

Navigating our future

2020 State of the Region address

By Karen Redman, Regional Chair

Intro

I grew up along the rocky shores of the Grand River in Cambridge.

As youngsters, my sisters and I would climb on toboggans every winter and fly down the hill towards the frozen river. We would gather bulrushes in the spring and float through the gentle current in the summer.

As a child, I loved the river because it was full of life and always held new surprises, regardless of the season. As an adult, as a parent and grandparent, I still love these things, but I also appreciate the symbolism of Grand: **connecting our communities, carving its own path towards the future, and always, always resilient.**

- **Connecting**
- **Future-focused**
- **Resilient**

To me, this is the quintessential story of Waterloo Region.

Welcome

Thank-you for joining me today for our first State of the Region address. Today is an opportunity to recognize our accomplishments, share our priorities for the future and acknowledge our challenges. It has certainly been challenging for everyone during our recent transit strike and I am hopeful we reach a resolution.

I would like to take a moment to recognize the shared history that brought us to this point. What I have learned over the years from Indigenous teachings is to be respectful, grateful and protective of our ties to the river and to the land. This tie is not about ownership but rather is one of stewardship.

The land on which we gather today is traditionally used by the Haudenosaunee, Anishinaabe and Neutral People. I also acknowledge the enduring presence and deep traditional knowledge and philosophies of the Indigenous People with whom we share this land.

I wish to extend a special thank-you to the Kitchener and Kitchener-Westmount Rotary Clubs for hosting today's event and inviting me to present the first State of the Region address. Service above self is a value that has drawn me and so many of us to Rotary and it's a defining value that we share collectively as a community.

Thank-you to all the elected officials who have joined us today.

- Regional Councillors
- Kitchener, Cambridge, Waterloo
- Wilmot, Wellesley, North Dumfries, Woolwich

I would also like to thank the elected officials who came before us, locally, provincially and federally. People who shared and nurtured a vision for this community. Experience has taught me that no one level of government can do everything. We work in collaboration, not competition, with all levels of government. It is here, at the municipal level, that our decisions have the most immediate impact on you, your family and your business. Thank you to all of you for being here today and sharing in a commitment to strong governance and long-term planning that has allowed Waterloo Region to prosper and flourish.

Another key partner in the Region's success is our passionate, dedicated and innovative workforce. Over the past year, I have visited many Regional facilities. I am so proud of our Regional staff. They truly care about this community and take pride in their contributions. They are an impressive group and it is through their boots-on-the-ground-work implementing Council's vision that the progress and achievements that I'm going to talk about today have been possible. For the staff who are here today and to the thousands who are not, thank-you for all that you do to make this community great.

Celebration & Challenges

We have so much to celebrate here in Waterloo Region. We have a strong economy, vibrant neighbourhoods and robust employment. We are a hub of innovation, a magnet for tech start-ups and home to dynamic education institutions.

We are a community that draws strength from our multiculturalism and celebrates our diversity. Waterloo Region's many immigrants bring new ideas and global connections. With many employers struggling to find and retain talent, immigrants will play a significant role in filling this gap as we move forward.

Our arts, culture and heritage attract talent and visitors. The Region proudly supports local arts and culture to enrich the lives of our residents. Our unique mix of bustling, urban cities nestled next to tranquil, idyllic townships gives us all a sense of hometown pride.

But this isn't the whole story of Waterloo Region. Our story also includes things like climate change, environmental challenges and unemployment. It includes urban sprawl, traffic congestion and an ongoing struggle to get daily connections to Toronto.

Our story includes vulnerable residents. Families who can't afford healthy food or rent, and a frustratingly long waitlist for affordable housing. We have people who sleep on church lawns and crowd our emergency shelters in the winter. Our story includes addiction and an opioid crisis that has seen hundreds of our citizens die from overdose in the past three years.

There is work to be done.

But we are a community that has a long track record of working together to make change happen. There are some stunning examples:

- As a community, we reinvented ourselves after the local decline in manufacturing.
- In 2016, we housed thousands of Syrian refugees who arrived here after fleeing their war-torn country.
- Last year, we identified some problems facing local youth during the Smart Cities Challenge...and we're now facing up to them, finding solutions and investing in young people.

We have a way of finding collective, innovative solutions. Made in Waterloo Region solutions.

We have our work cut out for us. I am confident we are up to the task.

Connecting

Last June, we proudly launched ION: a transformational rapid transit system that has already changed our urban landscape and spurred over three billion dollars in economic development. ION **connects** seamlessly with our newly expanded Grand River Transit to create an efficient, easy-to-use public transit system.

Make no mistake: ION was no small feat. Our LRT is one of only four similar systems in Canada—joining Calgary, Edmonton and Ottawa. The vision for this transformative system was nurtured by successive former councils who maintained faith over decades of planning to see it realized.

ION has given public transit in Waterloo Region a huge boost. It is moving people and helping them access all that our amazing communities have to offer. Since the start of service, boardings along the central transit corridor are up an amazing 35 per cent. ION is also doing so much more. It is the keystone to a well-planned, well-connected community that will redefine growth for generations. It will concentrate growth in our core areas and help preserve our farmlands and woodlands for those who come next...for my children and grandchildren and for yours.

The Region is also deeply invested in active transportation. In fact, we're investing in 580 km of active transportation infrastructure over the next 10 years. We're building more cycling lanes, protected cycling lanes and multi-use trails, encouraging bikes on trains and buses, piloting a bike share program. We know the importance connecting our trails, neighbourhoods and communities...of encouraging people to get around without relying on cars. We know the importance of providing affordable and sustainable transportation choices and making our communities accessible for residents of all ages and mobilities.

Our future Transit Hub in downtown Kitchener will integrate ION, GRT, GO, VIA and other transit services in a seamless transportation facility, allowing residents and visitors to connect within Waterloo Region and beyond. Two-way all-day GO is a big piece of this puzzle and I am hopeful that it will roll out soon. The Province has increased the number of trains, but there is more to be done. When the business community, Chambers of Commerce, tech sector and local governments speak with one voice, senior levels of government DO listen; they DO respond. It happened for LRT and – if we are consistent and persistent – it will happen for two-way, all-day GO.

From ION and GRT, to active transportation and our future Transit Hub, there are so many ways we are working to **connect** the people and places of Waterloo Region.

Future-focused

Public transit and active transportation are important components of a connected community...but they are also an important part of our future. **Future-focused** thinking is deeply embedded into the Region of Waterloo's decision making. We are constantly peering beyond the horizon to ensure a good quality of life for the next generation.

That's why protecting our natural environment is an underlying consideration to every decision we make around the Council table. There is nothing more fundamental to the quality of life a community enjoys, than the environment. People are drawn to our region for its green spaces and clean living.

- We are working with municipal partners and organizations like Sustainable Waterloo Region and Green Solutions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 80 per cent by 2050. We're also working on a Climate Action plan that will help our community thrive in tomorrow's low-carbon future.
- We are diverting waste from our landfill by continuing to invest in our already-successful recycling and organic waste programs. Waterloo Region is home of the Blue Box and our residents continue to embrace recycling...both blue box and green bin programs. We achieved a remarkable 65 per cent diversion rate in 2019, the highest in our history and one of the best in Ontario. We are collecting landfill gas to reduce emissions and generate enough electricity to power 5,000 homes!
- We continue to be strong stewards of our river and groundwater resources in so many ways: we're reducing road salt that seeps into the ground, encouraging the use of water efficient fixtures and rain barrels and sharing the importance of water with our youth at the annual Children's Groundwater Festival. I'm proud of the fact that we continue to have one of the lowest rates of water use in the country.

All of these activities become more challenging as Waterloo Region grows. We are the second-fastest growing area in Canada with a population expected to reach 835,000 people by **2041**. As you might expect, it takes careful planning, long-term vision and quite a bit of collaboration to maintain the quality of life for which Waterloo Region is so well known. We are building a future in which people who can live and work anywhere in the world, will choose to make Waterloo Region home.

The Waterloo Region Economic Development Corporation – a partnership between the Region and local municipal partners – is helping drive our strong economy into the future. Together we have had a \$1.9 billion impact in Waterloo Region through investment in the tech, advanced manufacturing, automotive and med tech sectors. Building on this momentum, we are optimistic about business and job growth in Waterloo Region in 2020 and beyond.

Resilient

As we look to the future, we are full of excitement and optimism. But we are also profoundly aware that some of our citizens could be left behind.

It's no secret that some of our residents are struggling with homelessness. Others can't afford their rent and are on a long and frustrating waitlist for affordable housing. These are complex issues and there is work to be done.

There are no simple solutions but Regional Council is deeply committed to making progress through collaboration with community partners.

We are already finding innovative solutions to boost our affordable housing stock. For example, Council recently approved a \$247 million plan to help create 600 new affordable units. We're also unlocking surplus municipal property and partnering with the private and non-profit sector to find unique housing solutions. We are increasing our funding for housing programs, working to make housing more affordable and helping people access emergency shelters and supports when they need them.

The opioid crisis has shaken our communities to the core. People are dying -- hundreds have overdosed in the past few years -- and it's not okay. We need to remember that these people are more than just numbers. They are "somebody's everything." They are brothers and sisters, daughters and sons, parents and friends.

There is a lot of disagreement in the community about how to solve this complex problem. Emotions are running high. But, we know that doing nothing is not an option.

So...we are working across sectors to forge a unique made in Waterloo solution. In October, after extensive consultations, we proudly opened a much-needed health clinic on Duke Street. Since opening, staff at this clinic have reversed dozens of overdoses and connected hundreds of individuals with health care, addiction and recovery services.

Recently, a new mobile clinic operated by Sanguen Health was purchased with funding from the LHIN and Telus. This is so much more than a van! With the help of dedicated outreach workers, it eliminates barriers and brings judgement-free healthcare to people living on the margins of society so they can get the help they need with dignity.

There is more to be done but we are moving in the right direction. This would not have been possible without the support of Kitchener City Council and partnerships with so many, including the House of Friendship, St. John's Kitchen, the Downtown Health Centre and Sanguen Health, Waterloo Regional Police Service, Public Health and the Crime Prevention Council.

I know we will continue to advocate for people struggling with addiction, providing paths to better health; rehabilitation and a more meaningful engagement in society. We will also continue to build more community housing and find ways to help people get back

on their feet...because that's what we do in Waterloo Region. We have our work cut out for us.

Summary

A few years ago, I was canoeing down the Grand River with my family. I distinctly recall the stillness and calm, the gentle tug of the current, the only sounds our slowly dipping paddles and the chatter of birds.

As we approached the Fairway Bridge – the Region's newest bridge at the time -- the muffled sounds of traffic rose up as commuters connected from Kitchener to Cambridge and Cambridge to Kitchener. Slowly, the noise faded as we passed beyond the concrete footings. Then it was just us again, enjoying the simple beauty of nature.

Looking back, it strikes me that the Region of Waterloo not only builds physical bridges, we build symbolic bridges: bridges across sectors, cities and townships. Bridges across levels of government, urban-rural divides. We build bridges toward collaboration, hope and a brighter future.

The story of Waterloo Region is about **connecting** communities, carving our own path towards the **future**, and always remaining **resilient**. In all that we do, we are looking upstream, building bridges for our citizens, our neighbourhoods, our communities. For our residents here and now *and* for those who will come next.

Thank-you for travelling on this journey with me and thank-you for continuing to build bridges with the Region of Waterloo for a better tomorrow. We should all be proud of the community we are today and excited about the community we building for the next generation.

I know I am.