

**CITY OF GRAND RAPIDS  
STATE OF THE CITY  
MON., FEBRUARY 25, 2019**

Thank you Mark.

Last year we talked about the city manager search and the importance of this role in our community.

While the City Commission sets policy and priorities in the budget - the City Manager is responsible for making it all happen.

Our city commission was committed to finding the best possible person to fill this role and through a lot of focus and persistence, we achieved that.

We are grateful to have you here in Grand Rapids.

Good evening, friends, neighbors and fellow Grand Rapidians.

I am excited to be with you tonight to talk about our city - a city of opportunity with a focus on building a better future.

Tonight, we will look back at our accomplishments to affirm progress that has been made.

We will also examine important ongoing work.

And we will turn our gaze to the future - highlighting our shared vision for progress.

A significant part of our city's success comes from our strong partnerships.

A great example is our gathering this evening, which would not be possible without the generous support of our sponsors.

For the sponsors here tonight, please stand and I ask everyone to join me in giving them a big Thank you!

Another element of our city's successful partnership is deep support and collaboration with other elected officials.

I want to take a moment to acknowledge the elected officials who are here this evening.

If you are an elected official, please stand.

Please join me in thanking them for their service - and sacrifice - and for being champions for Grand Rapids.

A very special thank you to my colleagues on the City Commission:

Commissioners

- Ruth Kelly,
- Joe Jones,
- Kurt Reppart,
- Jon O'Connor,
- Senita Lenear and
- Nathaniel Moody.

What an honor it is to serve our city with such a dedicated group of servant leaders.

Thank you to the members of my Mayor's Youth Council who are here tonight helping with this event.

And most certainly, a heartfelt thank you to our dedicated city employees.

Especially those who worked long hours to respond to the needs of our community as we endured several severe weather events this past month.

This winter has been a shining example of our community's spirit of coming together.

From our neighbors helping others by shoveling, clearing storm basins and sharing parking spaces - to GRPS collaborating with the Red Cross and the County to make sure there were places to keep warm - to the Rapid providing dependable public transit - to organizations making sure food was available to children and families.

And a special thanks to our Governor for providing additional resources to help in our storm clean up.

The first sign of momentum I want to highlight tonight is the creation of our strategic plan.

You may know the saying that "if you fail to plan - you should plan to fail."

I've found that to be true in my personal life and in every organization I've worked with.

Our city is no different.

Exceptional cities recognize and appreciate the need for focus.

These past few months, as our City Manager said, he has been working with city staff and the city commission on developing an aspirational Strategic Plan.

This plan will be our guiding light and will serve as a blueprint for the work we have ahead.

While the limits of time prevent me from covering all elements of the plan - I am going to pull a few topline issues out tonight and encourage those with an interest in the broader vision to visit our website.

The strength of a city is directly tied to the strength of its economy.

We must never forget that our revenue comes from our hardworking residents and the businesses - large and small - who call Grand Rapids home.

As we look back on 2018, we should be encouraged.

We experienced a year of positive economic growth and a skyline dotted with cranes.

New and expanding business projects brought hundreds of new jobs and expanded opportunities to Grand Rapids.

Businesses and entrepreneurs across our city literally broke new ground as we saw them establish AND expand in our city.

One success story among the many I'd like to hold up as an example of the innovation and vision of our business community is Grand River Aseptic Manufacturing, known as GRAM.

GRAM was founded in 2010 as a joint venture between the Van Andel Institute and Grand Valley State University.

GRAM is privately held, with more than 100 employees in two locations near downtown, dedicated to pharmaceutical product manufacturing.

The company has outgrown its current facility due to rapid growth and is constructing a new building on Butterworth.

The project is expected to generate a total capital investment of \$63 million dollars and create 107 additional jobs.

They are creating new opportunities right here, in the city they are proud to call home.

What a great example of the momentum that can occur when innovation meets opportunity.

2018 saw Bridge Street transformed with an explosion of new economic activity, including the addition of the Bridge Street Market, West Michigan Center for Arts and Technology and new living opportunities for those proud to call Grand Rapids home.

Ground was broken on several downtown projects including Studio Park, the Warner Building, Embassy Suites on North Monroe, the redevelopment of a historic gem at 50 Monroe...Gordon Foods Store opened on Michigan Street in a mixed use, mixed income development - a strong model for other future developments.

These developments - and dozens of others across our city - create jobs for residents and are catalysts for even more growth and investment.

This positive energy has continued into 2019 with the new MSU Innovation Center, the new RDV headquarters, Consumers Energy Regional headquarters on the westside, the Ten Ionia tower development, and the GVSU Health Sciences facility on medical mile.

Good things are happening all over our city!

This year will bring the Laker Line - our city's second bus rapid transit line that will provide another mobility option and help connect residents to jobs, to neighborhoods and downtown.

Our neighborhoods are seeing infill projects, like the mixed use development on Carlton and Fulton - as new restaurants, pubs and boutiques abound.

The exciting Plaza Roosevelt development on Grandville Avenue will move forward this year.

This development will bring: a brand new GRPS school for 500 students along with affordable housing, a new park, an addition to Mercy Health's Clinica Santa Maria and an expansion to Cook Arts Center.

This is what comprehensive community driven development looks like.

And it is another example of creating opportunities in our neighborhoods through the Grand Rapids style of collaboration.

When asked where we live, most of us would say Grand Rapids - but let's be honest: those of us who live here know one of the strengths of our city is that it is really made up of a collection of truly awesome neighborhoods - each with their own distinct identity and assets.

Regardless if you believe the Westside is the Best Side, want to keep Creston Funky, Eastown Eclectic, or you are organizing in the MLK neighborhood - we know that strong and vibrant neighborhoods and neighborhood business districts, with their own flavor, are essential to strong cities.

Rather than having a one-size-fits all, city-hall knows the best philosophy to supporting neighborhoods - we asked YOU what was needed.

This past year, we awarded more than \$65,000 through our Neighborhood Match Fund to 42 creative and unique neighborhood projects - many focused on and led by youth.

This little, free library in the Oakdale neighborhood would not exist today without the neighborhood match fund.

Nor would this community garden in the Roosevelt Park neighborhood.

Strong neighborhoods bring people together and create opportunities for connections - around a shared love for where they live.

While our neighborhoods are unique - we come together as well through our shared love for Grand Rapids.

One example is the gathering of more than 450 participants who turned out for last year's Neighborhood Summit.

We are excited about the rapidly approaching 2019 Summit, coming up this Saturday on March 2nd. I hope you put this on your calendar and be a part of the momentum it has created.

Another priority in our strategic plan is the objective of creating a city where there is an Opportunity for All.

Grand Rapids continues to top lists for the best place to find a job, buy a home, visit and start a small business along with one of the fastest growing metro economies.

Our local economy is strong as we experience a 3.1% unemployment rate. Grand Rapids is working in many ways!

Yet we know that this doesn't represent the story or experiences for everyone.

Our economic recovery is still far from reaching all people and there are still visible inequities by race and ethnicity.

These inequalities impact our community's economic vitality and basic quality of life for so many of our residents and neighbors.

As we work to reduce these inequities, we must be intentional and focused in our efforts - as well as work across sectors to have the greatest impact.

We must drive a faster pace of positive change and momentum in historically marginalized communities.

We need to support post-secondary degree attainment for people of color and first generation students, which is why we continue to strongly support the To College Through College program.

We must support effective workforce development and opportunities for wealth generation.

Just as our economic development experts remind us that our best prospects for new jobs and investment comes from those companies that are already here -

I believe that we have a great resource if we stay committed to identifying talent - and investing in the talent - that already exists in our neighborhoods.

We must be a city that promotes opportunity and inclusion for ALL residents.

This fundamental belief led to our partnership with

- Samaritas,
- the Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce and
- the West Michigan Hispanic Chamber of Commerce in what is called the Gateways for Growth Initiative.

We were selected as one of thirteen communities across America that received a Gateways for Growth Award and corresponding funding to develop a strategic plan to integrate immigrants, foster economic growth and promote inclusion for all.

We are developing an Equitable Economic Development Plan, led by our Economic Development Department and including key partners throughout our community.

We also continue to support the important work being done by:

- the Latino Talent Initiative,
- Grand Rapids Area Black Businesses, and
- the West Michigan Hispanic Chamber.

There are a number of success stories from these efforts including GRABB assisting Reliable Medical Transport to secure a \$250,000 small business loan to expand fleet and service capacity from Northern Initiatives.

And we are eager to find ways to partner with the newly formed Asian Pacific American Chamber of Commerce.

Our continued growth and progress will only occur if we are truly an inclusive and diverse business friendly city.

A city where regardless of your zip code, you have access to opportunity and the support necessary to reach your full potential and dreams.

Driving this change doesn't happen by just focusing on adults.

One way to elevate opportunity for every child who grows up in our City is to be successful in establishing a Promise Zone - A Promise Zone, which is meant to provide students scholarships to attend a two year community college or four year university.

I am excited at the opportunity to serve on the newly established Promise Zone Authority as we work together to make sure this incredible opportunity is available to every child in our city.

Superintendent Neal, we are so grateful for you and your leadership - as this has the potential to be a game changer for our community and will set us on the course to truly be - a city of opportunity for everyone!

Additionally, the Grand Rapids Racial Equity Initiative continues to work to increase equitable employment and reduce racial disparities in our city.

One of the primary efforts supported is called HireReach - a collaboration of Talent 2025 and West Michigan Works!, that equips employers to utilize evidence-based employee selection processes for hiring - one that helps to remove unconscious bias.

Currently there are ten employers participating - with the City of Grand Rapids being one of those ten.

For those Grand Rapids Racial Equity Initiative partners who are here tonight, I say thank you - thank you for your time, your passion and participation in this important work.

Mobility is another key component of our strategic plan.

The continued growth of our urban core and our neighborhood business districts as great places to live and work has continued to create increased demand and challenges related to parking.

We need to be a city where we have mobility options for all - we need to be a people focused, smart city, one that nurtures innovation and one that is prepared for future and changing technology.

When it comes to parking, the city is your partner.

A full consideration of the many complex issues around parking makes it clear we need to have an "all of the above" mindset on addressing mobility concerns and not just parking in isolation.

Our community has a need to invest, innovate and drive forward new solutions that match the realities of Grand Rapids in 2019 and well beyond.

Take heart that progress is occurring, even as we continue to evolve our mobility roadmap together.

Just one example is that we anticipate approximately 2,500 new parking spaces coming online downtown this year.

And our investment in infrastructure continues with the completion of 51 miles of road construction last year.

We are also looking at new ways to get to work. This past year brought clear progress.

A new and enhanced downtown area shuttle or DASH as we know it - resulted in a 30% increase in ridership.

That is an increase of nearly 60,000 total rides.

We are partnering with May Mobility on a pilot to deploy four electric, autonomous shuttles downtown.

Also this year we aspire to pilot car share, bike share and e-scooters.

And this is not just about cars and busses.

We have kept our focus on safety as we set new pedestrian crosswalk standards and a 5-foot-wide bicycle passing ordinance.

We accomplished new records for protecting the safety of pedestrians and bicyclists alike.

Bicycle crashes involving motorists are at a 10-year low and vehicle-pedestrian collisions are at a three-year low.

This type of progress for non automotive modes of transportation is critical to being the vibrant, economically successful and citizen accessible community defined by our vision.

Let's shift our focus to housing - affordable housing continues to be a critical issue in our city.

We must be a city where there is a place for everyone who wishes to call Grand Rapids home.

To those of you grappling with this challenge, know that whether you are



- the server who is providing coffee,
- the caregiver helping seniors,
- the staff cleaning hotel rooms or
- the construction worker on a job site,

you can be assured we want you to continue to have the opportunity to live in our city.

You are part of the heart of what makes our community special.

I want to applaud my colleagues on the City Commission - we have worked hard on this issue of equitable access this past year.

We

- adopted changes to our zoning code,
- increased our down payment assistance program for low income homeowners,
- passed a residential rental application ordinance and
- supported the eviction prevention program, which helped 131 families this past year.

And we continue to support our strong private and non-profit housing development organizations as they work to ensure access to affordable housing throughout our city.

Although overall our progress in this area is encouraging, as we move forward there have been stumbling blocks.

With all the positive strides forward, a new challenge has come with the County's decision to dissolve the Kent County Land Bank.

The Land Bank has been a strong partner with the City who assisted in securing over 1 million dollars to demolish blighted properties, oversaw cleanup of contaminated sites and assisted in creating 195 affordable housing units over the last six years.

The elimination of the Land Bank introduced a new gap in our strategy to reach our affordable housing goals.

We are now actively working to identify a new approach and other tools we can utilize to address the growing needs related to affordable housing.

This is a priority for us this year.

In addition to ensuring children and families have affordable housing, we must ensure homes are healthy and safe.

This effort is one we are addressing head on and the effort continues in 2019.

Despite operating a Lead Hazard Control program for years, our community still sees children poisoned by lead.

The primary cause is coming from lead paint in older homes.

In response, we created and launched a Lead Free Kids Committee that includes my colleagues, Commissioners Lenear and Reppart along with a number of community members with relevant experience.

We are currently working with researchers to analyze city ordinances, compare them to best practices and make recommendations for changes.

We are working closely with our partners at the county and state to ensure cross jurisdictional collaboration as we work toward a shared goal of preventing our children from being poisoned by lead.

I am confident that our strategic, collaborative approach will have a positive impact on children in our community.

In addition to being a city that attracts millennials, we want to be a great place for people as they age.

We noted last year that Grand Rapids has many neighborhoods where more than 20% - or 1 in 5 - of our residents are 65 years or older.

It is incumbent on us to ensure that Grand Rapids is an age friendly city.

The work of this past year has led us to focus on four important areas of improvement:

- communication,
- outdoor spaces,
- housing and
- transportation.

As a result of this work and focus, we have now identified recommendations to ensure that Grand Rapids truly is a great place for everyone, regardless of your age.

This year we will begin to execute a subset of these recommendations.

We also need to be a city where all people, regardless of your age, feel safe in our community at all times.

As City Manager Washington mentioned, having a safe community is critical to our success - and that requires our continued commitment to strengthen community police relations.

This requires building a strong foundation of trust between community members and our police officers.

This past year we spent a significant amount of time and energy on these efforts. Some tangible progress occurred.

Under former Chief Rahinsky's leadership, we started a Policing at the Speed of Trust program, bringing officers and residents together to build relationships.

Significant work was done by our Police Policy and Procedure Review Task Force, which examined police officer training, particularly around implicit bias, responding to youth and officer hiring practices.

It is clear that there is still work to do.

Our time this year will be spent on implementation and action as we prepare to welcome a new chief in our department.

I want to thank all the community members and police officers who were a part of the Task Force and who gave a significant amount of time to this hard and critical work.

It has been very important in laying a foundation of understanding we can use to build long term, sustainable results.

I also want to thank all of those who serve our city as police officers.

Every day and every night we are served by a dedicated force, that, I know, shares our love for this city and our potential.

And I thank them for their service to our community.

Spaces are essential to being a city that offers a great quality of life.

Our parks and public spaces make our city come alive.

If you want a feel for momentum and potential of what we can achieve together, consider how far we have come.

Ten years ago we had

- inoperable drinking fountains,
- closed restrooms,
- broken slides,
- crumbling tennis courts and
- the constant threat of closed pools.

One of my favorite natural spaces, Huff Park, had broken playground equipment, a boardwalk with splintered boards and complete sections under water.

A beautiful natural gem in our city was falling apart.

Thanks to our voter approved parks millage, Huff Park has new life and is once again a destination and a place of beauty and solitude.

After the grand reopening as Bryan and I walked the new boardwalk, we saw neighbors of all ages strolling, deer in the surrounding woods and cat tails.

As we finished our walk, children were playing on the newly installed playground.

We even ran into my Mayor Millennial Advisory Board members learning about foraging right there in the park.

Huff Park had come back to life, and is once again a contributing factor to the vibrancy of our City.

The Huff Park renaissance is exactly the type of project we envisioned when voters supported the parks millage in 2013.

For citizens this is a very smart investment. On this project alone we were able to leverage over \$300,000 in additional state funding.

But citizen contributions are not only financial.

The design was informed and inspired by community input - and brought together a diverse group of community partners.

It returned an asset to our community - an asset that will have a positive impact on our environment, health, and recreation for generations to come.

The park was reclaimed by listening to our community.

This type of successful, high payback, rejuvenation has been occurring in far more than just Huff Park.

In 2018 alone, we invested \$3.9 million dollars of millage funds in nine parks.

We engaged more than 750 residents in park design and planning.

We had over 46,000 pool visitors and 350 swim lessons - and we continued to make vital repairs to parks and playgrounds across our city.

The progress continues in 2019. There are many exciting projects planned this year.

Clemente Park is getting a complete park reconstruction with a picnic shelter, bathrooms and soccer field.

Riverside Park is installing a new accessible kayak launch.

In partnership with GRPS, the Wege Foundation and National Recreation and Parks Association, there will be two new school park projects at Burton Elementary and Ken-O-Sha to install outdoor classrooms and nature-based play elements.

We are connecting children to nature!

Our community has made significant gains over the past five years in addressing a massive backlog of repairs, keeping our three neighborhood pools open and working towards ensuring access to vibrant parks.

I've said it before and I'll repeat it tonight - We need to ensure there is a quality park within safe walking distance of every child who lives in our city.

We will work together relentlessly until we achieve that, and we are making great progress.

It is an important time now for us to look ahead.

With only two years left of the 7-year millage, now is the time to engage our community as we consider the best way to ensure ongoing, adequate and stable funding for our parks, pools and playgrounds.

We've made strategic and intentional investments, but we need to keep funding the little things that truly make a park system great, like

- emptying trash cans,
- mowing grass,
- maintaining plantings and
- keeping restrooms clean

so we never see them fall into neglect again.

As we look ahead, I ask you to join me in looking back.

A vibrant city with wonderful spaces is a legacy passed from generation to generation.

In honor and recognition of all those who came before us who helped protect, build and enhance our parks we have today,

I have selected 'Keep On the Grass: A Brief History of Grand Rapids Parks' as this year's Mayor's Book of the Year.

I want to thank our Grand Rapids Historical Commission for their work in writing and creating this beautiful book - and I hope you will take a complimentary copy as you leave here tonight.

It will broaden your appreciation of the long standing recognition of how special our space is to the magic of Grand Rapids.

Another vital undertaking - quickly approaching - and one that requires all of us to get engaged: is the 2020 Census.

This is an issue that is easy to underestimate.

The census may sound boring to some and spark fears of governmental overreach to others. But the next census is an enormously important juncture for Grand Rapids.

The tough job of ensuring everyone is counted, counted only once, and counted in the right place is essential to good government.

This task, mandated by the U.S. Constitution and conducted every 10 years since 1790, seeks to accurately tally some 140 million households and over 325 million people across our country.

The core belief in One Person - One Vote is the foundation of our democracy.

The information collected in the census is the starting point for determining how many seats we will have in both the US House and in Lansing.

Being fully counted will help our neighborhoods, streets, schools, and make our city stronger - because the census is what more than 300 federal and state programs use to determine funding - funding that comes back to our city to support critical community services.

There is a current saying in pop culture called F.O.M.O. - Fear Of Missing Out. As mayor of our growing city, I have FOMO when it comes to the census.

I believe we could fall victim to another trap - Missing Out Because of Fear. We cannot let fear keep us from responding.

I am asking us - as a community - to address this serious issue of gaining a robust response.

I do not want our community to miss out on our fair share of state and federal funding or of having fair political representation.

One of my top priorities this year will be to work with all of you to ensure we have a complete and accurate Census count.

To get us there, we have created a Complete Count Committee - Everyone Counts Grand Rapids.

We will be calling on you to help us make sure every member of our community is counted because every person counts.

As we get ready to close, I want to take a look back one more time with you tonight.

A look back to 1969 -

A time before the age of cellular phones or the internet.

A time when the Beatles were still performing.

A time when Grand Rapids proudly installed Alexander Calder's stabile "La Grande Vitesse", which was the first public art work funded by the Art in Public Places program of the National Endowment of the Arts.

La Grande Vitesse would not exist today if it were not for a group of passionate community members - who loved our city - that advocated for us to be selected.

Alexander Calder, one of America's preeminent artists, was chosen to create the first civic sculpture jointly financed by federal and private funds - right here in our very own community.

And in May 1969, our city and the nation watched as Calder's 42-ton work of art arrived in Grand Rapids.

The Calder has had a dramatic impact on our City.

It energized our community and elevated the importance of public art.

It branded Grand Rapids as a leader.

It was the impetus for our Annual Festival of the Arts.

The Calder has become a symbol of our city.

And this year, we celebrate its 50th Anniversary.

The Calder established Grand Rapids as a city that honors and values public art...which we see throughout our community today.

The latest installation, Love by Robert Indiana is yet another expression of what makes our city so very special.

It is the love that people have for their community, for their neighbor and for this special place that we all call home.

During a time when there are deep divides in our country, it is more important than ever to come together as friends and neighbors who share a common love for our community.

We all share a common goal of being a city of hope, love, compassion and opportunity.

A city where people feel connected and where we feel we belong.

We have all worked together to achieve the progress I have described in my remarks tonight.

And we all need to continue to work together to drive further momentum in the plans laid out this evening.

This work must happen with each of us, carrying in our hearts, that our role in this community and our own individual efforts - do indeed make a significant difference in this place we all call home.

I am deeply grateful every day to serve you and our amazing city as Mayor.

The updates and insights I have shared this evening illuminate some of the great progress we have made.

May it also inspire us on the journey that still lies ahead.

Thank you so much and have a wonderful rest of your night.