

## DC's Story

An Interview with The Honorable Muriel Bowser, Mayor of Washington, DC

**EDITORS' NOTE** On November 6, 2018, Muriel Bowser became the first woman ever re-elected as the Mayor of Washington, DC and the first mayor to earn a second term in 16 years. Prior to becoming Mayor in 2015, Bowser served as the Ward 4 Councilmember on the Council of the District of Columbia, first elected in a special election in 2007 and re-elected in 2008 and 2012. As a Councilmember, she served as the Chairwoman of the Committee on Economic Development which created more than 5,000 units of affordable housing, passed legislation to build a new soccer stadium, and secured from the federal government the best portion of the Walter Reed campus for DC. She first entered elected office as an Advisory Neighborhood Commissioner in the Riggs Park neighborhood more than 20 years ago. Bowser earned a BA degree in history from Chatham University and a master's degree in public policy from American University, and received honorary doctorates from Chatham University and Trinity University.



The Hon. Muriel Bowser

our public works. We will fight for the middle class. We're focused on how we expand and defend democracy in a city of 700,000 tax-paying Americans who have no senators and no vote in Congress. We will continue to build a stronger, more resilient future. And, above all else, as we look ahead to the next four years, there is nothing more important to me than the safety of our residents. Gun violence is a serious problem nationwide. Our country is awash in guns, and behind every act of violence in our community, behind

all of the data that is tracked feverishly, there are real people. So, we will continue to work with urgency to hold people accountable and build a safer, stronger DC.

I have more optimism and more hope for the future than ever before. Not a blind optimism, but one that is informed by a tested leader who knows where we are strong and who knows where we must be stronger. I'm optimistic about our future because I know our past. And I know our story. Everybody loves a winner and a good comeback – and that's DC's story.

**You have been clear about the need to speed up affordable housing production. Have you been happy with the progress made in this effort?**

We have made a lot of progress in DC, but there's more work to do. We set a goal in 2019 to build 36,000 new homes by 2025, including at least 12,000 affordable homes. We are on track to meet our goals. To date, we've delivered over 28,000 total units and just over 7,000 affordable units. As we build our supply, we are also being very strategic and intentional about where we build and how we help more families stay in DC.

We know, for example, that in order to close racial wealth gaps and ensure more longtime DC residents can stay and build wealth in DC, we must think and act boldly. Last year, we launched a Black Homeownership Strike Force to create recommendations for increasing Black homeownership rates in Washington, DC. I seeded our commitment with a \$10 million Black Homeownership Fund. Part of that work involved setting a goal to add 20,000 new Black homeowners by 2030.

Just last month, we opened The Ethel, named in honor of Ethel Kennedy. The Ethel is providing 100 units of permanent supportive

### What attracted you to public service?

Serving the community was a big part of my life growing up, and I spent a lot of time at community meetings when I was a young girl. That said, I didn't always know I wanted to run for elected office. I certainly saw, though, while working in the community and in government that going the elected route was the fastest way to make change. That is especially true in Washington, DC where we function as a city, county, and state and we can take something from idea to implementation in one budget cycle. I tell people all the time that I have the best job in the world – mayor of my hometown.

### Will you highlight the major initiatives for your administration as you approach your third term?

A third term is a special opportunity because we have a mandate – we have a mandate from the people to be bold, to think big, to push the envelope, and above all else, to win for Washington, DC.

During my transition, I laid out six focus areas: We must get all our students back on track. We must and we will win back our downtown because it is the economic engine that allows us to invest in our schools, our safety net, and



Mayor Bowser listens to a young DC resident during a community walk





*Mayor Bowser in front of the new Frederick Douglass Memorial Bridge with DC government employees*

housing for residents exiting homelessness. In addition to housing, the site has on-site services to help residents settle into their new community. Last year, we also increased the maximum amount of down payment assistance first-time homebuyers can get from \$84,000 to \$202,000. That change has put homeownership in reach for more DC residents.

I'm proud that we have a range of programs to address the needs of our residents, but like I said – there's more work to do.

**What have been the keys to driving impact in your efforts to reset DC's global and national competitiveness and how is your administration working to diversify the DC economy?**

We know that people come to and stay in Washington, DC to change the world. In January, we launched a Comeback Plan that supports our vision for a Washington, DC that is a city where every neighborhood offers residents the chance to achieve their full potential; a city that is a destination of choice for innovators, job creators, and visitors; and a city that is a place where people choose to live, work, visit, and thrive.

We are always looking for ways to diversify our economy. Pre-pandemic, the federal government accounted for about a quarter of DC's 800,000 jobs. Building on our economic base of feds, eds, meds, and tech is one strategy in our Comeback Plan. To support that work, we've launched innovation districts which are areas where we leverage existing economies and infrastructure to spur new ideas for growth and development. We already know that Washington, DC is home to some of the brightest minds and most passionate changemakers in the world. Now, we're ensuring DC remains the city of choice for employers, innovators, and anyone who is interested in launching big ideas to build a more equitable and sustainable future. We're using tools like our Vitality Fund. The Vitality

Fund is a multi-year incentive program designed to support companies in target industries that are actively planning to relocate, expand, or retain their physical location in Washington, DC. In fact, we have a website set up where people can learn more about the Vitality Fund and other resources for starting or growing a business in DC: obviouslyDC.com.

Like a lot of cities, we are very focused on our downtown. We set a goal to add 15,000 residents downtown over the next five years. One of the lessons we learned during the pandemic is that mixed-use communities are more resilient in the face of adversity. Unfortunately, right now, our downtown is 92 percent commercial and 8 percent residential. So, part of our economic strategy is focused on creating a better balance downtown.

But people should know this: Washington, DC is already a dynamic city. We're not a sleepy government town. We are a city of 700,000 people who live in vibrant neighborhoods. We are a sports city, a tech city, a city of creatives. When people visit DC or move their organizations to DC, that is the DC they experience.

**What needs to be done to break the polarization in politics today?**

I told DC residents at the start of my third term that in recent years, our dialogue became increasingly political and erratic and too strident in personal politics. That is our past. Our future is working together, and I'm setting the tone for my Administration to work harder, smarter, and more engaged with all of our partners – those whose views we share and those with views we don't share.

As a mayor, I am used to working with people across the ideological spectrum. Mayors can't get caught up in politics because our jobs are to get things done and to improve the quality of life for our residents. We also see that, at the end of the day, most people want similar

things – people want to be safe in their communities; they want safe, affordable housing; they want good schools and parks for their kids; they want jobs that allow them to take care of their families. To make all that happen, we must work together – across branches of government, across levels of government, and with our community partners.

**What do you see as the keys to effective leadership and how do you describe your management style?**

You have to know what you believe. I think leaders get themselves in trouble when they are all over the place in how they lead, or their leadership is not rooted in their values. Know what your values are. The other way I focus my work is to have big goals – the big buckets of work that I'm going to focus on. And those goals help me get to the biggest goal: how can I help the most people the fastest and how can I make sure that everybody in my city gets a fair shot.

I focus on those buckets of work and my system of values, and then I find the tough decisions to be easy to make. I call on my experience, and I call on all the information I have. I do try to talk through the tough decisions with residents and tell them why I have to make them. I have also learned in my years of leadership that one of the worst things you can do as a leader is waver. You can take time to decide, you can consider, you can even change your mind, but you can't flip-flop and waver. When you make a decision, explain why you did it and then implement it.

**Your administration has achieved strong results for Washington DC. Are you able to take moments to celebrate the wins?**

This is what I say: You win by winning – every day, every project, every initiative which, for us, has added up to more than 96 months of progress. We have taken big swings for DC over the past eight years, and in that time, our population crested 700,000, we created an 800,000-job economy, we had a record number of visitors coming to DC each and every year, we drove down unemployment rates, our bond rating was and is a triple A, and our finances and reserves were and are the envy of mayors and governors across this country.

But we know we can't rest on our laurels, and now we are very focused on our comeback and our relentless commitment to every Washingtonian getting a fair shot.

**What do you tell young people about a career in public service?**

Well, as I said: I have the best job in the world. I get to lead and serve my hometown. There are many ways to serve your community – you don't need to be mayor. We have 37,000 public servants in DC – they keep our city moving forward, they are out in the community every day, they are behind the scenes making sure we deliver world-class city services, and they make DC incredibly proud. That includes teachers, police officers, our public works teams – so many people of all different backgrounds and interests. So, if you're interested in public service, I would say this: consider coming to Washington, DC. You can find opportunities in DC government at [careers.dc.gov](https://careers.dc.gov). ●