Thank you Council President Stark for that kind introduction. It’s great to see you in your new role as president of the council.

I’d also like to extend a special thanks to retiring Councilmember Dave Thune for whom this will be his last official State of the City. I would like to extend a welcome to Chief Finney who has sat through a number of State of the City addresses, but this is his first as a councilmember.

And, of course, thanks to the partners who provided our space tonight, including the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, Schubert Club, Minnesota Opera and Ordway Center for the Performing Arts.

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In 2006, I stood before the people of Saint Paul in my first State of the City address and asked our community to seize the moment to move our city forward. Quoting Holocaust Survivor Elie Wiesel, I said that there comes a time when we must make a choice between repeating ourselves and choosing to grow. I asked that we intentionally implement our dreams for Saint Paul and propel our city forward with energy, inclusiveness and focus.

There were many opportunities on the horizon. But few items were fixed into the city’s future.

In that first State of the City address, I called for passage of state bonding support to assist the Ordway – not to build this magnificent space we are in today, but to make basic upgrades to the facility such as energy efficient windows and a new floor for the stage. The Central Corridor faced a thousand-and-one hurdles. The deteriorating Midway Stadium was acknowledged as a sub-standard home of the Saints, but no solution had been envisioned. The need for a structured out-of school-time system of learning opportunities had been identified in a gathering of nearly 300 people in December of 2005. But what was then known as the “Second Shift Advisory Commission” was little more than a concept.

Today, the path our city chose is clear. This beautiful hall provides the home that our world-renowned Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra has deserved for decades. The Green Line opened to much fanfare and an immediate flood of riders last June. CHS Field has already hosted Hamline University Baseball and will soon host the first Saints game. Now more than 90 organizations are part of our formal out-of-school-time network we know today as Sprockets.

There is so much more to celebrate in our city.

* Our population is growing
* Graduation rates for all children are up
* Crime is down across the city
* We have once again earned a AAA Bond Rating
* There is renewed vitality in neighborhoods across the city
* Property values are rising
* Investment in the city is at an all-time high
* Arts and cultural amenities are bringing back night-life to downtown, and
* The Minnesota Wild are in the playoffs

So today, I offer this year’s State of the City address as a toast to all we have accomplished this last decade – to the dreams realized, to the promises fulfilled, to a renewed, vibrant and growing Saint Paul.

Cheers.

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The plans we made, the partnerships we forged, the actions we took have led to a strong Saint Paul.

We are a city to which businesses want to move. Moventas, a Finnish wind energy manufacturer, is bringing green jobs to the Beacon Bluff Business Center.

We recently have cut ribbons on new or expanded businesses – businesses like:

* Redpath
* thisClicks, TKDA, KLJ Engineering and GovDocs
* Afro Deli and Public Kitchen and Bar and Urban Growler
* Legacy Chocolates, 11 Wells and Revival Wine, Beer and Spirits

Today, Ecolab renewed their commitment to downtown and I’m excited to confirm the oft-rumored plans that Ecolab will purchase Traveler’s North tower, bringing their downtown employees together in a new world headquarters for this fast-growing Fortune 500 Company.

I want to thank Ecolab Chairman and CEO Doug Baker for his commitment to Saint Paul. And I also want to thank Travelers for their commitment to Saint Paul as they will continue to maintain over 2,000 employees at their downtown campus.

Saint Paul is open for business. In 2014, the city’s Department of Safety and Inspections issued building permits representing $715 million of activity – nearly double what we saw just five years earlier. That translates into a lot of women and men working and providing for their families.

Securian continues to thrive as they transition from the incredible leadership of Bob Senkler to our new great partner Chris Hilger.

Plans are underway for new hotels.

HealthPartners is poised to break ground on a new four-story neuroscience center on Phalen Boulevard, the largest free-standing neuroscience center in the Upper Midwest and one of only a few in the country. This builds on the dream that Councilmember Bostrom has so faithfully pursued for the Phalen Corridor for over 20 years.

And the brand new East Side Enterprise Center is abuzz with entrepreneurs “Making it Happen on East Seventh.”

And the Wild are in the playoffs.

The Wild getting into the playoffs is the result of a season of hard work. And yet, just getting to the playoffs is not enough. Instead, we are anticipating a parade down 7th Street and a celebration of a Stanley Cup coming to Saint Paul.

Similarly, hard work over these past years has positioned our city well for future growth and development, greater vitality, more jobs, more residents and more visitors than ever before.

So let’s celebrate. But now we must double our efforts across the city to finish the work that remains.

In downtown, Macy’s, the West Publishing Building, the Gateway parcel and other opportunities must be seized. The West Side Flats, Victoria Park, Beacon Bluff, Whirlpool, Hafner’s and other sites across the city must be developed. And along the Green Line, we must fulfill the promise of a first class transportation system by redeveloping the former Bus Barn site and renewing the Midway Shopping Center at Snelling and University.

In neighborhoods across the city, our investments will continue to strengthen and anchor existing institutions, while paving the way for new housing to be built and entrepreneurs to build their dreams.

Next month, I am excited to announce that we will select the first two neighborhood commercial nodes to receive a combined $700,000 in “Commercial Vitality Zone” funding. Established as part of our 8-80 Vitality initiative passed by the Council in October, this resource will work to create jobs, expand tax base and increase vitality in the selected neighborhoods. I look forward to working with HRA Chair Amy Brendmoen and other members of the Council to make this work.

Whether it is a neglected or abandoned commercial strip or an empty lot, we know that there are numerous parcels in Saint Paul that can be put to higher and better use. I have requested the City’s Planning and Economic Development Department to take the lead. They will reach out to our community partners, especially our District Councils, to identify key parcels in each of their districts that can become future recipients of Commercial Vitality Zone grants or other funding sources. The goal, of course, it to help create 21st century, vital neighborhoods across the city.

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And of course, we can’t talk about economic growth without discussing the Ford site, which continues to be the greatest redevelopment opportunity this region has ever seen.

Recently, Councilmember Tolbert and I led a delegation of community leaders to Europe to study redevelopments in Germany, Denmark and Sweden.

There was a great deal of information downloaded during that week. But to a person, the true value of the trip was to instill in each of us a resolve to not think small. As noted city planner Daniel Burnham once said, “Make no little plans; they have no power to stir man’s blood.”

The developer of the airport site in Berlin, Dr. Phillipp Bouteiller, told us to give the property a “higher purpose.” We can’t simply look at the site and say let’s build X number of houses and create Y number of jobs without first understanding how we truly transform the land into a 21st Century community – an accomplishment that people from across the globe will come to study. In that sense, it can truly be a field of dreams.

But this same sense of purpose must be applied to every corner of our city.

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We describe ourselves as the most livable city in America. But what’s behind that phrase?

We would have a long ways to go to become the most musical city in America. Austin and Nashville have a pretty good head start. But as we demonstrate tonight, we can and should be mentioned alongside them as a great music city. A world class chamber orchestra. Great young artists like Jeremy and Chastity. The talented group of musicians who came out of Central High School. A young star like Dem Atlas. Folks like Solomon who share their talents with young musicians.

Music is more than a series of notes – music is a pathway to a stronger, more vital community.

We can say that we are the most sustainable city in America. That’s a title I would gladly engage in a fight over with other cities. Indeed, if cities across this country and globe strive to be the most environmentally conscious city on the planet, we will actually start seeing the long-term changes required to combat climate change.

Here in Saint Paul, we have so much to brag about:

* The passage of the comprehensive Bike Plan – which reflects the biggest investment in bike infrastructure in our city’s history.
* Certification of the Xcel Energy Center as one of the greenest convention centers in the world.
* Our Saint Paul Regional Water Service, visited by the head of the EPA just last week, which is nationally recognized for its water quality and safety.
* The new CHS Field, will be among the greenest ballparks in the country, including an innovative system to capture and reuse rainwater for the field and some of the facilities, a model recycling and composting program, and solar panels to help power the scoreboard.

We can say that we are the most educated city, for that is certainly true of many residents. We have one of the most well-educated work forces in the country – with high school graduation rates and college degrees well above national averages. But, that wouldn’t honestly reflect the fact that too many of our children are falling behind and that the Twin Cities is a community with one of the largest achievement gaps in the country.

Recently, an article in the Atlantic Monthly spoke of “the Minneapolis Miracle.” Of course, the real miracle was that it even mentioned Saint Paul. But the article did a great job of talking about the very special community we have in the Twin Cities. And much of the reason we do have the quality of life that we have here is the result of intentional strategies put in place decades ago to make sure that all parts of our region thrive.

But, while “the miracle” is true for some – it is not for all. We have an amazing region – home to more Fortune 500 companies per capita than any place outside of New York, world-class colleges and universities, a richness of arts and cultural amenities, low unemployment rates, a natural environment that belies the fact that we live in a metropolitan area of nearly 3.5 million people, and – of course – the Wild are in the playoffs.

With all this as our base, the higher purpose for our city and region must be to ensure that which is best about our community is shared by all within our community. As Daniel Burnham said, “Aim high in hope and work.” We must aim not to narrow the achievement gap, but to close it. Aim not to reduce disparities in income and employment and in housing and health care, but to eliminate them. Aim to create a 21st century community not just at the Ford site, but in every corner of this city.

The lofty goals we set for ourselves have never been idle chatter. Several years ago, we set out to develop a new approach to education and family stability in the Frogtown and Summit University communities. Under the banner of the Saint Paul Promise Neighborhood initiative, with inspiration drawn from the Harlem Children’s Zone, we began our work.

The Promise Neighborhood Partners rolled up their sleeves, reached out to over 600 families to help shape the work, and proceeded to build a network of support for children and families that is showcasing how to stop talking about closing the achievement gap and actually move the needle in the right direction.

In all three schools within the Promise Neighborhood, improvements in test scores have significantly outpaced state and district averages. In fact, at Jackson Elementary School, students made an eight percent gain on state achievement test scores, compared to the state’s one percent gain. Equally compelling is the fact that there is no significant gap in achievement between one racial group and another. All this in a school that became a neighborhood school through the district’s Strong Schools, Strong Communities plan – 85 percent of the students at Jackson now come from the neighborhood, as opposed to the four percent that it used to have.

There are so many partners to thank. People like Councilmember Thao and organizations like the Wilder Foundation. I also want to extend a special thanks tonight to Billy Collins, who is retiring from the YWCA – having served this community’s children and young people for decades.

We sought to “aim high in hope and work” when we began our out-of-school time network now known as Sprockets. From the original dream, to a network that today connects over 90 organizations with 20,000 youth participants – we can now measure the reach of out-of-school time learning and draw powerful connections between those programs and progress in school achievement.

I am proud to announce that 83 percent of out-of-school time program participants this past year were youth of color, compared to 67 percent kids of color in Saint Paul Public Schools; while, 80 percent of participants were from low-income households.

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We have placed a great deal of emphasis on solving one of the monumental challenges before our city – racial inequality. At the root of much or our work, directly through the My Brother’s Keeper initiative or indirectly through the expansion of our youth summer jobs program, the work that we do in Saint Paul must move our city to a place where all our families thrive, regardless of race or socio-economic status.

Because we started with the dream of an equitable community, the Central Corridors Funders Collaborative committed to making the Green Line a true corridor of opportunity. I want to thank Polly Talen who has been an integral part of our work in her position at the Knight Foundation. Polly is leaving that position soon, but I can’t thank her enough for her partnership.

Because equity is at the heart of our work, we have walked side-by-side with Catholic Charities and its leader, Tim Marx, to make sure we build both shelter and opportunity in the heart of our city for those experiencing homelessness. And Mayor Hodges and I have dedicated our communities to the special task of ensuring – by the end of this year – that no veteran is without a home. We have 259 days to go and, at last count, there are 154 homeless veterans on our Registry.

Through the committed work of a team of 20 agencies and advocates, who meet every two weeks, we are on pace to meet our goal, but we need the community’s help. If you know a veteran who is homeless or, very importantly, a landlord who is willing to rent to a veteran, please call 888-LinkVet and someone will be there to help.

I want to thank another community leader retiring this year. Carleen Rhodes, through her leadership of the Saint Paul Foundation, has brought c arity of purpose and resolve to the work of ending homelessness in Saint Paul – and across the state.

Because we want to end disparities in employment, we started an innovative program to train low-income residents and people of color to become paramedics at the EMS Academy. You may remember that I highlighted one remarkable young man a few years back, Donnell Gibson. Well, we were right about him. A few weeks ago, while driving to Rice Recreation Center where he works with kids, Donnell noticed smoke coming out of a Saint Paul home. With his training in mind, he leapt into action and rescued the family inside. Donnell is here with us tonight, so please give him a round of applause.

And because we are committed to equality for everyone, CHS Field will be among the most accessible buildings in sports. With 180 specially-designed seats for people with limited mobility and twice the required space for people who use wheelchairs – there will be greater access for people of all abilities to enjoy a game.

And because I am committed to ending the achievement gap once and for all in our schools, I have stood strongly in support of the district’s Strong Schools, Strong Communities plan. I know that this level of change is difficult. But ask any CEO in any private sector, non-profit or government organization how to execute change. They will tell you that you must persist in the face of doubt, or change will not occur. That is not to say courses can’t be adjusted. But the goal cannot change.

In this case, the goal we seek is a world-class education for all. If we don’t want those words to ring hollow, we must commit to the hard work needed to get there.

Connie and I proudly raised two children in the Saint Paul Public Schools. We certainly recognized the challenges. But we also saw the richness of their educational experience. Every child in this city deserves that experience. And it won’t happen unless we are all committed to the goal and willing to make change.

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We are a city rich in so many ways.

There is our great parks system, soon to be enhanced by improvements at Rice Park and a new vision for Dickerman Park at University and Fairview – a key to fully realizing the possibilities of the Green Line.

By the end of this year, our incredible libraries will have seen $15 million in renovation and expansion over the last three years – including $7.5 million from private sources – plus an additional $14 million to build the Arlington Hills Community Center, an anchor along this revitalized Payne Avenue corridor.

And of course, there’s art and music and a cultural richness rarely seen in communities our size. Tonight we are in this beautiful, newly dedicated hall. But that great strength that the arts community brings can be seen in the sidewalks of our city because Christine Podas-Larson and the city’s artists in residence had a vision to add simple beauty and grace through poetry in concrete.

I’d like to take a moment to thank Christine – who after 28 years leading Public Art Saint Paul – is retiring this June. We will miss her vision and her support.

I’m also excited by the Minnesota Museum of American Art’s plans to establish its permanent new home in the Pioneer Endicott Building. Their national treasure of a collection, including works by Paul Manship and George Morrison, will now be on display for visitors and residents to view.

At the renovated Turf Club, musicians old and new are filling the Green Line with great songs and inspiring new generations of performers. We continue to build out amenities like the Palace Theater that will open in 2016. Como Dockside will soon be filled with walkers and bikers coming to hear great music and sample an exciting range of Cajun food. And, if you don’t have plans after tonight’s event, slide over to the Hill Library to hear the Real Phonic Radio Hour. You can also head to the Xcel to watch the Wild game on the large screen because, in case you haven’t heard, they’re in the playoffs.

In June, the Jazz Festival will be bigger and better than ever – including a performance by Dr. John at CHS Field. Support these festivals. Help them grow. The visitors we draw for that event now will be the future employee, employer or resident of Saint Paul.

Let’s continue to build on the vibrant arts and culture of our city. Let us marshal our collective resources and our creative energy to build to a crescendo in 2016 – which I am, tonight, officially declaring the Year of Music in the City of Saint Paul. Let’s make sure that every child in our city experiences live music in 2016. Let’s make sure that our musical venues and artists are supported and celebrated in 2016 like never before. Let’s do it because it reflects our higher purpose and because culture and music and vitality are inextricably linked.

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We are a great city. The state of Saint Paul is strong. It will be stronger when all share its richness. We have accomplished a great deal this past decade. Let us keep the momentum going.

Tonight, I offer up our shared work together in celebration of all we have accomplished. And what better way to celebrate than great music. So, enjoy. Cheers! And thank you for being a part of this incredible city.