



Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce Annual Meeting

May 12, 2026

Keynote Speech by James E. Rooney, President & CEO

Good evening and welcome to the 2026 Annual Meeting of the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce.

Welcome to my friends, Governor Maura Healey and Mayor Michelle Wu. Thank you for believing in the work of the Chamber. And thank you for celebrating this special evening with us tonight.

Every year, our Chamber's Distinguished Bostonians inspire us, and this year is no different.

Our honorees joining the Academy of Distinguished Bostonians this evening are exemplary leaders.

Congratulations Paul, Kevin, and Catherine!

Our Chamber community has been fortunate to have the incredible leadership of our Board Chair, Corey Thomas, CEO of Rapid7.

After 2 years of leading our Board, our Chamber community is stronger and more vibrant because of Corey's vision. From our focus on AI and the future of technology to being a leader on collaboration, Corey is always showing up for Chamber members and for me as we navigate public policy issues that affect communities and commerce.

Thank you, Corey!

I am thrilled to welcome our Chair-Elect of the Board, Miceal Chamberlain, Massachusetts President of Bank of America.

For decades, Miceal and Bank of America have been corporate citizens committed to uplifting and transforming communities throughout Massachusetts.

Miceal, I am looking forward to continuing our work together in your new role.

And, tonight we have Miceal and Geri Denterlein leading our program as Co-Chairs. Thank you for answering the call to lead our exciting event.

I also want to thank all of our Sponsors, especially our Presenting Sponsors, Alexion, Encore Boston Harbor, Fidelity, State Street, Suffolk, and Vertex, whose partnership ensures that we have a memorable celebration tonight.

To my entire dedicated team at the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce, and especially Danielle Dorey, Vice President of Programs, and her talented staff who play such a key role in making tonight happen. Thank you for the work that you do all year round in service to our members and our community.

Tonight's gathering represents what makes our Chamber community so special. I look around this room, and I see the CEOs of large institutions and small businesses. Our region's government officials, non-profit leaders, industry leaders from hospitals, health care, higher education, technology, biotech, pharma, finance, construction, and real estate - all represented here tonight.

I see the faces of 1,500 leaders who want all people and all businesses in our capital city of Boston and our Commonwealth of Massachusetts to thrive.

I see the talented and collaborative leaders from our business group colleagues from across the state – thank you for your partnership and being here tonight.

We're here to celebrate you - the accomplished and committed business community of Greater Boston.

But this year, we're also here to celebrate something more.

In just a few months, we'll mark the 250th birthday of America. And I want to acknowledge all the efforts of MA250 and Boston 250 in celebration of the Semiquincentennial.

And thank you to Chamber executive committee member and Eastern Bank CEO, Bob Rivers who led the fundraising effort for Mass250 that will make our celebration on July 4th something special.

We should commemorate the unique role Boston and Massachusetts played in our nation's founding.

But my hope as we celebrate America in so many ways this year, is that each time we do begins with an expression of gratitude to the families and the men and women who put on the uniform of this great country, made sacrifices, and defended the freedoms we have enjoyed for the past 250 years. Please join me in thanking our active service members and our veterans.

Tonight, we focus our celebration on the centuries of entrepreneurs, the power of free enterprise and the influence of the business community in motivating a revolution and driving the prosperity of this city, this Commonwealth, and our country.

Tonight's theme is "Revolutionary Past, Visionary Future." I'd like to begin by reflecting a bit on our revolutionary past, and then I'll talk about our visionary future.

I was raised in South Boston, not far from here, on Dorchester Heights. As a young boy, I gazed up at the Evacuation Day memorial every day, filled with curiosity about the history that transpired there. I learned that after taking command of the Continental Army, on March 17, 1776, General George Washington and thousands of Bostonians forced the powerful Royal Navy to evacuate Boston Harbor.

I grew up just a mile from where, in a world-changing act of protest, a group of Bostonians tossed British tea into the Harbor and launched a revolution.

And I had the good fortune to attend the oldest, and dare I say best, public school in America, Boston Latin School — where for six years I looked up at a frieze in the auditorium and saw the names of the five Latin School alumni — Franklin, Adams, Hancock, Paine, and Hooper — who would go on to sign the Declaration of Independence.

As I learned then — and as every person here knows — it is no exaggeration to say that the America we will celebrate this summer was born right here in Boston.

As I always remind my friends from Philly, Boston shed the blood. Philly filed the paperwork.

The very first scene of the Revolutionary War — Paul Revere's midnight ride to Lexington — began just across the Harbor from where we sit tonight.

Before any shots were fired, Boston's dynamic energy made it fertile ground for the revolutionary thinking that inspired a continent.

New ideas — about freedom, about democracy, about equality before the law — were cultivated right here in Massachusetts by men and women.

Among them, there was John Adams who first argued that Parliament had no authority to impose the Stamp Act without representation. And Abigail Adams who fiercely advocated for women's rights and abolition.

There were a great many other Boston area patriots who are remembered as our founders; the people with new ideas — who argued against taxation without representation; who declared that government gets its authority not from a king but from the people — those patriots were people who were engaged in commerce.

From the beginning, free enterprise was a crucial element in American success. The American colonists didn't share the same backgrounds. They didn't have the same religious beliefs. But they did share a marketplace, and that's what united them: a belief in free enterprise.

For 250 years, our businesses have driven progress and created opportunities for the pursuit of happiness. Since the earliest days of this great nation, economic growth in a united, forward-thinking society has been built upon — indeed, has required — a strong business community operating in a free market economy.

In the first century of the American experiment, New England was a manufacturing power that drove national prosperity.

During the Civil War era, our thinkers advocated for the equality of all, and Massachusetts cities provided the Union Army with soldiers and supplies.

In America's second century, Boston and Massachusetts became a hotbed of innovation, exporting to the nation ideas and inventions that powered American greatness.

And during tough times, when America's path forward seemed in question, the people of Boston and its business community worked together to address the challenges, charting a path toward progress.

In the latter half of the 20th century, when America's cities faced decline and our economy shifted, Boston's business community stepped up. Our business leaders, working hand-in-hand with our mayors and civil servants, ushered in a "New Boston."

They led projects to revitalize our downtown. They built the modern Quincy Market, reinvigorated our high-quality public education system, and kicked off a building boom. A city in decline became a city with one of the highest construction rates in the country. Boston transformed into a modern, thriving, forward-thinking city at a time it could have gone in a different direction.

Our previous leaders didn't get it all right. Too many people were left out or left behind. And going forward, we must act, with real intention and forethought, to create more shared prosperity and economic opportunity.

Today, at the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce, we lead with transparency and inclusion, bringing a wide range of voices to the table with the same goal: to use the power of free enterprise to spur growth and improve our communities.

Just as Boston inspired America by starting a revolution, Boston continues to demonstrate how our biggest and best corporate citizens play a crucial role in improving life for everyone.

This is a region where world-leading universities and medical centers produce cutting-edge research that saves millions of lives every year, while supporting nearly 900,000 jobs across the Commonwealth and driving more than \$150 billion in economic impact.

This is a city where the pioneering businesses of our economy, like Fidelity, State Street, and Gillette are joined by innovative companies like Rapid 7, New Balance, and Vertex to create a dynamic economy that benefits our workforce, consumers, and global reputation — with growth enjoyed by all.

Today, the world is watching Massachusetts. In my work at the Chamber, I talk with business leaders from around the world, and I hear from government leaders and CEOs looking to Boston and the Commonwealth — to our talented workforce and our forward-thinking companies — as pinnacles of innovation and beacons of a revolutionary mindset.

Boston is at its best, and America is at its best, when our business community helps lead us forward. When investment and growth create the proud, vibrant communities in which we all love to live, work, and invest; where prosperity is shared; and where good jobs are steadily created.

Today, we are at a moment in our country when divisions are deep and partisanship is high. Affordability is a national concern. Many people are struggling to afford a life here.

We must build more housing to accommodate our workforce and keep our young people here. We must create a statewide transportation network that our success requires, and our residents deserve. We must find a balance between reliability, sustainability, and cost for our energy future.

We have a lot of work to do on these and other issues. But to support these efforts, we should be embracing growth and free markets, as we have in the past, when they are most needed.

Instead, it can feel too often like the core ingredients for launching a revolution and centuries of prosperity — the powerful forces of business and commerce — are under attack.

Make no mistake, capitalism is not perfect, and a free-market economy requires guardrails. Unfortunately, there are wealth gaps and inequities that are a stain on our past and present. But our free market system, even with its flaws, is far better than all the alternatives tried by people around the world.

People are frustrated; some people are hurting. At the same time, we also see opportunists who are taking advantage of unfulfilled communities and our challenges to attack businesses, further divide us, and promote a false hope that anti-free market, anti-growth policies will lead to a better future.

And there are also those at the other extreme, including some in our business community, who promote policies that harm our ability to encourage inclusive economic growth and a quality of life for all.

Extremism, in either direction, will never be the answer.

The American free enterprise story that started here in Boston is a story of growth and opportunity, a story of collective hope and optimism, not division and fear.

Here in Boston and Massachusetts, we know the formula. We've seen it work for 250 years. In partnership with our leaders in government, in public policy, with our communities, we can use

the influence of the business community – your influence - , a free-market economy, and a growth agenda to fuel progress for our people.

At the Chamber, we bring people together, like we're doing tonight. Just as Hancock and Adams did, we get together in a room, we debate, we compromise, and we solve big problems.

That is your Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce.

I am here to tell you — as every person in this room knows in their bones — that the business community of Greater Boston is as committed as we've ever been, to working together for the success of our city and all of Massachusetts.

We know that what happens in Boston changes the world.

We know that the next era of success for this region and this country can be built today, right here in Massachusetts, through investments in new industries, development, infrastructure, innovation, and ideas.

It's already started with the expansions and investments of Lily, Lego, Hasbro, SharkNinja, GE Vernova, Sanofi, HarbourVest, Foundation Medicine, Takeda, and Wayfair.

Our continued growth will be the catalyst for new opportunities and the well-being of our residents and our communities.

Here is the bottom line: Our history tells us that America and its people are successful when American business is successful. Massachusetts and Boston are successful when we are growing economically, and when our business leaders are helping guide that growth forward.

"Boldness of enterprise is the foremost cause of its rapid progress, its strength, and its greatness."

That's how Alexis de Tocqueville described the boldness of enterprise in the years after the founding of our country. That same boldness is still required of all of us today.

With our revolutionary history to build on, affirming free markets and growth, we can shape our visionary future together. As we embrace collaboration and innovation, we're building something that will benefit not just us, but generations to come.

Congratulations on all you've accomplished so far and all we will accomplish together - let's get to work!