



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.

If we're being honest, I'd get in trouble if I didn't mention some of the elected guests, St. Catharines councillors and City staff here today – thank you to:

CAO – David Oakes  
Deputy CAO – Erin O'Hoski  
Director of Finance – Kristine Douglas  
Director of Legal and Clerks Services/City Solicitor – Sandor Csanyi  
Director of EFES - Anthony Martuccio  
Director of PBS – Tami Kitay  
Director of CRCS – Phil Cristi  
Director of EDTS – Brian York  
Director of Corporate Support Services – Jeanette Pillitteri

Councillor Dawn Dodge  
Councillor Carlos Garcia  
Councillor Robin McPherson  
Councillor Caleb Ratzlaff  
Councillor Mark Stevens  
Deputy Mayor Bill Phillips

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.

As Mayor of St. Catharines, it is my duty and my honour today to report on the State of our City. After only 4 short months we've already begun to put in place the policies and plans we need to get to the bright future we all desire for our community. The next four years promise to be an exciting time for St. Catharines.

I should say - this is a strange time in which to write a speech when there are so many assistive tools available. I will admit to a certain curiosity in what would happen, for instance, if I were to head over to an online Artificial Intelligence chatbot like ChatGPT and ask it what "State of the City speech, St. Catharines" would look like.



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Imagine my surprise when it came back describing a need for a Britney Spears microphone, a lunch box and a large banner I had to have everyone sign! Also, something about rolling up my sleeves? It was all a bit much.

Truthfully though, when I asked it, the response was straight forward and to the point. ChatGPT's first thought was this:

“St. Catharines is known for its thriving arts and culture scene, with a number of galleries, theatres, and festivals throughout the year. It also has a significant historical and industrial heritage, with the Welland Canal passing through the city and a number of factories and manufacturing plants in the area.”

Our Arts and Culture scene has been a vibrant driver of our local economy for several years. Since the 2006-2010 term of Council the City has had in place the Creative Cluster Master Plan, a blueprint for a true rejuvenation of downtown St. Catharines. While everyone knows about the big pieces this plan has helped deliver, like the building of the FirstOntario PAC and Meridian Centre, a lot of small changes, and additional supports to our Creative sector, led to what is a true renaissance in our downtown.

For starters, the festivals! If you want to see evidence of St. Catharines entrepreneurial spirit, of its desire to get back outside, back to business, back to arts and culture – look no further than the myriad of festivals that our City hosted last year. While no one \*wants\* to remember COVID, the reality of the pandemic can't be lost when we look at where we came from. Re-emerging after global shutdowns and getting moving again took a lot of effort on everyone's part. And where did St. Catharines land?

Almost 140,000 visitors last year – that's another St. Catharines on top of St. Catharines! So what did that look like?

The Niagara Folk Arts festival – the longest running folk arts festival in Canada – continues to rebound strongly from the pandemic and is looking to expand even further this year as it welcomes members of the community into the different cultural homes that make up St. Catharines and Niagara.

Cicada Music and Arts festival – one of my personal favourites – now in its fourth year, brings together both local talent as well as some of Canada's finest musicians and Bands to Henley Island for an amazing experience.



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The Emancipation Day weekend of events in August, developed by local Black Entrepreneurs at BlackOwned905 and Matter of Black Niagara, reminding us of what our history is and what our future can be if we listen to and support those in our community who we haven't historically included.

The Born and Raised Concert series transformed Montebello Park over the Canada Day long weekend into a music hub – on display for the entire nation to see.

The Celebration of Nations weekend in downtown has become an annual gathering of Indigenous arts, culture and tradition in our community showcasing the history that has shaped these lands for generations. It was also a further chance to demonstrate our commitment to the path of truth and reconciliation that we as a community continue to walk down with our Indigenous partners.

And the Niagara Grape and Wine Festival – how can you ever forget the Wine Festival, Canada's largest wine and culinary celebration – bringing joy to the streets through parade floats and festivities for more than 70yrs.

But let's not forget that some of those 140,000 visitors to our community will have the choice to stay, thanks to the downtown renaissance and the recent residential building boom, brought about by further changes and a continued commitment to the Master Plan.

57 Carlisle St, led by Nick Atalick and Nickel Developments, continues to rise at the corner of St. Paul and Carlisle. I am sure we can all agree that the return of cranes to our downtown skyline is a welcome sight; and increased foot traffic is something many businesses are clamouring to see.

88 James St – the other stunning rendering on the screen behind me - has seen positive pre-sale interest, and the development team has been working in concert with City Staff to move plans through the system. This project has opened my eyes to the modernization and changes our Planning staff have made to make projects easier to get through city hall, and is a testament to the well-conceived and planned out concept plan that will be turned into a residential reality in the near-term.

At the corner of McGuire and St. Paul – site of the infamous Rockpile, Council made an important decision last fall to incentivize the clean-up and redevelopment of a site that was first conceived of more than thirty years ago. While only a very small minority complain about our Community Improvement Plan - and it did become a big issue in the



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recent election, when several third-party campaigns tried to impugn those of us who believe strongly in the CIP's capacity to do good in our community – it needs to be pointed out that every single Councillor who was targeted in the anti-CIP third party campaign was elected or re-elected – and not by small margins, either. We are an old City built on the very foundation of the industrial revolution and the community well-understands the needed support in cleaning up old environmental brownfields and directing development towards more affordable housing options.

But just in case anyone in the room wasn't completely convinced, let me give you one key statistic. The Community Improvement Program, at present is saving the average resident \$27 a year on their property taxes. While it is true that the program is designed to incentivize investment and development in target areas throughout our community, those incentives amount to approximately \$21 per year for the average taxpayer. BUT – the part that opponents to the program refuse to acknowledge – those same developments that we have attracted to our city with the help of CIP have generated substantial new investment and increased the assessment tax base to the benefit of the entire community. The assessment generated from those investments is actually REDUCING property taxes by \$48 per year for the average taxpayer.

For those keeping score at home – the CIP program is delivering a 228% return on investment. Now – I know my roots are in engineering and physics, and there are many of you in the audience today who understand business and finance better than I, but as your Mayor, I am pretty pleased with that kind of return on our investment and would love to find more programs that deliver so robustly.

That new assessment includes former brownfields, like the old Domtar property in Merritton, that are now viable lands providing an economic good to the community. In the future, it will include the former GM property at 282-285 Ontario St, which after rezoning could include a broad mix of uses that wouldn't be possible without the CIP funds, along with a myriad of other efforts at the City and Region to incentivize brownfield redevelopment.

And all of these new developments, incentivized or not, can't come fast enough. We've seen a shifting landscape under our feet as the Provincial government makes big changes across the municipal sector. Whether it was Bill 109 (the More Homes for Everyone Act), Bill 3 (the Strong Mayors, Building Homes Act), Bill 23 (the More Homes Built Faster Act), or Bill 39 (the Better Municipal Governance Act) – the province has not been shy about what their priority is for Ontario.



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It's housing.

And I don't disagree with their priority.

While there are aspects of all this legislation that I take issue with, the ultimate goal is one which I believe many of us recognize as being the biggest issue in our community right now – there isn't enough housing, and because of that, housing is expensive and unaffordable for many in St. Catharines and throughout Niagara. I have four kids at home – if things don't improve, they will all struggle to find housing in their hometown. As your Mayor and their father, I cannot let that happen.

It was with that in mind that Council passed the most important piece of our term so far – the City of St. Catharines' Housing Pledge. We were called on by the province to develop a coherent plan that would make it possible for developers to build 11,000 housing units in our community over the next ten years. The plan we laid out builds on a lot of the great work staff have done previously, but also demonstrates a strong willingness to change and adapt to do our part in getting those housing units built.

Now – I will interject here for a moment to simply point out that my plan – the one I ran on - was even more aggressive than the provincial guidelines. I believe we have the capacity to approve 15,000 more units than are currently in the ground, if we focus on medium and high-density developments and target them in underutilized areas of our city. Let's start discussing with our large property owners in St. Catharines how we can get housing built in these areas!

But back to the plan – this is how we're going to get housing built. With a more permissive zoning bylaw than most of our comparable municipalities coupled with a Housing Action Plan, a variety of incentives that make it easier to develop, we will get these units approved, and we will put developers in the position they need to be, in order to get those cranes in the air and those shovels in the ground.

That's not to mention the process improvements brought about by the support from the Provincial government through the Streamline Development Fund. In conjunction with the Development community, we're modernising the processes at City Hall in the Planning and Building Services Department under the leadership of Director Tami Katay. We're creating and implementing technology solutions to longstanding problems and getting permits and plans approved faster. And we're finally hiring the people we need in that department to make these developments possible.



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If you want more evidence that these changes are working, we can see it in the plans we're seeing come forward from the development community. Atria Developments is ready to move forward with a massive residential development on YMCA Dr. The owners of the Old General Hospital site on Queenston St are at the Public Open House stage with a 1200-unit development.

All of this is needed. All of this will help to improve the housing market. And the ultimate outcome will be that our kids will be able to keep their talents here at home as we build St. Catharines for this generation and the next.

See – there's a perfect example of why you can't trust a ChatBot to write your speech – there's no way they go from 'vibrant arts and culture' to 'Bill 23 includes some legislative tools that may make it easier for my kids to afford a home in their hometown'. That takes human ingenuity!

Back to ChatGPT's thoughts.

"In terms of infrastructure, St. Catharines has a well-developed transportation system, including a regional airport, a bus transit system, and several major highways. The city also has a number of parks and green spaces, as well as a variety of recreational and sports facilities."

We've made big strides with our Recreation infrastructure. When I think back to when I first became a Councillor, I don't know if there was a coherent plan in place on how to deal with our aging recreation facilities. We made a big decision in my first year on council – we voted to build the Meridian Centre – but that decision was made without a real idea of where we were, what we had, and what we needed to serve the needs of our community.

It was that lack of a plan that spurred the creation of the Recreational Facilities and Programming Master Plan – a document that, like the Creative Cluster Master Plan, didn't just sit on a shelf gathering dust - it was put into action!

10 years later, the rec facility landscape in St. Catharines looks very different. The recent completion of Canada Games Park completes a major overhaul of facilities across St. Catharines, and demonstrates an important concept that many in the community have been calling for but has been difficult to realize.



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We finally worked together in Niagara to meet our current needs.

Let's face it, we talk a lot about Shared Services – the facility at Brock is an actual, tangible example of multiple levels of government and governmental organizations working together to build more together than they could have individually. Even more than the FirstOntario PAC downtown, which accommodates Brock University as a part of its operating structure, Canada Summer Games Park is a partnership between St. Catharines, Thorold and Brock University – with Niagara Region a part of the group for capital purposes – that allows all three partners to benefit from a better, more robust facility at a fraction of the cost than if they had gone it alone. It's a model for the cooperation that needs to exist across all spheres in Niagara, not just on running buildings, but in all areas that municipalities touch.

Niagara Regional Transit is another success story in this respect; and NRT might be the model that we need to use going forward to continue the cooperation and collaboration between municipalities.

Speaking as the Chair of the Linking Niagara Transit Committee that recommended the amalgamation of Transit, and now as the Chair of the new Commission, the simple truth is that amalgamation wasn't an easy task to achieve. But it was the right choice. For all the parochialism that many complain exists in Niagara – an integrated system was chosen by an overwhelming majority of Councils and Councillors as the best way forward for the region.

Let's call a spade a spade – any time you've got the Niagara Poverty Reduction Network and the Greater Niagara Chamber of Commerce arguing on the same side of an issue – it's probably a winner.

But the truth is, getting to a yes on integrated Intermunicipal transit didn't just happen because of those who were arguing in favour of it – it happened because the process made sense to the municipalities that didn't have transit services to begin with and gave them a voice they were lacking.

In fact – the governance model didn't only give them a voice, it specifically lessened the voice that St. Catharines, Welland and Niagara Falls had on the commission. We could have argued that our population dictated a greater say on the commission but instead we adopted a different stance – influence isn't just about the number of votes you have. Influence can come from lessened numbers if the voices making the case make sense. By stating the idea of 'who has the power' was less important than 'building a system



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that works', we were able to get integrated transit across the finish line - something that we should all be proud of.

That's the model we need to adopt. We must stop thinking that simply by numerical superiority, we should exert our will. Let's make a better case, rather than simply demand that we be listened to.

We know that the Ontario government is looking at streamlining Regional government in some capacity – the long list of legislation I mentioned earlier includes provisions to facilitate a 'discussion' about governance and services here in Niagara. Let's use this opportunity to build a better idea of what Niagara can look like and then persuade others that that vision is one that can benefit all of us. Let's look across municipal boundaries for ideas that work, and let's ignore the lines on the map to make them work for more of us.

As for Transit, specifically – the amalgamation was the first step. There is more that needs to be done on the service side – we need more frequency, we need expanded hours, we need to keep moving the service in a direction that meets the needs of the community. One of my stated goals is to get high school students on the bus for free and develop the next generation of transit riders; we know programs like this work, and more riders today means more riders tomorrow – a benefit both environmentally and economically. And the plan doesn't end with High School students – we need to ensure our system also works and is affordable for our older adults and aging population, marginalized populations, and those experiencing poverty in our community.

Let's be honest – we need to do more to support people in St. Catharines and Niagara. We have an increasing population of people who are being forced into conditions no one would choose. As the cost of living rises – not just in our community or localized to Southern Ontario, but across North America – we need to build out better supports in our Region that support the most vulnerable among us.

To do this, we must hold upper levels of government accountable. Everyone in this room has heard the frustrations – the province underfunds Niagara when it comes to homelessness; we need more to combat drug addiction and develop programs to get people off drugs; mental health supports are lacking and waiting lists are too long.

At a certain point though, we must make the decision to deal with these issues – and sometimes, this means we might have to make the hard decision to do it on our own. But we need to stop studying. We need to stop discussing. Collectively, we have to pick a path to follow, senior levels of government need to make the tough decision to spend





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funds, and we all need to start building lasting solutions that will deal with these problems that plague our community.

I have already started working to find some solutions within our municipal and regional influence, and I am pleased that some of my colleagues at the Region have as well. I know that our Council here in St. Catharines is also on board, putting the city-owned property at 320 Geneva St back on the market for the provision of affordable housing. In addition, we will continue to push the Region, along with the Provincial and Federal governments, to spend more to tackle the social issues that exist in our community and across Niagara. Ultimately though, the time for talk must be over as social pressures continue to mount.

The drug epidemic will not stop – in fact it will probably get worse if we continue on this path. Without changes and funding, housing will remain unaffordable. Mental health issues will not spontaneously resolve. It's up to all of us to hold all levels of government responsible to account for the decisions they make or fail to make.

Because the reality is – these issues affect significantly more people than those who are directly impacted. These issues impact every member of our community. Residents feel uncomfortable walking in our parks and are forced to deal with the trickle-down effects of these issues in their neighbourhoods. Business owners in our downtown – people who've had to deal with three years of pandemic, rising costs and rampant inflation, are also contending with issues outside their front doors that are making it hard to not only attract, but to keep customers. Declaring a 'state of emergency' isn't enough if all that means is more talk.

The time for talk is over. We need concrete, actionable steps and we need them now. I know our city council is ready to take these steps, and lead, but we cannot do it alone. I'll do everything in my power to ensure Regional Council supports developing and implementing a plan of action, and I hope they will join me in calling for the necessary funds to deliver real results for our community.

One last time, back to ChatGPT's concluding statement:

"Overall, St. Catharines is a diverse and dynamic city that offers a range of cultural, economic, and recreational opportunities for its residents and visitors alike."

This is the one that hits home for me. The last several years – and the next several years – serve to demonstrate just how true this statement rings home.



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Last summer's Canada Summer Games were an unprecedented success; if you don't believe me, ask Doug Hamilton for yourself, he'll be happy to tell you all about it. We demonstrated to the entire country that we know how to host a national sporting event, and that we have the world class facilities to do so successfully. We ensured that the event incorporated not just sport, but all aspects of culture, inclusivity and diversity into the delivery of the games, and built linkages with our local indigenous community to make sure the games encompassed all aspects of our community. And that's a good thing, because sports and cultural tourism can be a big driver in our economy, much bigger than they've been in the past - because we've finally made the tough decision to invest in the facilities and listen to the voices of our partner organizations.

Our friends down the QEW in Niagara Falls have the market cornered when it comes to traditional tourism. They'll tell you all about it too; just ask Diamond Jim Diodati, and in between CNN interviews explaining to Americans all about Canada, he'll tell you about the plans to expand the tourism industry at the Falls. But Sports Tourism is a market that St. Catharines and Niagara can continue to expand and with the creation of Sport Niagara, the legacy project of the Games, we have the instrument we need to make this a reality.

Sport Niagara will be integral in helping the Canadian Henley Rowing Corporation welcome the world next year at the 2024 World Rowing Championships.

They've been engaged with the Niagara IceDogs and new owner Darren DeDobbellar in building out an impressive bid to host the 2024 Memorial Cup. And all along the way, the City of St. Catharines has been there at the ready with funding and support from city staff in Economic Development and Tourism as well as Community Recreation and Cultural Services led by Phil Cristi. And I can assure you our team will continue to be at the table as we move forward - supporting Sport Niagara, in the quest to make our community a top choice for hosting sport events for many years to come.

And before I get to talking about EcDev – I've had some great conversations with Darren DeDobbelaar, and I'm excited for the future of the team here in St. Catharines. Darren and his wife Michelle have fallen in love with Niagara, have fallen in love with the fans and the community, and their commitment to the City and the Region has been awesome to see. I may be biased as a 13-year season ticket holder, but I'm excited to see the team improve and I'm over the moon at the prospect of hosting the rest of Canada next year at the Memorial Cup.

This is my chance to shout-out EcDev – a group I'm sure many in this room have had the chance to work with at some point in time – under the excellent leadership of Brian



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York. The work done by the City's Economic Development department is second to none, and I appreciate all they do to work with our business community and identify ways the City can make it easier for local business to start-up and to grow right here at home. Brian and his team are pros, and I have complete faith in their ability to continue to grow our city's economic base. I look forward to continue visiting business across our City in the coming months.

I'd be remiss if I didn't also take the time to shout out the rest of our senior leadership team at the City. David Oakes and Erin O'Hoski have provided and continue to provide exceptional leadership from the CAO and Deputy CAO office. I won't go through everyone on the Senior Leadership Team – I could add adjectives to each of them – but I will simply say that we are blessed to have a very talented team running the City of St. Catharines, and that exceptional talent pool runs throughout the Corporation.

My office is no exception – Julie Hughes, Alysha Angrilli and Brianne Whitty are the best team I could have dreamed of.

After that slight detour . . .

One of the areas I've been immersing myself in since I took office is the Marine economy here in our City. St. Catharines has been involved with our Niagara neighbours, as well as our marine sector businesses, in pushing the province to build out and implement a Marine Strategy that develops and builds off the foundation we have right here in Ontario. Here in St. Catharines, the importance of the marine industry is obvious – Algoma Central Marine is headquartered across the street from City Hall, Heddle Marine has reinvigorated the dry docks in Port Weller and has big plans for expanded activity in the future, Neptunus Yachts International, also based in Port Weller, is still the best in the country, if not in the world in what they do. There are so many small, medium and large marine industry companies located in and around St. Catharines; we cannot continue to allow other provinces and countries to move faster than us, to build their marine industries without having a coherent, focused strategy of our own on how to move forward.

We need increased access to training for marine jobs. We need to make it less expensive for companies to choose to build, repair and retrofit vessels here in Ontario. We need to ensure that the investments that our shipping industry is making, like the massive sustainability initiative undertaken by Algoma Central to ensure they have the greenest fleet on the Great Lakes, aren't wasted or taken for granted. So, we'll ensure that our seat at the table is one that is vocal and pushes hard to have a strategy put in place in the short-term so our marine industry can grow in the long-term.



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As the largest city in the Niagara Region, with nearly a third of its population, St. Catharines punches above its weight. It's not just our location between Toronto and Buffalo that sets us apart; it's also the employers who call the Garden City home.

Our municipal roots in automotive manufacturing have long been a cornerstone of our community's economic vitality dating back to the turn of the century with McKinnon Industries Ltd – now General Motors Canada (GM). Two weeks ago, GM Canada made another historic announcement regarding the company's commitment to electrification, sharing plans to manufacture Electric Vehicle drive units at its propulsion plant right here in St. Catharines. This investment plan is expected to support around 500 jobs at the Glendale Ave facility and enable the production of more than 400,000 EV drive units a year. Investments like this are driving our economy forward.

This city has a long and proud history in the manufacturing sector, and that history will continue into the middle part of the 21st century if we continue to make it easier for the industrial sector to invest and reinvest here in Niagara.

At the Region, that was part of my push to ensure that our Industrial Development Charge grants remained as a major part of our incentive plans going forward. There is more we can do, and we will continue to push City and Regional staffs to find new levers to pull to make it easier to do business here in St. Catharines.

But no pressure, my EcDev friends.

On the Cultural side of things, there is still more that needs to be done. We've started to build bridges in our community and have found new and exciting ways to support cultural organizations, whether it's the Memorandum of Understanding with the Niagara Regional Native Centre, or the exhibits at the City's Lock 3 Museum explaining Black History in St. Catharines, and the challenges that still exist around racism and oppression in Niagara. Over the coming months and years, we will continue to expand on these partnerships and agreements as we continue to collaborate with local groups in our efforts to build a more inclusive and accessible community.

All of this, and so much more, to come in the next four years.

When you're trying to decide whether to run in an election, I've always thought that the first question you should be prepared for, and the question you should best be able to answer, is "Why?"



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Why do you want to run?

Why do you think you're the best person for the job?

Why should voters give you this opportunity?

I can tell you that my motivation has been the same since my very first election; I want this community to be a place of opportunity for those who are growing up today, and will grow up here tomorrow, and on for all future generations. I have always strongly believed in the concept of 'equality of opportunity'. But for those upcoming and future generations, if we want St. Catharines to be a place of opportunity, we need to make changes now to ensure that this can be a place to grow their families.

We need to do everything we can to ensure 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 properly together, to ensure that equality of opportunity is ensured for all the people who call this city home.

I am committed to that vision. I know everyone else in this room is committed to that ideal. And I look forward to building an equality of opportunity for all those who call St. Catharines home.



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