

Maura Healey Knows When to Take the Shot and When to Make the Pass

By Johnnie R.S McKnight

You can learn a lot about a person on a basketball court. Under pressure, character reveals itself. Some players demand the ball, determined to be the hero. Others understand that winning requires trust, composure, and the ability to make everyone around them better.

I learned something about Gov. Maura Healey long before she took office, in a place where political speeches and carefully crafted talking points mean very little: a basketball court.

One warm day in August back in 2022, Healey, then Massachusetts Attorney General and a candidate for governor, visited Jackson Courts in Holyoke as part of her "Healey Hoops" community basketball tour. The event, organized by the Holyoke Safe Neighborhood Initiative, brought together local youth, community members, and elected officials.

I had played against Holyoke teams all through middle and high school, so I knew what we were walking into. These were young athletes in their prime, with fresh legs, quick hands, and seemingly unlimited energy. I've always considered myself quick, fast, and scrappy, but experience can only compensate for so much youth.

Healey had her own credentials. A former Harvard Division I basketball player who later played professionally overseas, she certainly knew her way around a basketball court. But there is a difference between knowing the game and keeping up with teenagers determined to remind you how old you are.

Those kids weren't taking it easy on anybody.

As the game intensified, I noticed something about Healey. She wasn't trying to dominate every possession. When she had an open shot, she took it. But more often, she was moving the ball, encouraging teammates, and creating opportunities for someone else to score.

Meanwhile, I was running up and down the court, drenched in sweat, trying to catch my breath, wondering how much longer these young men planned to keep this pace.

There was Healey, still looking to make the next pass, encouraging me to take another shot.

I remember thinking she had more confidence in my legs than I did.

Looking back, that game offered a glimpse into her approach to leadership. Sometimes leadership isn't about being the person who scores. It's about putting others in a position to succeed.

Through her administration and partnership with Lt. Gov. Kim Driscoll, Healey has emphasized investments in housing, infrastructure, and economic development. Earlier this month, Massachusetts secured \$130 million in federal funding to modernize Springfield's rail hub, improve passenger service, and advance the long-awaited West-East Rail connection. The announcement reflected collaboration among the Healey administration, Massachusetts' congressional delegation, and federal transportation officials.

Her administration also recently announced \$330 million through the Community One Stop for Growth program, supporting 403 housing and economic development projects across 207 Massachusetts communities.

These investments represent opportunities for municipalities to address longstanding challenges and pursue economic growth. A governor cannot solve every community's problems, but can help deliver the resources and partnerships that make progress possible.

In basketball terms, she creates the opening and delivers the pass.

Of course, not every shot goes in. Massachusetts still faces serious challenges with affordability, housing, public education, and economic inequality. Communities like Springfield and Holyoke need investments that reach working families and neighborhoods too often left behind.

But beyond economic development, Healey's leadership raises a broader question about the political direction of Massachusetts.

Our Commonwealth has a long history of electing Republican governors while overwhelmingly supporting Democrats in national elections. Mitt Romney and Charlie Baker understood that governing Massachusetts required working with a Democratic Legislature.

Some argue that Massachusetts needs another Republican in that tradition, someone who can reach across the aisle and provide a moderating influence.

I question whether that political model translates to today's Republican Party.

Romney represented an older Republican establishment rooted in corporate leadership, fiscal conservatism, and national political ambition. Baker offered a pragmatic, managerial approach that appealed to voters seeking stability.

Both publicly distanced themselves from Donald Trump, although in different ways and at different moments. Neither built his political identity around embracing Trump's movement.

Today's Republican Party presents a different political environment.

The question is no longer simply whether a Republican governor can work with a Democratic Legislature. It is whether that governor can maintain independence from a national party increasingly defined by Trump.

Would Massachusetts residents have confidence that their governor would challenge federal policies threatening reproductive freedom, immigrant communities, public education, and other protections our state has established?

Or would we find ourselves wondering whether loyalty to Washington might outweigh responsibility to Massachusetts?

Healey's public record provides insight into how she approaches those conflicts.

As attorney general, she challenged powerful corporations, pursued consumer protections, and confronted federal policies she believed threatened Massachusetts residents. Her willingness to engage in difficult legal and political fights became a defining part of her public career.

That doesn't mean every decision she makes as governor deserves our agreement. I have concerns about the direction of public education, the affordability crisis, and whether state investments are reaching communities that need them most.

Supporting a governor should never mean surrendering the right to hold that governor accountable.

If Healey is going to be the facilitator I saw on that basketball court, then Massachusetts residents have every right to demand that the ball reach every corner of the Commonwealth.

Springfield, Holyoke, and other Gateway Cities should not stand on the sidelines watching prosperity move elsewhere. Investments must translate into stronger schools, affordable homes, good-paying jobs, and meaningful opportunities for working families.

When those investments fall short, we should say so.

A good point guard knows when to pass. A great point guard recognizes when the defense has left an opening and it's time to take the shot.

I still remember that game in Holyoke. The competition, the exhaustion, and those young players showing absolutely no mercy.

But what stayed with me wasn't the score. It was watching how Healey responded under pressure. She kept her composure, trusted her teammates, and understood that making the right play was more important than getting the credit.

Massachusetts faces a far more consequential contest today. Its governor must balance collaboration with conviction, deliver resources to communities, and defend the Commonwealth's interests when they conflict with Washington.

I saw a glimpse of those leadership instincts on a basketball court four years ago.

With so much at stake for Massachusetts, I want a governor who knows when to make the pass and when to take the shot.