

STATE OF THE CITY ADDRESS
January 28, 2012
Hon. George K. Heartwell
Mayor of Grand Rapids

Welcome to the ninth State of the City Address. Let me start by saying that I'm just glad to be delivering a ninth State of the City Address. Last year was an election year and I'm incredibly honored that the voters of Grand Rapids saw fit to return me to office for another four years. I think you know by now how much I love this job, what a privilege it is to serve as your mayor. I now have a four-year lease on life and I intend to make the most of it.

I want to thank Susan Broman for agreeing to M.C. this year's State of the City. As most of you know Susan has led the Steelcase Foundation for over fifteen years. She has just been tapped by Governor Snyder to lead his early childhood initiative. Those of us who have known Susan over the years and have seen her passion for children's wellbeing are excited to see her take on this challenge. Susan is one tough Yooper...and one great advocate for children.

I also want to acknowledge all the elected officials who are here today. Would you please stand and remain standing until I've recognized you all. Then we can thank these great public servants with our applause. [read the names]

Finally, there are in the audience many public servants who give their all every day for this city, this county and our public schools. This work is largely unrewarded, often difficult, but always important. Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in thanking our city, county and schools employees as they stand.

Introduction

This is my ninth State of the City address. I looked back over the previous eight and I found some common themes. Each speech has addressed the issues of sustainability: what does it take to make Grand Rapids a sustainable community? Each one has set audacious goals. And every one looks forward to a hopeful future.

The advantage of having delivered eight State of the City addresses is that I can look back and see some progress. What seemed audacious at the time I said it has come to pass through our hard work and creative energy over eight years. We have after-school programming in every one of our city schools as a result of our City/Schools partnership. This program has been effective in securing our children's safety and learning. In fact, the National League of Cities recognized Grand Rapids as a model city for our collaborative work for children. In another week I will be making a special announcement on another national partnership that will further strengthen our collective work for student achievement. I am fully committed to ensuring that our children have expanded learning opportunities.

We also have a robust adult literacy initiative aimed at reducing our unacceptably high illiteracy rate. We enjoy citywide wireless broadband access with deep discounts for low-income individuals as we work to bridge the digital divide. We purchase 23% of our municipal electric power from renewable resource energy. Our Community Sustainability Partnership has been recognized by the United Nations and Grand Rapids received the US Chamber of Commerce award as the nation's most sustainable mid-sized city. We have brought our total cost of employee compensation in line with the private sector with two rounds of concessionary labor contracts. And we have implemented improvements in service delivery that save taxpayers millions of dollars.

At the same time, eight years gives me an opportunity to laugh at my failings. Some things, no matter how brilliant they seemed to me in the quiet of my study simply weren't ready for prime time. Like the creation of a citywide tax capture zone to support public schools. I was quickly reminded by friends at the county, the library, the community college and the transit authority that it was their money I was so quick to give away.

There were some ideas presented in previous State of the City speeches that are still in the process of development and which I hope to see completed while I am your mayor. Among them is the streetcar development on Monroe Street. Another was transformation of delivery of City government services so that community needs could be met within the revenue constraints of our modern era. I am pleased to report that both initiatives are moving forward and I am confident that both will succeed.

And then there were those ideas that sounded pretty good when they came out of my mouth and yet looked entirely different when they became reality. I speak of my idea for consolidated government that became One Kent. Notwithstanding my disappointment in the product that came out of the One Kent initiative, the impulse was right on and One Kent lit a fire under local government. Grand Rapids, Kent County, Wyoming and Kentwood are working together as never before to consolidate services, improve their quality and lower their costs.

Champions of Diversity

One of the really good ideas I had along the way, starting with my third State of the City address, was to recognize Champions of Diversity, those in our community who work to advance the goals of diversity and inclusion. I have honored contractors working on diversity in construction contract awards, college and university Presidents, elders in the civil rights community, teachers who have championed diversity, and high school students who are brave enough to challenge their peers to be inclusive.

2012 is the Year of Interfaith Understanding in Grand Rapids and at this State of the City address I want to honor a group of individuals whose vision, creativity and hard work have brought about this celebration of the diversity of religious faith in our community. Theologian Hans Kung wrote "There cannot be peace among nations until there is peace among religions." In an effort to foster understanding which can lead to peace among religions Dr. Douglas Kinchie and Rev. David Baak assembled an interfaith group to plan a year of activities aimed at bridging religious divides. Let me tell you a bit about each of the participants in this planning initiative, this year's Champions of Diversity.

Petra Alsoofy is a graduate of Grand Valley State University where she serves on the Advisory board of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute at GVSU. Her interfaith interests go back quite some time: as a youth she served on the Interfaith Youth Corps in Chicago and was President of the Muslim Students Association at GVSU. Petra is a speaker in the community on such varied issues as the Arab Spring and Women in Islam.

Rev. David Baak has the longest title of anybody I know. He is the Designated Associate Pastor for Mission and Pastoral Care of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Grand Rapids. He is perhaps best known for his service at the Grand Rapids Area Center for Ecumenism from 1983-2002. David is also a member of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute Advisory Committee and serves on the Community Relations Commission of the City of Grand Rapids.

Whitney Belprez is a 2010 graduate of Grand Valley State University and is the Program Manager of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute. Whitney coordinates the Year of Interfaith Understanding activities, sometimes juggling tasks like a master magician.

Dr. Douglas Kindschi is now in his 36th year with Grand Valley State University where he is Professor of Mathematics and Philosophy and the first, and current, Director of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute. Doug's interfaith experience began while a young graduate student at University of Chicago School of Divinity. He is the brainchild of this Year of Interfaith Understanding and has been a great partner to work with.

David Krishef is rabbi at Congregation Ahavas Israel. A teacher at heart, Rabbi Krishef has published curriculum and taught courses at Grand Valley State University, Kuyper College and Aquinas College. David serves on the Spectrum Health Bioethics committee.

Ghazala Munir was born, raised and educated in Pakistan, immigrating to the United States in 1973. She is the Vice President of the Interfaith Dialogue Association. Ms. Munir was one of 250 invitees from around the world to attend the United Religions Initiative Third Global Summit in 1998. She has authored articles including "Muslim

Women in Dialogue: Breaking Walls and Building Bridges.” Ghazala is widely known as a speaker on women and Islam and on current issues of the Islamic Middle East.

Imam Muaz Redzic is the Imam at the Bosnian cultural Center in Grand Rapids and has served this faith community for two and one-half years. Imam Redzic holds degrees from Kuwait University and Vanderbilt University and has served as Imam at several Islamic centers in the US over the past eleven years. He is a co-founder of the Southern Kentucky Interfaith Council.

Michael Schadick is rabbi at Temple Emanuel where he has served since 2000. Rabbi Schadick has served congregations in Orlando and Plantation, Florida. Michael was ordained by Hebrew Union College- Jewish Institute of Religion.

Fred Stella has served on the Board of the Interfaith Dialogue Association for nearly 20 years. His other interfaith engagements include the Board of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute at Grand Valley State University and Grand Dialogue. Fred is the Pracharak (pruh –CHAR-ik) or Outreach Minister for the West Michigan Hindu Temple and completed a 30-city lecture tour of India promoting indigenous culture and religion in tribal areas.

Mary Vaccaro, an associate of the Grand Rapids Dominicans, serves as the Director of Dominican Center at Marywood and Adjunct Faculty in Theology and Women’s Studies at Aquinas College. Mary’s professional service prior to Dominican Center is as varied as Holy Family Parish in Caledonia and St. Andrew’s Cathedral in Grand Rapids, to the University of Notre Dame and the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. She also served on the Board of GRACE for four years.

Neither of the rabbis was able to be with us this morning as they are leading religious services at this time. Dr. Muzhar Munir will receive the award on behalf of his wife Ghazala who is out of town. Ladies and Gentlemen please welcome forward this year’s Champions of Diversity.

Learn more about the Year of Interfaith Understanding by going to gvsu.edu/2012interfaith where you can join the Interfaith Inform Mailing List.

This Year’s Theme

Eight years ago I stood before you at my first State of the City address when I had only three weeks in office. I saw that speech as a one-time opportunity to say what was most important to me. If my tenure as mayor were to be defined by one theme this would be the speech that signaled that theme. Well, the theme was children; and the focus was on education; and the means of achieving the good ends I proposed was a new kind of partnership with our Grand Rapids Public Schools.

I’m proud of what we have accomplished with the GRPS during the intervening eight years. By some measures our children are appreciably better off today than they

were in 2004. Children are being exposed to new ideas and innovative thinking as never before. With the public schools, we have actively created meaningful opportunities to engage youth in city government, career and college-readiness, and community service. I called for 500 jobs for youth and, through the Mayor's 50 Businesses and other community partnerships we are over halfway there! Also, through my Project GREEN nearly 250 teens have given back to their city by contributing 8,129 hours of community service to help "green" their neighborhoods. These programs help prepare our children for college, work and life. I am grateful to all the community partners that have made this a reality.

Yet, even with these successes, far too many measures of child wellbeing are headed in the wrong direction.

Did you know that 36.7% of all children in Grand Rapids live below the poverty line? Nearly four out of ten children live in poverty! What does that mean?

- Four of ten children experience persistent hunger
- Four of ten children live in housing that is unhealthy or unsafe
- Four of ten children don't have the resources they need to succeed in school: books in the home; routine access to the internet; paper, pencils, calculators
- Four of ten children can't afford the enrichment experiences that their more affluent friends have
- Four of ten children probably have substandard medical and dental care, if they have any at all

Today I am calling on each of you to put children front and center as we continue to build a vibrant and sustainable community. I do so with a sense of urgency that will drive my actions – and I trust will drive yours – in improving the lives of our children.

Before I even started writing this State of the City address I went on a listening tour. Between mid December and last week I had my magician Administrative Assistant Jane Bush squeeze 43 appointments into an already jam-packed calendar. Thanks to those of you who met me at odd times of the day or night in strange places. I was directed and encouraged throughout the process by Lynn Afendoulis, Bob Tobin and Susan Heartwell; themselves deeply invested in children's wellbeing. The topic of every one of those 43 conversations was children, and the Sages I met with ranged from College and University Presidents, to titans of business and industry, to local elected officials, philanthropists and foundation directors, non-profit professionals, parents and...of course, children. Let me say this about the exhausting last month. Nothing I have done since I took this office eight years ago is as important; nothing has been as eye-opening; nothing has been as energizing.

Ladies and gentlemen, remember this day. Today we launch a new chapter in our city's history and it fits under this rubric: Grand Rapids is a community that values

its children and commits its resources toward improving the lives of our youngest citizens.

OK. That's easy to say and it sounds pretty good. Let's look at what we're going to do.

This listening tour is about to move from my agenda to yours.

But let me back up a step. What did I learn from all the Sages I spoke to on my listening tour?

First, I learned that there is an amazing amount of work going on in our community around children's wellbeing. The work, the energy, the investment the blood, sweat and tears going into making a better life for our children is a secret that has been far too well hidden.

Second, I learned that there is a body of innovation and creativity focused on outcomes for children that exceeds anything else I have ever seen.

Third – and here's where it gets sticky – I learned that in spite of all that work and all that creativity many of the key measures of child wellbeing are declining. Declining! Rapidly declining!!

So, I believe that we must start this new era with a robust conversation about children. I want every organization over the next six months to have a conversation about children. Are you part of a service club? Take at least one meeting to focus on children. Do you belong to a mosque, a church, a synagogue, a temple? After one of your religious services talk about children. Are you a student in a school, a member of a neighborhood association, an employee of a business, a resident of a retirement community? Organize one formal conversation about children.

I'm going to structure this conversation.

Here are the three simple questions I want you to discuss:

- Do we value all children equally and are we prepared to prioritize their needs above all others?
- What clear, identifiable needs do children have?
- What can we – individually and collectively – do to meet those needs?

When you meet you must identify a recorder to capture the ideas expressed in your conversation. That recorder will report to the Community Research Institute at Grand Valley State University.

To start this process I have asked my colleagues on the Grand Rapids City Commission to organize opportunities to hold this conversation in each of the three wards of our city. I have also asked the Mayor's Youth Council members to take the questions to their peers and organize conversations in their schools. On Monday a letter is going out to Provosts at the area colleges and universities asking them to identify faculty to lead this conversation in the classroom and among their professorial peers. I am reaching out to religious leaders all over Grand Rapids asking them to organize a conversation among their congregations. I will also ask the Chamber of Commerce to encourage its members to have the conversation in the workplace. Every one of you here this morning has some context in which you can organize the conversation; and if each of you gathers only 5 others around this important conversation there will be 3,000 more citizens thinking about, talking about, and then acting on our commitment to our children.

Here's what I know: words have power to shape reality. I have personally learned so much about the needs of children and the structures that serve children by having these 43 conversations. A citywide conversation about children will elevate the subject on the community agenda and surface new ideas and new commitments to our children.

Collective Impact

There is a fascinating conversation already taking place around children. It is called "collective impact" and it is taking place at the Kent County Family and Children's Coordinating Council. Simply put here is the foundation of that conversation: although good work is taking place on child wellbeing, it tends to happen within "silos". That is, over here is the work of children's health, over there the work on education, here is the work around early childhood development, there is literacy work, here is poverty reduction work, there is workplace readiness work, here is child obesity work, and there is abuse and neglect work. Too little of this work is connected or aligned in ways that can drive sustainable change. Collective impact holds promise for me because it builds on our Youth Master Plan and can take it to the next level of shared outcomes for children.

I'm going to invite my counterpart on the Kent County Board of Commissioners Chair Sandi Frost Parrish to join me on the stage and tell you about collective impact, its goals and where the County's initiative stands today.

[Sandi speaks]

Madam Chair I want to pledge my personal support and offer my engagement in this work. Beyond that, I want you to know that you have a willing partner in the City of Grand Rapids. Our children need the best we can give them and collective impact will help ensure that their future is bright because we have thoughtfully directed the resources of the community to serve their most critical needs.

[Sandi returns to her seat]

Here's something else I learned on my listening tour: there are some programs out there that are already acting as collective impact initiatives. They are making a difference in the lives of our children and they deserve to be expanded.

Upward Bound

Here's one. When children enter the 7th grade in Grand Rapids they can apply to enter the Upward Bound program. There are Upward Bound programs associated with Grand Rapids Community College and Grand Valley State University. Here's what happens. When a child enters Upward Bound that child is surrounded with a set of core services aimed at preparing the child for college. Every school year from 9th through 12th grade each student takes one course per semester taught in their high school by a college professor and they receive after-school tutoring support from college students. They take cultural tours to museums, parks and historic sites. They engage in service projects, learning to give back to their community. Each summer the Upward Bound students spend 6 weeks living on a college campus, taking courses, eating in the dining room and using the college facilities. Once during his or her Upward Bound experience every student will participate in a travel seminar. Upward Bound students learn leadership skills, civic responsibility ethics, workplace skills, and they learn the importance of academic performance and hard work.

Reynard Ross, Grand Rapids School Board member, manages the Upward Bound program at GRCC and Arnie Smithalexander, a former GRPS Board member, manages the program at GVSU. This is what they tell me: 90-95% of the children who complete Upward Bound go on to college; and they graduate from college at the same rate as the general college population. Did you hear that? That's as good as any affluent suburban district in the state! But did I tell you that there are two criteria for participation: poverty household and first generation college? These are poor kids whose parents never went to college.

Now, here's the kicker. There are only 70 students in the GRCC Upward Bound program and about 90 in the GVSU program. I asked, "Why is that? Surely there are many, many more GRPS students who could benefit from this program." Of course, I knew the answer before I asked, you know before I tell you. It is about money. There just isn't enough money to expand the program. You see, the federal government pays for Upward Bound and the federal government, they tell us, is broke.

Wait a minute! A program that generates unbelievably good results and we can't do more because there isn't enough federal money to expand it?

So I went to my friend Jim Zawacki, the President of Grand Rapids Spring and Stamping, who really cares about the children of our city and who tells me that GRPS

graduates are more often than not ill-prepared to take even his entry level jobs. I said, "Jim, we can do better than this as a community. I want you to take on this challenge and rally the business community around Upward Bound. We can double those numbers, maybe triple or quadruple them." You know what? Instantly, he said, "Sure Mayor, I'll do that." I know Jim, and I know he'll get it done.

Challenge Scholars

Here's another one.

Did you know that any student enrolled at Harrison Park Elementary School is confident, from the day he or she starts school that his or her college tuition is guaranteed? I didn't know that. Not until I sat with one of my Sages on the listening tour. Diana Sieger of the Grand Rapids Community Foundation explained to me the Harrison Park/Union High School pipeline to college. It's called Challenge Scholars. Any 4th grade student at Harrison Park who sticks with the program and graduates from Union High School is assured that the last dollar scholarship will be paid through the Grand Rapids Community Foundation. Also, during their journey from kindergarten to senior year in high school they are supported by the Kent School Services Network that addresses human services needs that are part of their daily reality at home.

I visited Harrison Park Elementary School last Wednesday. I joined representatives of Calvin College, Hope College, Grand Valley State University and Grand Rapids Community College to speak with first and second grade students about the importance of reading. I talked a little bit about what a mayor does and then I asked them how many want to be mayor when they grow up. Every hand in the gymnasium went up! I told them how important reading is for my job and how important it is to go to college. As I walked back out of Harrison Park I noticed that every corridor was dedicated to a different college and banners and pictures and signs and posters were everywhere. Harrison Park students are enfolded in a college culture from the earliest age and are told that not only can they attend college but that it is expected of them.

This is a pilot program. The Foundation has begun measuring its effectiveness.

I ask you today: can we do this for other children in our public schools? Could the day come when all the children of the GRPS know that there is no financial impediment to getting a college education? A day when we truly have a K-16 system in Grand Rapids? Diana and I have begun a conversation around raising the community awareness and resources to make this happen. We're going to need you...many of you... to work with us if this is going to happen.

Literacy

There are terrific literacy programs available in our community. When I delivered my First State of the City address I called for the community to tackle the problem of adult illiteracy in Grand Rapids. In response to that call we all came together and developed a communitywide literacy plan and an initiative planted in the Literacy Center of West Michigan that pursues the audacious goal of making every adult a reader.

Here's something I know for a fact. The best way to have literate adults is to start with literate children and the best literacy instructor for a child is that child's parent. One of my Sages, Mark Murray, CEO of Meijer, offers this simple, profound challenge to our community: No child in Grand Rapids goes to bed at night without having been read to. Mark points out that by reading to a child at bedtime we address all three of the critical elements of development: first, the child learns that he or she is loved, they learn trust and they are nurtured; second, they develop the skills for navigating the complex world of the 21st Century; and third, they begin the symbolic learning process whereby they translate words and letters into concepts and actions. And if a child is read to from birth, that child will be a reader, a learner, a leader.

Parents, here is my charge to you: do not let your children go to bed at night without reading to them. A parent is working? Grandparents, it's your duty. A parent can't read? Hold your child in your arms, look at the pictures and make up a story...then get yourself to the Literacy Center of West Michigan and learn to read before the child is old enough to know you're making up the story. If we are a community of readers so many of our challenges go away. Readers finish high school. Readers go to college. College graduates get better paying jobs. People with better paying jobs are healthier, less likely to require public income support, more engaged in their community, and they read to their children.

Systems Collaboration

There is something else I learned on my listening tour...and I heard it from several of the Sages I interviewed. Education systems need better integration, deeper levels of cooperation, and fuller disclosure of those best practices that work.

Let me tell you about a brand new school I discovered on my listening tour. It is call the Laboratory High School of the Kent Intermediate School District. The superintendents of 20 school districts in our county – including public, Christian and Parochial schools – designed a leading practices high school that operates on the campus of KISD. These schools are learning together, testing best practices in learning and instruction, and, as a result, improving their performance in their own districts.

This is a great model for collaboration. Let's do more of this. In fact, let's try to incorporate into these conversations the charter schools, which were created to stimulate innovation in education. Let's learn from each other. After I penned these

words I learned that the Grand Rapids Public Schools Board of Education is talking about this very thing. At yesterday's Legislative Committee the Board proposed hosting a conference titled: "Best Shared Practices: Traditional and Charter Schools". I encourage the Board to include the Parochial and Christian Schools and I offer my support in any way that might be helpful.

Education Achievement Authority

Finally, there is one more challenge that lies out ahead of us. Governor Snyder recommended, and the legislature approved, the creation of an Education Achievement Authority. Its purpose is to take academically struggling schools out of local school districts and place them in a statewide authority that will manage them back to success. This is a good thing. But it is a good thing for those communities that cannot, themselves, wrap their arms around the challenge and return their schools to excellence.

Superintendent Neal, School Board President Lenear and I have been talking about how we will handle this situation when, and if, it arises. We are convinced that Grand Rapids people know best how to solve Grand Rapids problems. We have spoken with the Chancellor of the Michigan Education Achievement Authority and we have told him that this community is ready to step forward, when and if the time comes, to own our problem, to craft our solution and to work with state government to ensure that our children get the best education available.

I've covered a lot of ground in the last hour; perhaps too much. The simple message is this: put children as our first priority and align our efforts for better results. All children should be ready for college, work and life. In summary, talk with each other about how each of us can contribute to a child's success. Work collaboratively to align our efforts to achieve better outcomes. Support programs that are effective. In all you do partner with someone else working for children's betterment. Ensure that every child is read to and given the supports to thrive.

There were a dozen other initiatives that emerged out of my listening tour, all of them good, all of them important. Children's health initiatives, parent engagement initiatives, diversity and inclusion initiatives...all of them worthy of attention. Over the course of the next year I will attempt to give visibility to as many of these initiatives that I can.

Conclusion

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said:

"As long as there is poverty in the world I can never be rich, even if I have a billion dollars. As long as diseases are rampant and millions of people in this world cannot expect to live more than twenty-eight or thirty years, I can

never be totally healthy even if I just got a good checkup at Mayo Clinic. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. This is the way our world is made. No individual or nation can stand out boasting of being independent. We are interdependent.”

I started this speech by telling you that nearly four of every ten children in Grand Rapids is poor...and I told you what that means, each and every day, for them. If Dr. King is right – and I believe he is – then our interdependence calls us all to the battle lines against poverty, illiteracy, and inhumanity which daily deprive these children of the opportunities to thrive which a benevolent Creator intends for them.

But here’s where the going gets tough. Too many of our systems, intended to benefit these children, are operating at less than their potential. Too much of our work is disconnected and, therefore not as effective as it might be. Too many of us are investing our lives in work that is meaningful but cannot succeed because it is tied to the wrong alignment of systems.

During the listening tour one of my Sages lamented the years of work and hundreds of millions of dollars that have been spent on improving the lives of our children, only to come to this point and see all the indicators going in the wrong direction. “Somebody needs to call the question”, she said.

Grand Rapids, I’m calling the question.

We say, “Our children are our future.” Today I say, let’s show we mean it! Let’s put our resources, our energy, our talent, our passion, our creativity, our work ethic, our collaborative spirit, our stubborn Midwestern gumption...our love...into truly making a better community for all these children.

I’m not going to talk about shared sacrifice. That’s a given.

I’m not going to talk about setting aside personal pride and the sense that we alone have the answers. That’s a given.

I’m not even going to talk about giving up our insane enslavement to things that don’t work. That’s a given.

What I am going to talk about – and I’m going to talk about it a lot, so get ready – is how precious is every child in this community; and how every one of us has a role – no, an obligation – to these children.

I’m done waiting for somebody else somewhere else to figure this out. That is not the Grand Rapids way. We are among the most innovative problem solvers in the world. A sustainable community tackles tough problems and we have the capacity to do this.

Our children need us now.

Are you with me?