

2026 State of the City Address - Mayor Drew Dilkens

April 8th, 2026

Good afternoon, everyone.

Thank you, Steve Salmons, for that kind introduction, for your steadfast leadership of Port Windsor, your years of service to multiple levels of government, and your lifelong commitment to this community, and for stepping forward in support of this year's State of the City. You've helped bring-us all together today, and I thank you for partnering to create this opportunity.

Thank you to Tal Czudner as well, for your leadership of Windsor Detroit Border Link, your guidance as Chair of the Chamber, your support of this event, and your commitment to helping Windsor and the surrounding region shine.

And thank you to Ryan Donally, for the outstanding work you've been doing as CEO of the Windsor Essex Chamber of Commerce. After 150 years, The Chamber continues to be the voice of business in our region/ you bring business together/ and you bring people together... and today is proof positive of your efforts.

To begin, I'd like to recognize my colleagues on City Council who have taken the time to join us today: Joanne, Ed, Renaldo, Jim, Gary, Frazier, Angelo and Kieran.

The role of a city councillor always looks easier from the outside looking in. But when you sit around the table you quickly realize the complex-architecture of City operations and financing and the delicate balance required in an ever-changing world.

And, it's an election year, so those thinking of running I remind you that, for their public service, Council pays themselves just above minimum wage.

They get a parking pass and a cell phone and the joy of "death-by-a thousand cuts on social media."

All joking aside, I know that each of us would tell anyone contemplating stepping-up to serve... the job is big, important, and has the potential to change lives.

To each of them, in front of this esteemed group, I say thank you for working to make a difference in your wards, and across our entire community. It is an honour to serve alongside you.

Hilda MacDonald, the Mayor of Leamington and Warden of Essex County is also here with us. Thank you, Hilda for making time to be here/ and for your partnership and the spirit of cooperation you bring to our collective work.

Also in the audience are several City of Windsor employees.

I'd like to acknowledge our Corporate Leadership Team led by City Manager Ray Mensour.

These are the folks working around the clock to leverage every opportunity and face every challenge, shepherding each report to council, and working in lockstep with Council to build our city-up for the benefit of our entire region.

Finally, my heartfelt thanks to each of you in attendance. You are the leaders, trailblazers and community-builders for one of the most important cities to watch in Ontario and Canada.

It is important to have you all here today as we discuss Windsor's Long Game.

Speaking of long game's...It is meaningful to be here at the Giovanni Caboto Club, which celebrated its 100th anniversary just last year.

This Club has stood the test of time. For a century it has been an important and meaningful symbol of the endurance and grit of Windsor's Italian Canadians who have contributed so much to our region.

Over the years, I have delivered many Inaugural and State of the City addresses.

With each of these events, when I think about what my speech should include/ the themes that I will touch upon/ I start by considering the major regional, national and international events that shape our current context.

It sure has been an interesting year.

Certainly, again this year, I start with contemplating our status as a gateway between nations.

The frosty trade relations with the United States, which informed so much of last year's speech, continue to have a chilling effect on our local economy.

President Trump is looking to the mid-terms in November ... he's started to roll-back tariffs on many steel products due to the inflationary impact on US consumers.

And work is about to begin by all negotiating teams to review the CUSMA trade agreement... an important issue for us in Windsor.

Conflicts in the middle east have replaced trade irritants and Epstein stories on the front pages of newspapers.

Let's face it – many of us know more today, than we did a mere month ago about the geopolitical importance of the Strait of Hormuz.

This escalation is having a dramatic impact on the international economy as US tariffs did the year prior, with the price of oil having a significant impact on commodity prices and many ancillary goods.

Affordability is a central issue for people around the world, and right here at home these events layer more pain on those/ least capable of absorbing it.

At the same time, as our own Prime Minister pointed out in his powerful remarks in Davos – the global order that defined the last half-century has broken-down, and we must be clear-eyed about the future.

Some businesses are doing well in the current environment.

Some have figured out a pathway for survival.

Some are struggling to make money with the current framework... and that impacts employment... which in turn affects consumer sentiment and ultimately, optimism.

Uncertainty remains the name of the game.

But that doesn't mean things are bleak.

So, as I stand here before you, faced with all the challenges/ worrisome international events/ and troubling economic uncertainties, I continue to believe that Windsor's best days lie ahead!

Jim Morrison could say it for me by now: I am very optimistic about Windsor's future.

I know this can appear to be a bit of a political cliché. But this isn't an irrational exuberance or some innate mayoral appreciation that every mayor in every city ought to possess for their community.

I believe it to be true.

At Davos, the Prime Minister spoke about the future.

And that's of paramount importance amidst this chaos.

I'm reminded of the quote from Henry Ford (and you're going to hear a few more Henry Ford quotes today) when he said, "*When everything seems to be going against you, remember that an airplane takes off against the wind, not with it.*"

The City of Windsor continues to deliver for residents, with a focus on getting the basics right and planning for our long game.

Our recent budget stands in stark contrast to many of Ontario's large urban centres.

We are one of only two cities across the province to pass a budget with a 0% municipal tax levy.

Premier Doug Ford, a champion of our region has publicly recognized our innovative path at an important time in Ontario.

He and his Government acknowledged how we worked to protect Windsorites through our budget process; to help people make it through when times are tough.

And folks, 2026 was not some anomaly in our approach. I've heard the comments that we only did this because it's an election year.

Come on... look at the entire term... at a time when we all experienced the highest inflation in 40 years, the City of Windsor delivered the lowest tax increase of any city in Ontario over the past 4 years. The. Lowest.

That is the commitment I made to you in 2022. And we didn't cut projects or starve the capital budget... we actually increased it!

We leaned into what we can control, at a time when some folks are working hard to make ends meet.

And I'm proud of that work.

Because we are Investing Responsibly, our budget delivered the largest capital investment program this City has ever seen all while keeping taxes in check.

That investment is inflation adjusted... not some play on numbers or political trickery.

That doesn't happen by accident. It's possible through the hard work of Ray Mensour, Janice Guthrie, so many members of City Admin, and the whole of Council.

And we had difficult decisions to make.

We needed to acknowledge and recognize the moment that we find ourselves in.

By investing responsibly, we are securing the foundation that will continue to build our community, improve public service, protect our future, and ensure Windsor is a great place to invest, lay down roots, and raise a family.

In addition to holding the line on taxes, our budget maintained funding for the Asset Management Plan; continued responsible investment in infrastructure, growth and development with a \$2.26 billion 10-year capital plan; and included the largest road rehabilitation and repair program in the City's history; 13% higher than in 2025.

Our Asset Management Plan will become the benchmark by which the Province allocates future revenues to cities... recognizing and supporting communities who are working to take care of themselves and their assets.

Not supporting that plan would have been among the least intelligent decisions any city council could have made.

Thankfully the majority of this and the previous council recognized the importance of this funding for our future success.

So let me tell you more about this year's budget:

As part of over \$317 million in capital spending for 2026 alone:

\$164 million is allocated for roads;

\$60 million will go towards sewers;

Just over \$29 million for community services including parks, recreation, facilities and culture; and

\$5.5 million is included in capital investment in public transit.

Announcements and news from the past few weeks paint a picture of what I mean when I say I'm focused on Windsor's Long Game.

We've announced major housing developments at Caron Avenue, where Farhi Holdings Corporation is investing \$300 million to create three buildings with 200 units; plus a 28-storey residential tower with 187 more units at Janette and Riverside.

A few blocks away, the 531 Pelissier Group will invest \$17 million to build the 48-unit "Pelissier Park" development.

Both developments are on city owned parking lots that sit vacant most of the time.

Both are key projects under the City's Housing Solutions Made for Windsor strategy.

We've added new properties to the portfolio of City-owned lands available for development, including an unused portion of Kinsmen Norman Park in Ward 8 where we will invest the proceeds of the land sale into park improvements...

Also, the former Concord School site in Ward 6... and the former St. Michael's School site in Ward 2.

We have more major announcements coming soon for sites like the Roseland Parking Lot, and former W.D. Lowe secondary school.

Our housing strategy is working.

How do I know?

We surpassed our housing goal in 2024, achieving 213% of targets, and receiving \$5.2 million from the Ontario Government.

Our ambitious strategy is proving that investment attracts investment.

We certainly understood that when we launched our Strengthen the Core plan and invested \$5 million in that strategy.

We recognized that perception of safety issues had become a barrier to investment and enjoyment in the downtown core. So, we acted quickly and strategically.

We created a comprehensive plan that is working overtime to attract new investments, businesses, residents and visitors to the core.

This month, Council will receive a progress-report which shows that everything is trending in the right direction, and that much more is possible if we keep our foot on the pedal.

Last week, we launched surveys that will help deliver 36 new playgrounds in parks. We want your input on how these installations look and feel.

We know Windsorites love their parks. That's why we recently replaced 87 of our 125 playgrounds, and why we're investing \$16.2 million more now to improve amenities and quality of life across the city.

There's positive forward momentum with Parks Canada, with whom we just signed an Agreement in Principle for the creation of the Ojibway National Urban Park... something discussed but not delivered for many years.

Make no mistake... we will get it done.

Council also recently approved the Sandwich South Development Financing Strategy; and in the leadup to Easter you may have missed this very important development.

In 2003 the City of Windsor acquired 6,500 acres of land from the Town of Tecumseh.

When you look at any city map, the land between the airport and the 401 – Walker Road to the west the city limits to the east is the future growth area of Windsor.

Over the past several years, environmental assessments and ERCA elevation studies been completed. The official and secondary land plans are done.

The drainage studies are complete.

We know this area will guide future developments, attract game-changing investments, and unlock the potential of development lands AND thousands and thousands of new homes.

In fact, every time I see Mr. Habib, he tells me he's paying the bank \$1,000 a day in carrying costs.

He wants to get going on building housing. And we want to support that housing to be built in a quick and orderly way.

Folks, we are working with the Province to open the 401 at Lauzon with construction of a \$125 million cloverleaf to be funded by the Province, with thanks to the strong leadership of Andrew Dowie and Doug Ford's love of Windsor.

The environmental assessment is done, and design work is almost complete, and will get baked into an upcoming construction schedule.

Ok – so what?

It's imperative that we have our funding lined up to connect our road to the provincial highway, OR we get passed over in favour of communities who are ready to go.

We are not going to miss our window of opportunity.

And why is this road important?

Because with the road comes all of the requisite servicing that will allow the entire eastern portion of Sandwich South to open almost immediately after construction.

This type of opportunity is hardly seen but once in a lifetime.

If you look at our future employment lands – they are all located along the 401 corridor in Sandwich South which makes the opening of Lauzon a brilliant opportunity for economic growth.

In fact, this is how Windsor will benefit from the new bridge crossing by having the largest and closest industrial park to the US-Canada border, on the Canadian side.

In addition, the Fancsy Family Hospital will transform healthcare delivery in our region for generations to come.

This project is mere weeks away from moving forward. It will be one of the most expensive hospital projects in the province; and in the Ontario budget released last week, it is the number one project on the list.

You might have heard that this hospital project will be even bigger than originally planned.

They're adding over 100 new beds and space to expand as our population grows.

And while we get future-ready, the Sandwich South Plan also unlocks the remaining airport lands on the north side of Cabana Road with roads, stormwater retention and servicing that allow us to say 'yes' to today's economic development opportunities.

Site selectors don't care what land you'll have ready in 10 years... they want shovel ready opportunities now.

Ladies and gentlemen, you can't stop the future. But you can build it sensibly.

Which brings us to how we're funding this work: smart, sensible and by investing responsibly.

I'll let you in on a little secret about me - I have a natural aversion to debt... in my personal life and in my professional one. I don't like owing anyone anything!

And, I have sat through 11 years of annual meetings with our bond raters, Standard and Poor.

11 years of questions about our financial profile. Financial decision making. Tax rates and tax policy. Delinquent accounts and deferred revenues.

Debt structures, short and long-term borrowing and financial shock absorbers – for unexpected events like Covid and trade wars.

11 years of being responsible and accountable and getting drilled on 'the why', 'the how', and 'the when'.

Why hold taxes at zero?

When will you implement asset management strategies?

How will you fund battery factory land investments?

And so much more.

Frankly, I don't think there's a question they could put to me now that I haven't had before.

But more importantly, not one that we haven't contemplated in our strategic decision making.

Despite all of the challenges we have faced, our responsible decisions and actions saw our credit rating increase to AA+ with a stable outlook.

And - in each of those meetings, our debt levels are reviewed.

On many occasions I've been asked why the City isn't considering strategic debt issuance as we have a billion dollar borrowing capacity. Each time I've responded: "*We aren't yet ready.*"

Today, as a result of years of preparation, hard work, planning and growth, the City of Windsor is now ready to move forward.

The 10-year plan calls for taking-on strategic debt, incrementally, over a decade to ensure we can meet our future development potential while supporting hospital related growth.

The best part is, that debt will almost fully be repaid from the collection of development charges paid to the City as Sandwich South development takes off.

As taxpayers, we will not be paying for the service costs of this debt. Full stop.

And for that reason, I am able to accept this financing plan.

Some suggest that we could use our existing capital budget in place of debt.

That technically is an option – but not a responsible one... as we would significantly handicap all the work on roads and sewers in our 10-year capital plan.

In short, we would be funding growth, in exchange of maintenance on existing assets.

This is all about responsible investments that will make Windsor future ready... investments that have a strong ROI.

I want to pause here and acknowledge the 9 members of City Council who reviewed, assessed, analysed and asked good questions before approving the plan recommended by City Admin for this massive investment in Sandwich South.

Folks, most of these councillors will not be in office when the work is done. There will be no ribbons for them to cut. You won't see their names in the news. Most will never reflect on who approved the work and got it done; but know it was this crew who chose to invest responsibly for Windsor to be ready for the future.

Speaking of the future, the grand opening of the Gordie Howe International Bridge is on the horizon despite attempts by the 'billionaire boys' to keep it closed.

As much as I'd like to toll trucks on Huron Church Road, I'll be more excited to drop that idea in exchange for being able to cross the new bridge in the coming days.

That instantly-iconic infrastructure will support significant trade across a new crossing linking Canada and the United States. And as a border city, more trade is a good thing for our economy.

Our investment attraction efforts, led by Invest WindsorEssex and supported by our internal Economic Development Team continue to deliver new job creation in our backyard, and power the future economy in this region.

We recently cut the ribbon at the state-of-the-art NextStar Energy.

That battery facility has fueled so much of the growth and development Windsor-Essex is experiencing today.

Construction wrapped up last September; the 1,000th employee was hired in October; full electrode and cell production began in November; and by February of this year, the one-millionth battery cell was produced.

With \$6 billion invested, a 4.25 million-square-foot facility has risen to become a cornerstone of Canada's advanced battery manufacturing ecosystem.

With it... 1,300 direct jobs have already been created, building a high-skilled, future-ready workforce.

It represents one of the largest investments in Windsor in a century, and it has attracted incredible spin-off investments.

Since 2022, Windsor-Essex has welcomed:

55 new investments and expansion projects above and beyond NextStar Energy, across all sectors including Advanced Manufacturing, Hospitality, Pharmaceutical, Wholesale, and more.

I'm talking about projects like the Minth Group, with an over \$300 million investment and 1,100 new jobs.

I'm talking about additional direct investments, research and development, and more jobs from DS Actimo, Bobaek America Inc., and NEO Battery Materials.

These additional investments are poised to create over 4,200 more jobs and generate over \$1.2 billion in capital spend within our region.

Through the modern electricity ecosystem that has been built here, we will help to power the future of Ontario and Canada for decades to come.

And let's talk about our economic development pipeline, we're working on 15 high-potential leads within the City of Windsor.

Investment value amounts to over \$1.6 billion that could land an additional 1,600 jobs.

And because of the chaos in the United States, Canada is even more attractive as a location/ with stable government, rule of law, favourable exchange rates and free-trade access to the European union.

The pipeline is robust partly because of the Trump-level chaos.

As Mayor of Windsor, I can't predict when the current U.S. Administration will come to its senses, or when oil will stabilize under \$100 per barrel.

But I can tell you what's next for Windsorites.

We will see massive improvements to our local infrastructure...we're all ready for the construction delay complaints!

Residents on the east side will welcome the completion of the new Banwell Road Interchange.

The Gordie Howe International Bridge will open on the west end.

We will get shovels in the ground at the new regional Fancsy Family Hospital.

And we will announce major developments coming to additional sites in the Housing Solutions portfolio.

In addition, we're exploring the potential of the Windsor Arena site as a means to support the work of H4 to help address the challenges that homelessness, mental health and addiction continue to present.

The potential of that plan is the very definition of repurposing key assets from the past in a responsible way that helps shape our future.

The Windsor Police Service has recently implemented several “real-time” operational technologies to improve public safety.

That work has legs... and we continue to move forward on implementing a Real-Time Operations Centre that will support our efforts to Strengthen the Core, while safeguarding the broader community in every ward in Windsor through modern tools that reflect privacy standards.

When it comes to libraries as community hubs, a vision exists for a Central Branch in the core, connected to the dynamic space we’ve built at City Hall Square, which has been embraced by thousands of families over the past 10 months.

In terms of affordable housing:

We are doing all of the pre-work necessary to align available funding with opportunities at CMHC in support of construction of Meadowbrook 2.0... bigger and better than the original.

I’ve asked City Administration to get to work making that happen right here, right now, in Windsor. The original project created 145 affordable units, and we want to do more.

Finally... our \$5 billion, 50-year Sewer Master Plan is hard at work and succeeding in building Windsor’s Flood Resilient Future.

I’ve walked streets in neighbourhoods following devastating flood events.

When our memories were gathered in garbage bags waiting by the side of the road. I never want any of us to experience that again.

We’re spending record amounts to make Windsor more resilient to climate change and will continue with substantial investments like the \$32 million pump stations being built on Riverside Drive today.

This work is about protecting people’s largest asset and the memories contained inside.

Henry Ford also once said: “*Don’t find fault, find a remedy.*”

And in that spirit, I reaffirm my commitment to do away with the current Stormwater Financing Plan.

At its core, the program was about ensuring fairness for ratepayers. That should not change. But we need a plan that makes a difference, while also making sense; and that work is currently underway.

I'd like to think that when we get the basics right at City Hall... when we work together as Council and Administration, we're doing our part to make the job easier for officials at Queen's Park and Parliament Hill to deliver on their side.

When we invest responsibly, it strengthens our case when we advocate for new funding from those governments.

Because they know they have a trusted partner at City Hall to deliver for our community, and they know we have solid plans in place.

When we invest responsibly, it means that residents who are struggling with the rising cost of groceries, gas and just about everything won't be hit with a massive property tax increase.

When we invest responsibly, it means that we are able to provide the services and amenities that make a difference for families and seniors in Windsor.

Parks and recreation facilities, indoor and outdoor, that provide great options for sport, fitness, fun, and a sense of community.

Libraries that serve as community hubs, where neighbours gather to play chess or for regular story time for toddlers to foster curiosity and a learning-culture in the next generation.

Important historic and cultural institutions like the Capitol Theatre, and Willistead Manor, where my daughter will get married later this summer.

While the world swirls with negative news stories, economic challenges and major conflicts that are having real impact on the economic conditions right here at home, I know that by getting the basics right, by investing responsibly, I am as hopeful today as I was on my first day in office – that Windsor is on the right path.

Our determination and community spirit is unmatched, and I've never been more proud of the resilience of the people in Windsor... great recessions, pandemics, trade wars... the people here are resilient!

Just as the founders of the Chamber felt some 150 years ago, and the Caboto Club over 100 years ago – we are filled with hope.

Hope that our kids will have access to opportunities right here, to build a home and raise their own families.

But don't confuse that 'hope' with the type you get when you buy a Lotto Max ticket.

I'm talking about the hope that comes with hard work.

The hope the Italian families had 100 years ago when they founded the Caboto Club and put in the hard work and sacrifices to create success.

Never leaving it to chance. Never leaving it for someone else to deliver.

Always believing that this place, above all others, was worth the effort.

In 2023, I lost my father. In 2025, I had my own mortality-check and came through fighting; stronger than ever and back to normal.

Both experiences left me thinking about family lines, roots, history and heritage, culture and tradition.

Both experiences left me thinking about Windsor; this community we call home.

Windsor is one of the most diverse, multicultural, welcoming and inclusive communities in Canada.

It is the Automotive and Automobility Capital of our country, and a gateway between nations.

It is a city that honours its Veterans like no where else across all of Canada.

It is a city bursting with a vibrant arts and culture scene/ thriving small businesses/ innovative entrepreneurs, so many creative community-builders, and truly delicious pizza and top-notch shawarma.

It is a place where folks from all walks of life and all faith backgrounds gather together to celebrate, share stories, eat, laugh and connect.

It is a community with historic ties to the Underground Railroad, and a legacy as a refuge for countless immigrants seeking a peaceful, meaningful life; they too, thinking about a better future.

I've been thinking about all of that, so often, particularly over these past few years.

My goal as Mayor has only ever been to deliver the same level of determination, effort and energy that generations before me have contributed to building this city.

In many ways, that job will never be completed, because there is always going to be another project to fund.

Another problem to solve. Another new investment to land.

That's what makes local government, and service through public office, so important.

With full respect to our provincial and federal governments, and certainly to our local representatives who advocate for our progress every day...

The work that Administration undertakes on a daily basis at City Hall is felt in each of your homes when you turn on the tap, flush the toilet, or flick the light switch... when you drive to work, and when you rush home to get your kids to swimming lessons, or to soccer or hockey practice.

Investing responsibly is more than just a slogan to me.

It is what Windsor's been all about for as long as I can remember. It's become my own legacy beacon... guiding my work as Mayor.

It is the daily affirmation reminding me to focus on the next project, challenge and opportunity... the next path to leave our community, better than I found it.

Henry Ford also said, "*Thinking is the hardest work there is, which is the probable reason why so few engage in it.*"

And in that spirit, I would be remiss not to mention that we're coming to that time of year, in that four-year cycle, when an election will be upon us.

Everyone in this room today... you are the savvy, intelligent leaders who know what is at stake.

You – are – the – thinkers.

You've listened to the dangerous lies and utterly ridiculous rhetoric from across the water in the United States.

You've watched fake news online and on your social media feeds so skillfully presented that you're left wondering what's true and real versus fantasy and fiction.

We see it play out in Canada, in Ontario, and, right here at home in Windsor-Essex.

Every day I see the negative impacts of the decline in trusted media... please buy a subscription to the Windsor Star... it's so important!

You'll hear folks say that we're not investing in roads and infrastructure; that we're doing nothing to revitalize downtown; that wants are prioritized over needs; and that Canada ends at Toronto.

These lies... and I'm truly amazed by how often I hear them repeated... these lies ignore the progress and impact of Housing Solutions Made for Windsor; the transformational success of Strengthen the Core; and the potential unlocked by the largest capital budget in the City's history.

It ignores almost every good thing happening here today.

The folks perpetuating that narrative forget that Canada begins in Windsor. That has been more evident this past year than almost any other time in our history.

In my inaugural address in 2022 I spoke about the inflection point at which we find ourselves.

Windsor is making a transition – a transition from being a 'big small city' to becoming a 'small big city'.

That transition is fraught with difficulty and challenge. It's a shift in mood and in mindset, as much as it is in our approach and in our acumen.

It will take all of us in this room to leverage the opportunities and navigate the obstacles that come with this transition.

Henry Ford once said, "*Obstacles are those frightful things you see when you take your eyes off your goal.*"

So, I urge you to be hyper-vigilant this year.

Focus on Windsor's Long Game, focus on our goals.

Trust the impact of Investing Responsibly. Keep standing, united, to Protect Our Future.

I am proud of the work that we've done, Council and Administration together.

And of the Community and business leaders in this room who yourselves - have a strong appreciation for investing responsibly to deliver results each and every day.

I look forward to all that we will continue to do, together, to make sure that Windsor remains the best City... in the greatest Province... within a strong and united Canada.

Let's go create our future together!

Thank you.