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Mat Siscoe
Mayor

Good afternoon.

Thank you, Caroline, for that wonderful introduction – it is kind and flattering enough that I believe it less and less every year. Thank you as well to Verge Insurance for their continued support of this event and for allowing me to share my words with our community.

To the Greater Niagara Chamber of Commerce, and Mishka, Hugo, Corrina, and the rest of the team, thank you for the work you put into today and for making this event a reality, as well as for working with my staff to make it happen.

To Alysha, Zoe, and Brianne in my office – thank you for all you do. Days like today don't happen without your incredible efforts.

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, and specifically St. Catharines CAO David Oakes and Deputy CAO Erin O'Hoski, as well as members of our Senior Leadership Team, who, I promise, I will name shortly, and who, it should be said, lead an organization recognized as one of Hamilton-Niagara's Top Employers this year.

I will say simply that any success I may have is a direct result of the amazing people who run our City and Region, and I am eternally grateful for all that they do. Dave and Erin are the right people at the head of the City on the staff side, and I appreciate them both.



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I'd also like to thank my Regional colleagues for attending, including Chair Jim Bradley, Mayor Diamond Jim Diodati, and Mayor Sandra Easton.

For the first time in my time as Mayor, I also get to thank MP Chris Bittle for being here today. I suppose I should send a thank you to still PM Trudeau for proroguing Parliament and allowing Chris to be here to witness a State of the City speech in person.

Finally, I'd like to thank the Council colleagues who have been able to make it as well: Bill Phillips and Mark Stevens.

A notable absence today, and one near to many of our hearts, is that of Carlos Garcia. Carlos was a dedicated public servant whose leadership as Budget Chair helped guide our city through challenging times with wisdom and integrity. His commitment to fiscal responsibility and his passion for serving our community left a lasting impact on St. Catharines. We honour his memory today, grateful for his contributions and the legacy he leaves behind.

If we look around City Hall, we find much to be proud of over the last twelve months. My optimism continues to be motivated by our accomplishments, and what I know is in store from our staff.

I want to take a moment to thank Anthony Martuccio, our Director of Engineering, Facilities, and Environmental Services. This year, EFES tackled major projects, including replacing underground infrastructure along busy Ontario St. and launching an interactive



GIS map that lets residents explore property lines, zoning, permits, and more. Most notably, EFES introduced the City's first Active Transportation Master Plan—a balanced, thoughtful approach to improving bike and pedestrian routes without the conflicts seen in other cities.

On the GIS front, credit also goes to Planning and Building Services, led by Tami Kitay. PBS is streamlining the development process, implementing my Strong Mayor direction to reduce bottlenecks, especially in Development Engineering. Despite hiring challenges, they've cleared backlogs and pushed approvals forward.

I often joke that Tami must flinch when she sees me at her door—I'm there that often. But it speaks to our focus: cities don't swing hammers. We approve, incentivize, and then try to get out of the way so builders can do what they do best.

In Municipal Works, Acting Director Chris Anders has stepped up big time. Under his leadership, the department launched a new onboarding program for seasonal staff, rolled out the "Where's My Plow" app, and advanced the ARMs project—our Asset Resource Management System. This tool moves us beyond the old 'eyeball' test for infrastructure, providing precise data on what needs repair, when, and at what cost.

Shout out to Chris as well for understanding the assignment – I asked all directors for three key accomplishments this year, and I got three bullet points from Chris. Well done. As opposed to the



next person on my list, from whom I received a nine-page, single-spaced document that read like a novel.

Phil Cristi's team over in Culture, Recreation, and Community Services had another standout year. They revamped four multi-use courts, upgraded a playground, and resurfaced the Kiwanis Turf field. CRCS kept us in the top 10 rankings for Culture Days and hosted beloved events like Lakeside Long Weekend, Pumpkinville, Let it Glow, and the summer concert series—cementing their title as the Department of Fun.

Legal and Clerks Services, under Sandor Csanyi, made important behind-the-scenes improvements, like bringing claims and insurance in-house, updating policies, and creating a streamlined Public Notice Policy. It may not excite everyone, but to the few who notice—this was a big deal. And yes, I count myself among that group.

Jeanette Pillitteri in Corporate Support Services has been navigating a tough hiring market, modernizing recruitment, and improving services like Citizens First. Her team also introduced our helpful AI assistant, Catharine, on stcatharines.ca, making it easier for residents to get information.

Fire Chief Dave Upper's team made significant progress, securing grants for Next Gen 911 and the fire training tower, while advancing construction on the new Fire Station #2. Their FireFit team hosted a major competition and will host the Nationals this year—a first for the community and taking place at Seymour



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Hannah in September! One big highlight? An all-female crew worked Christmas Day—the first time in our city’s history.

In Financial Management Services, Kristine Douglas oversaw the rollout of the new PeopleSoft enterprise system, a shared service with the Region, and led the re-adoption of our multi-year budget amid Strong Mayor changes. Her team also handled the financial setup for two new municipal boards: TourismSTC and the St. Catharines Municipal Development Corporation.

These accomplishments across the Corporation reflect the dedication and hard work of all departments, pushing St. Catharines forward. Thank you to everyone who made this possible.

There’s one department still to be mentioned – Economic Development, Tourism and Government Relations, under Brian York, who played a key role in launching the new Municipal Development Corporation. Brian and I have spent countless hours together, advocating on behalf of the community to upper levels of government, and making sure St. Catharines is building momentum. I’ll have more to share on the MDC shortly.

One of our key initiatives this year is focused on storytelling—highlighting the incredible businesses that make St. Catharines thrive. This effort aligns with our Corporate Strategic Plan and our newly approved 2024-2029 Economic Development and Tourism Strategy, which lays out a clear vision to drive economic growth and make our city an even better place to live, work, and visit.



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Our strategy focuses on five key priorities:

- Strategic Economic Diversification
- Talent-Driven Growth
- Quality of Place
- Destination Development, and, as previously mentioned,
- Storytelling.

Together, these priorities lay a strong foundation for growth, resilience, and a thriving future for St. Catharines.

Enter the MayorLinks program—an opportunity for me to get out into the community and meet business owners, both new and established, to get a handle on who and what is keeping our residents employed, and what they need from City Hall to keep growing their businesses.

I met the team at Quickplug, a company providing sustainable growing media that boosts root development and moisture control for commercial growers in hydroponics, aquaponics, vertical farming, and tissue culture. I also visited Decora Powder Coatings, experts in eco-friendly, cost-effective powder coating for aluminum extrusions. They offer architectural coatings, wood-grain finishes, and shot blasting—something I had no idea about until I toured their facility on Benfield Drive. With over 35 years of experience, they serve clients across North America.

I met Kevin Jacobi at Mecha Games, where they buy, sell, and repair retro video games and consoles while hosting community



gaming events. They're also working to make St. Catharines a hub for e-sports, building connections across Asia to make it happen. This ties in well with my visit to Code Ninjas, which teaches kids aged 5 to 14 coding through a game-based approach—had to scratch my teacher itch somehow, didn't I?

Then I headed up to Thorold to visit Destiny Copper. Some might joke about South Merritton—or Merritton-on-the-hill—but Destiny Copper, led by Greg Hanna, shows how our EcDev team collaborates across the Region to benefit everyone. They started at BioLinc but quickly outgrew the space. Their low-cost, eco-friendly copper extraction system needed a new home, and while we didn't have the right fit in our City, the Thorold multi-modal hub along the Welland Canal was perfect, proving that a collaborative approach to Economic Development benefits all of Niagara. Mark my words—Destiny Copper is a name you'll be hearing a lot more of in the years ahead.

Back in downtown St. Catharines, I met Maeg and Greg Riddell at King Street Pantry, a whole-animal butcher and grocer specializing in locally and ethically sourced meats. They offer fresh cuts, prepared foods like Scotch eggs and sausage rolls, and a rotating lunch menu—all while supporting regenerative farming. If you get the chance, try their haggis—it's fantastic. Just down the road is Largo's Loft, an 1,800 sq. ft. natural light studio run by Victoria Van Hezewyk. Designed for photographers and creatives, it features high ceilings, oversized windows, and versatile shooting areas. Victoria, a proud grad—and loud



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booster—of our Enterprise Centre, is an absolute asset to our downtown.

Working closely with the business community has taught me something important – we are only as good as we are resilient to the changes happening around us. Last year, I stated that even with all the strife and uncertainty in the world, I had a sense of optimism. At this time, I'd like to thank our neighbours to the South for testing and trying that optimism with all their might. I will simply say that, regardless of the actions of the US President, that sense of optimism remains. But that optimism now comes from the knowledge that our business community, and our community as a whole, continues to build resilience as the threats from down south continue.

It's too easy for some to believe that tariffs are someone else's problem. Here in St. Catharines, an example of how they could affect our community is being felt at Neptunus Yachts – a vibrant local company custom-building some of the most sought-after yachts in the world. Employing nearly 50 people here in our community, and sourcing much of their materials and equipment from the local economy, this company is facing the dual threat of tariffs and the luxury tax that was introduced several years ago. Without attention to this issue by the Federal government, those jobs could disappear from our local economy. But Neptunus is not the only example of this.

We had the opportunity to collaborate with a number of local



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businesses to hear about the impacts and strategies being implemented to respond to the incoming tariffs. Take a look: [State of the City Tariff's Video](#)

It's incumbent on local government to do everything in its power to face these challenges head-on. I personally will take every opportunity I have to work with upper levels of government, both here and on the other side of the border, when I take on the role of Co-Chair of the Great Lakes St. Lawrence Cities Initiative in May. Next week, I'll be heading to Washington with the Cities Initiative for discussions on Capitol Hill and at the White House on how to protect the world's third-largest economy—that is, the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Basin, with an annual economy valued at \$8 trillion and home to 50 million workers—and ensure that goods and services continue to flow freely across the border.

Here at home, though, we all have the ability to show the resilience that will get us through. We can continue to support local businesses, like the ones highlighted in the video, and like those I've visited across our community. We can share their stories. And most importantly, we can advocate for and adopt FAIR trade policies that promote sustainable growth for local businesses and small and medium enterprises.

We can Support Local. Support Resilience. And Support St. Catharines.

Throughout the broader community, we've seen a lot of great news over the last year.



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Brock had a fantastic year—big thanks to President Lesley Rigg and her team for being here today. They celebrated their 60th anniversary in style, launching their new Strategic Plan, *Transforming People, Reimagining the Future*. With their first Engineering class starting last fall and both Men's and Women's Wrestling winning their 9th and 10th consecutive provincial titles, there's plenty to be excited about on campus.

Niagara College had another standout year, ranked #1 in Canada for applied research for the second year in a row. They were also named one of Hamilton-Niagara's Top Employers and Niagara's top employer for the third straight year. Beyond campus, they supported the world rowing championships with student involvement in broadcasting, construction of the alignment hut, and a strong team of volunteers.

The Niagara River Lions brought a National Championship home this year—CEBL champs after years near the top. If you caught a game last season, you saw a win—undefeated at the Lions Den downtown with thrilling finishes. Watching Khalil Ahmad seal games with deep threes or alley-oop dunks from beyond the arc was incredible. It was amazing to finally have a championship to call our own right here in St. Catharines.

One of my favourite stories this year has been the resurgence of the Niagara IceDogs. A big thanks to owner Darren Dedobelaar and head coach Ben Boudreau for being here today. This young team has put up impressive numbers all season, despite recent



injuries. In my view, Ben should be in the Coach of the Year conversation for what he's done with this talented group. Watching Kevin He, Ryan Roobroek, Charlie Robertson, and Brady Wasilyn night after night has IceDogs fans excited for the future.

We also got to witness the 2024 World Rowing Championship right in our own backyard, on the famous Henley rowing course in Port Dalhousie. Kudos to Bill Schenck, Vittoria Wikston, and the team at World Rowing for putting on a spectacular event.

And beginning this June, we will welcome the Niagara Ironbacks to the community as the first Canadian entry in the Perfect Game Collegiate Baseball League (PGCBL): elite Summer Collegiate baseball that will play out of George Taylor Field in Merritton. Mal Romanin has worked tirelessly with city staff to make this team a reality, and as a diehard baseball fan, I can't wait to be in the stands this summer cheering the Ironbacks on.

Getting away from sports fields and arenas, there were also a lot of business achievements that need to be highlighted. I had the opportunity to meet with and cut the ribbon on the new Tepperman's franchise here in St. Catharines. Tepperman's is a family affair, and this third-generation business chose St. Catharines for its newest location because they see the growth potential that exists here in our city.

And we know that growth potential exists! Look at the businesses that celebrated milestones here in St. Catharines this year – the Pen Centre turned 65 years old, still going strong after recent



renovations. And in the downtown, Critelli's turned 110, and Algoma clocked in at 125. Those two businesses, neighbours across the street from City Hall, are testaments to longevity and doing right by our community.

Our friends over at Oddbird also hit the highlight reel this year, being named one of Canada's 100 best restaurants. This isn't a surprise to any of us, as I would wager almost everybody in the room has sampled their food. It's great to see a fantastic local business get some recognition.

And with a quick throwback to last year's State of the City speech, a new business I highlighted then, Fat Rabbit, was listed as a recommended restaurant in the Michelin Guide this year for the first time ever. Also not a surprise to anybody who has eaten there, and another piece of our local culinary scene falling into place. I am also so happy that I was right when I sang their praises last year.

These two restaurants, along with a host of others, are the culmination of the work done by the city and the community in creating things like the Creative Cluster Master Plan, a roadmap that has helped guide different parts of our local economy over the last 15 years.

We also saw the return of Dallas Green and the Born and Raised concert in Montebello Park. I took a picture as I was standing above the concert area and posted it to Instagram, stating that it was hard to believe this was downtown St. Catharines. I wasn't the only person who thought that. Fast forward a few weeks from that



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event, and Jelly Roll was performing his first concert outside of the United States in the Meridian Centre here in our downtown. Back in 2011, I don't think we could have imagined acts of this calibre performing at the Meridian Centre, and if we could, the vote to build it would have been unanimous. After Jelly Roll, it was another successful Grape and Wine Festival, followed up by another fantastic edition of Cicada Fest – proof positive that St. Catharines remains the best place to throw a music festival in Niagara.

City Council has had an extraordinarily busy year. A lot of our work has been all about laying the groundwork for the development we know must be to come.

We've made big strides in planning and building policy. Our new accessory dwelling unit (ADU) program, with incentives to support it, is helping fill the “missing middle” in our neighbourhoods. The response has been strong—including a memorable night when the Property Brothers praised our work at a council meeting.

But we didn't stop at ADUs. Through our housing accelerator program, we introduced incentives for accessible units and new purpose-built rentals, along with affordable housing parking exemptions and DC rental grants to encourage private-sector development.

You often hear that municipalities are a barrier to building—that's not the case in St. Catharines. We're making sure City Hall is efficient and part of the solution. And when it comes to development charges, let's set the record straight. I get frustrated



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every time someone forwards me an article about Mississauga or Vaughan slashing their DC rates. The reality? Even after their cuts, their city-only charges are higher than what we have here in St. Catharines—including both city and regional charges. For a detached home, our combined DCs are still under \$45,000—far lower than what’s being celebrated elsewhere.

Maybe I shouldn’t be frustrated. Maybe I should be proud. Flattered, even, that they’re following our lead and pushing their DCs as low as is reasonable.

As Mayor, I will commit here and now that St. Catharines will continue to have some of the lowest development charges for housing in Ontario. We will always maintain development charges in the bottom quartile—ensuring that building here remains more affordable than in three-quarters of our peer cities, at a minimum.

I will also keep fighting to reduce other costs and find ways to incentivize new housing developments. The cost to do business in the development world is still much higher today than it was even five years ago. Whether it’s the cost of labour, the costs of building materials, the taxes and costs imposed by all levels of government, or the regulatory frameworks that exist, the reality is that we as a city need to make it easier for shovels to get in the ground. I ran on a commitment to get housing built, our City Council signed a pledge to get housing built, and I will continue to take the steps necessary to get housing built.

Now is probably a good time to point out that, as of Monday, St.



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Catharines has about 7,300 housing units in the site plan process or approved—66% of our provincially-set target of 11,000 by 2032.

We secured \$2.4 million from the province's Building Faster Fund, helping us keep costs down while improving housing-related infrastructure. But we need to remind our provincial partners that St. Catharines is an old city—turning 150 next spring. Anyone involved in a road project here knows that some of our pipes are as old as the city itself.

We'll keep pushing for new infrastructure funding models at the provincial and federal levels. Whether it's a return to the one-third/one-third/one-third model—something I've advocated for with my colleagues at the Big City Mayors' Caucus—or another solution, municipalities can't shoulder these costs alone. The city and region account for just 9% of your taxes but are responsible for 65% of the infrastructure. That equation doesn't balance, and it needs to be fixed—fast.

We're not just focused on keeping costs low for development—we're looking at City Hall itself. Last year, we launched a core services review to ensure we're focused on what's mandated and what our community truly depends on. About 75% of what we do is dictated by upper levels of government and other legislative rules. This review ensures we're meeting those obligations while also evaluating the remaining 25% to determine if everything we fund is still necessary.



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When the review wraps up in Q2, I'll ask council to shift our focus to value-for-money audits across all departments. While annual budget reviews happen internally, we've never conducted an external value-for-money audit. Sometimes, a fresh set of eyes is needed to ensure we're operating as efficiently as possible. Our senior management team fully supports this approach, and while I won't prejudge the results, if there are savings to be found, this is how we'll find them. My colleagues and I look forward to seeing the results.

Now, this is only a 30-minute speech, and I have important issues that I still need to discuss, but I know a few of you in the room would be upset if I didn't mention the governance review. I will simply say this: many of us have asked the province to institute some form of governance reform here in Niagara. The options abound, one city, 3 cities, 4 cities, 12 cities, and on and on and on. I presented at the standing committee last year when it came to Niagara, and I said my piece. I think the process playing out in Peel Region at the moment is a good indication of the province's thought process around regional governments. I made it clear last year that if full governance reform was not to come, at the very least, my city needed control over our transportation network and public works. That seems to be where Peel is going, and I hope those changes will migrate to Niagara.

One of the key priorities for this council has been improving the livability of our community. For years, recreational facilities—one of the few areas fully within our control—were neglected, with



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decisions deferred far too long. A decade ago, if you walked through our parks or played on our tennis or basketball courts, you'd see firsthand that maintenance had been lacking. That changed in 2015 with the adoption of our Recreation Facilities Master Plan, setting a path to better meet residents' needs. This past year, I had the opportunity to reopen several parks and multi-use courts, and that work will continue. Now, with the guidance of the Rec Master Plan Committee under the leadership of my good friend Jim Richardson, the Master Plan 2.0 is in motion, charting the next 10 years.

While there's still work to do, Jim and his team have helped make our city more livable. Our new Aquatics Strategy and Field Use Strategy will give people more reasons to put down roots here. Building housing is critical, but a complete community needs more than just homes—it needs places to play, gather, and grow.

The updated master plan will come to council later this year, shaped by months of community input. Given the success of the original plan, I have no doubt this next phase will be just as transformative for St. Catharines.

In conjunction with this, the city also passed its first active transportation master plan this year. While in other cities, efforts to increase active transportation options have been met with a lot of pushback from commuters, it is my belief that the plan put forward by our staff, developed after public consultation and feedback, will avoid similar controversies. Staff have put together a plan that makes sense, that allows active transportation users to get from



one part of the city to another, without disrupting the flow of traffic. With a rapid implementation plan that has already begun, we will start to see improvements over the next three years. The younger generation has made it clear: they want to live in walkable communities and not be overly reliant on cars, like we have been in the past. The active transportation master plan is another step towards building a community that people want to live in.

The final piece that needs to be discussed when we talk about livability in our community is the elephant in the room - homelessness. Across North America, we continue to see a worsening of the homelessness epidemic, in conjunction with more opioid-related deaths and the continued rise in mental health concerns.

St. Catharines is no different. But we continue to make strides to address the problems using the best practices we can identify from across the world.

In our downtown, we've increased the number of private security patrols. We're in discussion with the Niagara Regional Police about increasing their presence in and around St. Paul St. Supported by Councillors Macpherson and Ratzlaff at the City, I was able to convince Regional Council to fund a welcoming streets pilot project, a concept that has worked in cities like Ottawa.

At the regional level, my advocacy—alongside several non-profits



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and social service agencies—led to the recent announcement of provincial funding for a Homelessness Addiction Recovery Treatment (HART) Hub here in St. Catharines. Combined with the bridge housing project at 320 Geneva St., supported through the Housing Accelerator Fund, this will begin addressing the addiction and mental health crises that contribute so much to homelessness in our community. We're also working with the Region to identify a site for a permanent shelter to replace the temporary facility on Riordan St.

While homelessness and supportive housing fall under the Region's mandate, the downstream effects on our city can't be ignored. We can't afford to wait for action, so we continue pushing for solutions at all levels of government to ensure funding and responsibility aren't simply downloaded onto municipalities.

One of the most significant achievements this year was the provincial government's announcement of legislative changes that will allow cities like ours to address the challenges posed by illegal activity in our community. I've spoken with too many business owners who spend far too much time and money dealing with encampments near their properties. Through direct advocacy from myself and other big-city mayors, these changes will help us ensure public spaces remain safe and accessible—so residents can enjoy their neighbourhoods, and businesses can focus on what they do best.

Here in St. Catharines, a new Public Space Use Bylaw will help protect sensitive areas like schools, businesses, and residences



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from activities that disrupt daily life. Paired with the new services from the HART Hub, bridge housing, and a new permanent shelter, I'm hopeful we're starting to chart a better path for everyone in our community—whether they're currently housed or not.

What I consider to be our biggest accomplishment in 2024 was the establishment of our new Municipal Development Corporation – long talked about, and now a reality. I've mentioned it a few times already today, but the MDC truly has the opportunity to be this Council's biggest achievement.

The goals of the MDC are simple and straightforward – we want to unlock municipal properties for housing development; we want to support strategic long-term planning; and we want to deliver public value.

Under the leadership of recently hired General Manager Tim Herbert, the MDC has already begun discussions with the local development community on opportunities at three sites in St. Catharines. The MDC will be a game-changer in how we bring housing forward and one of the best ways we can fast-track new projects.

I've talked a lot today about things we're doing and things we plan to do in the future. But I also want to take a moment to thank everyone who has played a part in making this city great in 2024.

Whether you're a city employee, a local business owner, a volunteer, or a community advocate, your work doesn't go



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unnoticed. You are what makes St. Catharines the city we are today, and together, we'll make it even better in the years to come.
