in concrete ways that he was supportive of everyone who lives here."

Menino has attended nearly every major fund-raising event held by Fenway Health during the past 20 years, he added, and was instrumental in helping the capital campaign to build its Boylston Street headquarters.

Perhaps the mayor's singular accomplishment, however, is his press-the-flesh familiarity. A Globe poll released Monday showed that 49 percent of respondents said they had personally met Menino. One of them is Igor Kharitonov, 25, of Jamaica Plain.

PHOTOS



Bostonians reflect on Menino's announcement

- An outpouring of affection at City Hall
- Aides reminisce on the past, let emotions flow



Kharitononkov said he vividly remembers when he met Menino in September 2010 at a ground-breaking ceremony for the Emerald Necklace Conservancy. After being introduced, Kharitononkov handed the mayor a DVD about the conservancy's history.

"He said, 'Keep up the good work, pal,' " Kharitononkov recalled. "It was real quick, but it was a cool moment."

Paul Sedgwick, 52, a Boston public school teacher, said he has shaken Menino's hand about a dozen times.

"He loves to meet the people he serves, and he's tried to serve all of the neighborhoods equally," Sedgwick said on Centre Street in Jamaica Plain.

However, Sedgwick said, Menino's health makes his decision the right one.

Those cross-currents of sentiment — gratitude for service; anticipation of new leadership — were repeated across the city.

In Mattapan Square, Colette McCoy, 60, said that "I'm not happy to see him go, but he has to pay attention to his health."

A record 20 years as mayor, she said, is a good run.

On Broadway in South Boston, Jennifer Ledet, 39, agreed that a transition will be welcome. "He has served his time well. He's been good to us, but it's time for change," Ledet said.

In Jamaica Plain, 20-year-old Eddie Johnson said he was shocked to hear that the only Boston mayor he has ever known will soon step down.

"Wow, that's crazy," said Johnson, a lifelong city resident. "It's been no secret he's been having health issues. If he feels he can't continue at the same capacity, then he should step down."

Nayda Paz, 47, of Roxbury, agreed that the mayor deserves a break. She credited Menino with cracking down on landlords who do not treat properties or tenants well, but said some friends had been ignored after asking Menino for help.

Criticism, however, was difficult to find Thursday.



ARAM BOGHOSIAN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

"He loves to meet the people he serves," said Paul Sedgwick of Mayor Menino.

Christine Poff, executive director of the Franklin Park Coalition, recalled the mayor's keen interest in improving that jewel of the Emerald Necklace. Menino liked to ride with her in a golf cart as they toured the park and floated ideas.

"He's hearing you and mulling it over, and a couple of months later, he'd call me on my cellphone and ask, 'What do you think of this?' " Poff said. "That's kind of amazing. I'm just a Boston resident who runs a nonprofit."

Now, Poff said, Franklin Park "is a gathering place for people of all different backgrounds, every race in Boston, every age, and many neighborhoods."

Kim LaDue, 54, a lawyer who lives in Charlestown, once took a math class with Menino at UMass Boston. She praised his work to bring more people and activity to the city.

"He supports new businesses, and construction has gone up," she said. "It's allowed more people to live in the city more comfortably."

John Rosenthal, a developer in Boston and social activist, knows Menino on many levels, from Rosenthal's work on homelessness, gun control, and Fenway Center, a \$450 million mixed-use proposal for air space over the Massachusetts Turnpike.

"On homelessness and gun violence, he's been a passionate advocate," said Rosenthal, who founded Stop Handgun Violence, the group responsible for the massive gun-control billboard near Fenway Park.

In his development dealings with Menino, Rosenthal said, the mayor has always been concerned about the grass-roots impact.

"If the neighborhood was supportive, he would be supportive if he thought it would be good for the city in general," he said.

That all-politics-is-local ethos is nowhere more evident than on Menino's home turf, the Readville section of Hyde Park.

Residents there reflected on Menino the neighbor, the man who shoveled snow from his driveway and sidewalks, offered condolences to families who lost loved ones, and held crowded summertime barbecues.

Directly across from the mayor's Chesterfield Street house, Pais teared up when she recalled how the mayor reached out when her father died. Menino sent her family two cooked turkeys and fixings for the wake, she said, and then returned early from a trip to attend the funeral.

"I'm heartbroken he's not going to run again," Pais said.

Brian Ballou of the Globe staff and correspondents Matt Rocheleau, Patrick D. Rosso, and Johanna Kaiser contributed to this report. Brian MacQuarrie can be reached at macquarrie@globe.com.

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