

'We have creativity. We have compassion. We have chutzpah'

Karen Farbridge

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The following is an edited version of Guelph Mayor Karen Farbridge's 2011 state of the city address. The mayor delivered the speech Thursday in Guelph.

I want to talk about charisma.

Can a city have charisma? Can it inspire, engage, radiate confidence and build devoted fans and followers? Can it possess a distinct personality?



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I submit that it can. And I would argue that Guelph, in fact, does.

We've all seen the headlines and heard the accolades about Guelph. It's Canada's most caring community. It's the safest city in the country, three years in a row. It's one of the smartest. The best place to live. We've even been called the most romantic and fastest.

In most cases, these rankings are based on a set of factors or statistics — things like our employment rate, volunteerism stats, or crime rate.

It's certainly great to be recognized.

But what are the stories behind these headlines? What are people in our community doing to make Guelph so extraordinary?

I want to share two stories that begin to tell the tale of why Guelph is such a charismatic city.

The first story involves a local company called Enpar, which specializes in technologies to treat wastewater and drinking water — innovations that trace their roots back to a world-class research institution — the University of Guelph.

There is always a danger in singling out one business, especially when you have so many to choose from.

I chose the following story in particular because it is current and allows me to connect a lot of dots.

Enpar has been awarded more than \$570,000 in funding from the provincial Ministry of Research and Innovation for two projects.

Enpar is a client of Innovation Guelph. Innovation Guelph, established by the Guelph Chamber of Commerce, helps innovative enterprises start, grow and thrive and is part of a regional network of innovation centres.

The first Enpar project will use a new system to deal with nitrates in water. Nitrates are a potentially harmful contaminant, and the Enpar technology will turn them into harmless nitrogen gas.

The second project will use a new technology to turn municipal and industrial wastewater into safe drinking water.

When announcing the project, the province noted that Enpar's technology promises to achieve this more efficiently and economically than any method currently available. The province also said the project "has the potential to transform water treatment around the world and enhance Ontario's reputation as a leader in water technologies."

For both of these technologies, the design, manufacturing, and assembly of the systems will take place at Enpar's facilities in Guelph and Cambridge, creating new jobs.

What I am particularly excited about, is that the city is partnering in these initiatives. The technologies will be tested at the city's waste water treatment plant and a city-owned well.

The city has significant municipal expertise in water and wastewater management. Beyond applying this expertise to providing excellent municipal services, we are leveraging it through partnerships like this one to attract jobs and investment and help develop technologies that — as the province noted — could change the world.

The City of Guelph has been invited by the province and, more recently, by the Canadian embassy to participate in a global water technology network to encourage implementation of innovative water technologies around the world.

We are the only Canadian city that's been asked to participate and it is because of our record for innovation and collaboration.

Innovation Guelph is supporting an emerging Water Cluster in Guelph and our participation in this international initiative will help open doors for these enterprises.

These efforts also align well with the goals of the University of Guelph's Better Planet Project.

So many connections!

There is much more to this story and it continues to be written.

I'm sure all of you saw the headlines about Guelph's latest claim to fame: we have the lowest unemployment rate in the country. At 4.1 per cent, it's nearly half the provincial rate of 8.1 per cent.

I have received calls from across Canada asking what our secret is. I tell them innovation, collaboration and diversity.

Guelph is a prosperous community — it has been for years. Our unemployment rate has historically tracked below the provincial and national averages. That changed during the recession, so it's terrific news that jobs are returning to Guelph.

The credit for this achievement goes to many of the people in this room this morning — the business community and entrepreneurs. You are the ones who are growing the economy and creating jobs and wealth in our community. Congratulations!

And there are many more players collaborating on other innovative projects just like Enpar in our community. Guelph Connect is a new initiative involving the city, the chamber, the university, Innovation Guelph, the Downtown Guelph Business Association and the Guelph and Wellington Business Enterprise Centre.

The goal of Guelph Connect is to make sure all the dots are indeed connected and no dots are missing in our community's response to entrepreneurs wanting to do business in Guelph.

We have a remarkable ability to work together for a common cause, and it makes us the envy of other communities.

So, what does all this innovation and collaboration add up to? Simply put, we are creating a more diversified and resilient local economy. Diversification is the key direction identified in our economic development strategy, Prosperity 2020. And it's key to a prosperous future for our city.

We share a desire with the chamber to build environments that can innovate — developing new ways of working and new ideas to gain productivity, continuous improvement and value. In Guelph, we have launched a community well-being initiative to support this goal. What is the connection? A society's ability to innovate has been linked to the well-being of its people: career well-being, social well-being, financial well-being, physical well being, and community well-being.

Now, I'd like to switch from prosperity to livability — two sides of the same coin.

Guelph has made lots of "livability" lists over the years. MSN called Guelph "Canada's next most livable city" outside of the big three of Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal. Researcher and author Richard

Florida ranked Guelph as one of the country's top five places to live for single people, professionals, and families. We regularly rank highly on MoneySense magazine's list of Canada's best cities to call home. Guelph will soon be featured on the Discovery Channel as a "gem" of a city in Canada — the only Canadian city to be showcased.

The various lists use different criteria, but clearly they all show that Guelph is doing something right.

I'd like to share a story that illustrates why Guelph is such a special place to live and will remain so.

The story involves a situation that is inevitably challenging for any municipality: the redevelopment of a brownfield site in an established neighbourhood.

In this case, the neighbourhood is one of the most unique and historic in Guelph: the Ward. The site is a former factory with deep roots in the city: the WC Wood plant.

Situated close to our downtown on the banks of the Speed River, the site is full of potential for residential and commercial redevelopment. It's also fraught with possible pitfalls — everything from sensitivities about demolishing a factory that employed generations of Guelphites, to neighbourhood worries about whether the new development will fit in.

Quite frankly, this project could have turned into a showdown between a determined developer and an outraged neighbourhood.

But it hasn't. It has become a truly collaborative planning process.

The players include an engaged group of residents, led by The Ward Residents' Association which formed in response to the proposed project; an owner, the Kilmer Group, which is committed to respecting the neighbourhood culture; and city staff, who have shown leadership throughout the process.

The residents' association, chaired by Maria Pezzano, has worked hard to make sure the Kilmer Group "gets it" when it comes to the Ward's unique character.

For their part, the Kilmer Group has shown that in addition to being experts in brownfield remediation, they make it their mission to respect the neighbourhood that surrounds the site.

The site has now been acquired by local builder Fusion Homes, that has pledged to maintain the site's historic character and make the river a focal point. The president of Fusion Homes, Lee Piccoli, has told me he wants this to be a signature redevelopment in our downtown and set the tone for the next two decades.

The process is not over, and no doubt there will be challenges ahead, as there are with any redevelopment project. But we have built a solid foundation of trust, transparency, and engagement as the project moves forward.

We must replicate this new approach to meet the goals of our growth strategy and the downtown secondary plan. There is no point in developing a downtown secondary plan that cannot be built.

Understanding the financial risks and needs of the development community while protecting the livability of our neighbourhoods will not be easy, but engagement and creativity will help us immeasurably.

There are many factors that go into making a city livable: walkability; good transit; a wealth of entertainment and cultural options; parks, sports, and recreational opportunities; good schools; clean air... and the list goes on.

One important factor is that intangible quality called "character."

As Guelph continues to grow, some worry that our community will lose its character.

The Wood project is an example of people determined to make sure that doesn't happen — people working together to maintain our heritage, our neighbourhoods, and our culture.

I have only been able to touch on two stories when there are hundreds at play. These two stories highlight the work of just a handful of people when there are thousands of players.

However, I hope they begin to weave together the bigger story that Guelph is, in fact, a charismatic city in large part because of how we are connected to one another.

We have creativity. We have compassion. We have chutzpah.

We are not afraid to take a calculated risk and we have demonstrated an amazing capacity for innovation.

That's not to say there aren't challenges.

We will continue to experience the effects of global economic uncertainty. We will continue to be challenged with managing the pressures of growth and what it means to be an assertive and complete community. We will continue to grapple with the reality that we cannot afford all the facilities and services the community may want – at least not in the way we have done in the past.

The city can meet these challenges by adapting, evolving, staying relevant and creating value for the people we serve.

The days of municipal government acting alone to drive the city's future from inside the walls of city hall are long over — if they ever existed.

In today's complex, interlinked and fast-changing world, municipalities need to work collaboratively across the public, private and non-profit sectors to jointly produce public value.

At city hall we are redesigning our structures and processes to do just that.

This means more than just sitting at a table together. It's a fundamental change to the way governments have traditionally done business. There are many systems — cultural, structural and legislative — that define how government works, at all levels. And when these systems are outdated and not directly responsive to our local communities, it is not good enough to just "keep our heads down" and follow the path of least resistance.

These are not easy or comfortable conversations. They are politically risky conversations because not everyone embraces with open arms the need to do business differently.

We don't have all the answers. But we are asking a lot of questions.

These are conversations worth happening, because they will enable us to realize our community's vast potential.

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