

2018 State of the City – Remarks: Mayor Berry Vrbanovic

Introduction

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.

These words, made famous by academic and anthropologist Margaret Mead, ring true as much today as they did over 50 years ago when they were first spoken.

In fact, it is that group of thoughtful, committed citizens, our Kitchener residents and business owners, who have increasingly become engaged in building a better and more caring Kitchener.

Thank you Mary for that kind introduction.

As we begin, I would reflect on how we all got here today. For me, as a first-generation immigrant, it was back in 1969.

For others it was many generations ago. But regardless of how or when we arrived, we are all citizens in this great country, creating community on the lands originally traversed by indigenous peoples.

And so, I would like to begin by acknowledging that the lands on which we gather today is the land traditionally used by the Haudenosaunee*, Anishinaabe** and Neutral People. We also acknowledge and take a moment to reflect upon the enduring presence and deep traditional knowledge, laws and philosophies of the Indigenous People with whom we share this land today.

Good evening, and thank you all for being here tonight.

I recall being in this great space a little more than a year ago, when Kurtis McBride, CEO and co-founder of Miovision and Frank Voisin hosted a launch event, introducing their vision for this transformational, collaborative workspace. Now, less than two years later, Catalyst 137 is coming to life.

When they first shared their idea for Catalyst with me a few years ago, what I loved about their concept was the opportunity it presented in growing our economy, creating jobs, and advancing our city and region on a global scale.

Their vision for this innovation space was to have it blend in seamlessly with the neighbourhood around it, leveraging the strength of its location to build our economy and to contribute to a great city.

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Today, Catalyst 137 is home or becoming to many companies including the growing traffic management company, Miovision, government partners like BDC, suppliers like Westmount Signs and Ignite Restaurant group's newest ventures including the Graffiti Market, Red Circle Coffee and Red Circle Brewing Co.

And just last week, KIK Interactive, one of our local unicorn companies announced that they will also be moving into Catalyst 137, as the space that best met their needs for their growing messaging and cryptocurrency company.

Kurtis, Frank – thank you for providing this great space tonight, as we spend a little time talking about **city-building, our diverse and dynamic economy, and what it takes to build a caring, and innovative community.**

Citybuilding

I've said many times that great cities don't just happen. They are built with passion and purpose. By bold, proactive and positive leadership. By partnerships and collaboration, and by the pursuit of a common purpose.

It can be said that all of these things happen in other cities – and that is true. So what makes citybuilding different in Kitchener? Quite simply, it's **our people.**

Citizens. City Staff. Volunteers. Developers. Investors. Formal and informal leaders – and yes, even elected officials, coming together to do great things.

We, are all citybuilders. YOU, are all citybuilders.

At my first State of the City speech, I spent some time talking to you about the city-building journey we are on **together**, to build a better Kitchener.

Today, I'm going to spend a little time talking about all of the things we have accomplished **together**, making Kitchener the kind of city where you can make a great living, and live a great life.

Strong Neighbourhoods

One of our greatest strengths as a city is the diversity of our neighbourhoods. We have worked alongside our tremendous neighbourhood associations, our community partners and our citizens to create the spaces, places and experiences that connect people with one another.

We are making our city safer, healthier, and happier. Building a sense of community and pride that encourages people to "love their 'hood."

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And we have a long history of supporting our neighbourhoods. For example, about 15 years ago, the City of Kitchener provided a one-thousand dollar grant to the residents of Richwood Court.

In an initiative led by the Jones Family, the residents of this beautiful court redid the gardens, added some landscaping rocks, new trees and a pathway. A beautiful space that also serves as a memorial for a neighbour that passed away, this little court has much meaning for a very tight knit group of residents who love it and call it home.

And while it's a place that has been home to some families for upwards of 30 years, with new neighbours on the street, Richwood Court has introduced new traditions – like Saturday morning Court Coffee. These neighbours have built a strong sense of belonging. **The residents of Richwood Court are city builders.**

A little more than a year ago, council unanimously approved Love My Hood – Kitchener's first ever neighbourhood strategy, designed to encourage and support citizens to lead the way as citybuilders.

We promised you that LoveMyHood wouldn't sit on a shelf, and I am proud to report to you today that we have lived up to that commitment – and then some.

Since approving LoveMyHood, we've worked alongside many citizen volunteers to create new easy-to-use programs for community gardens, neighbourhood markets and resident-led traffic calming.

We've expanded our snow angel program and we've cut the red tape to make it easier for residents to throw a party in their 'hood – like the Diwali festival in Councillor Zyg Janecki's Ward 8.

What all of these programs have in common is their ability to bring people together – to create community, connections, and relationships that make our city a healthier, happier, more engaged place – a city where you can make a great living and live a great life.

Three years ago, the idea that thousands of people would come together on one specific day to celebrate what it means to be a neighbour was a concept we hoped would resonate with people. On that first neighbours' day in June of 2015, approximately five thousand people took part in one of twenty local events.

Three years later, the number of people celebrating neighbours day has grown by more than fifty per cent.

Last year, more than eight thousand people came together at more than thirty-five local events across the City.

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This year's Neighbours' Day – **Saturday June 9th** – will be even bigger as residents and neighbourhood groups take advantage of the Love My Hood **Host Your Own Event** program...residents like Sara Clarke, president of the Boardwalk Neighbourhood Association.

Sara launched the Party in the Park in Resurrection Park in Councillor Bil Ioannidis' Ward 7 four years ago, and for the past three years, Party in the Park has been a hallmark event on Neighbours' Day.

Together with her neighbours, Sara is committed to seeing the event grow and thrive, knowing that the success of this one event helps to make her 'hood safer, and more connected. **Sara is a Citybuilder.**

Through Love My Hood, the financial support to help people come together to do great things in their neighbourhoods has also grown.

Over the past 3 years, the number of neighbourhood matching grants provided to residents has tripled – and the financial resources provided to support this resident-led, city supported work has increased by more than **one thousand percent.**

Last year, twelve grants totaling more than fifty-eight thousand dollars were provided to resident groups to help them make their projects happen.

These grants supported things like a picnic shelter in Cherry Park, one of the most well-loved community spaces in Councillor Frank Etherington's Ward 9, and the Cinema Under the Stars at Country Hills in Councillor Paul Singh's Ward 6.

In Councillor Yvonne Fernandes' Ward 4, a matching grant for the Doon South Meet and Mingle brought people together for conversation, food and fun – and led to grander discussions about how those neighbours could work together, and with the city, to explore options to enhance the amenities in Thomas Slee Park.

Each of these grants reflect the unique vision of the residents who submitted the requests so they could do great things in their 'hoods.

But they are ideas that can – and have – inspired others to do more. And through a new LoveMyHood website, we're doing just that – encouraging people to get connected. To be inspired. **To become a citybuilder.**

To help create more great places, Love My Hood introduced a place-making challenge grant in 2016 that provided ten thousand dollars in funding for pilot projects valued at one thousand dollars each.

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This year, applications have more than quadrupled, and we've committed more than forty-eight thousand dollars for placemaking projects located throughout the city.

Projects like the one in Councillor Dave Schnider's Ward 2, being led by one of our youngest grant recipients ever, Lazar Paroski – who is here with us this evening.

Lazar was eager to create a great a place in his community that would inspire other kids to see math as creative and fun, while improving regional E – Q - A - O scores.

At 14 years old, Lazar submitted a Placemaking Challenge grant application to build a Math Wall in Morrison Park. He held workshops at local elementary schools and community centres, where other students could vote on the features they liked about the wall.

With the help of a \$6,000 placemaking grant, Lazar's vision will become a reality this July. **Lazar is a Citybuilder.**

And while he may be one of the youngest grant recipients we've seen in Kitchener, Lazar isn't the only young citybuilder in our community.

In Councillor John Gazzola's Ward 3, citybuilding took on the form of two vibrant street murals last year, installed in front of Wilson Avenue public school. Part traffic calming, part community connecting, this project enabled young people in our community to not only be involved in, but to lead the way as citybuilders.

High school Students from Eastwood Collegiate Institute provided conceptual designs for the street mural, inspired both by the community around them and the community they wanted to build.

Wilson Ave Public School students then voted on the design. They selected young artist Lauren Rueb's design as the one that best celebrated their 'hood and then collaborated with city staff to plan and paint the mural, creating a safer intersection that also builds community and generates neighbourhood pride.

Lauren, and the students of Eastwood and Wilson Ave schools, are Citybuilders.

As many of you know, I am a big Walt Disney fan. Well, Walt Disney once said that **our greatest natural resource is the minds of our children.** Seeing Love My Hood inspire and engage the next generation of citybuilders should give us all confidence that the future of our city is very bright.

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Strong Economy

In addition to Walt Disney, one of the other people I became a big fan of during my days of shelving books while employed at Kitchener Public Library during my high school years was Dr. Seuss.

Many Dr. Seuss books had great messages in them, and one that I enjoyed most was “Oh the Places You’ll Go” where Seuss tells us:

“You Have Brains In Your Head, You Have Feet in Your Shoes, You Can Steer Yourself Any Direction You Choose.”

As citybuilders, we know that it’s not enough to simply inspire our young people to dream big with the brains in their head, or to empower them to create change by steering themselves into new directions.

We need to make sure that we’re building a city where they can see themselves growing, connecting, working and living.

While Love My Hood is building a better Kitchener by creating safe, connected and vibrant neighbourhoods, ensuring that we have a strong and diverse economy that enables people to put their talents and passion to work is equally important.

Through Make it Kitchener - our four-year economic development strategy – we have ensured that our economy continues to thrive, driven by innovators and entrepreneurs, makers and manufacturers; by developers and investors who are all **inspired to be citybuilders**.

The strength of our economy has never been more dramatically apparent as it is today. Driven in part by a bold decision by our regional government to invest in light rail transit, and in part by the creation of Kitchener’s innovation district, our city centre is not only growing – it’s booming.

Astonishing. Extraordinary.

A model for the continent and the world, said citybuilder Rick Haldenby, in the Waterloo Region Record.

And with an expected \$1.2 billion dollars in building permits issued for 20 new developments in the city core by February 2019, it’s hard to disagree.

Kitchener’s urban centre is in the midst of an unprecedented transformation, as developers and investors build first class workspaces and new residential condo units and apartments for the thousands of new residents that will call our city centre home.

Developers like Frank Voisin are a valuable part of this urban evolution, and our Make it Kitchener story. Frank and his brother Steve Voisin are the third generation of Voisins helping build Kitchener as a great community.

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In the 60's and 70's, Frank Voisin senior started a suburban residential development company that helped build many of the neighbourhoods in Forest Hill and Forest Heights.

Frank's son, Greg has played an instrumental role in building some of the modern-day suburban retail serving Kitchener and Waterloo's west-side.

And today, Greg's sons Frank and Steve, recognize the important role of urban development and are helping create Kitchener's 21st century story with projects like 8 Queen Street North - part of the former Goudie's Department Store and home today to Vidyard – and 48 Ontario Street - the former Legion building. **The Voisins are city builders.**

And while developers like the Voisins have helped create some of the great spaces where citizens can live and work, citybuilders George Tsintzouras, Ruth Casselman and Kevin Wright have leveraged our region's unique innovation ecosystem to start and grow a business that protects citizens' homes from potential water damage and high water bills by using smart sensors for intelligent leak detection.

Launched out of the Accelerator Centre at Communitech, then growing at 44 Gaukel, Alert Labs has grown, creating meaningful and interesting jobs for 25 people, contributing to our innovation economy. **George, Ruth and Kevin are citybuilders.**

But it's not just the internet of things or technology sector that values the talented and highly skilled people that call our region home.

When Kitchener's Roadtrek Motorhomes was purchased by Erwin Hymer Group, the new German-based owners, could have easily chosen anywhere in the world to expand their operations. They chose our Region.

Started by Jac Hanemaayer in 1974, Roadtrek has long provided employment to hundreds of citizens. Jac's deep commitment to our city, combined with our region's collaborative approach to economic development, advanced in part through the Waterloo Region Economic Development Corporation, showcased the competitive advantage Erwin Hymer would benefit from by expanding here: a talented workforce, a strong investment climate – and most importantly – an excellent quality of life for their people.

As the new company takes Erwin Hymer products across North America and the world, we recognize that **Jac Hanemaayer and the dedicated employees of Roadtrek/Erwin Hymer have been and continue to be, city builders.**

The opportunity to thrive in Kitchener has never been stronger, and we must recognize that attracting and retaining the skilled and talented workforce that are tomorrow's citybuilders requires investment in, and support of arts, entertainment and cultural events that create meaningful experiences in our region.

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Citybuilders like Isabel Cisterna, founder of Neruda Arts, has been a driving force in creating a thriving arts and culture scene in our region for more than fifteen years. Through creative workshops, plays, concerts and festivals like the highly successful KULTRUN festival, Neruda and Isabel have attracted thousands of residents and visitors to our region.

Most recently, for Canada’s sesquicentennial anniversary, Neruda has created a sense of place in central Kitchener in the form of a 150 foot mural on Charles Street. The mural was created by a group of 150 artists, who held a series of public consultations to hear people’s stories, and create a sweeping, epic, visual story about belonging – about who we and where we come from.

Isabel notes that the mural is, in itself, a thousand voices; it represents our country, our place in the world, and the tension that exists as we grow and realize that our past and present is complicated. But it’s also a tremendous example of what people can do when they come together.

Isabel is a citybuilder.

Strong Local Government

Being surrounded by citybuilders like the ones I’ve highlighted tonight is inspiring. Each one, in their own way, has created something special; something that has helped make our city more connected, more caring, more livable. And while each one is unique, what they share in common is the ability to pursue their passions with the support of a strong, local government.

Strong financial leadership is critical in our ability to allow citizens to take the lead in doing great things in our community, while the city supports them along the way.

The budgets passed during this term of Council continue to build an innovative, caring and vibrant city in an affordable, sustainable manner – maintaining funding for existing programs and services while also investing in new resources for the parts of our city people value most: things like our parks, trails, and of course, neighbourhoods.

In Councillor Sarah Marsh’s Ward 10, the Queen Street placemaking project will create a pedestrian-first plaza, complete with decorative sidewalks and intersection design and the redevelopment of nearby green space.

And in Councillor Scott Davey’s Ward 1, we’ve completely revitalized one of Kitchener’s great gems – Kiwanis Park.

Originally a centennial project, Kiwanis Park will re-open this summer with a fully renovated pool and a new spray feature.

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As a result of the diligent efforts of successive councils, today, Kitchener has one of the most affordable taxation levels amongst large municipalities in Ontario, and our debt levels continue to decrease at a time when many municipalities are adding to their debt load.

And while we take pride in being one of the most affordable cities in the province in which to live, we know that citizens' expectations continue to grow – and we can't build our city alone.

That's why during this past term we worked together with our partners within the region and organized Waterloo region advocacy days, both on Parliament Hill and at Queen's Park.

Ensuring that the needs of Kitchener and Waterloo region are top of mind with decision makers in Ottawa and Toronto is key to see progress in areas such as affordable housing, dealing with the opioid crisis and addressing the mental health challenges being faced in urban centres.

It's also why we need the support of other orders of government to deliver on commitments to enhance infrastructure and transit – like two day, all day GO and the recent \$11billion announcement for high-speed rail, the single largest commitment in Ontario's 2018 budget.

But as I've said – strong cities are not built by government alone. In this region we have seen a long history of philanthropic donations to community organizations - from our hospitals and universities to cultural institutions like the Centre in the Square.

In fact, just this past year, we saw a \$1 million dollar donation from the Marskell family to THEMUSEUM and a \$200 thousand dollar donation from the Heffner family to the Kitchener Public library digital lab, now called the Heffner Studio.

As a city, we know we need the support of new partners and sponsors who share our values and commitment to citybuilding to support the amenities residents' value most.

To encourage those new partnerships, council approved and implemented a new strategic partnership policy – for the first time ever, providing an opportunity for civic-minded individuals and businesses to partner with the city on everything from strategic advertising to sponsorship and naming rights of an approved list of facilities, programs and spaces.

While still a relatively new strategy, we are already seeing success in our municipal partnership program. Citybuilders like Heffner Lexus Toyota, Playball Academy and Teppermen's have signed on as sponsors of neighbourhood camps, baseball facilities and the lounge space at Sportsworld Arena.

And tonight, I'm pleased to share with you that we are joined by some very special guests who are committing one of the largest municipal sponsorships in our Region's history.

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It is fitting that the first multi-million dollar sponsorship the city has received comes from a family who epitomize citybuilding: the Schlegel family.

The Schlegels' legacy of citybuilding has deep roots in our community. From the development of neighbourhoods in southwest Kitchener to long term care and retirement communities, to state of the art facilities that allow people to age in place gracefully, and to receive dignified, respectful mental health and addiction care, the Schlegels have long contributed to the health and wellbeing of our city.

It gives me great pride to announce today that the Schlegels' legacy as citybuilders continues with a two-point-three million dollar investment in what will be the region's largest, most comprehensive district park.

As a result of this investment, the South Kitchener District Park will be renamed **RBJ Schlegel Park**.

Currently under construction, RBJ Schlegel Park will bring much needed active and passive recreation space to southwest Kitchener – and it will become a destination park for users from across the entire Region.

The first phase of the park will include artificial and natural turf multi-purpose sports fields and a football field as well as open community event space, playground and splash play facilities and multi-use pathways and trails.

RBJ Schlegel Park will be a tremendous asset for all citizens in Kitchener – and it's a much needed amenity in Councillor Kelly Galloway-Sealock's Ward 5. I don't think it's a stretch to say that without Kelly's advocacy for her constituents and her perseverance on bringing this much needed park to her growing ward, RBJ Schlegel Park would not be set to open next year.

When complete, RBJ Schlegel Park will be a jewel not only in south Kitchener, but in the region as a whole. It will be one of the largest most active parks in the city, with a pool, indoor sports facility, outdoor entertainment space, and more.

But rather than me tell you about this amazing space, let's have a look at what's underway in South Kitchener.

[Cut to Video]

Please join me in acknowledging Ron and Barb Schlegel, their sons, Brad, Jamie and Rob Schlegel, and their families for this historic investment in building a stronger, healthier more connected city. **The Schlegels are citybuilders.**

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Conclusion

As I stand here tonight amongst you, talking about the citybuilders who have helped develop safe neighbourhoods, who have contributed to our diverse and vibrant economy, and who have leveraged the advantages of a strong local government, it is not lost on me that there are likely hundreds of other stories I could have shared – and hundreds more I have yet to hear.

And that – my friends – is the secret power of our community – the thing that truly makes us unique.

We are all citybuilders.

In my office, I have a print on my wall called the “The Essence of Success” and reads as follows:

“Successful is the person who has lived well, laughed often and loved much, who has gained the respect of children, who leaves the world better than they found it, who has never lacked appreciation for the earth’s beauty, who never fails to look for the best in others or give the best of themselves.”

Friends, as we leave today, I invite you to join me and join others from our community in this journey of success. We have an incredible community, but there is still much work to be done.

So I ask you to leave today reflecting on what you can do to give the best of yourself, every day, so that we can all leave this community and this world better than we found it. I invite you to join me so that you too can be a **city builder**.

Ladies and Gentlemen, that concludes my remarks for this evening. I’d like to invite Kitchener Council and members of the Schlegel family to join me for an official photo offstage to my right. Thank you.

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