



The Corporation of
the City of
St. Catharines

Mat Siscoe
Mayor

Good afternoon.

Let me begin by thanking everyone here at the Greater Niagara Chamber of Commerce for the opportunity I have today. To Mishka, Hugo, Corrina and all who were involved, my sincere thanks. To today's title sponsor Verge Insurance, thank-you for your support, and for helping to bring my words to life.

I'd also like to take a moment to thank all of the staff from the City and the Region who are able to be here today:

St. Catharines CAO - David Oakes and Deputy CAO - Erin O'Hoski, as well as Members of our Senior Leadership Team:

- Brian York
- Sandor Csanyi
- Anthony Martuccio
- Chief Dave Upper
- Tami Kitay
- Jeanette Pillitteri and;
- Kristine Douglas.

From the Region, we have CAO Ron Tripp, Deputy CAO Dan Carnegie, and Commissioners Michelle Sergi and Adrienne Jugley.

And I'd also like to thank those Council colleagues who have been able to make it as well: Deputy Mayor Bill Phillips, Budget Chair Carlos Garcia and Councillors Dawn Dodge, Matt Harris, Robin McPherson, and Mark Stevens.

And from the Region, Chair Jim Bradley and Mayors Sandra Easton and Diamond Jim Diodati, and Councillors Sal Sorrento, Tim Rigby, and Joyce Morocco.



As well, a thank you also to MP Chris Bittle and MPP Jennie Stevens, colleagues who are working hard on behalf of our community, both of whom send their regrets today.

I would also like to quickly thank my amazing Chief of Staff Brianne Whitty, my Admin Assistant Alysha Angrilli and the General of my office, Julie Hughes. I will get in trouble for this – but Julie is now on her fourth mayor, has been in the office for more than twenty years, and is the reason why things get done. If I can ask – can we give a round of applause for Julie, who will be retiring this April?

And finally – I don't usually do shout-outs, but allow me to fanboy for a moment – as a 13 year Season Ticket holder of the Niagara IceDogs, I'm happy to acknowledge Head Coach Ben Boudreau is here. I, along with many others, appreciate a straight-shooter of a head coach who is honest about what the team needs to do, and Coach Boudreau has done that in spades. I'm excited to see what the future brings, with the young core of players like Kevin He, Ryan Roobroeck and Charlie Robertson leading the club. I know Coach Boudreau is here with Barry Katzman, so I may have to have a chat with him about his taste in friends, but

There – now that I've indulged my sports fan itch.

Writing a “State of the City” speech is a funny thing. You want to look back on the year, celebrate the things that went well, maybe identify the things that you need to work on – and then look forward to the year ahead, and discuss all of the plans you may have. Last year's speech couldn't follow that pattern, because as busy as the first few months of my term were – our CAO joked that I had served two full terms worth of issues in the first three months – there wasn't time to have anything to look back on. And truthfully – I still didn't have a great sense of what this job looked like, and how easy or difficult issues would be to deal with.



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Speaking of the issues I've been dealing with – let me show you a sneak peak of what my first meeting on day one of this job has resulted in:

World Rowing Championship Video

More on that later.

Now – a little more than a year in – I'm more grounded. Our Council has some significant wins to celebrate. We've met our challenges head-on, dealt with them, and the City is in a better place because of it. And so as I reflected on the year, and thought about what I believe is to come, I can't help, even with all the strife and all of the uncertainty in the world today, to feel a sense of optimism for where our community is headed. And that optimism comes from all the different places that this job takes me.

I joke that three-quarters of my job is meeting people and learning about what they do. Maybe that will ease off in the coming years – but if I had to describe my first full year in office, 'meeting people' would be at the top of the list of how I spend my days. I'll choose this moment to thank the folks in our Economic Development Department, led by Brian York, for making sure I get to understand the business community and their issues as well as I can. The EcDev team also helped guide me as I work on advocating to upper levels of government, identifying the areas where the biggest impact can be felt by the largest number of businesses and residents in our City.

When we talk about business in St. Catharines, a lot of people's minds turn to the big companies in town. And there's a lot room for optimism for those big employers.

There's General Motors, a company near and dear to my family's heart, as well as thousands of other families in St. Catharines; a company whose pension power continues to lift so many in our City. We got great news in the past year when GM announced that their new Ultium line of drive



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motors would be built here in St. Catharines. I had the opportunity to meet with new GM Canada President Kristian Aquilina last week and heard about how the plant on Glendale is being retooled to get ready for that new product. It was good to hear at that time that St. Catharines continues to be

one of the most productive and efficient plants across North America – a testament to the hard work of so many St. Catharines and Niagara workers. I gave Kristian my commitment that the City would continue to build on the partnership that has existed for more than a century, and we'll continue to advocate for increased investment in the auto sector and our homegrown success.

And then there's Ontario Shipyards - formerly Heddle Marine, and just like Twitter is now X, it will take me a while to make that switch. We spent a lot of time this past last year advocating for an Ontario Marine Strategy, and we were thrilled to see the inclusion of Investments in Labour, Education and Training as one of the four pillars of the strategy – areas Ontario Shipyards has clearly identified as being crucial to their continued success, not just here in St. Catharines, but across the Great Lakes in our province. Combined with the recognition that a lot of work needs to be done fostering economic opportunity in the sector, as Ontario competes not just with Quebec and British Columbia but the rest of the global economy as well, we've helped move the needle with the province in recognizing just how crucial the marine sector is to our province's economic future. And we were thrilled to celebrate the \$107 million dollar investment by Ontario Shipyards as part of the Vessel Life Extension project at Port Weller, with a \$3.4 million direct investment from the provincial government through the Advanced Manufacturing and Innovation Competitiveness stream of its Regional Development Program. The reinvigoration of our dry docks continues.

Across the street from my office, I see another tangible example of the Marine Sector in our community – the headquarters of Algoma Central,



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who also happen to be celebrating their 125 anniversary this year – and another example of the leadership our community is showing in championing the Marine Strategy. Algoma has spent the past two decades greening their fleet and leading the Great Lakes shipping industry as we continue efforts to decarbonize the economy. Greening Marine

Transportation is another of the pillars of the provincial marine strategy, and St. Catharines will continue to advocate for companies like Algoma who have been going above and beyond for many years already.

Whether it's the companies I mentioned already, or Accenture leading the growth of jobs in our downtown core, or Rankin Construction moving forward with its build in Port Dalhousie, or Steelcon continuing to grow their operations not just in St. Catharines but across the Peninsula, we are thankful for all that these big companies contribute to our local economy.

Now, while it's understandable that when we talk about business in St. Catharines, many folks focus on the big companies, we can't lose sight of the 4000 plus small businesses in St. Catharines who employ an ever-growing number of our residents.

From small boutique shops and restaurants in our downtown to precision manufacturers and tech companies—our small businesses excel in their work and make us proud to live in this City, all while supporting local causes and making St. Catharines a great place to live. In the last year, I've made it one of my missions to get out to as many of those businesses as I can – and the success we see from them gives me a lot of confidence as we continue through 2024 and beyond.

There's Arrowhead coffee, one of 23 food manufacturers in our city. Those who know me know coffee is my vice – and Arrowhead is a Canadian veteran owned and operated coffee roaster making top notch roasted



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coffee that it ships across Canada to coffee shops and coffee lovers like me. While they proudly roast their beans in St. Catharines, the impact of Arrowhead Coffee is far reaching, as it also uses its business as a way of supporting veterans, law enforcement and emergency services workers. Allow me to drop an amateur recommendation here – Diver’s Brew, a French Dark Roast, is phenomenal.

And then there’s Fat Rabbit, a new addition to our downtown’s thriving culinary scene. This restaurant and butcher shop has made the east end of downtown its home with Chef Zach Smith, who has run kitchens across the country most notably in Toronto’s Bar Raval as well as Matty Matheson’s Meat plus Three in Fort Erie. You’ll get another recommendation from me here – the Breakfast sandwich, with Pastrami – you won’t be disappointed. One of the best things I’ve ever eaten.

Let’s talk about Anger & Artistry, a community minded hair salon and barbershop located at 146 James Street in our Downtown. They’re in the business of self-esteem building through conversation, pampering and great hair. Their promise is: We will fight for your hair's right to party. No recommendation on this one – I’ve had the same boring haircut since the mid-80s.

And then we’ve got Chrispy African Market, an all-in-one African / Nigerian food market. Olayinka is passionate about building community, and her store has become a central hub for the Niagara African Caribbean Culture Organization, a group whose mission is to support, celebrate and inspire refugees, new immigrants, international students, and people of color in our community. She’s a force of nature, and I feel blessed to know her and to be able to count on her honest opinion. Every time I see her.

And what about Manufacturing? Manufacturing has long been a cornerstone of St. Catharines' economic vitality, and for more than 7



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decades FBT Inc. has been a leader in precision manufacturing, providing clients with contract manufacturing services focusing on highly engineered, tight tolerance precision-machined components. Their multimillion-dollar expansion project announced this past summer reaffirms FBT's confidence in St. Catharines, and the investment the Forstinger family is making will contribute significantly to Niagara's continued economic recovery.

While government support from our Economic Development Team, including the St. Catharines Enterprise Centre, is necessary to continue supporting the growth of small business, so too is support from the broader community. In doing so, you're supporting your neighbour, a newcomer, a recent graduate, or a family member or relative who is contributing to the betterment of our community.

So, understanding the business community has been a major focus of my first year. But as I'm sure everyone in the room will agree, it is not what generated the headlines. The challenge that has dominated our conversations and has been a part of almost every government announcement, or new piece of provincial legislation, continues to be the focus on housing – making it easier to get it approved, and easier to get it built. And here, to – even though there are challenges – there's optimism to be found as well.

I've spent a lot of time with my Provincial and Federal counterparts. We've been as honest as we can be when it comes to housing – there are aspects we can control, and there are aspects we cannot. My over-riding message at City Hall has echoed what our staff have always preached – let's focus on those things we can impact and be prepared to take advantage of the opportunities that present themselves. That's why the first major initiative of this term of Council was to endorse, unanimously, our Housing Pledge and strategy in the first quarter of last year.



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But it is important to recognize what we can't control. The reality is that at a time when the whole country is focused on getting more housing built, interest rates have gone in the exact wrong direction to make that a reality. Those high interest rates increase the cost of borrowing for both homebuyers and developers. For homebuyers, higher mortgage rates mean larger monthly payments, reducing affordability and demand for homes. For developers, the increased cost of financing makes new projects more

expensive and less profitable. This has led to the slowdown in housing construction as developers wait for financial viability. In the meantime, reduced construction activity is making the housing shortage worse.

Now, while we can't **control** what happens with interest rates, that doesn't mean we've given up. We're pushing for policies that will help move the residential construction market forward. A few weeks ago, I had the opportunity to sit down with the Deputy Governor of the Bank of Canada, and stated in no uncertain terms that interest rates need to start coming down when inflation was under control. The most recent inflation announcement seems to be moving us in the right direction; we'll continue to push for the rate cuts that we know are so desperately needed to start getting shovels into the ground.

But what can we do in the meantime?

In terms of what we **can** control, we've taken a number of steps to be sure we're ready to work with developers and the private sector when rates do start to fall. The City's Planning and Building Services team, led by Tami Kitay, has worked diligently to develop and implement a new Building Portal and online application ability. The department has taken the lead in a number of different areas to modernize how we deal with development applications, and they will use some of the recently announced Housing Accelerator Funds to continue those efforts.



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That recent announcement of 25.7 million dollars in Housing Accelerator Fund investment, in fact, is proof of the hard work being done here in St. Catharines. Those funds, in addition to the modernization efforts, are going to allow the City to continue to clear roadblocks and make it easier for developers to get in the ground in the coming months and years. The programs we identified in our HAF application make it clear that we have a plan to get housing built.

The plan includes managing our infrastructure in such a way that allows for greater housing intensification in different parts of the City – a problem we've been dealing with for several years and now have some capacity to properly address. We're going to be able to incentivize the continued build-out of missing middle housing; that accessible, entry-level housing that will make it more affordable to get started in the market. Our plan also calls for more collaboration with housing stakeholders across Niagara. Dubbed the Housing Innovation Hub, we aim to harness the interconnectedness of housing, regional economic development, and global trends like the impact of international students on housing supply. The Hub is intended to serve as a catalyst for creativity, sustainability, efficiency, and resilience.

The biggest part of our plan, however, revolves around the new Municipal Development Corporation, approved in principle by Council and now awaiting the full business case to meet the legislative requirements. The MDC is our opportunity to work with the private sector and non-profit partners to develop housing and mixed-use, transit-oriented development on surplus and under-utilized lands. In my discussions with the development community, I know there are a number of willing partners ready to start working with this entity as soon as possible.

Federal Housing Minister Sean Fraser has been very clear – only the most ambitious cities would receive federal funding through the HAF. The City of St. Catharines, through the application created by staff, and the changes



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willingly – and pretty much unanimously – passed by Council, has demonstrated our desire to be ambitious. We appreciate the Federal Government’s willingness to support us directly in this task, and their confidence in our ability to get the job done.

When we look at how these new developments are proceeding, we can see evidence across our City of ground being broken, foundations being poured, and homes being built. On Oakdale Ave, Drew Toth and Elevate

Living continue apace on their three-storey build, a new style of residential construction that stresses affordability; while the Royal Tuscan development on Vansickle Rd rises from the ground with what will eventually be a showpiece development in our City. These and other projects add to our totals being tracked towards our provincial goals, and while I don’t have any big news to share today – keep your eyes peeled in the coming weeks about how we’re doing with respect to the Building Faster Fund. Once again – optimism abounds.

Now, while housing and the issues around it have been front and centre, there’s a closely related issue that has been garnering headlines as well. We know there is a homelessness epidemic ongoing in our community, and across not just the province, but all of North America. While we’ve looked at what best practices exist across municipalities, we’ve also had to recognize that some municipality is going to have to create the best practice, and that might have to be us.

Before I go too much farther, a reminder – homelessness prevention is a Regional mandate, supported by funding from the Province of Ontario. But as I’ve long said – residents don’t care who is dealing with the issue – they care that the issue is being dealt with. And so, the City has been at the table, as the frontline that has to deal with the day-to-day issues surrounding homelessness, and our staff have worked hard with the Region to find solutions.



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Our first step this year was to partner with the Region on the sale and development of Bridge and Affordable housing at 320 Geneva. The former site of the City's Parks and Recreation building, the city demolished the old structure and handed the property over to Niagara Regional Housing, who will, over the next 20 months, build out a 48-unit Bridge housing facility, the first step in creating a lasting solution to the homelessness that some in our community are experiencing. The rest of the site will be developed into

affordable and market housing, and that development will take place in conjunction with the private sector. With other opportunities in our City, at locations like the old Linhaven property on Ontario St, we are looking forward to considerably more in the way of affordable housing builds in St. Catharines in the coming years.

We also worked hand-in-hand with the Region to identify the site of the temporary homeless shelter on Riordon St, a project that began a year ago and came to completion with its doors opening yesterday. While we all recognize that shelter beds are a short-term solution to problems that require long-term thinking, the simple reality is that shelter spaces will be a necessary reality while we bring projects like 320 Geneva on-stream. I will continue to advocate for more shelter spaces to be added to the system in the short-term while we identify locations for bridge, supported and affordable housing for the long-term – it is the only way we are going to deal with the homelessness we see in the community today.

At the same time, I will continue to loudly call on the Provincial and Federal governments to come to the table with funding for mental health programs and rehabilitation for addiction. I have disagreed publicly with the idea that rehabilitation must come before housing and I'll continue to disagree with that notion. But whether you agree or not, the fact remains that a person who is addicted to opioids wouldn't be able to find a rehab bed in this community even if they wanted one. The waits are pushing three months –



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there aren't any beds available!. So even if someone makes the difficult decision to get off the drugs they're addicted to, they'll wait 3 months or more before they can get started. That's not good enough, and upper levels of government need to understand they need to do more.

The city of Belleville and the state of emergency it declared after 23 overdoses in less than 2 days is the latest example of a municipality by itself trying and failing to deal with the drug epidemic, intermingled with

homelessness and mental health crises, that is rampant across the continent. It can't take a tragedy for upper levels of government to provide the support we need. It should not require a Mayor to beg residents not to travel into the downtown, as happened in Belleville, for attention to be focused on this issue. Property taxes are not a viable funding mechanism for the challenge in front of us. We need help – and I would ask everyone hearing this message today to reach out to our Federal and Provincial representatives and let them know that. I truly believe our colleagues are starting to understand what needs to be done – now is the time for them to help us act.

We're making strides in other areas on the social side of things as well – we introduced the SCORE fund this year, the St. Catharines Outreach and Engagement Fund that my office uses to help support groups and events large and small across the City, using dollars raised from charity events like the Mayor's Golf Tournament. Those dollars have been able to help a variety of large organizations like the Niagara Health Foundation, the Niagara Children's Centre, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Niagara, Gillian's Place and the Young Caregiver's Association, but the dollars have also helped smaller groups like the St. Vincent De Paul Food pantry and the Westview Centre for Women. We'll continue those efforts in the coming year, and if everything comes together the way I hope they will, we'll have a major announcement about a new fundraising event in the next few weeks.



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Council also made the decision to continue its support for the cultural community. Through the financial commitment of seed money to the Rodman Art Institute of Niagara that the City provided to help build up that organization to where it is today, a new storefront is now open on St. Paul, and there are several opportunities to view parts of the collection throughout the City. And when the Niagara Artists Centre came forward to request help in their project to build out an Arts Hub in the downtown, the City was at the table there as well, helping them move forward with a

project that will continue to clean-up the core while building on the legacy of the Creative Cluster Master Plan that kick-started the ongoing redevelopment of the downtown.

And mixed in amongst all of that work – I had the chance to start the Mayor’s Reading Challenge. It’s funny – in this job, we always seem to think that people will want to talk taxes, or discuss new development proposals, or how to make the arenas run better. But when people talk to me, one of the things they want to discuss the most is my Reading Club. It turns out – and I’m sure most of us would agree with this - that most people just want a connection within their community. The Reading Challenge seems to be giving many people exactly that, and I’m glad it has been as popular as it seems to be.

There are a lot of other steps forward the City has been taking, things that may not necessarily get a mention in the paper or a radio interview but are important, nonetheless.

Our Fire Services, under the excellent leadership of Chief Dave Upper, broke ground on a new Station 2 – a good thing, too, because the old station 2 wasn’t big enough to hold a modern standard fire truck – and that build will be the City’s first zero carbon building. Fire Services is also helping to pioneer Next Gen 911 in conjunction with the Niagara Regional



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Police, and that has led to increased revenue generation as our Fire Services pick up dispatch contracts across the Province.

In Municipal Works, our team runs all of the underlying operations which are the heartbeat of our city – they work tirelessly each and every day to ensure people can travel our city safely, clean drinking water flows through our pipes, and our parks are ready for each and every game time. Under the leadership of Darrell Smith and his team, we are undertaking a massive upgrade to our processes and technologies to catch up and surpass other

municipalities when it comes to the way we maintain our City's assets and customer work orders. Those improvements will become more visible as the term progresses.

Our Corporate Services department under Jeannette Pillitteri continues to make strides in improving Customer Service through CitizensFirst, and the City's Information Technology infrastructure continues to undergo a massive restructuring as it is brought up to modern standards; there are a variety of improvements that residents have already started to see rolled out, including e-billing, the permit application portal I mentioned earlier, and the NextGen911 in Fire Services amongst other improvements.

Legal and Clerk Services, led by our City Solicitor Sandor Csanyi, has been quiet. And to be blunt – that's a good thing. If Legal is busy, there are problems. I prefer not to see Sandor much.

Our Engineering, Facilities and Environmental Services department under Anthony Martuccio won a Climate Action Award for the work done integrating climate change issues into our infrastructure asset management planning. And work has begun on the design of a new Civic Square and James Street redevelopment in the downtown, which will complement the new residential builds that have already begun in the core.



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In Community, Recreation and Cultural Services under Phil Cristi, work progressed on several projects this year, with funding from the Province announced for a revamped Sunset Beach, work completed on the revamp at Bogart Park, again with funding from the Provincial government, and a number of great new exhibits at the Lock 3 Museum. Staff also started the consultation with the public on a new and improved Fairview Park, as well as a new Recreation Facilities Master Plan. That document will help to form the basis of what St. Catharines looks like on the Recreational front for many years to come.

And our Financial Management staff, under the leadership of Kristine Douglas, delivered the first multi-year budget in our City's history; and they did it while navigating the new Strong Mayor process, a learning curve for all of us. I am pretty proud of the fact that we kept this year's tax increase as low as we did, after a difficult 2023 – just a 0.72% increase on the average home owners tax bill for 2024. As we look across the Golden Horseshoe, we can see the same issues that played out here last year playing out in other cities. The result of increased social pressures, and costs downloaded from upper levels of government, have put the strain on all cities and towns in Ontario. **We** faced that reality last year; others delayed the inevitable until now. I am proud that, while introducing a tax increase deferral program for low-income seniors, we were still able to keep downward pressure on our taxes in 2024.

The thing I'm most proud of on the staff side this year? One of my goals, since my time as Budget Chair, was to see our City access more of the grant dollars that exist at upper levels of government. In 2021, we were only able to access 1.8 million dollars in grants; in 2022, that number rose to 4.9 million. I'm happy to say that in 2023, under the leadership of CAO David Oakes and Deputy CAO Erin O'Hoski, the City was able to access a total of 30.5 million dollars in grants. While every year will not be that successful, I



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can commit to residents that we will continue to make every effort to access outside revenues and avoid placing the burden on the property tax levy.

So, as we finish the look back – what’s to come?

This past weekend, we hosted a FIBA qualifier for the AmeriCup, an international basketball competition featuring some of the best players in the world. This was another in a growing list of events we are actively pursuing in sports tourism opportunities – whether it is the recent announcement of the successful 2025 Minto Cup bid by the Junior A Athletics and the return of the national lacrosse championship to St.

Catharines, or the St. Catharines Golf and Country Club’s successful bid to host the 2025 World Junior Girls Golf Championships in September of next year, or the World Rowing Championships – the Triple Worlds as my friend Bill Schenck likes to remind me – coming to our hometown at the world famous Royal Henley Rowing Course this summer. All of these represent a concerted effort by both City staff and City Council to grow our portion of the tourism pie here in Niagara, and bring those tourism dollars to be spent in all the amazing places our city has to offer.

Like these:

Craft & Culinary Video

Now, if you were here last year, you saw a video entitled “This is how we live”, which featured the recovery of the tourism, culture, and culinary sectors in St. Catharines with footage captured at in-person events across the City. The video from last year was recognized, along with the City of St. Catharines, as a leader in economic development with a provincial award of excellence for the work we do in promoting the City as a year-round destination for marquee events.



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The work our amazing EcDev team does to feature our experiential elements continues with the video you just saw – another episode in our “This is how we live” series. In collaboration with Four Grounds Media and Giant Shoe Creative Agency, the video we just saw along with others in the series will highlight the different facets of our incredible destination city.

All of this and more in the Economic Development world has been made possible by steps our Council has taken, specifically with the introduction and success of the Municipal Accommodation Tax. That tax has given Council a revenue tool that doesn’t affect local taxpayers but gives the City the funds it needs to partner with groups and attract events that will continue bringing people to St. Catharines year-round. We’ve taken this

program even further by collaborating with our friends in Lincoln on a Tourism marketing partnership, to allow us both to leverage the natural beauty and homegrown industry that our part of Niagara provides to continue to build up this world class destination.

And I’d be remiss if I didn’t mention the ongoing work we’re doing with the Wine sector, the Grape Growers, the Tourism Partnership of Niagara, and our municipal, provincial, and federal partners to build on the success of Uncork Ontario, the economic strategy that was presented by Deloitte last year and can hold a major key to economic revitalization throughout the Northern tier of the Niagara region. It’s not good enough anymore for individual politicians to score political points by taking half-measures – the Uncorked report provides a template for building not just the Wine Industry, but also Tourism, Culture and Entertainment, Food and Hospitality, Construction, Next Generation Manufacturing and Farming, Transportation infrastructure and Education. Too often we commission studies and reports, and then allow them to gather dust on a shelf. We can’t allow that to happen with this project, and the City of St. Catharines will be there, at the table,



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with the resources we have to provide, to push our Provincial and Federal counterparts to make Uncork Ontario a reality.

As we look ahead in the other areas that will be on the workplan this year, Housing will again dominate much of what we do at City Hall. Finalizing the plans for the Municipal Development Corporation, setting it up and getting some quick wins will be job number one over the coming months, and I'm excited to see what can be done with the partnerships many in the private sector have expressed willingness to engage in. The MDC will need to be nimble to operate in the current difficult housing environment, but I have no doubt that with the right people at the table – and I see some of those people in this room today – we can operate in an environment where maybe the private sector alone wouldn't be able to go.

And finally, another topic we know will be a part of the coming months is governance. I will say – I have thought I had made my final comments known on the governance topic in Niagara many times over the last 15 years, and every time I've said my "final" piece, it pops back up again. I won't belabour the point too much, but I will say this – the current system, as it currently sits, doesn't work as well as we need it to in Niagara. That's not a comment about the good people working at both the City and the Regional level – I'm blessed to work with some exceptional people. But changes need to be made to get St. Catharines and Niagara working optimally.

I've made my stance pretty clear, and presented this to the Standing Committee when they were in town a month ago – I believe the four-city model is the best option for the people who live here. If you made a map of where the people live, and where the economic activity existed, an outsider looking at it for the first time would likely assume four cities was what existed in the first place. But regardless of what decision the province makes – whether it's four cities, or one city, or the status quo, or something



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in between all those – changes need to be made. More control needs to be exerted at the local level to get housing built. Shared services need to be a focus. I'm proud of the work David Oakes and his fellow CAOs have done to work across municipal boundaries, but more needs to be done.

As I wrote this speech this year, it became very apparent that writing your first State of the City speech and writing your second were very different processes. For one thing – you have an actual record and accomplishments you can talk about when you write your second speech. But that means your first speech can be high-minded and filled with rhetoric – by year two, things have happened, events have transpired, and decisions have been made which force you into reality.

We've had to make really hard choices over the last year – I would never pretend they were easy. They were tough decisions, and a few of them kept me up, thinking over the ramifications. I will also say – they aren't any different from the choices that just about every city our size or larger has had to make – whether its budgetary, or dealing with the homeless and encampments, or trying to decide how best to deliver services.

But regardless of how hard those decisions are, I still believe – as I did last year – that the vision is the right one. There are so many reasons to be optimistic – many of which I've just laid out. We need to continue to do everything we can – as we fight through everything else that is going on around us, and we avoid getting bogged down in debates that have nothing to do with the work we've been elected to do - to ensure that this is an affordable place to call home. We need to promote the ideas that will make all aspects of life in our community accessible to all. And we must ensure that the four – yes, still four – levels of government in St. Catharines are held accountable, and work together, to make certain that equality of opportunity is ensured for all the people who call this city home.

I am committed to that vision, and I'm encouraged by the optimism that I



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Mat Siscoe
Mayor

feel every day in this job. I know everyone else in this room is committed to that ideal, and I hope you feel that same sense of optimism. I look forward to the work of continuing to build equality of opportunity for all those who call St. Catharines home.