

STATE OF THE CITY ADDRESS: 2013
January 26, 2013
Mayor George K. Heartwell

What an astounding city we live in! The pride of the state of Michigan. A model for cities all over the United States. A center of innovation. Exemplary in risk-taking. Focused on outcomes and widely known for results. This is our city; our Grand Rapids. A community to conserve, to advance, to take pride in. A city to fight for. A place to invest to drive prosperity.

Our motto is *motu viget*, strength through activity. What better setting to talk about our activities than in the State of the City Address. This is my tenth annual address to the community and my challenge this year, as it has been every year, is that there is just so much activity – and so many powerful visions for the future – that condensing them into one speech is a challenge.

When we gathered here last year we began a conversation about our youngest citizens, our children. I believe it is our greatest responsibility to ensure all children are safe, protected and have the resources to be fully prepared for college, work and life. Innovation, perseverance, and trained intelligence are the capital of the future and how well we prepare children to meet those challenges is a reflection of who we are.

Last year, I challenged you to consider three questions and discuss them throughout the year.

1. Do we value children equally and are we prepared to prioritize their needs?
2. What are the needs of our children?
3. What can we do individually and collectively to address those needs?

Wow, did you take me up on the challenge! All over this city – in teacher’s lounges, on-line, at service clubs, in church fellowship halls, and in places of business – Grand Rapidians did what we do best...you heeded the call. City Commissioners hosted community dialogues in their Wards; Mayor’s Youth Council members facilitated discussions in their high schools; private citizens took up the questions in their social groups. I received more emails and comments from the public on this topic than any other. You confronted the questions and honestly wrestled with the answers.

Grand Valley State University, through its Johnson Center for Philanthropy, recorded many of the conversations and organized the responses in a report. A summary is on the table. Dr. George Grant, Dean of the GVSU School of Social Work, with oversight for the Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy will take a few minutes to report the results. While Dean Grant is making his way up here I would

also like to thank Ruth Stegeman of GVSU for her efforts on this research, and the Mayor's Youth Council for ensuring a youth voice on the project.

Thank you Dean Grant. We are ready now to take the conversation to another level. In a sense, the first questions were discussion starters and consciousness raisers. Now we need to advance the dialogue more deeply around these three questions:

1. How do we nurture a child-and teen-friendly culture in our community where children truly feel valued?
2. How can we demonstrate to children and teens that we will prioritize their needs?
3. How might the community positively support parents and caregivers and raise the importance of their role within our community?

You and I both know that talk is not enough; that actions must follow. Words have power, power to transform; but words alone won't get us where we need to go. I call on each of you to own this moment, to take ownership in your circle of influence, and to act for children! Our children need us!

Let me give you an example of what can be done.

The City, with leadership from City Manager Greg Sundstrom, set specific outcomes in our Sustainability Plan to increase the number of youth involved in city government, afterschool and service-learning activities, and youth employment. City departments such as Engineering, Planning, Customer Service, the City Clerk, and Traffic Safety offer job opportunities for youth who are trained through the City's LEAD program at the Office of Our Community's Children. Teens learn about how city government works, who their commissioners are, and how they can have a voice in the democratic process. Through my Mayor's 50 Initiative, businesses such as Cascade Engineering, Express Employment Professionals, SMG, Mindscape, Terryberry, Vi-Chem, Warner, Norcross and Judd, Compucraft, YMCA, the Public Library, Dematic, and many others have stepped forward with the City to offer LEAD students incredible paid work experiences.

Here's what the mother of LEAD student Aaron Thomas wrote to us,

"The LEAD program serves as proof that it takes a village to raise a child. Your program has given Aaron the confidence and essential skills necessary to reach his academic and career goals. I feel extremely blessed knowing that my 18 year old son is now earning over \$15 per hour and has the ability to be hired on for further work at Dematic."

Ms. Saffore (sa-fore), thank you for taking the time to write to us; and congratulations to you, Aaron, for seizing this opportunity to shape your successful future. And to Dematic for not only becoming a Mayor's 50 business but also

assuming full-costs of the paid internship. We need more people like Herb Fitzron, HR Director at Dematic, a global company, to step up to the plate for young people who would otherwise not likely ever have such an experience.

Ms. Saffore, Aaron, his great grandmother who is celebrating her 86th birthday today, Aaron's father and siblings are here today. Aaron would you please stand. And Mr. Fitzron from Dematic please stand and be acknowledged.

The city is offering the LEAD program this summer for youth, aged 15-21, with support of the Grand Rapids Community Foundation. We are looking for businesses who have not been involved with teens to follow Dematic's example. Sign up as a Mayor's50 business or donate to support the program. Information is at your table.

These are the very actions I am talking about for youth. Every person, every entity, every business can take action for our children. Together we can be part of the solution to improve children's lives and sustain a brighter future for us all!

Parents want a safe place for their children to learn after school. This past year, I met with several other mayors across the country with the National League of Cities and can tell you that the work we are doing here to support quality afterschool programs for children is a national model. The Wallace Foundation out of New York City is investing \$765,000 in Grand Rapids to help us build a comprehensive data-driven system of care touching the lives of children. We want to be confident that the quality of after school programming at our school sites is continually improving based on a clear set of indicators that measure student success and that produce the best outcomes for children. Our partners include the Grand Rapids Public Schools, the Doug and Maria DeVos Foundation, Kent Regional 4c, Grand Valley State University's Community Research Institute, Heart of West Michigan United Way, the cities of Wyoming and Kentwood, and all the members who make up the Expanded Learning Opportunities Network. This is difficult system work -- aligning community partners across sectors to address children's needs. It requires creative minds, technical expertise, and good communication so everyone is going in the same direction.

Grand Rapids is leading the way thanks to everyone involved. But we have more to do. Listen, lead, engage youth, and be part of the solution to make sure all young people, aged 0-21 are on track for success!

Last year I told you about Upward Bound. I explained that this program, run by Grand Valley State University and Grand Rapids Community College, works with high school students to prepare them for college. The program has been in place for over 30 years, funded by federal grants. The results are astounding! Children from low-income families whose parents did not attend college are, themselves attending college – in fact, 95% of those participating attend college; and they're graduating from college at rates equivalent to their peers coming out of any of the finest high schools in the region.

Jim Zawacki of GR Spring and Stamping Company joined me in an effort to raise funds to increase the number of students participating in the program. The response was heart-warming. Business leaders, philanthropists, folks who care about kids stepped up to help. We have business sponsorships for thirteen more children to participate in Upward Bound and our efforts continue.

This morning we have a very special announcement to make. I want to invite Michael Price, Chairman of Mercantile Bank to join me at the podium.

(Michael makes announcement of \$100,000 gift to GRCC and GVSU for Upward Bound...then takes his seat.)

\$100,000 for Upward Bound! What a commitment. Thank you Mercantile Bank. And for those of you who are ready to respond to the challenge, a special account has been established at the Student Advancement Foundation to receive your gifts. 100% of the proceeds of your contribution will go directly to the Upward Bound programs at GVSU and GRCC.

Now let me tell you about a powerful new initiative that is gaining momentum and will, ultimately, help insure that our kids get exactly what they need, and as much as they need, to prepare them for the future. Collective Impact was still a fledgling idea when I brought County Board Chair Sandy Frost-Parrish before you last year. She described a concept to organize the community's work to achieve large scale change with regard to children and their families, to best align children's needs and outcomes; to develop a community plan and to support that plan through a reconfiguration of community financial resources; and, finally, to rigorously measure outcomes of that plan and transparently report those outcomes. I pledged the support of the City and my personal support to this initiative.

I am pleased to tell you that this concept is moving toward reality. For most of the past eight months a high level task force - of which I am a member - has been meeting, soliciting community input, developing a master plan and then circling back to the community to check that plan. We have been working with the foremost experts in the field today, John Kania and his team from FSG. We have created a shared vision, or common agenda, that calls for all families and children in Kent County to enjoy meaningful and fulfilling lives by achieving self-sufficiency and economic security through high quality education and community support. We have developed five goals that include:

1. Children begin kindergarten ready to succeed.
2. Students graduate from high school college and career ready.
3. Students complete a post-secondary credential prepared for the 21st century economy.
4. Young adults achieve meaningful careers and are engaged in the community.
5. Families are supported to ensure that children grow up in stable and loving

households that enable them to succeed in and out of school.

We have developed a shared strategy and shared metrics, and next we will work together to develop an administrative home or backbone for the effort, whose sole purpose will be to accelerate change on behalf of children and their families. This new mindset of Collective Impact will drive our work in Kent County. Public, private and non-profit organizations will align efforts to contribute to the achievement of these goals and the backbone organization will help to keep us on track and coordinate the widely diverse efforts of the community. Duplication of service will be eliminated even as holes in service are identified. Efficiently, effectively, passionately our entire community will pull together to ensure a solid future for our children.

Watch for the launch of the Collective Impact initiative this year. It has the potential to transform the delivery of all community services to our children.

Before I leave the subject of our community's children I want to recognize the work done by our Superintendent Teresa Weatherall Neal and the Grand Rapids Public Schools Board of Education in the transformation of our schools. Superintendent Neal introduced a Transformation Plan that is bold and innovative, that focuses on student achievement and maximizes the use of tax resources. The Board of Ed took the plan to the public, listened to input and concerns, made responsive changes and then, on a 9-0 vote adopted the Plan. This plan takes an extraordinary challenge and turns it to an opportunity to improve education in Grand Rapids. Isn't that very essence of transformation? It's not about slashing until you reach your budgetary goal. Rather, it's about innovating, reorganizing and continuously improving within the restraints of limited resources. Join me in thanking Superintendent Neal and the Board members who are here today.

CHAMPIONS OF DIVERSITY

I look forward each year to recognizing pillars within our community who are moving the needle on civil rights. I call it the Champion of Diversity Award and it has been given to individuals young and old, of every race and faith, from business, education, and religion who have dedicated their lives to ensuring equity in our community.

Today I turn very close to home to honor two men whose lives exemplify everything that Champions of Diversity stands for. I recognized that I need look no farther than the Grand Rapids City Commission to find this year's Champions. I refer, of course to Commissioner James White and Commissioner Elias Lumpkins.

All his life, Commissioner James B. White has worked to heal society. His strategy has been to gather people to develop human services programs, projects and organizations. He has seen that whenever people of diverse ethnic backgrounds

come together to work on something that is worthwhile, they come to know and respect each other.

Jim has worked internationally as a fact-finder in apartheid South Africa and an organizer of an international peace conference in which nine nations participated. He walked with Dr. King and he worked on neighborhood initiatives with Malcolm X.

Commissioner White is a consummate educator who has taught young people entering ministry, provided real-world work experience for fifth graders and developed a program of academic competition for sixth graders, he organized and hosted a citywide Children's Summit and he was instrumental in developing Project Cool, renamed Youth Employment Program, to provide meaningful and educational summer jobs for urban youth. Jim founded Camp Tall Turf, developed the model that became Project Rehab and, together with Commissioner Lumpkins and others he established a scholarship fund that has distributed tens of thousands of dollars to graduating high school seniors.

Commissioner Elias Lumpkins, Jr. was born behind, as he puts it, "the cotton curtain in Redwood, Mississippi", a suburb of Vicksburg, one of the last battle sites in the Civil War. Although his sharecropping parents were divorced, they and his stepfather always encouraged Elias to get an education; something no one could take from him. He graduated from Grand Rapids South High, and earned higher education degrees from Grand Rapids Junior College, Michigan State University and Wayne State University.

Commissioner Lumpkins told me, "Alice Walker wrote, 'No one is your friend who demands your silence or denies your opportunity to grow.' This is especially true when working with and advocating for youths and adults."

His love of history and reading led to Elias to become an elementary teacher at Campau Park and Henry schools and an administrator at South Middle, Grand Rapids Community College, and Calvin College. He has always been active in public service in his community, St. Luke African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, community-based organizations and on the Grand Rapids City Commission. Each experience has enabled him to advocate for our children and young adults, as Eli calls them: "the trustees of tomorrow"!

Commissioner Lumpkins, like Commissioner White, has a long list of honors and recognitions including the "Giant Among Giants" award of Grand Rapids Community College.

Ladies and gentlemen help me welcome this year's Champions of Diversity Commissioner James B. White and Commissioner Elias Lumpkins.

Before I leave the matter of diversity let me tell you about a new initiative we intend to launch this year. We know that, apart from English, the most frequently spoken

language in our community is Spanish. We have translated many documents into Spanish and continue to look for ways to improve service delivery to Spanish-language speakers in our community. Every Thursday we have a City radio show on La Interferencia 810 AM at 8:10 AM addressing issues of interest to the Spanish speaking community in the Spanish language.

When a large number of Spanish speakers attended a recent City Commission meeting I was struck by the difficulty Spanish speakers have in following the proceedings, which take place in a language other than their mother tongue. We have identified funds and will be bringing a recommendation to the City Commission to provide translation services for City Commission meetings. Whether you are in the audience or in your home watching television, by June 30, 2013, you will be able to listen to the City Commission meeting in Spanish with simultaneous translation. I am very pleased to be able to offer this service and believe we are one of the first cities in the state to do so.

SUSTAINABILITY INITIATIVES

2012 was a year of building on our platform of prior sustainability gains.

Sticking to our goal of total replacement of coal-generated electrical power with renewable-resource electrical power by 2020, the City installed a solar energy system on our Water Department Building. That system is producing 35% of the total energy demand for the building and will pay for itself entirely in eight years, well ahead of our original estimate. What's even better, it was developed using federal grant funds with no reliance on local funding. Solar energy is, today, much more economical than wind energy and it produces power where it can be used at major building sites. We are exploring the possibility of installing solar on other City buildings to capture this free and sustainable energy source.

Also, today I'm pleased to announce that the City has received \$30,000 in consulting services from the US Environmental Protection Services for engineering studies on a large-scale solar installation at the former Butterworth Landfill. That site is ideally suited for this type of development and this study will determine if a project can be financially feasible and at what scale. The City of Grand Rapids is dedicated to achieving affordable renewable energy and reducing energy consumption and cost. I'm grateful for the work of Haris Alibasic, Director of the Office of Energy and Sustainability, and to our citizen and staff Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Teams.

Our combined sewer separation project, begun in 1993, is nearly completed and the results are dramatic. We have all but eliminated combined sewer overflows into the Grand River – by “all but eliminated” I mean that our overflows have been reduced by 99.8%. We will be done with this project by December 2016, three years ahead of schedule.

The river has rebounded as a world-class fishery for Salmon and Steelhead. Beaches between here and the lakeshore may still close but now it is for non-point sources like agricultural run-off. Our more than \$300 million community investment in environmental stewardship is paying off in significant ways. For one, it has set the bar for stewardship in the Grand River watershed that our partners are working to meet. And, second, it has set the stage for visionary thinking about the future of our river resource – like the thinking our citizens – many of you in this room – generated through Green Grand Rapids.

Nine years ago we started a fall riverbank cleanup in partnership with WMEAC and now we clean the banks from Walker to Grandville through Grand Rapids and Wyoming. This year 670 volunteers turned out on a beautiful fall day to clean over 5 tons of trash from the river edges over 25 miles of the Grand River and its tributaries. Water quality in the Grand River has not been better in the past 100 years than it is today. We are returning to our river, returning to the heart of the city, the watery connector between east and west, between our past and our future.

That's why I am so enthusiastic about the proposed rapids restoration project. When this project is complete it will redefine us, put meaning back into our name, and serve as a source of civic pride and recreational value for the centuries to come. Indeed, this is the gift of our generation to generations unborn: the majestic rapids restored, the river enlivened.

By now most Grand River Valley citizens know about the project. It was the dream of two visionaries – Chris Muller and Chip Richards – who imagined a different riverscape than anyone living in Grand Rapids today can recall. They envisioned restoring the river rapids of the Odawa, Potawatomie and Ojibway; the river rapids beside which Louis Campeau and Lucius Lyon built their settlement. It didn't take long for the vision of Chip and Chris to become the vision of many others. A stakeholder group formed under the leadership of Steve Heacock and Mike VanGessel. The federal interagency Urban Waters Coalition was introduced to the project by Mark VanPutten. The state of Michigan was brought to the table by Sam Cummings and Eric DeLong and Governor Snyder made special mention of the project in his State of the State speech last week.

And so our Rapids Restoration initiative is born. There is no doubt in anyone's mind that there are difficult challenges ahead: further developing, checking and rechecking engineering data; ensuring protection of upstream stretches against aquatic invasive species; raising a substantial sum of money from the private sector to pay for the redevelopment. But neither is there doubt in anyone's mind that if a city exists on this earth that can make difficult things happen, it's our Grand Rapids. We are visionaries. We are problem solvers. And if this thing can be done we will do it and we will do it right. I pledge myself to ensuring that every issue is considered and every voice is heard as this process unfolds.

Grand Rapids developed a sustainability planning process nine years ago and it has served us very well. I hope you might take the time to view that plan on the city website at www.grcity.us.

Our Sustainability Plan has been cited by others as a national model for municipal planning. A recent report released by the International City-County Management Association stated: “(Grand Rapids) sustainability plan is considered one of the most innovative in the nation with specific environmental, economic and social sustainability outcomes and targets as goals for all city departments connected directly to the...fiscal plan.” Just three weeks ago Bill Moyers cited Grand Rapids among the dozen most sustainable cities in the US. Our sustainability plan brings together economic, human and environmental planning in one document. Each City department takes responsibility for contributing not only in its obvious area of interest but in the other areas as well. So, for example, the Treasurer has responsibility not just for economic matters but must also pursue goals in the environmental area (for example, paper reduction) and in the human area (for example, customer satisfaction and ease of access). We have tied the Sustainability Plan to our budget process so outcomes drive decisions. We check our progress against the plan each year and then begin a new plan-do-check-act cycle.

Last year I reported that we would begin a planning initiative to help prepare this city for the impacts of climate change. I told you we would develop a Resiliency Plan that would take into account extreme weather events, including extended heat waves, heavy rain events and violent storms. Working with our partners at Grand Valley State University and the West Michigan Environmental Action Council, and tying into an international network of cities through ICLEI (Cities for Climate Protection) we are developing a model Resiliency Plan and have already imbedded new work into our Emergency Preparedness Plan. Here’s what ICLEI wrote in their newsletter about the Grand Rapids plan: “ICLEI strongly encourages its members to mainstream climate and disaster risk reduction into their conventional planning processes, project design, and development decision-making—and Grand Rapids provides a great example of how to go about this work.”

Smart cities today are figuring out how to harden infrastructure against heat and storms and they’re investing in storm water management infrastructure to handle the increased number of heavy rain events. Smart cities are figuring out how to best identify vulnerable people in the community and reach them in times of extreme and protracted summer heat. Smart cities are working with their public utilities to protect electrical generation and power transmission infrastructure. Because Grand Rapids is a very smart city you will see all of these matters addressed in our Resiliency Plan and our Emergency Preparedness Plan.

This doesn’t mean we have stopped work on the initiatives that will, ultimately, help mitigate the effects of climate change: public transportation, trees and greenways, energy efficiency, renewable energy and alternative fuels, green building design and emissions control. It does mean, though, that we are acknowledging the change in

climate that is already affecting us, anticipating our vulnerabilities that result from that change, and investing wisely for a future that many of us in this room today will never see.

ECONOMIC

I want to tell you about another planning initiative that is bearing fruit for each of us living in Grand Rapids. In City Hall we call it transformation planning and we launched it two years ago when the citizens of Grand Rapids gave us your support for a temporary increase in income tax. The promise we made to you, the citizens, was that, before the five year sunset date on the tax increase, we would throw a rope around this city government and wrestle it to the ground. In other words, at the end of the five-year period we will have a government that fits the tax resources available to operate it and that government will be more efficient than ever before.

In developing this plan City Manager Greg Sundstrom and his staff leadership team considered and recommended 76 objectives to bring alignment between revenues and expenses by 2016.

Additionally, the City set up a Transformation Fund to reinvest in core City services to transform them to become financial sustainability by 2016. The City created the Transformation Fund with revenues from the five-year temporary City Income Tax, and funds from the State of Michigan.

Our turn-around plan is unique for the public sector. We created a five-year plan – aptly named the Transformation Investment Plan. We identified owners for each of those 76 value streams, with a timeline for their transformation. We relied on citizen Transformation Advisors to guide our plan and monitor our work. We formed a group of employees to serve as Investment Managers to review all investment requests from the Transformation Fund.

Here are just a few of the elements of the Transformation Plan:

- We are exploring regional service models for building inspections, property assessments, community development, police services, fire services, and emergency dispatch.
- We're adopting universal codes with the Cities of Wyoming and Kentwood to enhance opportunities for regional enforcement.
- We are implementing a 3-1-1-Customer Service and Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system that will significantly improve our customer service, transparency, and accountability to our customers
- We are building a virtual 24/7 City Hall where citizens can seek their service at their convenience.
- And we are partnering with the private sector and neighboring jurisdictions to provide municipal services.

We publicly report our progress quarterly. We developed an online reporting tool to track the progress of each value stream. We developed an online dashboard to report the City's sustainability progress. At each City Commission meeting, City staff provide progress reports to the public.

We just passed the half-way point on our five-year transformation plan. In less than two and one-half years, the City Income Tax will expire and City's revenues for operations and transformation will fall by \$9 million each year. The good news is that we are about one-half way to our financial goals. We are beginning to see the return on our investments. For example:

- After thorough review, from both outside experts and our employees, the Police Chief and Fire Chief – who collectively are responsible for 67% of the City General Fund budget – provided transformation plans for their departments that will significantly reduce costs while maintaining the same service performance levels.
- 92% of non-public safety services that are funded by general tax dollars are set to meet their targets.
- Two of the past three years, we lowered water and sewer rates,
- The City's new curbside recycling program with myGRcity points has increased the tonnage recycled by residents by 80% and lowered refuse tonnage by 13%.
- The City's new pay-as-you-throw smart-cart refuse program has offered several new options to residents to better manage their refuse costs.

Over the next two years the City will continue our sharp focus on transforming City operations to become financially sustainable after the June 30,2015 deadline.

Before I conclude this speech let me tell you about one of the most important land use planning processes this city has ever undertaken. For many of you the Michigan Street Corridor Planning Initiative has probably passed beneath your radar. However, I am convinced that the Plan that will emerge from this 18-month process will fundamentally change the face of Michigan Street, which we have come to know as Medical Mile, and will bring even more vibrancy to this already-burgeoning area of our city and its surrounding neighborhoods.

There has been an extensive public involvement process. The findings thus far reinforce our community's vision of creating a multi-modal environment to insure that everyone has access to our high-quality medical facilities and education institutions. Michigan Street is a critical regional employment center that has generated tens of thousands of jobs. We want to see this growth continue – what will the next \$1 billion of development look like?

This coming year, we will hear of exciting recommendations such as a cycletrack on Lyon Street – if implemented soon, it will be the first in Michigan. This two-way bike system will dedicate a vehicle travel lane to cyclists. The Rapid will begin to construct new BRT stations on Ransom and Michigan to provide high-frequency transit service, and planners are already working with developers to create a dense mixed-use environment that will improve pedestrian safety and comfort. Plans will be unveiled that transform redevelopment sites along the corridor into places for shopping, living, and offices.

The Plan's goals will not only influence what happens on Michigan Street but Downtown, North Monroe and the Near West side as well. What if we added 10,000 residents to these areas to reduce the number of people who are commuting into the city? What if we had a goal of a 10% mode shift that encouraged people to get out of their cars and choose transportation alternatives that increased physical activity and improved the health of our city? What if these efforts created the tipping point for a grocery store or other long-desired retailers?

The goals to be set as part of the Michigan Street Corridor Plan will have a ripple effect that will improve the lives of all Grand Rapidsians. Because of this, I am encouraging planners to use the input gathered and goals from this process to serve as a launching point for a Downtown planning effort. It is time to begin the conversation not just about what happens on the Hill, but in the valley. Future development of our Downtown – which has become the region's downtown – and, particularly, the banks of the Grand River merits thoughtful and intentional action by the public and private sectors, informed by the region's residents, to continue our positive momentum. We need to leverage, maximize new opportunities, and be forward thinking in our continued work to make Grand Rapids the most livable city in America.

CONCLUSION

Three weeks ago Grand Rapids ended up on two national lists. The first was Bill Moyer's list of the dozen most sustainable cities in the United States. The second came from a Forbes article on the ten happiest places to work in America. The only thing that surprised me about these recognitions was that it took Moyers and Forbes this long to figure it out!

Remember when Newsweek magazine described Grand Rapids as a "dying city"? For that matter, do you remember Newsweek, which can no longer be purchased at the newsstand or delivered in the mail?

The Grand Rapids Business Journal printed a comprehensive list of accolades Grand Rapids has received since the Newsweek slam. Business Journal forgot a couple and I'm happy to add them.

- Best places to live in the US by Relocate America
- Best cities for raising a family by Forbes
- Best cities to retire to by “Where to Retire” magazine
- Brookings Institute labeled Grand Rapids among the top ten “comeback cities” in America
- The US Chamber of Commerce gave us the Seimans Most Sustainable City award
- The US Conference of Mayors last year gave us their first place environmental and climate protection award
- We are listed in the top ten urban fisheries in America by Fly Fisherman magazine
- And, of course, who could forget: Beer City USA

A lesser city than ours would sit on its laurels, content with the attention of the nation. But this is a city driven by what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called the “fierce urgency of now.”

We feel the urgency of a generation of youth facing a difficult and uncertain future.
 We feel the urgency of the mothers who have lost their children to gun violence.
 We feel the urgency of an economy struggling to burst the shackles of recession.
 We feel the urgency born of a warming planet.
 We feel the urgency of the immigrant longing to fit into her adopted home.
 We feel the urgency of a neighborhood seeking to redefine itself.

We feel the urgency; the “fierce urgency of now.”

And it is for times like these and places such as this that we were born.

So let us use this moment to rededicate ourselves.

I want you to stand and repeat after me:

- This is our Grand Rapids
- I pledge to her my energy
- My creativity
- My time and my passion
- Together we will reach new heights
- Together we will overcome great obstacles
- This is our Grand Rapids

Grand Rapids, you are beautiful. You are worthy of our best dreams. And in “Our Grand Rapids” we know how to work together to make dreams reality. Thank you.