Welcome to the 2011 State of the City address. As mayor of Waterloo, I’m excited and proud to share our recent successes and accomplishments, and to give you a glimpse of some of the exciting initiatives we have planned as we move forward.

I would like to start by reflecting upon the fall municipal election. I enjoy this time as residents often become more engaged and really open up and share their thoughts with us. They ask questions and offer feedback to candidates at public debates, by phone or email, and as we go door-to-door canvassing.

They also tell stories. For some of our senior residents, these were stories about growing up in Waterloo at a time when it looked much different than it does today. And for others, it was about raising families here, watching their children grow up in a safe and vibrant community. And for some, it was about starting prosperous businesses and careers here. They were amazing stories. What I took away from these exchanges was the great sense of pride that Waterloo residents have in this community and our collective heritage.

That pride dates back to Waterloo’s early days, when Abraham Erb first arrived on this land. As you well know, Abraham was a determined man who was inspired by Laurel Creek’s fast-moving waters. His decision to build a grist mill there in the early 1800s is credited with laying the foundation for this area’s economic and cultural development, spurring settlement in this community.

In his footsteps followed a long line of big thinkers who have played pivotal roles in successfully propelling Waterloo through the decades to where it is today. Names that immediately come to mind are Moses Springer, Joseph E. Seagram, Gov. Gen. David Johnston, Jim Balsillie and Mike Lazaridis.

Waterloo’s history, present and future have and will continue to be written by people like this. Pioneers. Dreamers. Big thinkers. Collaborators. Innovators. Doers. Many of the people gathered here today fall into these categories.

Right now the City of Waterloo is working on our next strategic plan, a document that will guide us towards future success. Our living environment, a healthy and safe community, economic vitality, commitment to excellence, and partnerships and collaboration are the
five core pillars in the existing plan – our accomplishments over the past four years have been rooted in these concepts.

**Our living environment** is about providing the best environment possible for our residents and visitors. This includes protecting our natural resources and environmental features, and pursuing excellence in our city’s form and design. In 2010 we did that by adopting urban design guidelines, updating our Environmental Strategy and taking a leadership role on many environmental projects, ranging from Earth Day activities to grassroots creek cleanups.

Another highlight was our move to shift stormwater fees from a tax to a user rate, creating a more equitable model of paying for stormwater management and addressing shortfalls in funding. This was a significant step forward for the city, and we were thrilled to receive a certificate of merit from the Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators for our program.

In 2011 and beyond, the city will continue to live our environment-first policy and build upon the objectives in the Environmental Strategy. The environment is high on our priority list based on our discussions with you. Our new official plan will be launched this year to guide land use and development. And right outside these doors the new TD GreenLab will help us spread the message about water conservation. This spring we’ll also recognize excellence in private and public urban design projects through our new Urban Design Awards program, among many other exciting environmental initiatives and projects.

Fostering a **healthy and safe community** refers to our focus on wellness, and on creating opportunities for all our citizens to participate and feel welcome, safe and included. It’s also about respecting and treasuring our heritage and culture.

Last year, we made significant progress on this front by opening a new fire station on the east side of Waterloo that has enhanced our service delivery to residents in this area. We also focused on offering a wide array of arts, cultural, recreational and wellness opportunities at our world-class facilities each and every day. You’re in one of them right now. RIM Park alone is visited by more than one-million people each year who enjoy its indoor and outdoor sports facilities, its lush parkland, and its heritage and art features. It’s a one-of-a-kind facility that we should all take pride in.

Looking to the future, we have so much underway, starting with the grand opening of our new skateboard park in Waterloo Park. We’re also building a premier outdoor sports field
complex here at RIM Park thanks in part to funding from the Building Canada Fund and the Waterloo Minor Soccer Club. We are committed to getting the community involved in all we have to offer, whether you’re interested in arts, culture, recreation or wellness.

Also in the works is a bylaw that will protect the health, safety and welfare of residents in low-rise residential rental units. Right now city staff and council are collecting public feedback on this proposal and considering the options while keeping that goal in mind.

**Economic vitality**, meanwhile, is always at the forefront. It’s about building our thriving economy by strengthening our relationships with all sectors, and spreading the message that Waterloo is the place to learn, live and do business. In this past year, we’ve done that by keeping the tax rate stable, continuing to pay down our debts and attracting talented people to this community.

The cranes that speckle Waterloo’s skyline at almost every turn are another indicator of Waterloo’s economic vitality. The intersection of Erb and Caroline streets is a prime example. Construction is underway on its four corners at the Balsillie Campus, the BarrelYards complex, the Perimeter Institute and the Knox Presbyterian Church. Growth isn’t confined to our core though … it’s happening throughout the city. In fact, the construction value of building permits issued in 2010 was more than $800 million. To put that figure into perspective, the value was $334 million in 2009, which means our permit values in 2010 were almost 2½ times what they were in 2009.

Fiscal responsibility and transparency will continue to steer the city’s decision-making and planning. That means we’ll carry on with our debt repayments as well as develop prudent and reasonable operating and capital budgets. In fact, as part of our commitment to openness, we’re in the process of developing a citizens’ taskforce to advise the city on the development, implementation and evaluation of our upcoming three-year budgets.

As well, the city will continue to leverage our position internationally. Being named the World’s Top Intelligent Community in 2007 propelled our collective accomplishments onto the global stage. We’ve remained in the spotlight over the years thanks to our high-tech sector, our prosperous economy and our world-class universities, not to mention visits by Queen Elizabeth, Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Stephen Hawking. It’s no doubt this internationally competitive city will continue to be a strong force in the world economy.

Turning to our **commitment to excellence**, this city, as an organization, encourages and strives for excellence and fosters a culture that focuses on innovation, best practices and
values. This commitment extends to all groups and organizations with whom we work.

One of the recent projects that highlights this commitment is the creation of new guidelines for engaging residents. With a focus on informing, listening and learning, consulting, collaborating and empowering, the Public Involvement Guidelines enhance our ability to make appropriate decisions for this community.

Also in 2010, the city’s continual-improvement process initiative increased effectiveness and efficiency in the organization based on employees’ suggestions, and the restructuring of the Community, Culture and Recreation Services department was completed.

Over the next few years, the city’s commitment to excellence will be reinforced through our new strategic plan. Please visit www.myfuturewaterloo.ca if you’re interested in more details about where we’re headed with it.

We’re also working to improve communication, especially two-way dialogue, with all our stakeholders, but with residents in particular. Tangible examples of this will be an improved website and increased focus on our social media sites. Our Facebook page already has many fans, and we’ve recently launched a Twitter page to keep the community abreast of events and issues as they happen. And if you’re interested in watching this speech again, it will be available on our YouTube page! Sooner than later, these will be the first places residents turn to when they need information about what’s happening in Waterloo. This is just another way we’re keeping you informed and engaged.

The final pillar of our strategic plan is partnerships and collaboration, arguably the two concepts upon which Waterloo was built and, subsequently, has flourished. We will continue to seek new partners and deepen our relationships with existing ones to improve our community.

There are endless examples of this in Waterloo. In the past couple of years, it was evident by the many road projects and upgrades to our recreational facilities that got off the ground thanks to funding from the provincial and federal governments’ economic stimulus funds. This work came in at about $17 million, which we certainly wouldn’t have been able to undertake without funding support, especially in light of our current infrastructure deficit.

Then there’s the John M. Harper District Branch Library and Stork Family YMCA facility. This project wouldn’t have been possible without a partnership between the city, the Waterloo public library, the YMCA and the University of Waterloo – this collaborative
spirit will greatly enrich the lives of west-side residents once the facility opens its doors this summer.

On a daily basis, city employees collaborate with our partners in neighbouring municipalities. In fact, the City of Waterloo currently is involved in more than 40 joint initiatives with the City of Kitchener on projects ranging from winter control and leaf pickup, to accessibility staffing and programming and cemetery services.

The skating rink in the Waterloo Public Square is another significant example of collaboration. A group of four community members took it upon themselves to raise enough money to establish that wonderful venue for fun and recreation in the heart of the city. As you can see from the smiles on the faces of the skaters there in the winter, Jim Playford, Paul Rossi, Rick Dubeau and David Martin were most successful in garnering support for this worthy project.

Waterloo is, and always has been, home to people like them. People with great vision. Pioneers. Dreamers. Big thinkers. Collaborators. Innovators. Doers. When considering the state of the city, I’m reminded of the words of Winston Churchill who said, “I am easily satisfied with the very best.” Waterloo was built upon this mantra, and it’s an institutional belief that lives on today in all sectors.

At the end of the day, Waterloo’s past successes and future accomplishments are and will be thanks to the collective force of its visionary residents. People who have never been willing to rest on their laurels, but rather are always looking ahead to the next juncture. People like you and me.

And that, ladies and gentlemen, is the state of the great City of Waterloo. Our future will indeed be a bright one. Thank you for being a part of it.