

2015 State of Our City Speech

Friday, March 27, 2015

Kitchener's Central Library

Check Against Delivery

Thank you very much for that kind introduction.

Bold, proactive, and positive leadership is what's required to build a great city. This is as true for Kitchener as it is anywhere else. Local governments that simply take a passive role on the sidelines, while wishing for a better city, are simply not going to make it happen.

City-building is about making smart and strategic investments into the community that will benefit all of our residents and all of our neighbourhoods. But City-building is about more than just counting pennies and building more roads, it's about creating awesome, dynamic and inclusive places and spaces where people can live, work and play.

This morning, I'd like to spend some time with you talking about city-building and the journey we're all on together to build a better Kitchener.

Good morning ladies and gentlemen.

On behalf of Kitchener City Council, it's my pleasure to welcome you to the 2015 State of Our City Address.

It's an added pleasure to be sharing this address with you today for the first time as your Mayor. The past four months have been filled with many firsts, and today is no different. It is indeed an honour to be speaking to you today and to be joined by Kitchener's longest-serving Mayor, Carl Zehr.

With a new Mayor, also comes a new location for this year's event. We are fortunate to have so many wonderful community amenities in Kitchener and I think it's time that we showcased them. Beginning this year, we will be moving the State of Our City event to different locations throughout our community.

The Kitchener Public Library Central branch is a great place to start. It's where I got my start in public service as a student, and the opening of its expansion last year also marked a significant investment in our people and creating great places for them.

And libraries – known as the great social equalizer – are full of ideas, so we find ourselves in the perfect setting to discuss all that our city is and all that we're capable of building when we're at our very best.

CITY BUILDING

I've been talking a lot in recent months about continuing to build a better Kitchener – for now and for the generations to come. As I look around this room, I have to admit, there are people who are better at building homes or new companies than I am. But, while I may not be great with power tools, after 20 years on City Council, I've learned a little bit about building a city.

One of the most important things I've learned is that this is not something we do alone as community leaders or as a city Council. We are *all* city builders.

Each one of us, no matter what our job is or where in the city we live, is contributing to building our city *every day*. Because city building is in actions great and small – from playing at the Hohner Avenue Porch Party to playing in the KW Symphony; from planning a neighbourhood barbecue to designing a brand new neighbourhood; from launching the next great start-up out of your basement to being CEO at any one of Kitchener's many longstanding businesses.

With our every action – individually and together – we determine the kind of city we are building. I challenge each of you to remember that when you leave here today. It has the power to change you and what you do. And it has the power to change our city.

Four years ago, His Excellency, Governor-General David Johnston articulated his vision for building a “smart and caring” nation. That vision appeals to the best in us and has always resonated with me. I've often thought about how we're continuing his legacy by building a smart and caring city – as citizens, as community leaders, as City Council....*as city builders*.

Together, we *have been* building a smart and caring city. We've been doing it for generations. And we're not about to rest on our laurels.

Today, we're doing this in a myriad of ways:

- by building strong neighbourhoods,
- by innovating and growing our economy,
- by supporting and involving our citizens
- and, through strong local government

BUILDING STRONG NEIGHBOURHOODS

When you think about city-building, you probably think of putting up new buildings, economic development initiatives or developing more infrastructure to accommodate growth. Those things are important but they don't paint the whole picture.

City-building is also about place-making – about creating more meaningful and memorable places and spaces and a more diverse, interesting and sustainable city. It's about creating a sense of belonging, of home – of community spirit and pride for our citizens.

It starts in our neighbourhoods. They're the building blocks of our smart and caring city.

While innovations in technology and social media make it easier than ever to connect without leaving home, and we often hear about cities having reputations as places where people don't know their neighbours – Kitchener is getting more and more connected.

We're building on a long history of helping to plan, build and support safe and thriving neighbourhoods.

Unlike almost any other city in Canada, over the years, Kitchener has proactively built a network of 14 community centres located throughout our city. These centres, programmed largely by our incredibly dedicated Neighbourhood Association volunteers, define us as a community and play an immeasurable role in the quality of life of our residents.

For more than 20 years, Kitchener's Festival of Neighbourhoods program has been building connections, celebrating neighbourhoods and building community spirit and pride. I'm pleased that by doubling our capital grant to this festival in recent years, we're helping them do even more amazing things. Picnics, park clean-ups, Jane's Walks – Kitchener neighbourhoods never cease to amaze us with the many ways they find to connect everyone.

In addition to doubling the Festival of Neighbourhoods grant, the City has also recently partnered with the United Way to create a new Neighbourhood Matching Fund Grant. The United Way has committed to matching the City's \$30,000 investment – dollar-for-dollar – over the next three years so that together we can support even more grassroots place-making that helps improve the overall quality of life in our neighbourhoods.

And let's not forget about Neighbour's Day. That's right, in Kitchener we think so much of our neighbours that, in 2015, they get their own special day.

Neighbour's Day, as you may have heard, is a new annual celebration that is intended to bring people together to celebrate our unique neighbourhoods and showcase our many City facilities. Planning is still underway, but stay tuned for what's in store on June 13th – our many City facilities will be open and brimming with family activities, and we hope the whole city will celebrate with us!

I am pleased that as we plan Neighbour's Day, we're working closely with the United Way to support their Annual Day of Caring so that we have two awesome community festivals focused on celebrating our neighbourhoods.

When I think about specific examples of creating a place where neighbours meet and feel welcome, I think of Ward 6 Councillor Paul Singh's neighbourhood. And when I say it's Paul's neighbourhood, I really mean that.

Paul grew up, went to public school and bought his first house in Ward 6 and so he's very passionate about creating great events that see families and neighbours spending time together and getting to know one another. His popular Ward 6 movie night has been so effective that we're looking to expand it into other neighbourhoods this summer.

The list of great things happening in our neighbourhoods is, quite literally, endless.

As we look to build on this momentum, Council has initiated plans to develop our first-ever Neighbourhood Strategy. This marks the first time that we'll take a comprehensive approach to all of the elements of our neighbourhoods, and the extensive work of our community partners and volunteers, so that we can better co-ordinate, leverage and support everything that's happening in our neighbourhoods.

I look forward to involving as many people as possible from across our city in developing Kitchener's Neighbourhood Strategy in the coming months. Remember, we are all city builders. Who better to prioritize the actions that should be taken in your unique neighbourhood than you – the people who live there? I hope you'll join us as we begin the conversations that will result in your neighbourhood's action plan.

While we're fortunate to have so many neighbourhood success stories already, like anything else, building strong neighbourhoods is not without challenge. And it's certainly not without change.

In recent years, Kitchener has undergone substantial change as we continue down the road of revitalization, reinvestment and renewal. Naturally, our neighbourhoods have begun to change too.

Some newer areas, like the southwest district in Councillor Kelly Galloway-Sealock's Ward 5, are growing steadily. For years Kelly has been a strong advocate for developing a new Southwest District Park and we've both been vocal about how these new recreational amenities are long overdue for this fast-growing part of our city. Just recently, Kelly's leadership on this saw an \$8.6 million investment in this new park added to the 2015 budget. The first sports fields are expected to open in 2017.

Recognizing that parks are an incredibly important part of building a smart and caring city, I've also been advocating for advancing the development of a new Grand River Park for the past several years. I was very pleased that during our recent budget deliberations, Council agreed to set aside additional money and look at how we can make this new park – which will preserve greenspace alongside a designated Canadian Heritage River – a reality sooner.

The reality in the Doon South area of Kitchener is another challenging example of a neighbourhood that is evolving. As Conestoga College continues to grow, the neighbourhood is seeing some challenges arising from the need for more student housing. I believe it is important that we address this issue, and I look forward to working with Ward 4 Councillor Yvonne Fernandes to build connections and collaboration between residents, landlords and the college on solutions to student accommodations.

In other areas of the city, we see challenges with residential infill – the development of brand new housing in already established neighbourhoods. As a city councillor, as a candidate in the recent municipal election, and now as your mayor, I have been leading the charge to create new residential infill guidelines and requirements to more effectively engage residents about their input and ideas for residential intensification.

With more than 20 years' experience as a City Planner, Ward 8 Councillor Zyg Janecki has also been a passionate advocate of ensuring that good planning is a priority. Zyg and I both know that these guidelines won't solve all of our challenges, but they will help ensure that new developments complement and strengthen our neighbourhoods, not weaken them.

Closer to our city centre, we start to hear talk of gentrification – of urban renewal of some of our older places and spaces that makes way for a future of improved market conditions, new uses and refreshed neighbourhoods.

We know you don't build a smart and caring city at anyone's expense. This is a smart and caring city *for everyone*.

I don't have all the answers to this growing urban phenomenon, but I would challenge us all, as city builders, to think differently about it —to think about the concept of “shared neighbourhoods” and find new tools and approaches that help us continue to build our smart and caring city.

INNOVATION

We can think differently. There is no doubt about that.

When it comes to innovation, generations of Kitchener's dreamers and doers have built our legacy as a resourceful and inventive city that doesn't simply wait for the future to happen.

For example, over the next 24 months, our downtown will probably see the greatest changes since it was originally built, with the addition of two new condominium projects, Google's new 160,000 square-foot home, the new underpass planned for King Street, underground infrastructure improvements and the construction of ION.

We're literally building the connections to our future – laying the groundwork today for LRT, GO and potentially high-speed rail – because they're game-changers for our city, our region and beyond. These important new transit solutions will connect our cities, and reduce traffic congestion, commuter costs and the impact of cars on our environment.

Even more importantly, this kind of visionary city building positions Kitchener, our region and our province, to compete with the world's leading innovation centres. Kitchener will continue to build our city's success by joining forces with municipal partners within Canada's Innovation Super Cluster to create a globally-competitive innovation cluster comparable to California's Silicon Valley. And we'll continue to create a more livable city that is a magnet for the skilled dreamers and doers – the knowledge workers and creative talent – that we need to support our businesses.

Down the road, it may mean making investments that don't resonate with everyone. For example, attracting and retaining those skilled dreamers and doers isn't just about getting around. It takes a vibrant arts and culture scene – and supporting and sustaining that scene requires investment. While it's often seen as a nice-to-have, arts and culture are absolutely critical to the city we're building.

It will come down to Council making the right decision about the mandate for Centre in the Square on Monday night. This decision, and those we make in the months and years ahead, will have a substantial impact – not only on the future success of the centre, but on the future success of our city.

It will take the kind of unwavering vision that Ward 7 Councillor Bil Ioannidis has about the impact digital media and music can have on our local economy. You'll recall that Bil was instrumental in bringing Big Musicfest to Kitchener. It wasn't universally embraced in our city initially but, in its first year, it drew 50,000 people from around the world and created a \$7 million boost to the economy. This year, it will grow to a seven-day event with shows in the suburbs and our city core.

It will also take the kind of vision that Ward 1 Councillor Scott Davey has for the role that technology and innovation can play in creating efficiencies and better service for citizens. Scott's passion and vision for putting wifi and high-speed fibre networks in key areas of the city has the potential to make Kitchener one of Canada's most technologically-advanced cities. These are just some of the initiatives that will be considered within the new Digital Kitchener Strategy that we're starting work on now.

GROWING OUR ECONOMY

We're envied as a Canadian city for more than just our ability to innovate. We're envied for reimagining and reinventing our economy in recent years in a way no other Canadian city has done.

We saw the writing on the wall and proactively rewrote our story. We reimagined Kitchener – by diversifying our economy and focusing on our many strengths, including financial services and education.

And then we made it so.

Imagine a city focused on building a robust local economy by enabling a strong class of startups and growth ventures built by innovative entrepreneurs – a city focused on creating an ecosystem that enables taking innovative ideas to market, creates jobs, nurtures talent, builds wealth and invests capital back into the ecosystem.

Imagine a city that quite literally nurtures those sparks of genius – those rare “AHA!” moments – that create legends and change the world.

For example, Start-Up City has literally come alive in Kitchener. Last year's \$1 million Landing Pad Grants program is now facilitating the transformation of once-vacant upper storeys in the core into contemporary new start-up spaces. And what started as our Warehouse District has now become our Innovation District – one of the province's premiere multi-disciplinary centres of innovation.

But then, imagine a city that, even in the midst of this innovation evolution, doesn't forget where it came from – a city that embraces its past and does all it can to help the region's traditional industries transform and succeed in the economy of tomorrow.

You don't even have to imagine this stuff. This is the smart and caring city we're building.

Still, some think that our successes mean that our work is done, but continued focus on our economy, talent attraction and quality of life, is more important than ever. We'll stay on the right track this year with the development of a refreshed five-year Kitchener Economic Development Strategy – or KEDS 2 – that will drive the continued growth and diversification of our local economy, building on our legacy of industry, innovation and investment.

We're going to work together with our local partners to keep Waterloo Region's economy strong too. We don't need to compete against each other for business. We've already seen the success we can have when working together. It's not at all unusual to see businesses move between our partner cities.

Just recently, Hereoux-Devtek needed to expand and built a new, larger facility in Cambridge where the land was available. Stantec will soon be moving out of downtown Kitchener to a new, larger home in Waterloo. A few years ago, Google moved its offices from Waterloo to The Tannery in Kitchener's Innovation District. This fall, they will open a new 160,000 square-foot facility that has room for more than 1,000 employees.

These are the business decisions that make sense for these firms and they're good news when we consider them in the context of what's good for Waterloo Region. Keeping jobs and taxes here is a good thing.

Still, as the economic landscape across the country continues to evolve, sometimes difficult business decisions are made that means businesses and jobs must leave our community. I think about the recent Schneider's plant closing.

Schneider's was one of the last large, traditional manufacturers in our city and had been one of the backbones of our local manufacturing sector for 125 years. Without question, its closing was difficult for the community and former employees and their families.

But, there is no doubt that our city has shown its ability to be resilient and adaptable in the face of changes like these.

As our manufacturing economy continues to shift, we're shifting our focus with it to areas like advanced manufacturing. The rich manufacturing heritage that made us famous for our tires, boots, shirts and furniture has given way to the development and use of robust robotics, automation and information technologies within a myriad of globally-competitive local companies.

Think Miovision, ClearPath, Vidyad and Thalmic Labs. Think Christie Digital – one of the most amazing stories of reinvention from traditional manufacturing to advanced manufacturing that we've seen in recent years.

Creating a more diversified local economy by capitalizing on and enhancing our strengths is just one more way we're building a smart and caring city that can withstand, and even thrive, in difficult economic times.

SUPPORTING AND INVOLVING CITIZENS

Every day, I am reminded that Kitchener citizens are the real city builders – in the businesses you run, the services you provide, the volunteer hours you give to our community, and the time you take to participate in city decisions.

We can't build a smart and caring city without you.

Our philosophy is always to make it as easy as possible for you to connect with us – anytime, anywhere. Nowhere is this more evident than in our efforts to provide excellent customer service. Citizens can now get information or report problems to us 24 hours a day, 7 days a week via our Corporate Contact Centre. They can do the same online with Ping Street, our new mobile app or through our website.

We are listening. That's what smart and caring cities do. We listen and we engage citizens, too.

Kitchener has a longstanding history of citizen engagement and involvement in city government and public affairs. And we start early – with our youth.

Through My Ideal City, which gives elementary students a chance to experience an evening in the life of City Council, our annual high school Youth Forums and our Kitchener Youth Action Council, we are focused on creating engaged future city builders who understand how municipal government impacts their lives and how they can make change in their city.

We often reach out to all citizens on the issues that are important to our future. In 2014, our focus was on talking to citizens about your priorities for the city through the *Your Kitchener, Your Say* consultations led by City staff and Compass Kitchener, a citizens' advisory group. Your collective priorities for our community will be front and centre when we launch our new City of Kitchener Strategic Plan later this spring.

The *Your Kitchener, Your Say* campaign, and how citizen feedback is incorporated into the strategic plan, is near and dear to Ward 10 Councillor Sarah Marsh's heart. She has devoted countless hours to this campaign over the past eight years as a member of Compass Kitchener. I expect that her passion and expertise will be invaluable as we strive to continue providing meaningful engagement opportunities to citizens in the future.

Ward 2 Councillor Dave Schnider's support during the budget process was instrumental in the city's decision to invest in a new e-participation platform – a centralized one-stop shop online where citizens will be able to participate in two-way discussions about issues and initiatives, and share ideas and views with Council and fellow citizens. When it's up and running, I hope to see you there helping us to build a better Kitchener.

It's been said that the measure of a society is how it treats those who need our support the most. I'd like to think that's the measure of a smart and caring city like Kitchener, too.

We need to be inclusive wherever we can, at the same time knowing that while we can't do everything, we can do *something*.

I'm reminded of last year's discussions about our City Hall flag pole policy. I was really pleased that we could agree to revise our policy so that we can be inclusive and fly the flags of all of the diverse and important organizations in our community.

I'm reminded of how we collaborated with our community partners to tackle the Out of the Cold issue earlier this year when we learned that many longstanding partners were no longer able to provide this valuable program. I was proud that Kitchener took the lead on advocating for city stakeholders to come together to find a short-term solution and work on longer-term solutions.

In recent months, Council identified the need to look at affordable housing in more depth as one of their collective priority areas of focus for 2015. Ward 9 Councillor Frank Etherington has been a passionate advocate for this issue calling for Kitchener to work with Waterloo, Cambridge and the Region to collaborate and ensure this remains a high priority issue. As a result of this discussion, in 2015, City staff will review ways of encouraging the development of more affordable housing options to help increase the city's supply of low-income housing.

STRONG LOCAL GOVERNMENT

These are all examples of strong local government that keeps the best interests of all of our citizens at heart. This is important in everything we do – particularly at budget time.

Kitchener City Council recently approved our 2015 budget which included a 1.91 per cent tax increase amounting to just under \$20 per year on the average tax bill. While there were difficult decisions to be made we struck a good balance between making key city-building investments – in key areas identified as priorities by citizens – and strengthening our financial position through lowering debt levels and replenishing reserve funds to secure our future.

We made substantial investments into the lives of our citizens while maintaining one of the lowest property taxes in Ontario. In fact, Kitchener continues to be one of the most affordable cities in the province, enjoying amongst the lowest combined tax and utility rates of Ontario's largest cities.

Sometimes strong local government must make decisions today intended to build a better future for tomorrow. Without question, our biggest challenge this year was water and sewer rates. Ultimately, we approved a 9.9 per cent increase. That was a very difficult but necessary decision as we, like most other Canadian cities, have reached a critical point.

Significant portions of our infrastructure are at the end of their lifecycle and need replacement. During the most recent recession, the City subsidized water and sewer rates because we knew people were struggling. In retrospect, we may have overdone that and now we need to start catching up.

With more than 40 years' experience between City Council and as a former City Treasurer and Chief Administrative Officer, Ward 3 Councillor John Gazzola, knows that infrastructure is an issue that requires creative long-term thinking, not just short-term solutions. I hope to count on John's experience over the next year, as Council engages in more discussion about how to better plan to fund the infrastructure deficit.

When we look at all of the services citizens receive from the city – services they value – what's really astonishing, and probably not well known, is that for every tax dollar we pay to all orders of government, local governments get only about eight cents. Yet local governments are responsible for over 60 per cent of the country's overall infrastructure. No wonder we are behind. Expecting municipalities to continue relying on the outdated and regressive property tax system is simply not sustainable.

With a federal election looming, 2015 is a pivotal year to put key municipal issues like this front and centre on the national stage. Through my work with the Federation of Canadian municipalities – in particular the Big City Mayor's Caucus – I will continue to make Kitchener's voice heard, every chance I can, as we advocate on behalf of all cities about important issues like infrastructure, affordable housing and public transit.

CITY BUILDER AWARD

Ladies and gentlemen, bold, proactive and positive leadership is what is required to build a great city. It's not just about counting pennies. It's about making smart and strategic investments into the community that will benefit all of our residents and all of our neighbourhoods. It may not yield results overnight, but over time, it adds up to a smart and caring city.

We have a truly incredible story to tell about the smart and caring city we're building. But, sometimes it seems that we're too busy, or maybe too humble, to celebrate our successes. Today, I'm proposing that we share our city building story in a big way – at least once a year.

It's my pleasure to introduce the **Mayor's City Builder Award**. This award, which will be presented for the first time in 2016, is an honour created to recognize an individual, group or organization that has – through their outstanding volunteerism or exemplary action – demonstrated an extraordinary commitment to building a better Kitchener, for today and for generations to come.

There are plenty of worthy candidates for this award right here in this room this morning – and in neighbourhoods and businesses across our community. Let's celebrate these remarkable City Builders – because our smart and caring city wouldn't have the same bright future without them.

They are humble and innovative people, quietly making great things happen in our city. They are active, engaged, adventurous, dynamic and creative volunteers who willingly give of their time and talents – who go the extra mile for a neighbor and who are unfailingly kind and inspiring. They are people from all walks of life who have adopted the pioneering spirit that is so much a part of Kitchener’s fabric and channeled it into the not-for-profits, the arts, sciences, technology, business, medicine and education.

They are city builders. You are city builders. I challenge you to remember this in all that you do.

Remember that ordinary people like us can do extraordinary things. That has always been true in Kitchener.

Look around. Generations of past city builders have left their extraordinary proof everywhere – generations who, like us, believed that the smart and caring city we’re building together for tomorrow— begins with what we do today.

Thank you very much.