

State of the City Address – Mayor Ed Holder

February 16, 2021

Good morning and thank you for the kind introduction. My thanks as well to the Chamber of Commerce for hosting this event as it has for the last 42 years. This remains the largest gathering of its kind in all of Canada, virtual or otherwise, and the credit for building this into the annual tradition it has become belongs to Gerry Macartney. As we know, after 24 years as CEO of the London Chamber, Gerry is set to officially retire from his role by the end of the month -- meaning this is the final State of the City organized under his leadership. Gerry has never shied away from a challenge, and he's entirely fearless when tackling difficult issues. It seems fitting then, that pulling together a State of the City, under these circumstances through a pandemic, would be one of his last official acts as Chamber CEO. Gerry, I have met few people with your clarity of thought, vision, and commitment to service. You are an icon in London's business community, and we honour your leadership.

When speaking of leadership, I also want to recognize and highlight the efforts of our City Manager Lynne Livingstone. She officially took over the job on March 1st of last year. Less than three weeks later, our entire province was under lockdown. To say her introduction to the role was baptism by fire would be an extreme understatement. To say she's been anything less than phenomenal would be an even greater mischaracterization. Lynne's decisive, collaborative, and compassionate approach to leadership has guided our city through a time like no other. We salute you, Lynne, as well as our entire Senior Leadership Team, our amazing City of London staff. Our municipal unions and their leadership have stood tall in support of Londoners. I can share with you that City Council regularly references the calibre of the work done by staff, and I whole-heartedly agree.

Similarly, I want to acknowledge my colleagues on Council. They represent 14 different wards across our great city, coming from diverse backgrounds, experiences, and demographics. When it matters most, when the stakes have been highest, this Council has rallied around our community. During those times, Council has been at its best, considering the interests of London as a whole and never wavering in its commitment to the greater good.

To our federal and provincial leaders with us today, I say thank you. Thank you for listening. Thank you for responding to our City's needs. And, thank you for taking action. When we have needed our senior levels of government most, they have answered the call, and I am sure we will be calling again.

At last year's State of the City address, I concluded my remarks by declaring without hesitation that the State of our City was strong. What feels like a lifetime later, I believe that still to be true. But, the State of our City, at this moment in time, is also tired. The State of our City is equally anxious, frustrated, and weary - all for good reason. I cannot and will not use this platform to sugar coat our circumstances. Instead, what I've set out to do in previous years, and especially during this time, is to provide brutal honesty along with credible hope.

While COVID-19 hit with full force in March of last year, it actually arrived on our doorstep in London several week earlier. You'll remember, a young woman, returning to our city from Wuhan, China became one of the first confirmed cases in all of Canada. That was back on January 31st. To her credit, she immediately self-isolated, took all appropriate precautions, and prevented her illness from spreading to others. Even still, the devastating impact of COVID-19 has been our reality ever since. More

than 12 months. 382 days and counting.

During this time, we've all desperately missed loved ones, family and friends. We've sacrificed the potential for countless memories, and experiences that could have been, if not for the virus. We've seen our kids unable to enjoy their favourite activities, family breakdowns, and mental health deterioration. Businesses have gone under, while men and women across our City have become unemployed.

What's more, and what's most exasperating? After everything we've been through, after 382 days, at this moment, it feels - at times - as though we're spinning our wheels. As of today, while our most recent lockdown has eased, the risk posed by COVID variants and the potential for a third wave persists. The delivery of vaccines from international suppliers has been plagued by seemingly constant delay. We don't know when reliable supply chains will be established. In the meantime, more people continue to get sick, and more people continue to die. What's perhaps most heartbreaking is we know with certainty people who are healthy and alive at this very moment will have become infected, and will have passed away before this is over. As of today, since the start of the pandemic, 181 people from the London-area have died as a result of the virus.

I'd like to pause briefly for a moment of silence, and would ask you to join me, in honour of those lives lost.

That, my friends, is the stark reality — the brutal honesty — of our current situation. But you'll remember earlier, I also mentioned credible hope. Not just 'hope' on its own, but *credible* hope — the kind that sustains us in our darkest times. A hero of mine, Sir Winston Churchill, once famously said "if you're going through hell... keep going." And that's exactly what we're doing, and will continue doing, together. That's the London I know, the London you know, and the London we all love.

The fact is: there is hope — *credible* hope. More so than at any time since the onset of this pandemic. It's not lost on me that this morning thousands of businesses across our London-area will re-open for the first time since the December 26th lockdown. Just over a month ago, our daily COVID case counts were approaching 200. We're now in the low teens, and down to just 8 yesterday. This hope comes in many forms, however. It comes, first and foremost, from our health-care heroes, our essential service workers, our London Police, London Firefighters and Paramedic Services. Those who keep showing up, day after day, working extremely long hours, missing their family members, and making significant sacrifices all while under immense stress and scrutiny. You are not only frontline workers, you remain our last line of defence. You have held the line, against all odds and for that, our entire City offers you its deepest gratitude, and will remain forever in your debt.

We draw credible hope from the latest offerings produced by the collaboration of medical research and science. Safe and effective vaccines, being administered on a daily basis across our region. London was one of the first communities to vaccinate all residents of long-term care and high-risk retirement homes. Like all cities across Canada, we await an adequate supply of vaccine. However, our public health unit has used this time to develop an infrastructure to administer as many shots, as quickly as possible, by securing the necessary staff and physical space to do so. We will be capable of delivering 3,000 shots per day, seven days a week. Prime Minister Trudeau, Premier Ford — deliver us the vaccine, and London will finish the job.

As much as anything, we draw credible hope from the incredible sense of community that has always

been at the core of who we are as Londoners. We see it every day, and in ways that too often go unnoticed or under-appreciated. We see it as well during times of crisis, and times of overwhelming sadness. We saw it the August before last on Woodman Avenue in Old East Village, and we saw it just a few weeks before Christmas on Teeple Terrace in Westmount. We see it still, in shows of solemn solidarity, as Londoners hang construction vests from doors, balconies, and windows, to honour the lives of Henry Harder and John Martens. That same sense of community, that sense of empathy, and sense of compassion has guided our response to COVID-19.

Within 48 hours of the Ontario Government declaring a state of emergency in March 2020, representatives from more than 200 local businesses, groups, agencies, and organizations joined together as part of the Mayor's Economic Impact and Recovery Task Force, as well as the Mayor's Social Impact and Recovery Task-Force. We did this because, in addition to the economic impacts, we recognized — right away — the strain this pandemic would inevitably place on London's most vulnerable, and the stresses on those who provide them support. Yet nobody involved in this effort asked 'what's in it for me?' or 'how much of my time will you need?' Instead, the most common question was 'how can we help?' Over the course of four months, meeting multiple times each week, these groups worked closely with many members of Council who co-led the specific groups with community leaders, with civic administration, as well as local MPs and MPPs. Our Deputy Mayor at the time, Jesse Helmer, chaired the initial meetings, and is owed great recognition for his efforts.

These Task Forces were crucial, especially in the early days of the pandemic, as we heard first-hand and in real-time, from key stakeholders the effects of COVID-19 across all sectors, so we could best determine how to mitigate the initial impacts, and work towards a safe and rapid recovery.

As a result of these efforts, dozens of initiatives weren't only conceived, they were acted upon. The United Way of Elgin-Middlesex, in conjunction with the London Community Foundation, in less than one year, deployed over \$3.7-million in COVID relief funding to agencies across our region, providing rapid relief to vulnerable individuals. We successfully lobbied the federal and provincial governments for a moratorium on evictions, a rent freeze for residential tenants throughout 2021, property tax deferrals, and millions of dollars to support women and children experiencing domestic abuse.

Locally, new partnerships were formed, including one that sees the London Food Bank working with RBC Place, 519 Pursuit, and Y.O.U. to produce and distribute bagged lunches every day to those who are homeless or at risk. The City of London, collaborating with emergency shelters, managed to move nearly 200 individuals into motel rooms instead of crowded, congregate settings, and London's numerous faith-based communities were connected to support service agencies.

The Task Forces have since evolved into the London Community Recovery Network, and we continue to witness its many positive impacts, most recently with a \$2.3-million dollar emergency response to winter homelessness. This includes two temporary overnight shelters and two daytime coffeehouses, acting as drop-in centres. More action will stem from the London Community Recovery Network in the coming weeks, and months.

These are but a few examples of credible hope. There are so many more to be found within our local economy.

One of our signature achievements in working with Council, something that Deputy Mayor Josh Morgan, Councillor Helmer, City staff and I worked specifically on, was successfully convincing the provincial government to streamline its education tax rate for all businesses in Ontario. For almost a decade, London businesses, and many communities across Ontario, had been paying a much higher rate than some specific cities in Ontario. It wasn't right, and it wasn't fair. No longer will that be the case. The province heard us, Ministers Jeff Yurek and Monte McNaughton helped take our message to Queen's Park, and the result? Commercial taxpayers in London will save \$22-million alone this year, and hundreds of millions of dollars for businesses across the province. And not just this year, but each and every year going forward. This is a massive competitive boost to the already impressive turn-around for our local economy.

According to Statistics Canada, the London area has now had seven straight months of positive employment growth, adding an amazing 33,300 jobs during that time. It shouldn't come as a surprise then that London's economy has recorded the most rapid and robust recovery in all of Ontario, regaining more jobs at a faster pace than Ottawa, Toronto, KW, Guelph, Hamilton, or Windsor. In fact, London is one of only three communities across Ontario to have more people employed today than we did at the start of the first lockdown in March of last year. Not only that, but the 2021 Ontario Economic Report from the Ontario Chamber of Commerce found London businesses — at 70% — have the highest percentage of confidence in our community's ability to thrive coming out of the pandemic. No other region in the province even comes close.

These statistics are a testament to the dedication, and ingenuity of our local employers and the work ethic of every-day Londoners. We are resilient. We will not roll over. We are London-strong.

Despite the encouraging employment numbers, we know they fail to capture the experience of many Londoners who are still laid off, or working reduced hours, due to the current restrictions. As someone with family running a small business, I empathize deeply with all those who continue to be impacted. Businesses have done everything that's been asked of them, often on very short notice and at significant expense, while constantly adapting to ensure members of the public are kept safe from COVID-19. According to the available data, businesses are not responsible for the level of spread we've experienced, but they and their staffs wind up bearing the brunt of the consequences.

In spite of the pandemic, we set a new record last year for building permits, over \$1.6-billion, breaking our previous all-time high from 2014. We've seen 26 businesses leave the downtown since last year, and we've also welcomed 26 new businesses to our core during the same period, including Siskinds law firm. Let's show everyone that London is open for business. We need London to be at its very best.

Over and over again, we see world-class employers choose London. During the pandemic, Aspire Food Group, ANVO Laboratories, Quest Brands, Carfax Canada, Bos Innovations, Kontrol BioCloud, and most recently - the Hard Rock Cafe - all announced plans to invest long-term or expand in London, announcements that will create thousands of new jobs. Just a few weeks ago, The Grove at Western Fair District received a multi-million dollar investment from FedDev Ontario which will assist with the creation of 550 new skilled jobs. Thank you MP Kate Young, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Economic Development. Your support of this project, among several which have been approved, truly matters to London. Meanwhile, construction continues at the new Maple Leaf Foods facility on Wilton

Grove Road, and when completed next year, will bring another 1,500 new jobs to London. I say 'bravo' and 'thank you' to all businesses and industry who call London home.

Together, our economy has weathered the worst of COVID, and we are well-positioned for the balance of 2021 and beyond. Restoring London's place as an economic driver in Ontario has been a priority of mine since before I was elected as Mayor, and so it remains. We have demonstrated an ability to put aside self-interests in favour of a greater, collective interest. If ever there was a community that gives true meaning to the phrase "we're all in this together," it's ours. However, as the pandemic wears on, that same spirit — those newfound partnerships — will be called upon once again to help positively assist all sectors, and all individuals, through the final mile. We've done it once, and we'll do it again. We are ready.

Friends, hope — *credible hope* — breeds hard-earned optimism which, when paired, begets a fundamental truth of its own, and that is this: COVID too shall pass. That's no longer a hope, that's a fact. There's more of this behind us than lays before us. We could not say that with confidence just a few months ago. We can now. Uncertainty has been lifted. Thanks to vaccines, combined with ongoing advancements in treatments and rapid testing, we know *how* this ends, and we know - approximately - *when*. More than anything else, we know with certainty that this *has* an end, likely not with a moment of triumph we'll all remember, rather with a slow whimper — albeit one we won't soon forget.

While we remain focused, in the present, and for good reason, on flattening the curve, in a post-COVID London, there are other curves that must be flattened.

I think first and foremost of rising poverty, lack of affordable housing, and a lack of supports for London's most vulnerable. These curves continue to rise, and must be crushed with the same determination, the same level of community involvement, and the same commitment as has been summoned against COVID.

For all our talk, from us wanting to 'get back to normal,' or 'getting back to the way things were,' how does that apply to those in our community who slept rough before the pandemic, and continued doing the same throughout the pandemic? What are they getting back to? What about the one in seven London families who struggle to put food on the table, or the one in five who live at or below the poverty line? For too many in our city, there is no discernible difference from the way things *are* to the way things used to be. There's little in the way of hope, and even less in the way of choice.

It must be said, and it must be understood: London's most vulnerable don't 'choose' their circumstances. They didn't choose to be physically or sexually assaulted as children, or choose to be born with complex mental illness. They didn't choose to be exposed to trauma, and subsequent PTSD. They are where they are, largely, due to a lack of choices. However, we are in the unique position to support our most vulnerable by making different choices, more compassionate and caring choices, and that's what I am proposing here today.

Over the last 12 months, London City Council has made historic and unprecedented investments, \$70-million dollars in our multi-year budget, for homelessness and housing supports. We've spent a quarter of a million dollars per month to house at-risk men and women in hotels during the pandemic. 141 of these individuals have since been housed permanently, while an additional 235 individuals who were sleeping unsheltered, or staying in shelter, have been housed permanently through our various housing

programs. More than 80 people have been moved out of the cold and into our temporary emergency winter shelters, and, after years of advocacy, the province – and Health Minister Christine Elliott - gave final approval late last year for an expanded, permanent safe drug consumption site on York Street.

These are but a few examples of progress, yet our progress must be crystallized into conviction. The curve has yet to be flattened — except that is, in one area...

I'm exceptionally proud to announce today that London, Ontario is the first city in all of Canada to achieve functional zero when it comes to Veteran homelessness. Not the first city in southwestern Ontario, not Toronto, Vancouver, Montreal, or Calgary. *London, Ontario* is the first city anywhere in Canada to achieve functional zero for Veteran homelessness. And what does 'functional zero' mean? A community has achieved functional zero when the number of individuals experiencing homelessness is less than the number a community has proven it can house in a month. If someone becomes homeless, it is rare, brief, and non-recurring.

That is 'functional zero,' and that is what London has achieved when it comes to Veteran homelessness. It is a truly remarkable accomplishment, one that should instill in us not only pride and confidence, but also a motivation to aim higher, think bigger, and challenge ourselves to do even more.

Instead of stopping at functional zero for Veteran homelessness, why not functional zero for homeless women, or mothers with children fleeing abuse? Why not functional zero for our homeless Indigenous population, or those with addictions, or those cut off from family and related supports?

Why not functional zero for chronic homelessness, period? And why not in London, Ontario?

Perhaps the more pressing question is 'what would it take?' According to our Housing Stability Action Plan, London needs to generate 3,000 new affordable housing units to our existing stock. Right now, we're averaging about 150 new units each year. If that remains our pace, it would take us 20 years to achieve. That's unacceptable. What if we cut it in half - and instead of 20, we did it in 10 years? What if we could do it even faster? Having discussed this with our Building and Development Community, our City Staff, our Provincial and Federal governments, my challenge to us all is to achieve this in 5 years.

That is our mission: to provide 3,000 additional affordable housing units over the next 5 years, thus achieving functional zero for those who are chronically homeless.

It's ambitious — it requires us to quadruple the number of affordable housing units that are currently being provided annually. But we can do this, and the time to start is now. The opportunity is right in front of us. We must rise to the occasion. We have partners at the federal and provincial levels of government who understand the need. We have a City Council that gets it, and has made historic investments in support of London's most vulnerable. We have innovative, action-oriented staff, and we have not-for-profits and social agencies standing shoulder to shoulder, collaborating in ways like never before.

We need something else, however. We need the private sector. We need you. We need you as builders, as developers, as Londoners who have grown with this City. You make investments in buildings, and property. We need you to make additional investments in people and community. Whether it's

providing labour, property, funding, or partnerships — join us. And not just our builders and developers in London — what if our business community accepts the challenge, and finds constructive ways they can support our most vulnerable?

I challenge 'us' as well. I challenge our senior levels of Government, I challenge our senior leadership at City Hall, I challenge my colleagues on City Council, and most of all, I challenge myself — what can I do, what can we do, to speed this process along? How can we better incentivize our partners? How can we better prioritize the need at a local level, and what must we do differently?

Beyond the overriding moral imperative, this is not charity. This is an economic driver. Homelessness, poverty, mental illness, addiction — these are not only the greatest inhibitors to a fulfilling human existence, collectively they represent the greatest inhibitors of London's economic growth and future prosperity. Think of the economic spin-offs which result from stable housing. If people have affordable places to live, our workforce expands dramatically. If we're building 3,000 affordable housing units over the next five years, think of the benefits for our construction and trades sector and the thousands of jobs it creates over many years, continuing London's role as the leader in job recovery and growth and humanity. Now, imagine a downtown — vibrant, exciting and once again, the heart of our City.

Similar to COVID, when it comes to London's most vulnerable, we are all in this together. Just as London was the first city in Canada to achieve functional zero homelessness for Veterans, let's do the same for chronic homelessness, and flatten the curve of poverty, and misery experienced by too many.

Let us also resolve to flatten the curves associated with two more public health crises — I'll start first with climate change.

You'll remember last year during this address, I announced a goal to fully electrify the LTC's fleet as part of a move away from diesel buses. As with many things, progress was slowed as a result of the pandemic, but progress has not been stalled. Several weeks ago, the LTC voted unanimously in favour of developing an implementation plan, to be returned no later than June. In the meantime, while this work is ongoing, the LTC will also work with Civic Administration and London Hydro to pursue all available funding opportunities for electrifying our fleet.

There's no reason why that cannot begin to happen by this time next year. This is no longer a matter of 'if,' it is a matter of 'when.' Let's not be the last ones on the bus. The charge towards electrification is happening across Ontario, and around the world, both in the public and private sectors. Electric buses are already being ordered, and on the streets, in numerous Canadian cities. Just last week, the Federal Government announced billions of dollars to help support the electrification of public transit. We are fortunate to have an MP the caliber of Peter Fragiskatos, advocating tirelessly on behalf of our city in support of enhanced transportation.

Locally, greenhouse gas emissions from LTC buses represent as much as 40% of total emissions either controlled by, or directly influenced by, the City of London. This is one of the single most impactful things we can do as a City if we're to achieve our goal of net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, or sooner.

Beyond public transit, we are also in a unique position to improve transit between regions across

southwestern Ontario, while also increasing London's connectivity to the GTA. I had the honour a few weeks ago of being asked by Transportation Minister Caroline Mulroney to chair the Southwestern Ontario Transportation Task Force. This group includes representation from southwestern Ontario mayors and Indigenous communities, with a mandate to augment connections between rail, bus, road, air, and local transit services across the region. What a huge opportunity this can be for us, so please work with me.

Work with me on how people get around their communities, how they travel to and from work, and how they travel across Ontario. All of these are absolutely essential components of building a strong post-COVID economy. In my role as chair, I will advocate in the strongest possible terms for more frequent, more reliable and faster rail service to and from Toronto. Our VIA Rail terminal in London is the fourth busiest in all of Canada. I've met with the senior leadership at VIA, and they acknowledge the importance of London in their planning. Aside from increasing economic productivity, and opportunities, the kinds of enhancements I am advocating will have significantly positive impacts on supporting businesses and people, while reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Meanwhile, here at home, progress continues on other fronts. We begin construction in the coming months on the first elements of our rapid transit infrastructure, including the Downtown Loop, and Adelaide Street Underpass, while work will continue on Old East Village streetscape improvements, and the Dundas Place-Thames Valley Parkway connection to Ridout. The LTC has also developed plans to increase service in all areas, which includes Innovation Industrial Park, later this year. A green bin program, approved by this Council, will launch city-wide next year, while multi-million dollar investments continue to be made in other green infrastructure projects, including pathways for cycling, walking, scooters, e-bikes, and wheelchairs.

As we work to address this environmental public health crisis, we must also continue to work on eradicating a public health crisis of a different sort — one that diminishes our shared dignity as Londoners, and as fellow human beings. We know systemic racism exists in London. City Council passed a unanimous resolution acknowledging this, while our local health board deemed it a public health crisis. That's not a simple opinion, that's a reality. Whether it's "better" or "worse" in our city compared to elsewhere is, frankly, irrelevant. What is relevant is that it happens, and that it happens on a regular basis in ways both overt and subtle.

Let me say clearly: Black lives matter. Indigenous lives matter. People of Colour, your lives matter.

We, as the City of London, are committed to listening, to learning, and we are committed to acting. The mandate of our Strategic Priorities and Policy Committee was recently amended to include anti-racism and diversity, including anti-oppression, as a strategic initiative. As well, we unanimously approved the creation of an Anti-Racism and Anti-Oppression Unit at City Hall. This unit will include a Black Liaison Officer, Indigenous Relations Officer, Accessibility Specialist, and Workplace Diversity and Inclusion Specialist.

Our London Police Service is one of the leanest police services in Ontario across almost every metric, and has the second-lowest number of police officers and staff per 100,000 population in the country. While I absolutely do not support any call to 'defund' our police, the London Police Services Board has deferred the number of new Police hires to just five, instead of twenty. We appreciate the support from

our Police, and the funds saved as a result have been reallocated to cover the cost of housing allowances for those in need, approximately 78 households for an entire year. The Police Services Board's travel budget has also been re-dedicated to anti-racism training, while additional funds have been repurposed to create a dedicated crisis outreach and support team. This involves specialized officers being paired with outreach workers from the CMHA of Elgin-Middlesex with the goal of delivering more appropriate responses to mental health crises.

These actions are in addition to significant changes being implemented by the Public and Catholic school boards, Western University, and Fanshawe College. All of these are public institutions. When I think of corporate London, the need for change is just as great. To what extent has diversity been fully embraced, especially in senior and middle management? While this type of change takes time, it also takes commitment. I am confident that commitment is strong, and I am confident it will be reflected.

I can think of few other issues during my years in public life which have resulted in this amount of change in such a relatively short period of time. Those changes will continue, and while we may not always agree on the path, or how we get there, we must always be in absolute agreement on our destination: a community that does not tolerate hatred, bigotry, racism, or discrimination. We are all in this together.

In closing, that really gets to the overall theme of this address. Whether we're talking about jobs, transportation, or London's most vulnerable — all of these things have been affected and influenced by COVID-19 over the past year. There has never been an issue that has so defined our personal and professional lives — in all facets — than this pandemic. These have been 382 days of progress and sacrifice. We are all in this together.

We all want to get back to the way things were. In certain respects, so do I. At the same time, we cannot be seduced by promises of a return to the way things were. Not when such a return prevents us from advancing our city to where it ought to be — to where it must be.

Given where we've been, where we are, and where we're going, I'd like to leave you with this. It was our seventh Prime Minister, Sir Wilfrid Laurier, who said "Let them look to the past, but let them also look to the future; let them look to the land of their ancestors, but let them look also to the land of their children."

Instead of getting back to the way things used to be, I'd rather we look to where things are going. And where we're going is proudly, enthusiastically, and confidently towards a more prosperous, economically-exciting, equitable, and compassionate London.

While tired, anxious, and weary, I believe above all else — the State of our City is hopeful, and so long as hope — *credible hope* — remains, the State of our City is strong.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is my privilege to serve. Thank you.