Mayor Brenda Halloran’s 2012 State of the City address

Thank you for being here with us today for my annual State of the City address. Working on this speech each year gives me an opportunity to pause, and reflect upon where we’ve been, where we are and where we’re going as a city.

After launching the Mayor for the Day contest, I found myself reminiscing about when I embarked on my first campaign to be mayor in 2006. Back then I was like Izabella. I had a vision for what Waterloo – my home – could be in the future.

My dream was to lead Waterloo in its evolution towards becoming an even greater community in which to live and work. Many of the elements I had envisioned in that Waterloo have been incorporated into our current strategic plan. We have our priorities straight in this plan, focusing on what really matters – the environment, public engagement, health and safety, vibrant neighbourhoods, getting around and economic vitality.

After coming to office six years ago, I realized that achieving this vision would not be easy and would be met with many hurdles. But I knew this community and our dedicated city employees and council were up for the challenge.

We have a mandate to provide residents with a broad range of vital programs and services. We do this with 3½ per cent of all the taxes you pay, according to the Fraser Institute. To break that down for you, the average family in Ontario paid $40,350 in taxes last year. Of that, residents of Waterloo paid $1,400 to the city.

With this $1,400, residents receive fire protection, roads, trails, parks, sewers, recreational facilities, libraries, snow and leaf removal, and much more. Programs and services that impact your family each and every day. And at a cost that’s around what the average household pays for landline and cellphone service each year!

This council is committed to fulfilling our obligations to you while maintaining modest tax rates that are fair and provide services at the level you have come to expect. Keeping the tax rate modest while ensuring we have enough money to cover our budgetary requirements is a delicate balancing act that comes with challenges, especially in a large community like
ours. We made headlines recently when Statistics Canada named Waterloo region the 10th biggest urban area in the country.

Conservative budgeting and decision-making have removed us from the top of the municipal debt list. That’s something we’re extremely proud to have accomplished. And we continue to grow our reserves at a steady pace, giving us flexibility to both plan ahead and deal with unexpected issues. These are complicated but prudent choices that will benefit us in the long run.

Much like many other cities across the country, another challenge we face is aging infrastructure that requires significant reinvestment. Right now Waterloo’s infrastructure needs are estimated at $250 million – that may sound like an exorbitant figure, however, it’s comparable to what other Canadian municipalities are experiencing.

It’s a problem that didn’t develop overnight, and it won’t be solved tomorrow. But that won’t deter us from reviewing our funding options and banding together with other municipalities to lobby the federal and provincial governments for stable infrastructure funding.

You may be wondering how I remain confident that my vision for a greater Waterloo can be achieved in light of these challenges. It’s because I believe so strongly in our city. I believe success is the culture of our community. It’s just the way Waterloo is. I know there will be bumps in the road and detours to be made. But we won’t stop moving forward.

Waterloo is a great city, known around the world for its innovation and success. It’s a city with a rich past, a spirited population and a bright future. If 2011 is any example of what can be achieved, I’m certain we will face our challenges and reach new heights in the future.

Guiding us on this journey is our 2011-2014 strategic plan, which is based on six strategic pillars: sustainability and our living environment, public engagement, health and safety, vibrant neighbourhoods, getting around and economic vitality. The achievements and progress we make in these areas will contribute towards the fulfillment of my vision for a greater Waterloo.

**Sustainability and our living environment** is at the heart of our operations. We follow an environment-first policy and are committed to leaving a legacy of environmental
responsibility for future generations. Protecting our resources and being stewards of the environment are natural directions for us.

Our draft official plan is a shining example of that. Set to be adopted by council this year, its pages are filled with concepts that put our environment first. An official plan guides a community’s growth and change, and, in Waterloo, ours will revolve around intensification – growing up instead of out, environmental planning, and rapid and active transportation. It also addresses planning for infrastructure capacity that meets the needs of our community.

Being awarded gold-level certification for the construction of our new east-side fire station under the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design green building rating system was one of our greatest environmental achievements last year. The facility’s careful architectural, mechanical and electrical design led to projected energy costs savings of 33 per cent compared to a standard building.

There are also many private-sector examples of this kind of commitment to the environment. One that comes to mind is the student residence in the heart of the university district that recently received the first ever platinum certification for student housing under the same rating system. This kind of development is the way of our future.

When developing our strategic plan, we heard from residents that we needed to enhance our approach to public engagement. You want to be engaged in what the city’s doing, not just told about it. You want more opportunities to have your voice heard.

Public engagement is a cornerstone of democracy. And it’s key to the way we do business in Waterloo, starting with our strategic plan, which contains elements from the thousands of voices who provided input.

We took public engagement to a new level throughout this year’s budget process by opening our books to a citizens’ budget task force that reviewed various facets of our financial processes and provided us with constructive recommendations that we endorsed in principle. You’ll hear more about this soon when we share a report card that reflects our progress in these areas.

Our all-access budget town hall was a turning point in our engagement strategy as it gave residents the opportunity to ask questions from the comfort of their homes and watch as
they were answered in real time on our Facebook and Twitter sites. No budget-related topics were off the table – we answered them as they came in, demonstrating our commitment to transparency and accessibility. This meeting was unprecedented for us and was one of the first times a Canadian municipality has attempted to use live social media in a public meeting.

Moving forward, we plan to broaden our social media offerings through our new blog, which was launched recently. We will also be circulating an e-newsletter and releasing an improved website to ensure the information you’re looking for is only a few clicks of the mouse away and accessible in multiple formats.

The health and safety of our residents continues to be a top priority, and we’ve made significant progress on this pillar over the last 12 months. We were recently named a member of the World Health Organization’s Global Network of Age-friendly Cities for our commitment to assessing and improving our age-friendliness. This honour has been bestowed upon less than 50 cities in the world, and speaks to our desire to be inclusive of all members of this diverse community. It’s truly an incredible achievement.

Along the same vein, a significant investment in seniors was announced this summer. The Schlegel-University of Waterloo Research Institute for Aging will develop a research and learning centre on the university’s north campus, giving students, researchers and educators the opportunity to interact directly with seniors in a long-term care environment. This project is the work of many partners, including the city and the generous Schlegel family, and is yet another example of what can be achieved in Waterloo thanks to our innovative and collaborative spirit.

Promoting recreation and culture are important aspects of a healthy and safe community. We’re fortunate to have an abundance of both in Waterloo. The world-class facility we’re in today recently marked its 10th anniversary. If you haven’t ventured past this building, you might not realize the park is actually a 500-acre facility with trails, a golf course, heritage elements, public art and parkland. It’s been exciting to watch RIM Park evolve over the past decade into an outstanding destination for both indoor and outdoor recreation that has been visited by millions of people, including our prime minister.

One thing RIM Park doesn’t have is a designated area for skateboarders to practice their sport. But enthusiasts are in luck – our first skate park opened this fall in Waterloo Park, by the Waterloo Memorial Recreation Complex, and it has already become a hub of activity.
The youth in Waterloo put their stamp on this facility by providing input into its design – their efforts certainly resulted in an amazing park!

Throughout the community, our vibrant arts, culture and heritage scenes continue to delight residents and visitors alike. Whether you drop by the City of Waterloo Museum to take in the latest exhibit, dance to the music at one of our uptown festivals or take in a movie in Waterloo Park, our lives are enriched by the multitude of opportunities in this city and beyond. To ensure this continues in the future, the city is working on a culture plan that will provide direction and strategies for supporting local cultural opportunities because it’s so integral to our community.

Something else that is important to our community is safety. Our dedicated Protective Services team is committed to providing a high standard of service and safety to residents. Thanks to the completion of our east-side fire station, firefighter response times in that area are much improved as they’re better positioned to respond to emergencies. That’s critical to residents who are waiting for help to arrive.

**Vibrant neighbourhoods** is a new strategic pillar for Waterloo, and one that impacts us all, whether you live in a high rise or the suburbs. Neighbourhoods are where we live and where things happen at a grassroots level.

We have many active neighbourhood associations that bring residents together to get things done. We see that each year when neighbours roll up their sleeves and work with the city and community partners to build new playgrounds for their kids to enjoy. Council recently supported a funds-matching program to ensure there will be more citizen-led projects aimed at improving the quality of life in our neighbourhoods in the future.

Located near the two universities, the Northdale neighbourhood is high on the city’s agenda. It’s home to both long-term residents and to students, with challenges on both sides of the fence. The status quo is not an option for the people who live there, so we’ve embarked upon a land use and community improvement study to revitalize the area. Change on this scale takes time, which is why council recently supported an interim control bylaw that will temporarily halt new development in Northdale. We’re going to take a step back and work together to revitalize and reurbanize this neighbourhood.

**Getting around** means different things to different people. That’s why a central objective of this pillar is to support all forms of transportation. And this is where our transportation
master plan enters the picture, with its focus on getting people to leave their cars at home and opt to walk, ride a bike or take a bus.

Continuing to build bicycle networks and complete gaps in the trail system are key components of this plan. We’re gaining momentum on both fronts, and were thrilled to receive a silver Bicycle Friendly Communities Award in Canada at the Ontario Bike Summit this past summer. As for filling in gaps in our trails, we’ve been working with the region on this for many years and have made significant strides throughout the community. Cyclists here enjoy about 130 kilometres of trails and 50 kilometres of on-road bike lanes. Waterloo continues to be a wonderful place to cycle.

On your way here today, some of you may have driven by – and maybe on – the bike lanes on Davenport Road. The reconstruction project on that road transformed it into a complete street that accommodates all road users and lowers traffic speeds. For this innovative improvement project we were awarded a Sustainable Communities Award by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities in the transportation category. Accepting this award on behalf of the city was a proud moment for me.

Our final pillar is economic vitality. A survey released recently by CIBC World Markets pegged our regional economy as the third strongest in Canada as of the third quarter of 2011. While this is a great news story, we’re not immune to the effects of the global economic downturn. Stories of layoffs and plant closures made headlines last year, and many of us know families who are struggling financially.

Waterloo’s economy is resilient though, thanks in large part to its diversity. The tech sector continues to gain momentum regionally, with more than 1,000 open jobs in that field.

On the academic front, we’re fortunate to have global think tanks and such renowned institutions as the University of Waterloo, Wilfrid Laurier University and Conestoga College within our borders. We’re particularly excited about Laurier’s new state-of-the-art Global Innovation Exchange facility on University Avenue. These organizations truly are anchors for our economy, and we’re committed to enabling their success. Of course, we’re home to robust financial, insurance and manufacturing companies as well.

Collaboration is an essential ingredient in our economic vitality and community building, and we’re fortunate to partner with many organizations on projects that benefit our residents and propel us into the international spotlight.
You’ll often hear me say, “we wouldn’t achieve as much in Waterloo if it wasn’t for our partners.” Among many other projects, the John M. Harper Branch Library and Stork Family YMCA, the Balsillie School and the newly expanded Perimeter Institute stand as testaments to that statement. The benefits of these, and other, relationships are widespread.

The YMCA-library project is a prime example of this. One of its earliest challenges was finding a location. Thankfully, the University of Waterloo stepped in and generously agreed to lease us the land upon which the facility was built for $1 a year. In return, we service the site, providing roads, watermains and sewers for the university’s northwest campus. This arrangement is now underway, and we can look forward to more investment and talent as this campus develops.

The city’s economic development team entered into 35 partnerships and collaborations in 2011 alone, guided by the belief that collaborative investments in our time and money will elevate this community’s collective wins to greater heights than any one of us could achieve on our own.

Canada’s Technology Triangle’s efforts to build international relationships by sending local mayors abroad on targeted missions is an example of this kind of strategic investment. These trips foster a global business presence for the region, while also forging new business, government and institutional relationships.

I had the pleasure of leading a delegation to Chongqing in 2011 in support of our friendship agreement with China’s largest city. I certainly felt at home when I visited their Garden Expo, which featured a recreation of Waterloo Park’s Victorian garden. That was an experience I won’t soon forget.

This trip also granted my fellow delegates and me the opportunity to strengthen our economic and cultural ties with Chongqing, while sharing our local story. I can tell you, it’s a story that’s being heard around the world.

Closer to home, our uptown core continues to be a recognized success story thanks to its vibrancy and the reinvestment we’re seeing there. I’m sure it will be one of the top destinations for visitors who flock to Waterloo for the Manulife Financial LPGA Classic at Grey Silo Golf Club this year. The classic tees off on June 21, and is expected to generate about $25 million in economic impact annually for the region through hotel stays,
restaurants, retail sales and more. St. Mary’s General Hospital Foundation has been named the official charity partner, a truly worthy recipient. We’re proud to have this event in our city – we’ll be gracious hosts!

Congress 2012 is another event that’s expected to have a significant impact on our local economy this year as well as propelling us into the national spotlight. The humanities and social sciences scholarly community will arrive by the thousands to participate in this conference, which is being co-hosted by Laurier and the University of Waterloo. We’re looking forward to hearing what innovative ideas and research come out of the eight-day Congress.

And finally, what would a conversation about Waterloo’s economy be without mentioning the construction that continues to spread across the community? I’ve been saying for years that our skyline is speckled with cranes, and that’s something you can expect to see for many more to come. Our building permit value hit $450 million in 2011 alone, which is about double of what we historically considered to be a “pretty good” year.

As I was putting the finishing touches on this speech, I was struck by the scale, magnitude and diversity of the work we all undertake in Waterloo each and every day. The topics I’ve addressed here merely provide a snapshot of what we all do.

We celebrated many tremendous successes in 2011 – the Global Network of Age-friendly Cities recognition, the 10th anniversary of RIM Park, the Sustainable Communities Award for Davenport Road, the John M. Harper Branch Library and Stork Family YMCA opening and the Chongqing Garden Expo, to name only a handful.

Those successes wouldn’t be possible without you – our residents, staff, council, volunteers, students, community leaders, philanthropists and organizations. Thank you.

Despite the challenges that lie ahead, I’m confident my vision for a greater Waterloo will be achieved. The progress we’re making in the realms of sustainability and our living environment, public engagement, health and safety, vibrant neighbourhoods, getting around and economic vitality speaks to that. Our hard work, partnerships and tough decisions will pay off.

Looking back, I admit that the mayor’s job isn’t exactly what I had envisioned it would be ... it’s even better. That’s because I’m charged with leading this great city, dedicated council
and exceptional staff on the journey into Waterloo’s future, facing challenges head on and celebrating many successes along the way.

The Mayor for the Day contest helped to put that into perspective for me. It gave me the opportunity to take a step back and consider why I’m here – why we’re all here. It’s simple ... we’re here for Waterloo, the great city we’re all fortunate to call home.

Sometimes it takes a 10-year-old Grade 5 student to remind us that Waterloo is an incredible place to live, and that being mayor is an honour, a privilege and a joy.

Thank you for joining me today.