

**EMBARGOED UNTIL 7 P.M. MARCH 21, 2023**

**Mayor Rosalynn Bliss – State of the City Address**

Good evening everyone. And thank you, Representative Grant. I am grateful for you and your leadership in Lansing - and appreciate all of the elected officials who are here tonight. It is an honor to work together as we identify shared priorities that move our city and region forward.

I appreciate all of you coming out tonight for our 2023 State of Our City...especially my colleagues on the City Commission, who I have the privilege to serve with.

This is my eighth State of the City address since first being elected as Mayor.

And each time I've stepped up to this podium and looked out at all of you in the crowd, I have felt a deep sense of gratitude to serve among such a dedicated community of residents, workers, appointed officials, City Manager Washington, public employees, business, civic and elected leaders - who all have a commitment to working together.

That's how we make a real difference. By working together.

The word "collaboration" gets thrown around a lot about Grand Rapids.

But I'm not sure if that term is clear enough - or strong enough - to describe what happens in our community.

We are on an important journey, to build a vibrant and welcoming City for all.

But we increasingly understand that no one does the work alone.

No one person or organization alone can effectively reimagine policing, solve the housing crisis or instill an equity-driven economic system. This is critically complex work.

We know that bringing about our City's brightest future only happens when we all do the building.

This includes the public and private sectors, neighborhood and nonprofit leaders, philanthropy, community and especially historically marginalized Grand Rapidians.

We all have something to contribute. Some wisdom, experience, talent, perspective or capacity.

We are all on the journey together.

And we share a common destination: An ever-better City with the brightest future. Filled with opportunity. For everyone.

Over the past year we continued to make considerable progress toward this next version of Grand Rapids.

Dozens of new neighborhood businesses opened.

Hundreds of new homes, and hundreds more currently under construction.

Major transformative civic work projects soon to break ground.

Yes, experts anticipate a national economic slowdown this year.

But opportunity will continue to rise in Grand Rapids.

Employment and wages are expected to grow locally.

Our regional industrial economy is projected to grow twice as fast as the US economy.

Our property values are strong.

Our population is young, growing and becoming more diverse; the average age in the City is just 31 years old, which isn't too far off the average age of our current City Commission.

Working together, we are building one of the nation's most desirable places to live, work and grow.

We are making real, meaningful progress.

Sometimes slower than we had hoped, yet we don't give up and we keep moving.

We do have a lot to be proud of.

I am proud of the progress we are making to develop and improve our public safety system.

Please join me in recognizing Chief Eric Winstrom, who this month celebrates his one-year anniversary on the job serving the people of Grand Rapids.

It was also almost a year ago that Patrick Lyoya was tragically killed. A tragedy that has had a profound impact on our community. And one that has amplified our need for meaningful change. My heart continues to go out to the Lyoya family as they grieve the loss of their loved one.

Chief, we are deeply grateful for your leadership this past year and your ability to listen, build accountability, trust and meaningful partnerships to ensure Grand Rapids remains one of the safest cities in America.

Some may think that public safety starts with the Police Chief. But he'll be the first to tell you he – and the men and women of the department - cannot do it alone.

For too long, in too many places in our country, we have asked officers to try and shoulder an every-growing burden. We have asked them to fulfill their traditional roles of emergency response and enforce laws while also expecting them to be social workers and mental health professionals.

With the help of the City Commission and numerous community partners, GRPD has worked tirelessly to expand and enhance our public safety toolkit.

We began testing a new program last summer that pairs mental health professionals with police officers when they respond to some calls for service.

Instead of sending people to jail or an emergency room, this innovative approach helped an average of 85 people per month find more appropriate and effective care.

That's three people a day guided to a better path by this program.

These are encouraging results. But the City didn't do it alone.

We continue to work closely with Kent County and Network 180 and we value their partnership.

We'll build on this effort as a new crisis stabilization unit opens later this year in partnership with Network 180 and Trinity Health. This facility will provide additional support for people managing a mental health or substance use crisis.

Important results stand out in other areas as well. In its first year, our Cure Violence initiative worked to prevent violence through nearly 3,000 engagements with young adults and families.

Think about that: 3,000 occasions when a more proactive, compassionate and relational approach interrupted the potential for violence before it could happen.

The best response to violence is to stop it before it starts.

We are now working to expand these proven violence prevention efforts in other parts of our city.

The City is not doing it alone.

We are grateful for our partnership with the Urban League and their network of community leaders.

Our Project Clean Slate program helped expunge the criminal records of over 500 people who deserved a fresh start.

That's 500 Grand Rapidsians – in just the past year – who now have a second chance to gain access to a better job, a place to live or an educational opportunity.

We established the Office of Public Oversight and Accountability in 2020 with the goal of elevating community voice and oversight in public safety operations.

Brandon Davis continues to do tremendous work leading this effort and I'm proud to say the role of the Office is now included in the City's collective bargaining agreement with our Grand Rapids Firefighters and Grand Rapids Police Officers Association.

That means – for the first time – the City's labor contracts with public safety professionals now include significant oversight language that serves to increase accountability, review misconduct and more directly and intentionally support our goals for community-oriented policing.

While change is slow and often messy, representation matters.

We are working together, figuring it out and building a system better designed to keep us safe, especially the most vulnerable among us.

This takes time, there is more work to be done, and it takes all of us.

I'm also proud of the progress we are making to grow and develop our housing system.

I mentioned last year, we are in a housing crisis because we have more people than homes. And our population is growing fast.

So our goal is to support building more homes. For everybody - at all income levels.

A recent study tells us, that to meet community need, we must build 14,000 homes by 2027.

That's 2,800 homes a year for the next five years.

To put that number in more clear perspective, it's the equivalent of roughly 580 blocks of traditional neighborhood housing in the City of Grand Rapids.

Think 580 more blocks of housing - like we see on the Near Westside, Garfield Park or Creston.

By 2027.

A skeptical media headline wondered "*Can it be done?*"

I believe it can. But we must have realistic expectations: We have a great deal of work to do. And we must proceed with a great sense of urgency.

The City of course doesn't build housing. We need our private and nonprofit home builders.

Working closely with them, we're doing all we can to promote an environment where residential development can thrive.

The City last year permitted construction of nearly 800 homes, condos and apartments.

That's close to the equivalent of 31 blocks of traditional neighborhood housing.

That's good progress. But we need more.

Encouragingly, the City so far this year already approved more than 400 homes for construction, well ahead of last year's pace.

And we currently have more than 1,000 affordable homes and apartments in the development pipeline.

So the equivalent of another 58 blocks or so of housing is on the way.

491 more blocks of new housing to go.

Of course it's not our intent to sprawl out across the land. We don't have a lot of vacant land left in our city. So that alone will not get us there.

We need to go up.

Like the 16-story residential tower rising on top of the parking garage at Studio Park in Heartside.

This building is changing our skyline and we need more like it to change and grow our housing system.

And we need to look at every vacant or underused parcel of property across our city as a housing opportunity.

Like the 72 apartments that will soon rise on the vacant lot across the street from Creston Brewery.

Just a few blocks away 110 more apartments now rise at the construction site for the Lofts on Grove. This is more housing on another previously underutilized piece of property.

The next neighborhood over, 52 more apartments are going up on Belknap Hill.

On the South East End, 45 more apartments going up on an under-developed lot.

Together with the private and nonprofit sectors, we're steadily working to address the housing crisis - one development at a time, across our city.

And it's not just apartments for young professionals and students.

Everyone needs and deserves a place to live and call home.

I am encouraged to see new affordable housing options for our senior citizens about to break ground in the Madison Area and the South East Community.

I am especially excited about the innovative Hope Village project, which will deliver 16 "tiny homes" that provide new opportunities for people to work their way out of homelessness.

In 2021 we organized our Affordable Housing Fund.

In 2022 we seeded the fund with 5 million dollars that will be dispersed yet this year.

This year we will grow the fund by another 10 million dollars.

Together with another 9 million dollars from the State of Michigan, we are growing our capacity to bring more affordable housing to our community.

Housing affordability is also a priority for our partners at Kent County.

They recently established a Revolving Housing Fund and seeded it with more than 17 million dollars.

Another welcome tool in our tool box.

Our partnership with the County helped start Housing Kent, led by the talented Eureka People, focused on building a system for housing stability for all in Kent County.

We are also working closely with our state legislators, many who are here tonight, to develop additional tools that we will use to support low income and affordable housing solutions.

They too recognize the urgency of this crisis and are finding ways to support our efforts.

This housing crisis has our top attention and, together, we're working to build a system that works for all Grand Rapidians – no matter where they are on the spectrum of housing stability and need.

While our landscape and skyline continue to change, the City is also focused on facilitating grass roots neighborhood economic growth.

We are on a city building journey - and few things signal we're headed in a promising direction more than what we now see happening in our neighborhood business districts.

We are seeing an explosion of entrepreneurship across our City.

Locally owned coffee shops, restaurants, unique boutiques, butchers and other services.

More and more small businesses are opening. And they build upon the established neighborhood businesses we all love, while adding more energy and appeal.

Arick Davis this past winter started Last Mile Café on Hall Street, in the 49507 neighborhood where he grew up.

Paola Carlson recently opened Pochis, our first Columbian café, in Heartside.

Javier Olvera is organizing to renovate an old building into a new grocery store in the Roosevelt Park neighborhood.

Chris Wessley recently opened Noodle Pig ramen shop in Monroe North.

Monsoon Vietnamese opened Downtown.

Black Napkin opened in East Hills.

Sip Coffee and Cocktails in Alger Heights.

These - and numerous other neighborhood businesses - reflect and amplify our community's rich diversity, culture and creativity.

And it's not all coffee, beer, food and hospitality.

There's significant energy in non-retail sectors too.

Footwear maker HOLO moved from Portland to Grand Rapids, citing our talented workers and attractive environment for growth.



Startups like Iris Innovations are driving innovation in artificial intelligence and growing their presence here in Grand Rapids.

Manufacturer Gentex is opening a facility in Grand Rapids for better access to our ready workforce. They're setting up shop in the Madison Square neighborhood.

We recently saw the grand opening of The Bridge, a highly anticipated incubator space located at the Doug Meijer Innovation Building within the Michigan State University Innovation Park.

This pace of business activity is a remarkable signal that our community is a great place to invest and increasingly full of opportunity for everybody.

Just as our growing businesses reflect our entrepreneurial spirit, so do our parks and Grand River reflect the quality of life in our community.

And the quality of these outdoor places – just like public safety and plenty of housing options – are key drivers influencing people's health, comfort and happiness.

Our parks provide places to play and gather for children, families and social groups of all ages and economic status.

I'm proud of the continued investment the City has made to steadily improve our neighborhood parks system.

We successfully completed nearly 20 park improvements last year.

New pickleball courts at Belknap Park.

Bathroom and splash pad upgrades at Garfield Park.

A hammock grove in Briggs Park.

More space for dogs at Hillcrest Park.

A new and improved place to watch the sunset from Sweet Street Park.

The City this past year acquired nearly 30 acres of property to build new parks, and a majority of that land is in the Third Ward, a part of our community that has historically lacked access to quality parks that other neighborhoods enjoy.

We'll push forward another round of steady improvements this year.

I'm especially looking forward to building a new MLK Park Lodge.

The addition of new park space in the Roosevelt Park neighborhood.

And a complete transformation of the alley on the east side of Van Andel Arena. Those dumpsters full of garbage will soon go away and the alley will become a linear park with outdoor café space and more places for people to gather.

Finally tonight, I want to highlight our ongoing effort to reconnect two of our community's greatest assets: our people and our river.

Last March I stood before you and declared we had a big year ahead for our campaign to revitalize the Grand River corridor.

That prediction proved generally accurate, but with a few unexpected turns.

You may have heard about the current back-and-forth between the City, our partners Grand Rapids Whitewater and state and federal departments.

One thing I have learned is not to let the news of the day determine how we view our long-term success: with the complicated work we're doing, oftentimes it is two steps forward and one step back.

Although we chose to withdraw our current permit application to remove dams from our river, work is underway to resubmit a modified design that is acceptable and supported by all.

Just as you can count on the Grand River flowing to Lake Michigan, you can count on our efforts to achieve a design that meets many of our initial objectives and delivers a transformational project for our community. When this entire project is completed, we will have rapids back in Grand Rapids!

I want to thank all those who have given so much of their time and resources to this effort and I applaud them for never giving up.

We expect to have project permits in hand by the end of this year, and we anticipate work will begin in 2024.

I realize those of you tracking this project have heard “next year” for the last 5 years. You are tired of hearing it...and I am tired of saying it. But we truly are closer to starting work in the river, now more than ever before.

We also were pleasantly surprised last year when the State of Michigan awarded significant funding to grow the Grand River Greenway in Grand Rapids and Kent County.

That means the riverfront parks and trails projects we aimed to get done over the next 10-15 years will happen much faster.

You will start to see significant riverfront construction and change later this year at Lyon Square and the Grand Rapids Public Museum.

Major riverfront improvements will soon follow at Canal and Ah Nab Awen Parks.

We will close a critical 1-mile gap in the riverfront trail system adjacent to the Creston neighborhood.

Organizing to build the exciting outdoor riverfront amphitheater continue to move forward.

And, we will start a very important community conversation about how we meaningfully connect the southeast side of our community to the Grand River.

The Third Ward is separated from the river and the broader regional recreational trail system by political boundaries, the 131 highway and significant gaps in the urban trail network.

We see promising opportunities to blaze new connections and address these legacy inequities, working together with neighborhood and community leaders.

These investments have a significant impact on our entire community and everyone who lives and works here.

Better parks, recreation, trails, river, peaceful places to relax and connectedness throughout our city contributes in a positive way to better physical and mental health – and an overall enhanced quality of life.

These are essential elements of a flourishing city.

I fully understand that we live in contentious and divisive times.

But there is no problem we can't solve here in Grand Rapids.

And there is no opportunity we can't seize.

We are on a journey – together - a journey to build a vibrant, welcoming city for all.

We have come a long way together. We have built real momentum.

And there's real complexity in the work we are doing and what we are trying to accomplish.

From policing - to housing - to our economy and environment, we are genuinely addressing root causes of issues that have simmered under the surface for generations.

We are not doing it by hastily pushing top-down solutions.

We are building from the bottom up. Community coming together. Shaping real solutions that actually work in our local context.

Building consensus for fundamental lasting change is important – and that takes time.

But I am motivated and energized about the direction our community is headed.

Many positive things are happening.

We are making significant progress by listening to each other, respecting each other, learning and working together.

We are keeping our sights and ambitions high.

And we are increasingly powered by a diversity of thought, experience, people and voice.

We have much to be proud of and encouraged by.

Our accomplishments are real, and they have real value. And they are right in front of us as we look around our city.

They inspire us to do more.

I look forward to continuing our city building work together over the next year and I am incredibly grateful for all of your partnership and support.

Thank you all for joining me tonight as we reflect on the state of OUR city.

Good night.