Good evening friends, neighbors and fellow Grand Rapidians. I am excited to be with you tonight to talk about our city – what we’ve accomplished and the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead.

Opportunities that are hopeful and meaningful. Challenges that are serious, but solvable. Challenges we will overcome. Together.

According to realtor.com’s national ranking, we have the hottest zip code in America – with a booming real estate market, a growing economy and a strong sense of community. This isn’t just a “nice place” to live. It’s the best place to live.

Grand Rapids is our hometown. More importantly, it’s our home. Let’s talk about what that means.

A home is where family and friends gather. In this home we call Grand Rapids, a significant part of our city’s success comes from our strong partnerships. A great example is our gathering this evening, which would not be possible without the support of our sponsors. For the sponsors here tonight, please stand so we can thank you for your support.

Another element of home is working together. Which can be seen in our city’s collaboration among elected officials. While much of the politics outside Grand Rapids is divisive and divided, our West Michigan leadership works together. We don’t always agree – but we always keep in mind that we serve the same people – the people of Grand Rapids.

I want to take a moment to acknowledge the elected officials who are here this evening and ask that you rise. A special thank you to my colleagues on the City Commission - Commissioners Joe Jones, Milinda Ysasi, Kurt Reppart, Jon O’Connor, Senita Lenear and Nathaniel Moody - along with our newly appointed Comptroller Max Frantz - what an honor it is to serve our city with such a dedicated group of individuals. Please join me in thanking these leaders for their service and sacrifice.

A special thank you to my Mayor’s Youth Council who are here tonight helping with this event.

And most certainly, a heartfelt thank you to our dedicated city employees who work around the clock to serve and protect us.

Please, everybody, a big thank you to all of these individuals.

HOME
As I begin tonight, I ask you to close your eyes for a moment and think about where you live. Picture it in your mind. Do you see your house? Maybe a Bungalow in Creston or the West Side, a historic home in Heritage Hill, a brick ranch near MLK park - an apartment building or condo downtown.

Everybody here is picturing a different house, but you’re all thinking of home.

Home is not just four walls and a roof overhead - home is where the heart is. Home is the look in a child’s eyes on Christmas morning. Home is the smell of cherry pie on the stove and turkey in the oven. Home is the feel of grass on your feet and a wooden bat in your hands. Home is a hammock in your backyard. Home is everything you experience – all the joy and pain that comes between the family gatherings, backyard parties and living room wakes.

Home.

Grand Rapids is our home.

I’m going to expand on this theme tonight. Because we want everyone to feel at home in Grand Rapids. Our mission is to make sure there is a space for everyone. A space where people feel safe and where they feel they belong. We want them to choose this community to live, work, raise their families and retire. We want to be a home for business and economic vitality. And we want all of our residents – including our most vulnerable: those who are sick, struggling with poverty or homeless – to have a safe place to call home.

[Pause]

I make this pledge to you, as mayor of our great city: Your home is where my heart is. And where our heart is, our focus is.

As we look back on 2019, we have a lot to celebrate. We experienced yet another year of positive economic growth and a skyline dotted with cranes. New and expanded business projects brought hundreds of new jobs and opportunities to Grand Rapids.

We opened Studio Park in the heart of South Arena, along with the exciting announcement that Acrisure will be building their headquarters downtown and bringing hundreds of jobs to our city.

We watched the transformation of an asphalt parking lot into an impressive mixed-used development on the corner of Pearl and Ottawa.

We broke ground on the Doug Meijer Medical Innovation Building, to further strengthen our reputation as a center for excellence in health care - and serve as a magnet for world-class talent.
We had our first medical marijuana facility open last month and, to clarify, there are no changes to our current medical marijuana approval process. In regards to recreational marijuana, the commission continues our work as local ownership and equity are important factors in moving forward.

We’ve taken steps to ensure an inclusive city for everyone, while recognizing that there’s still a long way to go to get our house in order.

We’re diversifying our business community. The Downtown Development Authority supported minority- and women-owned businesses with over $200,000 in grants. These dynamos of entrepreneurship include Ambiance … Mosby’s Popcorn … Mel Styles … GR Noir. … Oh Hello … and Art Caribbean.

Our Economic Development Department worked with over 35 partners in our community to create an Equitable Economic Development and Mobility Strategic Plan. This nation-leading plan was finalized last month and sets bold objectives to embed equity into every aspect of our work.

We supported the important work of our neighborhoods with the finalization of the Heartside Quality of Life Study and the approval of the Southtown Business Area Specific Plan. We are now seeing the benefit of that work with the activation of vacant space along Division, improvements in lighting and the addition of a public restroom that will be installed this year.

And we saw significant investment continue in our neighborhoods as Plaza Roosevelt comes to life and additional affordable housing developments move forward on the Westside, near Garfield Park and on Eastern.

We have momentum. But we need to remain committed to becoming the exceptional community we aspire to be. My personal commitment is to work side by side with you — to make this city an even better home for families, businesses and neighborhoods.

To make homes safer … more affordable … and healthier for more people.

To make this the greatest hometown in America.

To make that happen we need a healthy, vibrant and supportive business community.

That includes recruiting and retaining retail businesses as small businesses are the heart of our local economy. The cornerstone of our effort is a new partnership with the Grand Rapids Chamber and the Downtown Development Authority on a Retail Retention and Recruitment Initiative. This includes the completion of a citywide market analysis and hiring a specialist who can focus specifically on this goal.
The goal of this work is to support current small businesses and increase the number of new businesses - resulting in fewer vacant storefronts. At city hall, new businesses will be supported by a new Business Liaison who will help remove barriers when moving through the permit and approval process.

These initiatives are pointing us in the right direction for a better future. Yet our hometown is more than just our vibrant economic development plans. We know better than most other cities that a hometown is nothing without strong and safe neighborhoods.

Because that is where our homes are.

The City of Grand Rapids works to support and strengthen our neighborhoods. Each year the city supports neighborhood associations with roughly $600,000 in Community Development Block Grant. Last year, we awarded more than $96,000 through our Neighborhood Match Fund to 46 creative neighborhood-driven projects. One powerful example is The Black Book Exchange House, a beautiful space for black literature. The Founder of this project wanted to build awareness of African-American culture and creativity. The match fund allowed us to do just that. Be sure to look for the colorful and creative boxes throughout the city.

Strong neighborhoods bring people together and create opportunities for meaningful and long-lasting connections. Last year, more than 500 people turned out for our Neighborhood Summit. We are excited about the rapidly approaching 2020 Summit, coming up this Saturday. From north on Plainfield, to John Ball Area Neighbors, down to Alger Heights and Southtown to Ottawa Hills and East Gate – all our voices together make Grand Rapids great. Please join us! Your unique voice and role in your neighborhood matters!

The strength of our neighborhoods is the strength of Grand Rapids. Yet simple economics tell us that being a great place to live increases demand for housing - which can drive up prices.

For our neighborhoods to be truly strong, we need to make home ownership affordable.

Good decision-making starts with good data and information. Last year, we partnered with the Michigan Land Bank .. K Connect .. and the Grand Rapids Chamber as we continue to tackle this challenge. We launched a county-wide housing analysis. And we will partner this year with Housing Next, an organization that has a proven track record of advancing affordable housing efforts.
All of these efforts are aimed at expanding the base of affordable housing. Over the last two years we added over 250 affordable housing units in our city and another 800 are under construction or planned. This is a move in a positive direction but represents just a fraction of the affordable housing we need in our community – which is why we will continue our work on this critical issue.

But new businesses, better neighborhoods and more affordable housing doesn’t mean much if our homes are toxic.

In 2019, we increased our focus on protecting children from lead poisoning. Too many children in Grand Rapids live in older homes that are not safe. With old windows covered with lead paint that when opened and closed creates toxic dust. We can and must do better.

Thanks to the the work of our Lead Free Kids Committee, we will be looking to implement recommendations on improvements to our housing code, inspections, and enforcement procedures along with public education.

We partnered with the county on a lead poisoning public awareness and education campaign. This year, that campaign will inform more people about the dangers of lead poisoning and where to go for help.

We won a $4.2 million federal grant from HUD that will now be used to remediate lead in homes.

To move this work forward and ensure progress, we must take a multi-jurisdictional approach that combines efforts from the City, County and State. And that will happen this year thanks to County Chair Mandy Bolter and her leadership in creating a Kent County Lead Action Team, which will be led by our County Health Department Director, Adam London.

A hometown isn’t much of a home without green spaces and play place for kids… a place for couples to hold hands and take long walks … for any one of us who needs a quiet moment in these frenzied times.

Last year I talked about the importance of our parks and the need to continue our investment to ensure every child in our city lives within a safe walking distance to a park and playground. We moved closer to that vision by investing $3.3 million in 17 parks last year.

But there are many neighborhoods that still lack green space and trees. Fortunately, you - the residents of Grand Rapids – agree. Thanks to the tremendous support of the voting public, we’re able to invest in more green spaces for more people. We can all stand very proud that this city understands the clear connection between peaceful green space and community safety,
dignity and vitality. We will leverage your financial support to seek grant funding, improve maintenance and care for our parks.

In the midst of winter the idea of “green” spaces seems far away. Yet take a moment with me to think about spring and picture what this investment looks like across our city:
A beautiful picnic pavilion at Camelot Park;
A new playground, restroom and shelter at Clemente Park;
And new restrooms at our universally accessible playground at Ottawa Hills Park.

If you listen really closely, you may hear the collective sounds of excited conversation at family picnics, birds chirping on quiet morning walks and children laughing. If you hear such sounds, I am happy to tell you it is no longer just the echoes of our imaginations, but the sounds of the future we - made possible - together.

No matter how beautiful our settings, Grand Rapids must be an open and welcoming home for everyone.

Our strategic plan spells out our commitment to equity. Last year we moved forward on updating our human rights ordinance. The strengthened language in our ordinance expands and affirms protections for individuals against bias and discrimination. Going forward, we will better protect people from being discriminated against in all avenues of life -- including housing, employment, public services - and crime reporting. Hate has no place in our home.

I want to thank the members of our community relations commission, the ACLU and LINC Up for their support in this important work. We continue to be a leader in our state in our commitment to civil rights, which is why I am also actively supporting the recent ballot initiative to expand Michigan’s Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act – to add sexual orientation, and gender identity or expression to the list of protected classes.

That brings me to another proud development: Last year we welcomed our new police chief, Chief Payne who is here with us tonight – he has a strong commitment to building trust, improving community police relations, working in partnership with community and embedding community policing throughout the department. And we are eager to support these important goals. Chief, thank you for your leadership.

We also added positions to the police department to expand community policing into evenings and weekends. Additional crime tech positions were added along with a victim specialist and a police wellness specialist. To further our work and commitment to improving community police relations, our city manager created
the new Office of Oversight and Public Accountability, which is being led by Interim Director Brandon Davis.

Residents in every home aspire that the next generation have greater opportunities than the previous generation. Which is one of the many reasons I am excited we are creating a Grand Rapids Promise Zone Scholarship, a promise that guarantees free admission to Grand Rapids Community College for our city’s high school graduates. For the first time in our city’s history, public, charter and private schools have come together in partnership to benefit the students of Grand Rapids. As our former Superintendent - and current Promise Zone chair - Teresa Weatherall Neal has said – this is a game changer for our community.

The Grand Rapids Promise Scholarship will address inequities in educational attainment within our city and expand economic opportunity for all. It will help meet the growing need for talent in our strong economy. It is aligned with our belief that every student should have access to high quality education after graduation, no matter their circumstances or legal status. We appreciate the state approving our GR Promise plan and we now turn our focus to raising 3 million dollars to secure the scholarship into the future.

We could not do it without our exceptional partner, Grand Rapids Community College, and we are thankful for the leadership of their board and President Dr. Bill Pink.

There’s so much to be excited about in our community. But let’s not forget those men, women and children without any kind of home.

As our city experiences positive growth and development, we sadly saw the number of people experiencing homelessness in Kent County grow. The good news is we saw reduction in single adults experiencing homelessness. The tragic news is that we saw a significant increase in the number of families experiencing homelessness and reaching out for help.

In 2018, 10,538 people in Kent County were in the homeless system. Nearly 6,500 or over 60% are children and families… nearly 3,500 children. For many families, services were not available, which left them sleeping in cars or desperately looking for a safe place to lay their heads.

To put these numbers in perspective:

There are nearly as many children in the homeless system as the number of third graders in the county who are proficient in reading.

And overall, there are over twice the number of people in the homeless system in our county than high school graduates who enroll in college.
This has been and continues to be unacceptable.

And yet it happens here, in West Michigan, every day.

Even in the bitter cold of winter.

There are real lives behind these statistics. Real hopes and dreams that may not be realized because of tragic circumstances. And as an increasing number of people call Grand Rapids home – it’s more important than ever to make sure families have a place to call home.

Working with K Connect and key community stakeholders, we’ve begun to identify root causes of homelessness. We’ve analyzed data illuminating the deep racial disparities and implications for children and families. And, we’ve compiled research on best practices from communities throughout the country.

We are taking action – starting with what we can do internally at the city to better respond to those experiencing homelessness. This year we hope to create a Homeless Outreach Team that will include individuals specially trained from our police, fire and community development departments with a mission to more effectively respond to those struggling with mental health or substance abuse. We want them to get the help they need and not end up in our jail or emergency rooms. Ultimately, we want them to have a place to call home.

We also must come together as a community to improve our system in order to truly end homelessness. Over the next six months, I will work with the Housing Stability Alliance to turn the recent findings into an action plan. Soon we will have a road map on how best to increase access to affordable housing and decrease homelessness for families, children and youth with a focus on eliminating racial disparities. Part of this will be identifying and openly sharing clear measures that show progress and results.

We are already starting to see the benefit of this effort with the recent announcement of an innovative coordinated care network focused on creating greater access, efficiency, and impact for families experiencing homelessness. This network, called GRACE - which stands for Gather Resources and Align Community Effort has partners from health and social service organizations - all aligning their efforts to achieve improved housing stability and health for families. Our community is building bridges across fields to make housing opportunities and community wellness a shared priority.

Our community has a caring and compassionate spirit that knows how to remove roadblocks. What we need is an aggressive plan and a commitment to guarantee everyone has a place to call home. And I believe we will get there.
We can’t talk about home without doing our part to recognize and respond to climate change. This planet is the only home we have.

Thanks to Mayor Heartwell, Peter Wege and many others - Grand Rapids has long been recognized as a leader in environmental sustainability and innovation. We are a community that feels a deep responsibility to care for this beautiful space where we live.

Our City proudly ranks fourth in the nation in the number of LEED certified projects and we have more LEED buildings per capita than any community in the country.

Our city’s water department building was the first LEED-certified municipal building in Michigan. Our Art Museum shares a similar distinction as the first LEED gold certified art museum in the world.

We have converted our downtown shuttles and Rapid buses from diesel to cleaner compressed natural gas. The May Mobility autonomous shuttle initiative uses electric vehicles and has had over 50,000 passengers.

This year we will finish building a biodigester that will convert waste to Renewable Natural Gas.

We hold firm to our goal of getting to 100% renewable energy for city facilities by 2025. And we will work on converting over 18,000 streetlights to LED lights.

We are continuing our work with the Zero Cities Project to identify policies and programs to help move buildings to zero net carbon by 2050.

And we are happy to support this year’s Grand Rapids 2030 District Building Competition – which will highlight buildings that have been working to reduce energy consumption and their carbon footprint.

But this is not enough. We must come together as a community to set bold goals to confront the growing environmental dangers we are facing. That is why we recently launched the Community Collaboration on Climate Change. This Collaborative will support the work being done by existing grassroots environmental organizations, elevate awareness of environmental injustices and provide resources to create a climate change action agenda. This is critically important work that we all must be a part of in order to reverse the damaging effects of climate change.

We live in a time of rapid proliferation of data and technology that create new challenges and new opportunities. We are fortunate to be a city at the leading edge of transparent sharing of city data that allows everyone to be a part of finding solutions. In 2018, Grand Rapids was accepted into the ‘What Works
Cities” initiative, aimed at optimal data empowerment in areas such as affordable housing, air quality, and transportation trends. The city’s open data initiatives continued on many fronts through 2019 and will evolve in 2020 as we begin reporting progress toward our strategic goals.

We are a city that uses the free flow of data for the betterment of our homes, neighborhoods and community. We are proud that today, any citizen can easily download a variety of Grand Rapids information, from community health to crime statistics to housing data, at our open data website. This gives every citizen, non-profit, startup and established business the ability to analyze and leverage data in countless ways for the greater community good. It is free and open. With no forms or applications to fill out.

The last priority I want to touch on tonight affects every person in every home in every neighborhood: it is the fast approaching 2020 census. This is an issue that is easy to underestimate, yet I can’t stress the importance enough. This upcoming census is vitally important for our city. The more people who stand up to be counted, the more leverage we have in Lansing and Washington to protect and improve Grand Rapids.

Last year we created a Complete Count committee and have launched the Be Counted GR campaign. Every one of you needs to join us in making sure your family, friends and neighbors are counted.

Your hometown is counting on it.

As you can see – we’ve accomplished a lot together. And there is a lot more to do. And we will do it together.

I couldn’t be more proud to hold this position and serve the people of Grand Rapids.

I love serving as Mayor. I love the people of Grand Rapids, and I love our city. It’s the true definition of home for me.

I’m energized by the opportunities that lie before us and am eager to tackle the challenges – and to work closely with people like you, who stand with us - to address those challenges - because you too care deeply about this community that we all call home.

Thank you and good night.