



**State of the Region Address**  
**Welland/Pelham & Port Colb./Wainfleet Chambers of Commerce**  
**Tuesday, May 27, 2008**  
**Regional Chairman, Peter Partington**  
**Casa Dante Lodge, Welland**

- Thank you for having me here today to speak with all of you. I would especially like to highlight and commend the Chambers on their approach in partnering together on events such as this.
- Thank you to mayors & councilors in attendance.
- When making these presentations, what's important here is the message – not the messenger. I would remind you of a story I was told long ago about the beaver and the rabbit. They were standing near the base of the Niagara Gorge staring up at the immense wall that is the Adam Beck Generating Facility – and the beaver turned to the rabbit and said “No, this one, I didn’t actually build myself. But it was based on an idea of mine.” As a region, many exciting opportunities lie before us – through the work of partnerships, through private or public interests – and today, I am going to speak to many of those opportunities.
- My actions need to match my words - and I feel strongly that the similarities, the sense of community and cooperation that exists across all of our municipalities is of paramount importance to us all, and my comments this afternoon will paint a picture of the state of the Niagara region – not any one of our single municipalities.

- It is often said that Niagara is in ‘transition’. We talk about the changes that are occurring, and those that will continue to take place as we move from an economy and a Region reliant on our traditional manufacturing, tourism and agricultural sectors, to a Region that continues to diversify.
- I believe that this transition is focused, and the result of work that has taken place over the last few years. Today – we are on track. We have a strong sense of where we’re headed – and how we’re going to get there.
- We know what we want to achieve. We have plans in place to lead us there. Our Economic Growth Strategy has been in place since April 2005 – and we continue to be guided by the same principles, three years later. Building a strong collective voice. Creating a competitive business environment. Improve transportation and related infrastructure. Re-brand Niagara. Develop Niagara’s talent pool.
- So I truly believe that we, as a Region, and our individual municipalities are on track. Let’s think about that track as a metaphor for where we stand. Much like when the final spike was driven into the Canadian Pacific Railway on November 7<sup>th</sup>, 1885 in Craigellachie, British Columbia - our track acts as a connector, a link between cities, towns, people and business. It shows us how transportation can directly affect how and where we grow. It drives the economic and social aspects of our communities, and does not stop at municipal boundaries. And it is built through partnerships. Through the support of many different business, political and geographic interests working together for a common cause. So it has a constant, positive momentum building. Niagara is indeed on track.
- We are not blind or immune to the economic turbulence that is taking place globally, in the United States, Canada and Ontario. As a trading border region, much of our growth and prosperity is linked to others. Our focus is to positively effect those factors over which we have some control or influence, and continuously improve how we go about our business as a region.
- We have strategic direction, with the afore-mentioned economic growth strategy, and with the short and long term actions identified in our council business plan – which many of you may have picked up on your way in today.
- Words are nice – but where are the concrete examples? For lack of originality – something which former lawyers are never accused of - let’s use the council business plan as a measuring stick to assess our progress.

**Niagara is on track when it comes to a responsive region – but how do we do it?**

- As a level of government, we do not directly create jobs, what we do is create an environment that is conducive to that economic growth – and that environment touches on all the aspects of the services we deliver, both hard and soft services.

- We have focused on living within our means. In another word, affordability. This guiding principle has led us near zero tax increase in 2008, and a modest 1.9% increase in 2007, and 2.2% in 2006. Considering that the regional portion of the property tax bill is roughly 50%, this has provided our taxpayers with a level of welcome stability.
- We are a different Niagara Region than we were in the past. To steal a line from General Motors, “This is not your father’s Oldsmobile” – well, this is not your father’s Region. We have been asked to play a whole new role, and we are wholeheartedly embracing it. We are no longer simply a deliverer of services – and even if we were, we deliver many more than when we were created in 1970
- In 1970 we were responsible for water, sewer, planning, seniors, policing and roads. Since then we have added to that list our public health, children’s services, provincial court administration, solid waste management, recycling, emergency medical services and housing.
- Now, the Region’s role, in addition to providing service, is that of a facilitator, a connector, a catalyst.
- This can be seen through the Job Bus service, where we have worked with many different partners to facilitate getting people to jobs across the region – and saving \$500,000 in social assistance costs.
- We play a significant role in the administration of justice and commitment to safety across Niagara through our role as a service manager with the Niagara Regional Police Service, and operation of the Provincial Offences Administration – our court system. As such, we look forward to continuing to work with the NRPS to identify and supply the facilities necessary to provide responsive and effective police services in Niagara, in accordance with its needs, sound planning principles and at a cost that’s appropriate for the residents of Niagara.
- Our planning services review led to many changes in how planning issues are handled by government – streamlined process, clearly defined responsibilities, and the removal of duplication. We have created a Development Services Division at the Region - whose role is to simplify the business of government. It is truly one-stop shopping for business and residents. Reducing processing times, improving accessibility, and reducing confusion.
- We are focusing on our youth retention strategy. The increased cooperation and integration of our post-secondary institutions into our communities, more investment in training programs, and we are clearly focusing on increasing the Niagara Region’s level of co-op and other job placements and opportunities.
- We are reviewing our own internal structure and how we integrate and interact with other levels of government, non-profit, business and charitable organizations.

- We cannot be static, we must – and we are – receptive to these changes, and foster an internal commitment to creativity.

**Niagara is on track when it comes to community and social well-being.**

- Clearly, being on track is not about simply identifying your issues – but it is a part of the process.
  - Our demographics are a reality. Compared to the rest of the province, we have a greater percentage of our population over the age of 65.
  - Poverty. Our family median income in Niagara is \$56,700. As well, we have the lowest median income in Ontario at \$23,400. There are many people living and working in Niagara who are hovering above the poverty line, about 14% of our population is living in poverty.
  - Social housing. Our needs far outweigh our ability to fill them. 8,000 people – or approximately 4,000 families – are on our social housing waiting list.
  - Obesity. We need to get our populations active. Provincial and national data show that less than half of our residents are at a healthy weight for their height, and locally, our rates of overweight and obesity have not improved significantly in the past several years.
- However, we have plans to deal with these issues, and we are on track.
- We have created 553 additional child care spaces in Niagara in 2007. Our waiting list went from over 300 to zero. This provides support to allow mothers and fathers to pursue or maintain employment, upgrade skills, or invest in continuous education.
- We more than doubled the available space in our emergency hostels, increasing our capacity to house the homeless in our communities by 76%.
- We have invested significant dollars to date in the Greater Niagara Circle Route and other multi-use trails and infrastructure to support our residents ability to be active on a regular basis.
- When discussing our economy, we begin with an economy of one – and that is each and every new citizen of Niagara. We must invest in our youth - all 95,230 of them in Niagara – over 22% of our population, and invest in building strong families, and in the creation of safe and supportive neighbourhoods.
- On that note, I would like to take the opportunity to highlight that in 2008, 100% of the proceeds of my charity golf tournament – being held on

Thursday, September 11 of this year - will be going to two organizations that support these issues – the Boys and Girls Club of Niagara, who is in the process of opening their St. Catharines location at the former Queen Elizabeth Centre, and PRO-KIDS, which is aimed at providing funding for children to take part in sports, music and other opportunities who cannot otherwise afford the cost. The tournament has raised approximately \$100,000 a year for local charities over the last few years.

- As well, we are in the midst of creating a region-wide cultural plan. This is an economic and social priority for Niagara, and is part of the economic engine that drives our region. We benefit from a wealth of culture, both in the heritage resources in our communities, the wealth of arts-related industries, and the cultural resources, such as theatres and studios. We must continue to support and build on these assets.
- A wonderful example of history and economy coming together to provide an opportunity lies in the upcoming celebrations marking the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the War of 1812. It speaks directly to the focus on culture as an area of future growth for Niagara, and provides an occasion to celebrate - on a national level, in partnership with our American neighbours - what is a truly a monumental event for the region, the province, and our country.
- Potential for a world-class international music facility that exists, in partnership with the National Arts Centre and Toronto Symphony Orchestra, in Niagara-on-the-Lake.

### **Niagara is on track when it comes to economic prosperity.**

- We have had many ‘wins’ as a region.
  - A \$500 million investment in green energy at the AbitibiBowater and Northland Power co-generation facility in Thorold.
  - Eurocopter recently completed a 50,000 square foot expansion of their facility in Fort Erie, nearly doubling its size. DMI Industries – attracted to Fort Erie in 2006, has experienced aggressive growth and expanded a number of times to accommodate its increased sales volumes of its towers for wind turbines.
  - The continued transformation of our manufacturing sector. An excellent example is Handling Specialities in Grimsby. Transforming from a company reliant on the automotive sector, and provincial and national buyers, to a company focused on the creation of custom-built, specific products and materials, to international markets, such as underwater lifts for the Las Vegas show of Cirque de Soleil.
  - In Welland, ITS Rail, an internationally recognized company that maintains, overhauls and produces locomotive equipment, moved here

- in 2007, bringing with it 65 jobs. Same for Universal Resource Recovery – 45 jobs, and Salit Steel, 75 – 100 jobs.
- The financial commitment, support and finally the creation of the Niagara Falls Convention and Civic Centre, which will bring year-round employment, visitors and exposure to Niagara Falls and the Niagara Region.
  - The funding announcements for the Brock Bio-Manufacturing Centre and the new media incubator through Silicon Knights in St. Catharines.
  - A significant investment in new and expanded facilities at the Niagara College Welland campus, resulting in a complete transformation of the campus, including new classrooms and labs, expanded technology skills training facilities and new student facilities.
  - A \$25 million provincial and federal investment in a rejuvenated Vineland Research and Innovation Centre.
- Without a doubt, businesses are facing tremendous challenges in order to remain competitive and profitable. We have particularly seen evidence of this in the automotive sector.
  - However, much of our real growth over the past several years is found in small and medium sized businesses, which includes multiple sectors.
  - Between 1999 and 2004 Niagara lost 26,000 jobs – but created 35,000.
  - Between 1999 and 2007 Niagara gained over 6,000 small and medium sized businesses, and our net manufacturing employment has remained stable, hovering between 25,000 and 26,000 jobs.
  - This SME growth will continue to diversify our economy, and make us less vulnerable in the future.
  - Recently we had two major projects that will create short term jobs – \$1 million invested in the brownfield development of the Exolon property in Thorold and the development of the former Welmet site in Welland to include residential and commercial space on former industrial lands.
  - So we know our economy is diversifying, we know that we can use provincial policies such as Places to Grow to help, rather than hinder, our growth, and as Richard Florida highlighted during Niagarapalooza, this activity, this diversity, this innovation – and these partnerships – are what have put us, and will keep us, on track.
  - Our own growth management study has highlighted opportunities and challenges. Our projections have us growing to 545,000 people by 2031. However, our

Niagara 2031 survey results – available on our website – have highlighted that where those people will live is a variable.

- 60% of our residents want growth in our downtowns. That’s good. But only 8% want to live there. That’s interesting.
  - Only 2% of our residents use transit for work. But 60% say they would if the service was more convenient.
  - Opportunities and challenges.
- There is no single white knight looking to move in to Niagara and bring with them thousands of new jobs. To use a sports analogy, we are going to build through the draft – not through free agents.

### **Niagara is on track when it comes to environmental stewardship.**

- In the southern tier of the region you are blessed with one of the most significant freshwater bodies in the world in Lake Erie. Although the smallest of the great lakes, it is the most abundant in terms of the commercial and recreational fishing and boating opportunities that exist.
- The development of our green master plan is underway, and we are making big and small strides.
  - We, in partnership with private industry, are undertaking our first wind farm project in Wainfleet, which, when fully operational, will be capable of generating up to 10 megawatts of electricity – generating enough renewable energy to supply the needs of about 3,500 homes.
  - We just celebrated the beginning of our battery recycling pilot which should direct over 13 tonnes of batteries, and the resulting mercury and cadmium, from entering our municipal waste stream. The company that is handling this recycling for the region is a local company – International Marine Salvage based in Port Colborne.
- A large part of the land between Niagara Falls and Fort Erie is designated as provincial wetlands, and we are working diligently with the Town of Fort Erie and the province to look at the issue, and find solutions that protect our environmentally sensitive lands, but allow for growth as well.
- Last week we opened our high-rate treatment facility in conjunction with the City of Niagara Falls. During periods of heavy rain, raw sewage can be discharged into our lakes and rivers. This \$26 million facility in Niagara Falls – the largest facility of its kind in the country, is a collaborative project that will improve our environmental footprint by reducing the annual volume of combined sewage overflow to the Niagara River by 580,000 cubic metres per year.

- We continue to work with the Township of Wainfleet to find a solution to the existing concerns over drinking water quality for its lakeshore residents. This is an issue that, as recently as a month ago, were discussing directly with the provincial Minister of Health, and I thank Mayor Henderson for her efforts on behalf of her residents, and for the work that has taken place between regional and township staff.

**Niagara is on track to an integrated transportation system.**

- This issue has been, and will continue to be, a focus of mine, and is integral to the growth of our region. For our communities to grow and prosper, so must the transportation infrastructure that supports them. So must our interconnectivity to the rest of our province and our American friends and neighbours.
- Our priority has been the expansion and extension of the 406 into East Main Street in Welland. The environmental assessment and design will be completed by this time next year, and I am urging the government to commence construction of the project by 2010. Recent presentations by the Ministry of Transportation to regional staff have shown an understanding of our concerns, and I am confident that this is understood to be an absolute priority for the Niagara Region.
- We are undertaking a southern tier arterial roads study with the goal of better connecting Fort Erie to the Welland/Port Colborne and Wainfleet areas. The study should commence by mid-June with public meetings later this year. We are scheduling actual construction to proceed concurrent with the next phase of Highway 406 improvements between Port Robinson Road and East Main Street.
- These connections work well in conjunction with the grow south strategy as the economic development of the southern tier is critical to the development and prosperity of the entire Niagara Region.
  - Better access to our northern communities such as St. Catharines by the widening of the QEW is integral to this growth as well. This provincial and federal investment is one of the largest roads projects the province has ever undertaken, with over \$140 million in provincial money, and \$40 million in federal money to widen the QEW through St. Catharines and Niagara-on-the-Lake.
  - Over the next three years, the Region will be spending over \$ 9.7 Million to reconstruct Regional Road 20 (the former Highway 20) between Fonthill and the new interchange at Highway 406. Staff is finalizing property, design and utility matters on the section between Rice Road and Cataract Road and we hope to have a contract awarded for this section of the work by this summer. The section from Highway 406 to Cataract Road should proceed in 2009 and the final section from Rice Road to Station Street should be constructed in 2010.

- I cannot underscore the importance of Niagara gaining a foothold in the GO transit system as well. GO Bus' movement into Grimsby will be a welcome move for our Region. Metrolinx, formerly known as the Greater Toronto Transportation Authority, has given Niagara a place on their advisory group looking at the future plans for transit in the Toronto area and neighbouring communities.
- We have worked diligently as a facilitator and a connector on Inter-Municipal Transit, and it is on track. It needs to offer our residents access to an affordable method of movement within our communities, and it needs to be a solution that our existing providers can agree on. Welland transit offers service in Port Colborne. St. Catharines transit offers service in Thorold. The examples of this cooperation exist, but we must build upon them.
- Our first form of Inter-Municipal Transit – namely, Niagara Specialized Transit, has been a resounding success. The same for the Job Bus. So we are already moving people from municipality to municipality for health reasons or for employment, and our municipal leaders are committed to looking at the potential of an inter-municipal transit system. This is not a St. Catharines, or a Welland, or a Niagara Falls issue – it has ramifications for all of Niagara.
- So while some of our transportation issues are about moving people, some of them are about moving goods, and moving our economy. The Niagara – GTA corridor environmental assessment should be completed by 2009, and we believe that our investment on our east-west road system and connections in Niagara provide increased options in the short term, and that work will then support some of our long-term solutions, such as the proposed Niagara-GTA corridor.

**Niagara is on track when it comes to proactive marketing and communications.**

- Let me cut to the chase. I do not believe that every organization, public or private, and every municipality across Niagara will want the same thing. We will not always speak with the same voice. We will disagree. What is important is that we continuously support one another. That when speaking with our provincial and federal partners that we share a belief in a common goal, in the understanding – both through words and actions – that what is good for one community in Niagara is indeed good for us all.
- We are creating a Niagara 'brand'. When it comes to business investment, Niagara is not top of mind like we are when it comes to tourism, and we need to be. However, even there, our global icon – the Falls – does not convey the depth and breadth of our tourism industry. A clean, well thought out, and differentiated Niagara brand is one of the building blocks for our future success.
- These priorities have been confirmed by council, by business, and by community stakeholders. So we are not planning for better things, we are doing better things. We are on track. And I have a vision for the future of Niagara. A vision of a

region with open and interconnected communities. Where job opportunities are ample, and our quality of life is second to none. Where our youngest citizens and their families are safe and supported in any neighbourhood across Niagara. Where we preserve and enhance our natural areas, make better use of our fresh water coastlines, curtail urban sprawl, and build exciting and vibrant communities. I see a Niagara that is seen as a national leader in arts, culture and heritage. A Niagara that boasts a thriving and diversified economy. That is my vision, our vision – and we are well on the way to making it a reality.

- Thank you.