

MAYOR MIKE SAVAGE
State of the City 2013
Halifax Chamber of Commerce: November 6, 2013

Good afternoon and thank you all for coming. I'd like to thank the Chamber for inviting me to here today and acknowledge RBC for their generous support in sponsoring today's event.

Exactly a year ago I was sworn in as Mayor of Halifax.

About 11 months ago I addressed this Chamber and spoke to some of my goals as Mayor. Those goals were the issues and opportunities on which I campaigned.

Let's recap my commitments. Specifically, I said I would:

- Star in a film with Brad Pitt
- Take on a pop star
- Grow out my hair
- Sleep under the stars with the Police Chief
- Scare small children.

It has been an eventful year.

But, I talked about some other things as well: economic development, transportation, healthy community and urban core investment.

I'm pleased and proud that our Regional Council shares these top priorities, aligning nicely with this Chamber's ambitious goal to make Halifax one of the three fastest growing cities in Canada by 2018.

I'm here today to check in, to speak to our progress on Council's priorities and my campaign commitment to make Halifax the most liveable, entrepreneurial and inclusive community in Canada.

And, I will also touch on the areas where we should be doing more.

I've long said that the first step in getting to work was to have a productive, collegial Council that has respectful, spirited debate in the best interest of the citizens we serve.

And, I think we have exactly that.

Compare how we conduct our business with what's happening in other legislative chambers in Canada and to our south.

I am proud of the professionalism and the passion that my Council colleagues – the newcomers and the veterans - bring to the table.

I can't begin to tell you how supportive they have been of me and of each other. Let me wish happy anniversary to Steve Craig, Matt Whitman and Waye Mason who are also celebrating their first year today.

They all hit the ground running and I suppose I have too.

I can tell you that being the Mayor is infinitely more complex than my last elected job as an MP.

The schedule is a bit like air traffic control; whenever my staff find a gap, I manage to fill it.

It's simply a busy job.

But it's easy to confuse **activity** with **productivity**. There must be a focus.

For me, economic development enables everything else.

Our city needs growth – smart growth. Cities that don't grow don't prosper.

If we grow effectively our city will be a place where people – those here now and those who may not even have Halifax on their radar – will see a bright future.

I don't want to recite all the natural and earned advantages that I spoke to last year; suffice to say we have all the ingredients for success. So how are we doing?

First, the basics.

Financially our city is strong.

Compare us to other levels of government:

- Our budget is balanced
- Our debt is declining
- Capital from operating is increasing, and
- Our reserves are healthy.

We began budget deliberations last year looking at a 2.4 percent increase in taxes, and we ended up at zero percent (other than moving snow removal into the general rate).

We had the first unanimously passed budget any one at City Hall can recall.

Our budget process was disciplined, rigorous, and we will follow the same type of process this year, beginning in a couple of weeks.

We recognize the need to be as competitive as possible on taxes, particularly commercial rates.

Last year commercial taxes made up just over 38 percent of total tax revenue compared to about 50 percent when HRM was created in 1996.

We now set the commercial rate not as a multiplier of residential but in relation to GDP, and we are working to blunt the impact of spikes by averaging out assessments.

As our city's tax base grows we are directing that growth to align with the services already in place rather than have services chase development.

A review of our Regional plan is well underway. It takes a good deal of time and effort, but the dialogue will bring us to a better place in the end.

Strong plans that place a value on high quality development inspire good work. Our urban core is undergoing quite a facelift:

- Our new Central Library is fulfilling its promise
- RBC Waterside is shaping up.
- The next phase of King's Wharf is on the market.
- Barrington Street is welcoming E-Space and, next, The Roy.
- Footings are going in for the Nova Centre
- New residential and commercial space is coming to Clyde Street

These projects will join other projects already changing the way we think about development in our city:

- The Vic with its red glass balconies
- Theatre Lofts on Gottingen,
- The Trillium on South Park - interesting, different buildings than we've seen before.

A great city has a strong downtown, a unique character that encourages creativity and values culture.

Downtowns are a home for innovation and a birthplace for imagination.

They are places with inspired architecture, interesting histories, open public spaces, inviting streetscapes, the arts.

Downtowns are home to concerts and small gigs, restaurants and food trucks, art galleries, public art and theatre.

Our downtown is where we cheer on the Memorial-cup-winning Mooseheads and the Halifax Rainmen.

Our harbour unites our downtown, welcoming hundreds of thousands of cruise ship passengers and container ships from around the world.

From the harbour's shores we proudly send members of Canada's East Coast Navy off to sea – and, even better, welcome them home.

A strong downtown is the heart, the economic engine, for the municipality.

The supply chain from large projects in the downtown extends into communities throughout the region – which is why I speak about the downtown wherever I go in our community.

At City Hall, we're working to be a better partner for good growth.

I'm happy to say that 80 major developments are underway, approved or under consideration in the downtown and the regional centre. Many of them will help to define our city for years to come.

Take a look at this flythrough. It gives a great sense of the escalation in development in recent years. (This includes things approved and projects in play – with the **red** being residential and the **blue** being commercial).

Soon, we'll have a report back on the costs and opportunities associated with tearing down the overbuilt Cogswell Interchange.

We'll marry those findings with the tremendous wealth of ideas that came out of the Strategic Urban Partnership's Cogswell Shakeup public event in May.

I want to thank Joanne MacRae, Andy Fillmore and the rest of the SUP for taking the initiative to spark a renewed Cogswell conversation.

Cogswell is an opportunity to forge transformational change.

Our downtown is turning a corner on development, but we need to see fewer papered over storefronts and tighter approval processes.

We also need to better support arts and culture.

Council established a new Arts and Culture advisory committee that I hope will be the first step on the road to a formal arts council to better support the professional arts community. Thanks to Waye Mason for his work on this.

And, we will soon see the results of Dr. Don Clairmont's review of the Task Force on Violence report, which I asked for and Council endorsed.

This winter we will be hosting a downtown forum for stakeholders and the public to tell us what we can do better, how we can think differently to improve the downtown as a place to work, shop, play and dine.

Some things can be done quickly – think of the picnic tables the Downtown Business Commission put in the Grand Parade. Others will take longer, such as attracting new companies and new retailers.

I look forward to working with the new government at Province House and with the federal government to bring further investment to our downtown and our region.

Our city is a solid investment, whether we're talking public spending or private, and that goes for our entire municipality.

I have made a commitment to sell the attributes of this community as a good place to live and do business wherever I go.

I suggested that I would be the city's marketer-in-chief.

With Paul Kent of GHP we are visiting existing businesses to better understand what it takes to enable their growth and our growth. And that means hitting the road.

Last week, I was in Dallas at an Aerotropolis convention at the invitation of our award-winning Halifax Stanfield International, exploring exciting new commercial opportunities for an airport that already has an economic impact on our community of nearly 1.5 billion dollars.

I was in Houston for the Offshore Technologies Conference and to meet executives of BP and Shell.

And, to Aberdeen for Offshore Europe where I signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the city, and met with universities and businesses that see opportunities here.

I meet regularly with businesses that are exploring the possibilities of setting up in Halifax with both NSBI and the GHP. Our city is very much on the radar thanks to the work of these organizations.

I am excited that Council has authorized a new branding initiative.

It's been 17 years since this municipality was created: it's time for a new brand that speaks to how we see ourselves and how we want to be seen.

Our brand will be equal parts aspiration and inspiration, as we define ourselves as the progressive, interesting city others know us to be.

This is a city full of smart, skilled people with big ideas.

We have an educated workforce, a wealth of resources, and the opportunity that the \$25 billion Irving Shipbuilding contract brings.

Shell and BP are putting a billion each into offshore development, and we are optimistic about their findings.

As exciting as it is to be thinking out loud about our collective future and opportunities, we cannot afford to be naive about our challenges.

The Halifax Index - an “economic gut check” for the region - tells us Halifax is a middle of the pack performer among Canadian benchmark cities.

So, how do we become the kind of high performer our Council, this Chamber and others say we can be?

We must work to ensure challenges do not become obstacles.

One of those challenges - not unique to our region - is a looming demographic shift in our workforce that could leave good jobs wanting for employees.

We should all be worried in a province where deaths outstrip births. Even in Halifax 97 percent of the labour force growth between 2006 and 2012 was in people over the age of 45.

These are critical times for attracting and retaining young people. But, Halifax has a unique strategic advantage in its six universities and strong community college.

To that end, I am meeting regularly with university and college presidents. Our most recent meeting two weeks ago was attended by all seven of our university presidents and CAO Richard Butts.

We are developing a Memorandum of Understanding with the post-secondary education sector that will outline cooperative work, starting with talent retention.

We share a goal to make Halifax Canada's education capital.

The city launched its Bridging the Gap program to offer valuable paid work experience to new post-secondary graduates, to overcome the challenge of education but no experience.

We benefit from their fresh perspective while they gain experience to give them a good career start.

If we are to counter the demographic tide, we need to redouble our efforts to draw new immigrants who are willing to lay their aspirations at our doorstep.

In June, Council approved the city's first Local Immigration Partnership, working with community partners to help immigrants achieve their potential while we achieve our potential.

We can solve the people puzzle, just as I think we can meet our other big challenges:

- aging infrastructure
- housing, and
- affordability

Like many other Canadian cities, we face a funding gap as we struggle to maintain old infrastructure while we build new to stimulate our economy.

New wastewater charges alone are a huge challenge for a city with underground systems as old as ours.

The federal budget brought welcome news of continued infrastructure spending programs for Canadian cities and towns.

Federal and provincial investments in cities are not acts of charity: they pay dividends.

The country's wealth does not trickle down to cities so much as it ripples out from cities.

Look at our city: Halifax represents nearly 1/5 of the total economic output of the Atlantic Provinces, 55 percent of Nova Scotia's output.

It makes good sense to invest in the roads, the transit system, the buildings and wastewater systems and – increasingly – the technology, that underpin the urban economy and make our city work.

A big rethink is underway for our \$100 million a year public transit system, in an effort to make it a preferred method of travel.

I am confident that transit director Eddie Robar and his team are prepared to bring forward the bold changes offered up by the scores of people who participated in the recent transit consultation.

Already, Council has approved a plan to invest heavily in a new technology platform that will modernize the transit experience for riders.

And, I am happy to report that transit ridership is up four percent year over year.

As our city grows and real estate prices climb, we need to work hard to protect housing affordability, so people regardless of income and family structure can afford to live close to the services they use.

Council last week unanimously supported our participation in a United Way led initiative on housing that includes other levels of government,

private sector leaders like Killam Properties and W.M. Fares Group, and community organizations like the Affordable Housing Association of Nova Scotia.

As Gloria McClusky said "This affects all of us, we can't be saying it's not our issue."

Above all else, Halifax Regional Municipality is in the community business. The decisions we make, the actions we take, impact the day-to-day lives of our citizens.

So, we must be inclusive.

That's why we're taking steps to be more open, to give citizens a greater say in how their city is governed and run.

We've launched a new public engagement web portal, Shape Your City, which we've already used to consult on solid waste and transit.

Soon, we will be doing the same for the upcoming budget, with citizen opportunities online and in person.

Halifax has also heard the calls to open up its data, something I raised in my campaign.

In April, we opened 17 data sets to the public and I attended my first ever Hackathon event at Volta Labs.

Computer developers and people with neat app ideas squirrelled themselves away for the weekend working to beat the clock to come up with new ways to bring the city to the palm of your hand.

They are among the new class of entrepreneurs - smart, creative, rooted in the knowledge economy, knowing what we need before we do.

They will help define the future of this city.

Where others say why, they say why not. When others say "In Halifax?" they say "Where else?"

In August, I spoke at a convention of American newspaper publishers. They had previously held conventions in New Orleans, San Francisco and other major cities.

The President said they thought Halifax, with its excellent waterfront, was the best city they had visited.

In July, I had lunch on board the British naval vessel HMS Scott, a ship that visits dozens of ports of call. The schedule shifts regularly with weather and changing priorities.

Commander Pat Mowatt told us the one non-negotiable stop was Halifax.

To alter course would risk a mutiny.

The crew, he said, always felt inspired by Halifax.

So we inspire others, but where do we look for our own inspiration?

I have been inspired many times in the past year by the people I meet throughout our communities. People like:

Catherine Woodman and her team at United Way;

Dale Godsoe and her endless appetite for volunteering to improve her city;

Gordon Stevens who came back from New York to scratch an entrepreneurial itch and launch a “buy local” movement;

Don Spicer, the retired cop who now heads Shelter Nova Scotia.

Irene Smith at Avalon Centre who is a determined voice for victims, at a time when our community has had a painful reckoning with issues of sexualized violence.

I was inspired by a man I never met, **Petty Officer Second Class Craig Blake**, a husband, father of two, and a volunteer hockey coach who died in Afghanistan in 2010. Thanks to the efforts of Blake’s son and Councillor Darren Fisher a Dartmouth park now carries his name.

On the day in September when we unveiled the new park, the community was bursting with pride.

I am inspired by **Gerry Post** who ended up in a wheelchair early this year, tragically, without warning, in the middle of a successful career that took him throughout the world.

If he’s bitter, he doesn’t show it. He rolled into my office to discuss how to make Halifax a better, more accessible community.

He is a great reminder of the power of positive thinking and the need to keep moving.

We can all take a lesson from him.

Mostly, I am inspired by the potential for this city, and our shared desire to reach it.

Recently, my office invited dozens of people across a variety of sectors to a day-long conversation on building healthier, liveable communities.

We sent out 75 invitations and 80 people showed up.

They shared their expectations for their communities with me, with Councillors the CAO, and city staff. We talked about what Halifax can look like in 2020.

They offered big ideas and small fixes in equal measure; they cheered each other on; they jumped on stage to act out the kind of community they envision.

Together, we crafted a greater Halifax, one that offers something for the youngest citizens to the most senior.

In this Halifax, people of all incomes in different family structures could afford to live in safe accessible neighbourhoods with sidewalks, parks, food markets, reliable public transit and bike lanes.

It has been a busy year with busier years ahead.

We have much to do, but much to celebrate as well.

I am proud of where we are and inspired by where we are headed.

Halifax can be a city where success is measured not only by GDP but by the quality of the community we create, where everyone meets opportunity outside their front door.

Thank you.