



# STATE OF THE REGION ADDRESS

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REGIONAL CHAIR GARY BURROUGHS

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## Introduction & Welcome

- It is my pleasure to be here today, with so many guests from all corners of Niagara. With this many people gathered to hear my remarks, I certainly hope I don't disappoint. First of all, I would like to thank all of the Chambers of Commerce for hosting this opportunity to share my perspective on Niagara, and where I see the Region in the year ahead. I would also like to acknowledge the many members of Regional Council in the audience today – seems to me like we have enough representation to hold a Council meeting here. I see that most of them are seated together and I hope they are listening attentively – I am sure there will be questions later.
- We also have a number of staff and senior management from the Region as well, including Regional CAO Mike Trojan, and I certainly appreciate their support.



- As most of you know, this is my first term as Regional Chair, but I am no stranger to the politics and scope of the Region, having spent the last 10 years as a Regional Councillor, and Lord Mayor of the Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake.
- As I have said to a number of people on a number of occasions, I am very excited about the term ahead – both at Council, and throughout each of your communities. Together we can build a strong foundation for Niagara, making informed decisions that will improve the lives of our residents and businesses. We will provide the leadership now that will ensure Niagara is stronger and more vibrant tomorrow. I believe we have a Council that wants to tackle the tough questions, make the right decisions and improve the way we do business – I am thrilled to lead them in the term ahead.



## Successes – Budget 2011

- This year's 2011 budget process was the start of tackling those tough questions. Earlier this month Council passed a 1.37% decrease in taxes (after assessment growth) after a lengthy and detailed budget debate. Regional Council and staff have addressed the important issues of transparency and accountability in this budget - while respecting the taxpayer's ability to pay. Certainly a significant achievement given ongoing financial pressures to do more with less. We know our infrastructure assets are vital to the sustainability of our quality of life. We recognized our affordability target on capital spending, while maintaining our commitment to delivering the necessary tools for business, like roads, bridges and water/wastewater infrastructure. These are the backbone of our communities.



## Successes - Communication

- One of the significant changes in the budget process this year and to which I credit a great success in our enhanced public communication, was the level of public engagement that occurred throughout its evolution. 2 public sessions were held to get your input into how we allocate resources on your behalf. In preparation, staff presented our 2010 budget from last year in a very clear and concise format – what we do and what that costs using the cost to an average household assessed at \$210,000. The 2011 budget was accessible, open and transparent – a move that far exceeds the minimum disclosure requirements, ensuring healthy public debate and engagement. This focus on enhancing our means of communication is a priority of mine as Regional Chair, ensuring that we effectively communicate with business, with the public and with our municipal partners about what we do, how we do it, and what it costs to deliver those services.



- As Chair, I am committed to continuing this public engagement process, and I firmly believe that in order to maximize our community engagement, this communication link must be a 2-way street – your input, whether directly or through organizations like the Chambers of Commerce, helps to inform, advise and guide Regional Council and staff in our decision-making process. We may not always agree, but we are committed to listening and value that input.
- After all, we need to support each other in our challenges and trumpet our successes. We must overcome the urge to place blame, and instead seek to provide clearer, more concise information. We want to be responsive, constantly improving and earning public confidence in us – that means hearing from you about the concerns you have and how we might do things better.



- The “Our Niagara Region” newsletter which highlights Niagara Region’s programs and services, Council achievements and current issues, will be arriving in mailboxes this week and copies will be made available here as well. This is just one tool we use to raise awareness of, and access to, the services the Region provides as we improve the way we get our message out to you.

### **Successes - Infrastructure**

- Over the last 2 years we have seen unprecedented strategic infrastructure investments from our federal and provincial partners throughout Niagara. Investments which we are now seeing begin to take shape, will undoubtedly change the face of our communities. 2011 will see a number of these projects completed, while others are taking major leaps forward. The expansion of Highway 406 through Welland will make considerable progress, moving closer to its highly anticipated completion.



The Burgoyne Bridge in St. Catharines is undergoing its environmental assessment as we speak. Green GO Transit trains will roll through to Niagara Falls once again this summer. Niagara District Airport will have a new look to welcome guests arriving through Niagara-on-the-Lake to the whole Niagara region.

- Tuesday's federal budget had welcome news for municipalities, as it was announced Ottawa was making the federal Gas Tax Fund permanent, giving the Niagara Region and a number of other recipient municipalities a long-term, predictable infrastructure funding stream through our federal partners, and we applaud this initiative.
- We are seeing exciting revitalization occurring in our downtowns, including significant projects in Pelham, Port Colborne, St. Catharines, Thorold and Welland. Though a long time in coming, we



have inter-municipal transit beginning this September, making it easier for people to travel throughout the region. While this is only a pilot project, we will be analyzing and learning from this initiative to guide our future decisions.

- I would also like to point out something that had never really occurred to me in my 10 years here at the Region. With all the focus on infrastructure investments, lost is the fact that the Region relies heavily on operational transfers. We are very appreciative of the Province of Ontario for their transfer contribution of nearly \$400 million in 2010 to support a wide range of services delivered by Niagara Region on behalf of the Province, to our residents, and approximately \$300 million in 2011, as ODSP is uploaded. That is a considerable investment from our provincial partners, one that may not be as widely known as it should be.



## Remaining Committed to Core Services

- Niagara Region continues to provide the core services our residents need and expect whether they turn on the tap, put out their garbage, get a flu shot or dial 9-1-1. And we at the Region do it well - with the Ontario Municipal Benchmarking Initiative (OMBI) data to back that up:
  - In 2011, our 8 long term care homes received 3-year accreditation from Accreditation Canada – a significant achievement and a standard of excellence Niagara Region is very proud to have attained;
  - Our investment in solar technology at Northland Pointe in Port Colborne shows we are committed to delivering innovative, ‘green’ solutions to realize operational efficiencies;
  - Niagara EMS is internationally recognized for its outstanding service;



- Our Public Health and Community Services departments are partnering on a number of initiatives aimed at Early Years Child Development, because these programs are proven to have a direct impact on lifelong child development, giving our kids the best trajectory in life;
- We provide accommodation and housing support to more than 15,000 residents through Niagara Regional Housing;
- Our police services continue to provide safety and security in our communities;
- The water supply from your tap is safe and clean;
- And our wastewater treatment plants and waste management services including garbage pickup and operation of our landfills are surely services we take for granted.



- These services are delivered by dedicated and professional staff at the Region, committed to ensuring Niagara residents get the level of services they expect and deserve. All in all, I think the Region is living up to commitment to “Building Lives... Building Communities”. Senior staff can be proud of the leadership they provide, and the contribution their staff make to ensuring efficient delivery of services to our residents.

## **Challenges Ahead**

- However, balancing the demands of service delivery obligations with infrastructure improvement and ever-increasing regulations, while respecting the taxpayer’s ability to pay, is not an easy task. Council is facing difficult choices in the term ahead and we do not take that responsibility lightly. Making reckless cuts to vital services does not help support our families, our communities, or build a



stronger economy. As I recently heard it put, “you can’t cut your way to strength”.

- But I believe this Council is not afraid of facing the challenges that lie ahead of us. As Regional Chair, I am committed to tackling those challenges as a team, and this is where I believe Niagara’s test will be: finding common ground on issues of mutual concern; agreeing on what is in the best interest of Niagara residents; and moving the agenda forward in a positive and constructive manner.
- So we must make these decisions with the right information, the right advice and the right options, to arrive at the most informed best decision possible. It may not be the most popular, but it will be well-informed.



- The accountant in me firmly believes we need to provide measurable goals and clear expectations for delivery. We are accountable (and want to be), for what we say we will do.
- We need to challenge staff to be innovative and creative in their research and policy development, thinking ‘outside the box’ wherever possible to present new ideas and new ways of doing business.
- Our best days are ahead of us – I truly believe that. There are a lot of exciting things happening in our region. Success stories shared with me each day about new and innovative things happening in both the public and private sector. But, we are clearly not out of the woods with our economic recovery. Niagara has one of the highest unemployment rates in the country. There are far too many people looking for work, so clearly there is more to do. We are resilient... focused... resourceful... and



committed to finding and sharing new ideas to overcome our challenges together.

- There is no doubt that our infrastructure is aging. Just as you and I are becoming more ‘experienced’, so too is our wastewater facilities, our roads and our buildings. I doubt very much we will see the influx of infrastructure stimulus investments from our upper level partners like we have seen over the past few years. We are grateful for their investment in our communities and we definitely would not have been able to do it on our own. Now, we are obligated to find innovative ways to ensure we have a sustainable future for our kids.



- Council will have difficult decisions to make about how we invest in the things many of us take for granted. The clean water that comes from our taps, the roads we use to get to work, the bridges we cross driving our kids to school, the street lamps that light our way home at night. These are critical to our quality of life, and we must ensure their longevity and renewal well into the future.
  
- We will, however, not do more than we can bear. The 2012 budget process will begin in just a couple of months. I am committed to starting this process before spring has passed. We need to focus on sustainability and our ability to pay, as we make these decisions moving forward. We need to recommit to looking at the way we do business and looking at more than simply service delivery. This may mean reviewing governance issues which may impact how we do business. Governance means different things to almost everyone in this room and before we start debating, staff will provide many of



the “governance issues” in a clear and concise way.

I would like to begin addressing those governance issues in 2011 and I am determined to face those questions head on, believing we have the Council and committed staff at the Region to achieve success.

### **Attracting New Business – Creating Conditions for Prosperity**

- As a small business owner for over 30 years, I know the importance of small and medium-sized businesses (SME’s) in Niagara. Of the 25,000 businesses in our region, over 93% have less than 19 employees. That’s a lot of entrepreneurial spirit. With that many SME’s, it tells me that people are willing to get their hands dirty, to take their dreams and make them a reality, to innovate and take risk, and to reinvest in their communities. SME’s are busy ‘surviving’ - that’s how I always referred to it, having been there myself. We need to ensure SME’s are informed of all government programs available to them, whether financial, educational or human



resource-related, in a manner that assists them and meets their business needs also. Niagara needs a “One Stop Shop” to welcome new investors and businesses to assist in dealing with issues like Niagara’s 13 official plans, so that companies can locate wherever they choose in our 12 municipalities.

- We are going to keep Niagara an affordable place to start and expand a business and create jobs. It is incumbent upon us to create a climate receptive to investment and growth. This doesn’t always mean investing in bricks and mortars. They are necessary, but so too is the ability of a business to be nimble, innovative and able to take risk. This means freeing up their capital and lowering their expenditures.
- We have a number of changes coming forward including a new disposal of lands policy, a comprehensive “Gateway Economic Zone and Centre” community improvement plan, and



brownfield/downtown support programs in partnership with the private sector, to name but a few. This support could also mean provision of programs, at both the local and provincial levels, to connect potential investors like the Angel group, to match upstart companies and innovators looking for precious capital resources. It also means providing accountability for areas like development charges and brownfield redevelopment programs – we all want to see, and share, in their success.

- Reducing the Business Education Tax paid by Niagara businesses is one item that as Regional Chair, I am determined to address with our provincial partners to ensure Niagara maximizes every opportunity for growth and prosperity in our economy, and support to our business community. Whether that be in Fort Erie, Wainfleet or West Lincoln, a growing and prosperous business community makes for happy, healthy families and vibrant communities.



- We are actively engaging our post-secondary institutions, leveraging their capacity for innovation, technology and research. Transformations are occurring at each of their campuses, meeting the demands of a changing world and an evolving economy, demanding a highly skilled workforce. I know there are representatives here today from both Brock University and Niagara College and I know that presidents Lightstone and Patterson would agree with me when I say that we need a coordinated and targeted approach to economic development, and to business retention and expansion (BR&E). We need to enhance our opportunities to engage business, to seek their input on what the issues are facing the business community that they know best, and how we can improve the way we assist them in their pursuits.



- We are working hard to attract new business and industry to Niagara, creating stable, long-term jobs in high-growth sectors such as biomanufacturing, digital/interactive media, ‘green’ technology, and life sciences and we need to ensure we have the fertile climate to cultivate them.

## The Road Ahead

- In the coming months Regional Council will be addressing many issues of significance. We have begun the debate on our role in economic development, the infrastructure ‘gap’ and water rates. There is much more to be done. I value the input from each Councillor and the experience they bring to the table. We are on track to ask the right questions, identify the right issues and the right opportunities. I am committed to addressing the issue of sustainability before we enter into 2012 budget debate. As I said earlier, that debate will happen very soon.



- In closing, I want to thank the Chambers for the opportunity to be here today to share this message with you. I can't stress enough how important your voice as the business community is to driving the issues forward in a positive and constructive manner. We have considerable creativity and innovation in the public and private sectors and we will ensure that we are inspiring people and business, to come together for the mutual benefit of the entire region.
- I am committed to making regional government work better for the residents of Niagara; to improving the quality of life in this region; to building on our strengths; and to help everyone achieve success by bringing us together.



- Whether it's preparation for the 1812 Bicentennial, Niagara's application to be the Cultural Capital of Canada, the upcoming Pan Am Games, or the Great Lakes St. Lawrence Cities Initiative Niagara is hosting this summer, all eyes will clearly be on us. That is an exciting prospect and I know that Niagara will yet again, rise to the occasion with the passion and pride we are known for around the world.
- Thank you for indulging me over the last few minutes. Whether you are here as a Chamber member, owner of a small business, or president of a large institution, let 2011 be a year of prosperity and success – as together we build a stronger, more vibrant Niagara Region.
- Thank you.