

Mayor's annual address to the Halifax Chamber of Commerce

Thursday, November 24, 2016

Westin Nova Scotian

Good morning and thank you. It's great to be back!

I would like to begin by acknowledging that we are on traditional Mi'k ma qui lands, the territory known as Kji puk tuk.

Since my first of these addresses a few years back they have become an opportunity to talk about where we are as a municipality, and where we are headed – a pulse check on our progress.

But, I have always used this event to speak to broader themes as well, ones that are equally important to building not simply a bigger city, but a better one.

As I look back on the past four years, I am very proud of the journey we have taken together. But, I re-offered because I believe we have so much more to do if Halifax is to fulfill its immense potential.

It makes me so happy to be part of this new Council. While it could hardly be categorized as a “change” election, we do have some new faces around the Council table.

Four councillors retired after distinguished service, making way for new representation. Two new Councillors won election, 10 councillors and one old mayor were returned to City Hall.

Let me introduce your new councillors: Shawn Cleary, Lindell Smith, Lisa Blackburn, Richard Zurawski, Sam Austin, and the once and future Steve Streach.

This is a younger Council – the average age has dropped by more than a decade, pretty significant! At the beginning of the last term I was six years younger than the average; now I’m six years older.

I used to feel like a young Luke Skywalker – now I’m more like Yoda.

Four council members arrived at their first meeting on bikes. Remember when the Grand Parade used to be full of cars?

This is a smart bunch and if the first two meetings are any indication I expect this Council will be one of impassioned debates and steady progress on public priorities.

Indeed we will be meeting this afternoon to establish our collective agenda for the next four years.

We also have a shiny new CAO, Jacques Dubé and a new Auditor General, Evangeline Colmann-Sadd.

Four years ago I was first elected with an agenda to make Halifax the most livable, entrepreneurial and inclusive city in the country through well-planned growth and economic development.

Within days of the 2012 election, I met with Valerie Payne and members of the Chamber's board who outlined their goal to make Halifax a top three growth city in Canada by 2018.

It seemed like a tall order. In 2011, the Conference Board pegged Halifax second last in growth.

In 2012 we moved up to 10th of 13 major Canadian centres.

Thankfully, our lot has improved.

In 2015 we hit third; earlier this year we were forecast for second behind Vancouver.

We're clearly still within the top three, and set for an impressive 2017.

Our good fortunes have been helped by strong growth in construction and manufacturing, primarily at Irving Shipbuilding.

More than 1,400 people are at work at the yard and hundreds more will be hired: welders, ironworkers, pipefitters and others clocking in daily at the largest indoor shipbuilding facility in North America.

Once again, we are Canada's shipbuilder.

Buoyed by a renewed sense of confidence, Halifax is hitting its stride, transforming rapidly into a more modern, progressive city with different places to live and cool places to work.

It's not just forecasting agencies like the Conference Board that speak to our momentum.

The Halifax Partnership's Business Confidence Index this past spring reached its highest level since the Partnership began measuring in 2011. This followed several consecutive years of sluggish confidence.

Corporate Research Associates released findings just last week that showed strong and stable consumer confidence.

This matters because investment follows confidence.

You see it in the regeneration of our downtown, in strong neighbourhoods and in the presence of multinational giants

that are now seeing enough growth and potential in Halifax to enter our marketplace.

Do you remember when we scoffed at the possibility of us ever seeing IKEA here again? Here I am presenting the Allan Key to the city to the IKEA Canada President.

The meatballs will be here before we know it.

Some of you joined me last month to hear a speech I first presented to a sold out luncheon at the Economic Club of Canada in June. Working with the Partnership, I will continue to take Halifax's value proposition – **talent, location, cost** - to the world

I believe our message is resonating. Just last week I had the head of Arizona-based tech company Mobivity in my office to tell me about his expansion plans for Halifax where he is experiencing our winning combination firsthand. I think someone from Mobivity is here today.

Wherever I travel, I unpack the message that Halifax is ripe for business investment.

And here I am with the Mayors of Houston and Cape Town...

As a city, we are keeping a steady hand on our finances. Our fundamentals are strong:

- We have reduced commercial and residential tax rates in three of the past four years and found efficiencies in our budgeting.
- After years of increased year over year spending between 2006 and 2013, we have arrested the trend.

Last year we didn't simply hold the line we spent \$3 million less than the year before.

- Our debt is steadily declining, from nearly \$350 million at the time of amalgamation to \$251 million for 2016-17.

- We continue to plan ahead for future capital projects by building healthy reserves - a position improved with the receipt of a \$20 million settlement for a longstanding federal payment in lieu of taxes for Citadel Hill.

Thank you, Justin.

We are doing this while we improve the quality of our communities: new arenas, more bike lanes, community gardens and urban orchards, a mobile food market.

More of our services are free: kids' swimming lessons at our lakes, bikes and skates at the Oval. And, more cultural groups have access to funding through an Arts Advisory Committee.

We are showing what it means to be the economic and cultural hub of Atlantic Canada, to be proud of who we are and what we can accomplish.

As you've heard from Ron, we have adopted an Economic Growth Plan with aggressive measurable targets to increase our GDP and add 50,000 new people by 2021.

Getting there is going to take all of our efforts, our faith in ourselves and our community.

Through smart planning, sound management and good luck we continue to see our city grow. But it can't be taken for granted; we need to do some things better.

Far too often we have heard stories of the entrepreneurial spirit that built this city being dampened by burdensome regulations and outdated business processes.

Folks, we have too much red tape.

It's time to demonstrate that we are open **for** business, and open **to** business.

To that end, Council has given direction for our CAO to work with the province's Office of Regulatory Affairs and Service Effectiveness.

The goal: To reduce the burden of municipal regulation.

This Chamber, CFIB, and others are on board, and we kicked off our first official meeting yesterday. I have already had numerous discussions with Chief Regulatory Officer Fred Crooks and Premier McNeil about our commitment.

I'm convinced that municipal staff is also committed to finding new ways to make it easier for our customers to do business in Halifax.

We will establish an open door policy to ensure entrepreneurs' questions are answered so they can get on with building their business, and our economy.

And, too often we hear from business owners - and some of you are here today - that it's a struggle to cope with sharp year over year commercial property tax or rent increases.

The very entrepreneurs that bring new life to our main streets risk being pushed out by rising assessments.

After asking for legislative amendments, I am pleased that relief is in sight.

The Province has given us the greater autonomy we sought over how we levy commercial taxes. With the passage of Bill 52, we now have the power to set tiered rates, along with rates that consider street frontage, square footage, and geographic areas.

This will not be easy; tax decisions never are. What helps one invariably hurts another. Still, I am confident that we have the political will to make real change.

We can align our commercial tax approach with the values and principles of the economic strategy and our Regional Plan.

As part of that Regional Plan, we've recently released the full draft of the new Centre Plan to guide sustainable growth on the peninsula and Dartmouth neighbourhoods inside the Circ.

Once finalized, this plan will articulate what can be built where, provide greater certainty to communities about growth and density, and create swifter turnaround timelines for developers.

We are fortunate to have outstanding developers, people who live here and are personally invested in our community, who care about the legacy they create.

If you want to contribute this economy by putting people to work or building the places where people want to live and work, we intend to make it easier to see your project through.

But, make no mistake, we expect high quality buildings, appropriate mitigation efforts and a general appreciation for the impact construction has on its neighbours.

Development is positive, but strong communities are about so much more than just buildings.

We will do our part to make this a city where more people want to live with continued progress on transformative projects, some of them already out for public feedback:

- **The Cogswell lands plan:**

After years of talk, we are moving to action.

Done right, we will see more greenspace, housing, better transit connectivity and district energy where we now see concrete and asphalt.

- **Macdonald Bridge cycling connection:**

We've shared design options for the long-awaited improvements to cycling connections on both sides of the Macdonald Bridge – to encourage more people to cycle and to alleviate traffic.

- **Integrated Mobility Plan:**

And, we have a series of workshops starting next week on the **Integrated Mobility Plan** that will help us make wise decisions for everything from roads to public transit, to improvements for cyclists and pedestrians.

We are already a great host for events of all sizes but we are working with Destination Halifax and others to develop a strategic marketing plan that brings more people into our friendly embrace. As Mayor I want to lead that effort.

When people visit this place, we want to ensure they see a bit of everything that makes us special.

One of our greatest assets is our natural environment. We've made significant commitments to preserving the still-wild, uniquely Nova Scotian places within our vast municipality:

- 100 Wild Islands on the Eastern Shore – which I had the privilege of touring this summer.
- Blue Mountain Birch Cove
- and the Purcell's Cove Backlands.

And, we are devoting new energy to the Green Network Plan, an open space and greenbelting priorities strategy for the region.

Together – well-planned neighbourhoods and well-protected open spaces - make us a competitive, livable community.

This is a city on the move, and we're sharing the road ahead with incredible partners, all committed to their city's future.

We all know the impact the new Central Library, becoming a social and cultural crossroads in our downtown, our city's living room.

It has also sparked our imagination and spurred new investment. Let's stop and think about the city we are quickly becoming through the marriage of good ideas and strong support.

Next door to the library, Dalhousie, with backing from Ottawa and the private sector, is making a massive \$64 million

investment in the Innovation in Design Engineering and Architecture (IDEA) project.

Now consider the \$200 Million-plus Dalhousie-led Ocean Frontier Institute, an initiative to enhance Halifax as a world leader in ocean research.

Add to that the provincial, federal and private investment in COVE, the Centre for Ocean Ventures and Entrepreneurship, at the former Dartmouth Coast Guard site.

And, in the Nova Scotia Power building the amazing new Discovery Centre is racing toward opening day.

Think of all of this in the heart of our Downtowns - this can be not only Halifax's idea hub, but Canada's.

Imagine the unparalleled opportunity our researchers, our start-up community, our graduates, and our children.

Already, we are rewriting the narrative of young people leaving, something that seemed beyond our reach a few short years ago.

From 2014 to 2015 we experienced a net gain of nearly 2,600 25-39-year-olds – a demographic that cities across North America are competing to attract

Our business community deserves a great deal of credit for this, as more and more companies make room for young talent.

Bob Mussett was kind enough to share CBRE's Tech Talent 2016 Score Sheet with us. It shows tech sector employment in Halifax has jumped 50 percent over the past five years and we have one of the lowest business cost locations in Canada.

Halifax ranks high in tech talent across the country, putting us ahead of start-up darlings like Waterloo, and some of the bigger cities.

In the Branham Group's 2015 list of the top 25 Canadian up-and-coming ICT start-ups, Halifax had more than anywhere else in the country.

As start-ups move in to the upper floors along Barrington Street and elsewhere - many of them gently pushed from the Volta Labs nest - they are quickly becoming part of the personality of this place.

And, we're seeing companies - KinDuct and NewNet, and others – draw big investors.

When I was in Toronto in June, I met with a number of companies who now have this city and its talent on their radar. A few short years ago, this was not the case.

One venture capitalist followed up with a visit to Halifax to find new ways to spend what he called his “unlimited pool” of money for good ideas in Halifax.

So we are doing well to attract and keep young people, entrepreneurs and innovators. As we do so we are also becoming a more multicultural HRM.

It is all about people – choosing to live here, study here, invest here.

In September I hosted our third annual welcome reception for international students. Again, they shared their youthful enthusiasm for our universities and our city.

Our immigrant retention rates are higher than they've ever been, as more people find Halifax, and Nova Scotia, and decide to make a life here.

It makes me incredibly proud that our country, province and our city have stepped up in such a profound way to help Syrian families start new lives in our communities. Already, many of them are finding their way.

But, we need to give more newcomers a chance. As the Chamber says it's time to say "yes" in a multitude of languages.

A couple of weeks ago, a wonderful group of six women came to meet with me. They were from Egypt, Jordan and Iraq, all educated and skilled, working hard to make a home Halifax.

I asked three of them to join me today:

Manal has a background in marketing and business development, and a dream to create a dedicated centre for female immigrant entrepreneurs and professionals.

Amel is an electrical engineer has worked in areas undergoing post-conflict redevelopment, including with the United States Corps of Engineers in Iraq.

Abir is a senior technical writer with a Master's degree in Computer Engineering, and a translator fluent in Arabic, English and French.

I also want you to meet **Janvier** who came here through the provincial nominee program and is working hard to help other immigrant nominees through the African Community Investment Co-op while also seeking out clients for his graphic design skills.

They are happy to be here, but they need to work.

Let's all do a better job of opening our workplaces – and that includes the public sector – to new people and ideas and become a Halifax that offers real possibilities for all.

In the current world political climate, where too many have relinquished optimism and inclusion for fear and protectionism, I believe Halifax can demonstrate that we have room for everyone; those who are finding us for the first time and those who have too often been excluded from helping this city realize its true potential.

Every morning, I place this colourful little pinwheel on my lapel. It is a symbol of our municipal commitment to creating a workplace and a society that better upholds the ideals of diversity.

By opening our civic life and our economy to new people and new ideas we say we are city that is welcoming new possibilities. We believe in culture, in community, in belonging.

It is impossible to survey the state of our municipality without addressing safety, in particular the tragic murders that have ended young lives, and all of their promise.

Families and friends are left despondent, looking for answers, angry. These are not losses for *some* people in *some* neighbourhoods; they are our collective loss and our shared responsibility.

No parent ever looked at their baby with the expectation that their child would one day pick up a gun, or lose their life to one. The determinants of crime – poverty, education, inequality - are well understood even if addressing them has proven difficult.

I have always said economic development enables all other priorities. As we work toward future growth, I believe we need to do more to ensure more people share in Halifax's success, to find opportunity and to find hope.

As winter approaches we know some of our citizens sleep on the streets, food banks are struggling against growing demand. As many as one in four families is challenged to afford basic housing.

I believe it is time for our municipality to take a community wide approach to poverty. So I will be asking my council colleagues to support an anti-poverty plan for HRM, working with the United Way, the provincial government and other partners.

In recent years, we have undertaken important initiatives in housing, transit, food security, public safety and health. I am proud of our Housing Partnership, low Income Transit Plan, Mobile Food Bus and other initiatives.

They are a good start. But, we can do much more and I may come asking for your help.

This is the real measure of our success: how we strive to build a community in which everyone can **live, belong** and **thrive** - in

which we work together to lift up those who need our help to reach their true potential.

As we head into this holiday season, let's be grateful for this place we are fortunate to call home.

And, as we look to 2017 with optimism and with hope, let's not put limitations on our potential to be a truly great city for all of our citizens.