



Mayor Berry Vrbanovic's 2017 State of the City Address

2017 State of the City Speech
April 4, 2017
Stanley Park Community Centre

Check Against Delivery

Thank you Jeff.

And thank you also to our friends at the Stanley Park Community Association and St. Daniel's Catholic School for sharing this great space for tonight's State of the City address. I have fond memories of my time growing up in this neighbourhood, and as a student at St. Dan's – I'm just hoping none of my teachers are here to tell those stories!

Before I begin, I would like to take a moment to acknowledge that we're gathered today on the traditional lands of the Anishnabeg, the Haudenosunee, and the neutral peoples. Each of here this evening arrived as immigrants at one time or another, and it is important that we acknowledge our First nations.

INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen.

Two years ago, I stood before you and gave my first State of the City address. I talked to you about city-building and the opportunity ahead of us to work together to make Kitchener a place where everyone has the opportunity to shape our collective future.

And last year, I introduced Make it Kitchener – our award-winning economic development strategy. I talked about our community's long history of coming together to make things.

From buttons, shirts and boots, to furniture, food and car parts, hardware, software and art – there is no doubt that we make some pretty amazing things here in Kitchener.

But perhaps the most important thing we make is community.

Today, I'm going to talk to you about how, through great places, connected people and working together, we are building a better city – **a city that is founded on the ideas and inspiration of its residents.**

CITY-BUILDING

When we think of city-building, it's easy to default to tangible, hard infrastructure - like roads, sewers, bridges and safe water pipes.

Investing in this critical infrastructure is essential as we face the demands of our growing city.

But it's also something every city **MUST** do.

For Kitchener, what has always set us apart is not that we do what we **must** to build our city – it's that we lead the way. We don't settle for average. We collaborate.

We come together to ensure that our city is a place where every resident can make a good living, and live a good life.

So when we embarked on the development of our first-ever neighbourhood strategy, we went above and beyond to find out what YOU believed would make Kitchener an even more connected, caring and vibrant place to live.

We handed out lemonade and cookies to get people talking.

We spoke to you at local events, soccer games and splash pads.

We heard from residents gathering in places of worship, in living rooms and on front porches.

And after more than one-thousand hours of conversation, we had listened to more than five thousand people. That's the equivalent of talking to three people per street in Kitchener!

We were inspired by the things you love about our city.

You **love your parks, trails and playgrounds.**

You **love your community gardens.** You **love your porch parties, street parties and events.**

You **love the people** you connect with on your street, and in your community.

You **love your hood.**

And we were inspired about how....together... we can make Kitchener an even better community.

So we worked together with you to create Kitchener's blueprint for do-it-yourself city-building.

Titled Love My Hood, our first-ever neighbourhood strategy is all about giving you the tools and support you need to take the lead in doing great things in your neighbourhoods, while the city supports you along the way.

When Love My Hood came to council for discussion and approval earlier this year, it received unanimous support. Because no matter which ward in the city my council colleagues represent, we all know that **the most important thing we make in Kitchener... is community.**

GREAT PLACES

Kitchener has been city-building building for more than a century, working together to make a community that inspires people to pursue their dreams and realize their big ideas.

And in Kitchener, we understand that to be a compelling city in which to live, we must create great places that bring people together. We have shaped a lively urban core and bustling suburban neighbourhoods. From midtown to Williamsburg we have learned that the things that make these great places a community are the experiences that draw people together.

Experiences like those that happen every week at the Kitchener Market.

Throughout history, markets have been a powerful force in city-building; spawning growth and acting as anchors that bring people together.

Kitchener's original farmers' market evolved as our region's farmers produced more than their families could consume. These farmers came together to share their abundance with others. And while it was the food that brought people together, it was the connections people made and the experiences they shared that turned the market into a **community**.

Markets are vibrant public places that bring people together, creating a sense of belonging and connection. They encourage experiences that energize our city.

Markets make community.

It is no surprise then, that one of the actions you said would enhance our neighbourhoods is the addition of more community markets – like the ones that take place at the Mill Courtland Community Centre and in Belmont Village.

In Councillor Frank Etherington's ward, volunteers from the Highland-Stirling Community Group and staff at the Mill Courtland Community Centre run a successful neighbourhood market that sells fresh local produce, bread, preserves and more, every summer. Often selling out before noon, people come to the Highland Stirling Market for more than the food – they come for the social interactions. Residents and friends connect in a great place that adds vibrancy and life to their neighbourhood. **They make their community healthier.**

And in Councillor Zyg Janecki's ward, the Belmont Local Food Market that began two years ago is a natural extension of the diverse food scene that has developed in Belmont Village. Run entirely by volunteers, the market sells farm-fresh seasonal vegetables often picked only hours before being sold. To complement the fresh produce, the village's restaurants contribute fresh-baked goods. With all profits donated to charity at the end of the season, the residents in Belmont Village contribute to the local community as well as our city as a whole. **They make their community stronger.**

The connections that happen over food are universal - which is why they are so integral to city-building. In addition to neighbourhood markets, we heard that community gardens are some of the most loved places in Kitchener.

Like neighbourhood markets, community gardens provide a common place where people of all ages and backgrounds can come together to share experiences. They contribute to stronger, safer and healthier neighbourhoods where residents share a sense of pride and belonging.

In Councillor Paul Singh's ward, the Chandler Mowat community garden began as a partnership with the Foodbank of Waterloo Region and the city. A truly inclusive garden, it is an example of how connection over a common purpose can cross cultural and social divides. Residents with diverse backgrounds and physical abilities work side by side, fostering the development of their neighbourhood identity and spirit. **They make their community greener.**

We heard clearly during our consultation for Love My Hood that you want it to be easier to see neighbourhood markets and community gardens come to life across the city. You want fewer barriers and less red tape so that you can take the lead, and the city can support you along the way.

Resident-led, city-supported is a theme we heard a lot during our conversations. You want to lead the way, and have the support of the city behind you to make things happen.

Things that can make otherwise ordinary spaces extraordinary.

Some of those extraordinary great places start with something as simple as the addition of a Buddy Bench.

In Councillor Yvonne Fernandes' ward, Pioneer Park student Ethan VandeKuyt noticed there were kids who were lonely on the playground at his school, and he wanted to do something about it.

Ethan imagined that a Buddy Bench would make people feel more included, so he took his idea to his parent council. They not only approved it, they helped fundraise for it and later installed two Buddy Benches at their school - creating a place that eliminates loneliness and fosters friendship. And Ethan's idea has spread – with Buddy Benches being installed at other schools in the city. Ethan – who is here tonight with his family - **makes our community kinder.**

Other great places are the result of partnerships between community-minded businesses and the city.

Hallman Construction wanted to give back to the Grand River South community, where they have been working for a number of years. Recognizing that placemaking is more than bricks and mortar, Hallman met with Ward Councillor Dave Schnider and city staff to create a special place for residents that has broad community appeal. Together, they came up with the design and concept for Eden Oak Park. Although it has yet to open officially, the park has already become a central gathering place for the residents of this neighbourhood. Funded in part by the city, and in part through a donation from Hallman Construction, Eden Oak Park has traditional play structures, a multi-use paved court and a natural play area. **Making that community vibrant.**

Imagine the community that will grow as a result of these great places. Imagine the people who will feel more connected, more included, more supported and more valued. These great places help make Kitchener a more livable city. And they make Kitchener a **healthier** city.

The Kitchener and Waterloo Community Foundation – who the proceeds of this event proudly support – has done a lot of work in this regard. And they have found that we all have something in common.

We all want to belong to something bigger than ourselves. We want to belong to a family, a group of friends, a neighbourhood, a community.

When we feel like we belong, we are happier and healthier - physically, mentally and emotionally.

We are more likely to ask others for help in a time of need, and more likely to lend our hand in return.

Working together to **make our community** even stronger.

Working together to create **great places** - places that uplift us as individuals, and as a community.

Some of Kitchener's great places are historic landmarks – beacons of our past like the Tannery, the Breithaupt Block, the Kaufman Lofts, and the former hide house on Joseph Street - transformed over generations to adapt to the vision of today's dreamers and doers.

Some are cultural jewels – like Centre In The Square – a place that was the dream of those who believed Kitchener deserved a stage for theatre and music that would rival the best performance venues in North America.

And others are neighbourhoods themselves – neighbourhoods that are well-established and that have, over time, developed their own identities.

Maintaining the integrity of these established neighbourhoods is as important as creating new great places for people to enjoy.

In established neighbourhoods, recently approved guidelines will help manage residential intensification to ensure we maintain a neighbourhood's unique identity while providing a clear and fair process for how development is approved.

Created with the input of residents, developers and staff, the guidelines provide recommendations on things like front setbacks and home heights. And they will see the creation of new tools to help residents understand intensification so that they can have a more informed say on how their neighbourhood changes. While these new guidelines will be piloted in specific neighbourhoods, like the Vanier neighbourhood in Councillor John Gazzola's ward, my hope is to see them applied throughout the city in the coming years.

Great places – from neighbourhood markets, to community gardens, buddy benches and neighbourhood identities – all contribute to a sense of belonging.

But what takes them from great places to amazing communities is the **connected people** that bring them to life.

CONNECTED PEOPLE

Kitchener's summer street parties and porch parties – like those on McKenzie Avenue and on Hohner Avenue– would not be possible without the passion of the residents who work tirelessly to connect the neighbours, friends, artists, musicians and entrepreneurs who bring these events to life.

And throughout the city, little libraries dot front lawns and public spaces – connecting people through a shared appreciation of the values our community holds strong – values like literacy, independent thinking, freedom of opinion and exchange of knowledge.

These vibrant street parties and quiet little libraries couldn't be more different – but they both provide an opportunity for people to connect, to celebrate diversity, and to appreciate the commonalities we all share. **They make our community shine.**

But in Kitchener, we don't just connect when the sun is shining and we're sporting our flip-flops and Bermuda shorts.

During the harshness of winter, neighbours in every corner of the city help each other out by shovelling the driveways and sidewalks of those unable to look after them on their own. This year, to help promote this neighbourly activity, we launched Kitchener's first Snow Angels campaign.

The snow angels campaign encourages people to share the stories of those who go above and beyond to lend a hand shovelling for those in need. This year, more than 150 people contacted us to share their stories.

And let me tell you – if you're having a bad day, there's nothing that will change your mood more than reading these amazing stories of kindness. They highlight the best of who we are in Kitchener.

In Councillor Bil Ioannidis' ward, a resident named Murray is the kind of neighbour we all hope to have – and we should all aspire to be.

Murray was nominated as a snow angel by his neighbour, who has lived on his street for five years – and for five years, she hasn't had to shovel her driveway once!

This is because Murray, who is in his 80s, is out snowplowing neighbours' driveways and sidewalks after every snowfall – clearing their driveways and sidewalks before 7 a.m. Murray takes a lot of pride in giving back to his community. **He makes his community safe.**

As a city, we reap the benefits that come when resident-led, city-supported activities like street parties, little libraries and snow angels become part of the fabric of neighbourhoods.

To support more resident-led city-building, we have tripled the amount of money available through our neighbourhood matching grants. And we've made the application process even easier to complete.

A partnership with the United Way Waterloo Region Communities, the Neighbourhood Matching Grant will now make sixty-thousand dollars a year available to people who want to do great things in their neighbourhoods.

And while you connect people in our neighbourhoods, we will continue to invest in the infrastructure that connects you with the resources, people, and organizations that make Kitchener a city where you can make a good living, and live a good life. A city where you can put your talent to work - and where you can start, grow and succeed, thanks to world-class connections at your fingertips, and on your doorstep.

Connections like the Toronto – Waterloo Region Innovation Corridor, which is coming to life thanks to a partnership with the federal and provincial governments that recently announced a \$1.8 billion in the GO Transit Regional Express. More than just a transit link, the corridor is a global centre of talent, growth, innovation and discovery – connecting 15,000 tech companies, 200,000 tech workers and 5,200 startups. And it connects future entrepreneurs, leaders and mentors from 16 colleges and universities. **Making our community global.**

Connected people is critical to the success of a city's health, resiliency, and strength. In an increasingly digital world, **how** we connect can have a dramatic impact on our experiences and the opportunities ahead of us. Which is why Digital Kitchener– our city's award-winning smart city strategy – is so critical to our success.

Digital Kitchener provides the framework for more online services, like the ability to participate in community engagement from the comfort of your own home – or to pay your utility and tax bill anytime, from anywhere. Greater access to these activities is something we heard you value; being able to connect with your city on your terms, in a way that is meaningful to you. **Making our community available on demand.**

And, Digital Kitchener is building new connections that will have a positive impact on digital literacy for people in our region. Connections like the one we've forged with the Kitchener Public Library, THEMUSEUM, the Waterloo Public Library and HIVE Waterloo Region will increase digital literacy and diversity in technology in our region. **Making our community more inclusive.**

WORKING TOGETHER

There is no doubt that inclusivity is one of our region's greatest strengths. We have a history of welcoming those who are fleeing hardship and persecution in other parts of the world.

Since 2015, approximately 1,800 Syrian newcomers have settled in our region. They have been welcomed with open arms as we worked together to ensure that their settlement here was successful.

Recently, hundreds of people filled the Rotunda at the City Hall to celebrate our new neighbours, colleagues and friends.

This celebration was a beautiful reminder that here in Kitchener, our strength comes from our collective diversity – and our common desire to work together to enable people to pursue their dreams and realize their big ideas – whether they are from Syria, or Silicon Valley.

We are a city and a region that allows people to put their talents and passions to work. To think big, and be brave. And we know that we can accomplish more by working together – so strategically, we invest in the resources people need to start, scale and grow their dreams.

And we appreciate and welcome the vibrancy and perspective that newcomers bring to our city.

Newcomers like Nadia Muhammad, who arrived in Kitchener from Pakistan about five years ago. Nadia began working with the community centre in her Victoria Hills neighbourhood to implement storytelling programs that encourage appreciation and understanding of different cultures.

She quickly became a mentor and leader, and her unique perspective was instrumental in enhancing how people celebrate Diwali, the Hindu Festival of Lights, in Kitchener. Nadia led a delegation of youth who came to council asking for permission to expand fireworks beyond Victoria and Canada Day to also include Diwali. City staff supported the request and council approved a change to the fireworks bylaw so that everyone feels like they belong. **Making our community more inclusive.**

Creating a sense of belonging and inclusivity doesn't always have to be as big as changing a city bylaw. In Councillor Kelly Galloway-Sealock's ward, the residents of Williamsburg came together on Neighbours Day to paint their local rink shed. Over 75 kids helped in this activity, working together to create a beautiful piece of art that is an important part of their experience living and growing in Kitchener. It's an experience that helps them know they belong here – and it is a project that has instilled a sense of community pride that everyone can relate to.

Across town, in Councillor Sarah Marsh's ward, residents have worked together to install murals in a completely different way – they've come up with a creative solution to an everyday problem: how to calm busy traffic in their otherwise quiet neighbourhoods.

Residents in the Mount Hope-Breithaupt Park neighbourhood led the way in implementing the city's first traffic-calming street mural. In 2015 they worked with city staff on a pilot project that has inspired others to follow their lead - Kitchener's second street mural was installed at the Lancaster and Chapel Street intersection last fall.

Nicknamed 'walking on sunshine', that brightly coloured mural is a daily reminder of the power residents and city staff have when they have open minds, imagination and a willingness to work together to rip away the red tape. **Making our community safer.**

These are just a few examples of how, when people have an opportunity to work together to improve their city, amazing things can happen.

And this fall, a number of community groups will work together in Councillor Scott Davey's ward to enhance one of our city's most-loved great places.

To celebrate Canada's 150th birthday, community groups that represent the history and diversity of our city will join staff and leaders to plant 150 trees in Kiwanis Park. These trees will be planted in groves throughout the park, adding to our tree canopy and contributing to a cleaner climate. **Making our community greener.**

CONCLUSION

Great Places. Connected People. Working Together.

These are the foundations of Love My Hood – a neighbourhood strategy that encourages residents to take the lead while the city supports them along the way. Through Love My Hood we will work to further enhance the connections people have with our city. We'll work to tear down the red tape, and instead roll out the red carpet.

Because while the foundations of Love My Hood are now more clearly articulated, they have always existed here in Kitchener.

They have existed among the city-builders that have come before us.

And they exist in the imagination of people whose passion for our city is matched by that of staff and city leaders who work hard every day, delivering valued services in a connected, caring and vibrant city.

It's no secret that I wear my K-town pride on my sleeve. What I've shared with you today is only part of our story.

So don't just take it from me.

Take it from the people who are leading the way, every day.

[CUT TO VIDEO]

You've heard my story.

You've heard their story.

Now, let's share our Kitchener story with the world, and inspire others to tell theirs too.

As we celebrate Canada's 150th birthday, this year we'll be launching a civic pride campaign encouraging you to tell your K-Town story to the world – because coming together to celebrate our strengths, makes us.....a COMMUNITY.

And we all know...the most important thing we'll ever make here....is community.

Thank you.