

2010 State of the Region Transcript

Speech Delivered to the St. Catharines – Thorold Chamber of Commerce

May 14, 2010

Good afternoon.

It's a pleasure to be here with you today to deliver the annual State of the Region Address; to report on the progress Regional Council has made - and is making - in carrying out its commitment to make government work better for the citizens of Niagara, and to improve the quality of life for all in this region.

Ladies and gentlemen, as you know, this is my final State of the Region address as I'll not be seeking re-election this Fall. Being the Regional Chair has been the greatest honour of my career, however, it is time for me to move on to my next challenge. I can tell you that delivering this progress report each year is one of the duties of office I've enjoyed very much, because there is always a lot of good news to share.

But before we look back at our achievements, I want to take a moment to look ahead. To the year 2020. Many people are frankly afraid of what the Golden Horseshoe will look like ten years from now. Where will people live? How will they get to work? Where will they find work? How will they afford to raise a family?

Now there are regions of Ontario that don't have these fears: these are the cities and towns with little or no growth. Gridlock is something they see only on their cable or satellite television. Their roads and highways are unblemished, because their mills and factories are empty.

Other municipalities have huge, century-old schools. But those school hallways are silent. The children whose voices filled them have moved away to raise their families somewhere else.

I would rather have our challenges - the challenges of a region whose best days are ahead of it, not behind it.

I am not afraid of the challenges we face. I am excited. Because I know that we are going to be able to answer the questions about how people will live, work and prosper in Niagara Region.

How do I know? Because we have been answering those questions here in Niagara Region for a long time. Again and again, we have turned our challenges into successes. I would even go so far as to say that, success requires a challenge. Where there is no struggle, there is no achievement.

"The best predictor of future behaviour is past behaviour," people like to say. I am confident that Niagara Region will continue to turn its challenges into successes. Let me tell you about a few of them we have had over the past year.

Successes

This year we are delivering a zero per cent tax increase. That's right: zero. We have managed to hold our tax increases to an average of just over one per cent per year for the past five years - a significant achievement given ongoing financial pressures.

Holding the line on taxes was achieved through the uploading to the province of the costs of some of our social programs, and through the commitment of our senior management team and our staff to carrying out Council's determination to stay the course on taxpayer affordability.

There are some municipalities, with reputations for being well-managed, that have actually had several years of tax increases that are two and three times the rate of inflation. There are others where the mayors have kept their promise to keep tax increases to the inflation rate. But they pretend the rate of inflation is still 3 per cent.

There are no excuses or fudging statistics here. We have kept tax increases below the inflation rate every year. With the implementation of development charges approaching full cost recovery, we will be able to continue with our goal of holding the line on tax increases.

I'm proud of Council's work in approving a new schedule of

development charges. The new rates will almost double our revenues from \$8 million to \$15 million, and reflects more accurately what it costs the Region to support good development.

The rate increases were long overdue. But they're still lower than the provincial average. I commend Council for doing the right thing in the face of well-organized and vocal opposition.

Other municipalities have been short sighted. They coasted on their Greenfields and when the land ran out, up went the taxes. We are not going to make that mistake here.

Stable taxes and reasonable development charges help keep and attract employers. According to a recent study by KPMG, Niagara is one of the most affordable areas in North America to do business.

Niagara's economy continues to evolve and adapt to the changing global marketplace. Exciting things are happening across the region. For example:

- Earlier this year, Biolyse Pharma celebrated the opening of its new multimillion dollar high-tech production facility at its laboratory in St. Catharines. The facility allows the company to produce and package its medicines, including an innovative cancer treatment drug.

Just a few weeks ago, GM Canada announced a \$235 million dollar investment in its St. Catharines engine plant. Naturally, people are excited that this investment will translate into 400 direct jobs in our region. What's even better is that those workers will be building GM's next-generation of high-tech, aluminum block engines. Engines that meet tough emissions standards, and can run on E85 ethanol.

We are going to keep Niagara an affordable place to start and expand a business and create jobs. Low taxes are just one thing that businesses look for when deciding where to locate or expand. Another item on their checklist is whether a community has the infrastructure to support their activities. In Niagara region, the answer is yes.

Last year we leveraged the Region's investment of 33 million

dollars to secure 67 million dollars in economic stimulus and other program funding. These investments let us to move forward on a number of important infrastructure projects.

A new wastewater plant in Grimsby will mean increased capacity for business, residential and tourism growth.

By this time next year, the Niagara District Airport will have a new terminal building and other improvements that will make it more attractive, functional and accessible. Investors often get their first impression of a community from its local airport. With these upgrades, Niagara region's first impression will be an even better one.

We also received provincial support allowing us to proceed with the expansion of Highway 406 to East Main Street in Welland- a project that is central to the Region's Grow South strategy. Preparation work for the actual construction is underway, and the Merritt Road overpass project is on schedule for completion in June.

The East-West corridor project will open up the southern tier for economic development, save time and money for commuters and businesses, and improve safety by reducing the amount of truck traffic on Highway 3. We are now at the environmental assessment stage, with the second information session for the public set for next week in Port Colborne. I am looking forward to seeing the public's feedback from that consultation, and hearing the next update at our public works committee in July.

These investments are vital in helping our communities prepare for future growth and development.

To be sure, economic growth and infrastructure are important. No economic activity means no tax revenue. But we never forget the human element in Niagara.

Safeguarding public health is one of the original principles behind modern municipal government in Ontario. This principle was tested last year, when we had to plan for the anticipated H1N1 flu pandemic.

Our Public Health department led, planned and coordinated Niagara's response to this global pandemic. It worked with community and corporate partners to educate our citizens, doctors and hospitals about how to respond to and manage the pandemic. Public Health monitored the outbreak through ongoing surveillance, and administered or distributed vaccinations to more than 130,000 residents as part of a well-planned and coordinated response.

The H1N1 outbreak demonstrated the Region's ability to mobilize and respond quickly to any threat to the public's health. Our vaccination clinics were supported by computer software it developed that allowed the vaccine to be administered to large volumes of people - and the software is now being used to support vaccination programs across Ontario. Now I don't want to brag, but, here we are once again setting the standard for those other large municipalities!

Many residents continue to feel the effects of the global recession. Although signs of recovery are emerging and Niagara is poised for solid economic gains, the fact is that many in the region who lost their jobs continue to have difficulty re-entering the workforce.

Last year, our social assistance caseloads increased by 20 percent and they're expected to climb even higher this year.

At the same time, we're working hard to re-integrate social assistance recipients into the workplace through a variety of employment programs. Each year, we play an active role in helping hundreds of recipients get back into the workforce by providing job training opportunities and job search services.

Still Taking Care of the Basics

On top of all these achievements, Niagara Region continued to provide the services people need and expect whenever they turn on a tap, put their garbage out for pick-up, or dial 9-1-1.

- Our eight regional long-term care homes set the standard for quality and compassionate care for almost one thousand seniors.

- We provide financial assistance to those in need - from those who need just a short-term boost to our most vulnerable residents who simply cannot fend for themselves.
- We manage the child care system in Niagara, giving thousands of families access to high quality, affordable child care programs to give kids the best start possible.
- The Region, through our agency, Niagara Regional Housing, owns or manages more than 8,000 public housing units, providing accommodation and housing support to more than 15,000 residents.
- Niagara EMS has been recognized internationally for providing outstanding service.
- The Niagara Regional Police Service continues to provide safety and security services in our communities and on our waterways.
- We provide much of the infrastructure that make our communities work - roads and bridges, water and waste water systems. We maintain more than 750 kilometres of major roads and almost 200 bridges and culverts.
- We ensure a safe supply of water, operating nine water treatment plants in the region and we operate six wastewater treatment plans as well - essential services that I think most residents take for granted.
- And we provide effective and efficient waste management services, including operating five landfill sites in the region.

The work involved in delivering these programs and services is accomplished by a highly skilled and dedicated team of employees. And their work in supporting the business of Council is absolutely vital. They conduct the research, analyze the data and present the options for decision-making.

They are there when you need them, supporting Council every step of the way.

I appreciate their support and that of Council in carrying out my responsibilities as Regional Chair.

It's always a good idea to seek out those who will stand by you, no matter what. Legendary college football coach Bear Bryant once was lecturing his team on the importance of going to class. "I don't want no dumbbells in this room," he warned. "If there is

a dumbbell in this room, I wish he would stand up." At which point Joe Namath rose to his feet. "Joe, how come you're standing up?" asked Bryant. "You're not dumb." Namath replied: "I know, coach. I just hate to see you standing there by yourself."

Now I've been boasting a little about our successes and I appreciate you indulging me. But I am not going to pretend that I am leaving my successor with nothing to do.

Challenges Ahead

One of the things I mentioned previously was our tax rates. But as everyone knows, property taxes are just one of the many bills we have to deal with as homeowners and businesspeople.

A large cost for many homeowners and businesses is the water bill.

First, let me say that I understand the frustration of residents who have made great efforts to reduce the amount of water they use but are not seeing the results of that effort in the form of lower water bills.

The people of Niagara have made water conservation a priority - and that is a good thing. However, the simple reality is that the costs to operate and maintain the aging infrastructure delivering that water are not getting any cheaper. We're still running deficits and we are still in need of a long-term solution to the problem.

I believe we need to take a serious look at reforming our two-tier system of water treatment and distribution. Five regional municipalities in Ontario have exclusive control over both water and wastewater services. Five years ago, a provincial report recommended that Niagara Region should also be given exclusive responsibility for all elements of water and wastewater services. That report has yet to be implemented.

I'll be asking Council to direct staff to determine the cost-savings that would accrue from the Region taking over all water and wastewater services. If the savings are significant, it's my view

that the Region should act as quickly as possible. That's something we owe to residents and property owners who are paying the bills.

As frustrated as people may be with their water bills, they still want to feel connected to the source of their water. Niagara is blessed with more than 200 kilometres of waterfront on the shores of Lake Ontario, Lake Erie and the Niagara River. Seven of the 12 municipalities in Niagara border on one of the two lakes. Many communities have lake access or a canal or river running near or through them.

That's why we are working to develop a comprehensive waterfront enhancement strategy.

Indeed, all municipalities in Niagara have opportunities to enhance their waterfronts. The Region's waterfront enhancement strategy will pursue three specific goals:

- To increase public access to our waterways so that residents and visitors have more opportunities to enjoy all of the recreational activities they have to offer.
- To increase public ownership of waterfront properties where feasible and appropriate.
- And to ensure that private development of waterfront properties is takes place in a way that respects the areas' natural and environmental assets and enhances the quality of life for residents.

Another priority is the creation of an inter-municipal transit system for Niagara.

I believe it's imperative to move forward on this initiative so that people who don't have cars can still get to where they need to go. Council has approved a vision for a system that would see public transit operate between St. Catharines, Niagara Falls and Welland.

A consultant's report that includes recommendations on proposed routes, schedules, hours of service, and a fare structure was to be debated by Council on May 13, and will now be determined at a meeting of council scheduled for June 23. It is essential that we move this issue forward. A regional transit system, in my view, is

vital to our future economic growth.

Also, we need to continue our work of promoting Niagara as a strategic economic gateway and border crossing between Canada and the United States. The fact is Niagara is located a mere day's drive from half the population in the United States. We are ideally positioned as a place to do business.

We're keeping this issue front and centre with the governments of Ontario and Canada. Recognition as a Gateway Economic Zone and Gateway Economic Centre would help us secure both funding support for infrastructure and regulatory changes which we need to support the movement of goods and people across the international border and to foster the development of Niagara's growing green economy, including its advanced manufacturing, agri-tourism and other emerging sectors.

As KPMG has noted, we offer one of the most attractive and competitive business environments anywhere. We have only begun the job of selling ourselves internationally, but we need the support of the province and federal government to give us the tools we need to maximize our competitive advantages.

Earlier this year, an important agreement was reached that will lead to the development of a new headquarters for the Niagara Regional Police Service.

In addition to building the headquarters the police need to do their job effectively, we also need to enhance the relationship between Regional Council, the Police Services Board and the police service in general. To help achieve that, I'd like to suggest that the next Regional Chair - whoever it might be - should exercise his or her right that is granted within our by-laws to be on the Police Services Board. The Regional Chairs in Durham, York, Waterloo, Peel and in other Regions are all members of their respective Police Services Boards. It's a model that works well there, and it would work well here.

As I mentioned earlier, waste collection is one of the most basic services citizens look to municipal government to provide. Recently, council decided to maintain weekly waste collection with a new one bag limit.

I admit that I was disappointed in this decision and I hope it will be revisited. Moving to bi-weekly garbage pick-up - with recycling and green bin waste collected every week - is safe, more effective and affordable. And it's a bolder option that 37 per cent of Ontario's residents are already living with.

While I'm on the subject of efficiency and reform, I'd like to comment on an issue raised recently by my Council colleague and Mayor of Fort Erie, Doug Martin. Mayor Martin is proposing to reduce the number of Regional Councillors from the current 31 members to 19 - roughly two-thirds the size it is now.

His proposal has certainly sparked a lot of positive discussion. And it leads one to think about the broader issue of governance in Niagara and the view held by many that we should reduce the number of municipalities - and by extension the number of Councillors - in Niagara.

The appetite for amalgamation in Niagara to create a more reasonable number of municipalities - I'd say somewhere between six and eight - just isn't there, certainly not at the political level in Niagara or at Queen's Park. Perhaps the next Council will choose to revisit the issue and the province will take a renewed interest as well. The status quo, in my view, is not an acceptable option.

These are some of the challenges that Niagara will have to meet in the months and years ahead. But I have every confidence that, as with our past challenges, they will be turned into successes.

Things to Look Forward to

I want to wrap up on a positive note, by highlighting some of the big events Niagara will enjoy in the years ahead.

In addition to Niagara Region's 40th anniversary this year, there's a major anniversary on the horizon. It's one that will throw an international spotlight on Niagara's rich history.

I refer of course to the Bicentennial of the War of 1812.

Ontario's Lieutenant Governor, David Onley, has told us that he would like to host his 2012 New Year's Levee in the Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake to help kick off the Bicentennial activities.

I recently had the honour of presenting the Lieutenant Governor with some prints of historic Niagara-on-the-Lake. Many of you will know that Niagara-on-the-Lake was the site of the first parliament of Upper Canada, from 1792 to 1797.

I would not blame the Lieutenant Governor or any MPP for wishing that it had remained there. Perhaps we can convince the Legislature to move its sittings around the province in the same way the L-G has put his levee on the road.

Something else we're looking forward to: Next year, the Region will host the annual conference of Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative.

Our world-class hospitality and conference facilities coupled with the Region's experience in managing a range of water issues make us an ideal host for an international audience. And still looking ahead, Toronto's successful bid for the 2015 Pan-Am games is great news for Niagara. Welland will play host to canoeing, kayaking and open-water swimming while the rowing competition will take place in St. Catharines.

The games will see significant investments being made in our venues which will benefit our residents and communities long after the games are over.

We are also hoping to host a future meeting of the Can/Am Border Trade Alliance Conference.

Closing

Let me close by saying that as we move forward into an age of both economic and social globalization, local government is no longer just about roads, social services and garbage collection.

Long-term planning, partnerships, and most importantly vision, are what will keep Niagara moving forward in a way that helps strengthen our communities and improves the lives of

individuals.

I mentioned earlier that the Region is celebrating its 40th anniversary.

I like to think of it as four decades of hard work of many individuals who care a great deal about this region. It is a pleasure to work with a Council committed to achieving great things for Niagara.

I have also had the pleasure and the good fortune of working with one of the strongest senior management teams anywhere.

I wish to thank all of the commissioners and the entire staff at the Region for their commitment to excellence in implementing the policies and directions set by Council.

I would like to honour all of them with a quote from Winston Churchill:

"We have faith in our work and we are proud of it. We know that it will last longer than our lives; we are sure it was necessary; we are sure it is good; we know that we have done our best; that we have done our duty."

My thanks to them and to you for the opportunity to share with you our successes, our challenges, and all that we have to look forward to in Niagara region.