

# 2019 KENT COUNTY STATE OF THE COUNTY



**May 2, 2019**

**DeVos Place · 303 Monroe Ave NW · Grand Rapids, MI**

# KENT COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS CHAIR MANDY BOLTER



Good evening! I am Mandy Bolter, Chair of the Kent County Board of Commissioners. On behalf of my fellow commissioners, I would like to welcome you to Kent County's first ever State of the County. It only took us 188 years!

Thank you for joining us today. I think my fellow commissioners will agree, there are people in this community who do not fully understand the work and public service that is done by the County. We are working to change that.

Over the past few months we have been updating our Strategic Plan, our goals, mission and vision. Many of you were a part of that. We held several local meetings, emailed thousands of people and heard from hundreds in our community about what they want from their County.

Tonight, is part of that process. It is our opportunity to take a look back at some of our collective accomplishments and explain what and how we are serving you. It's also a time to look ahead – together.

Before we do that, I would like to thank tonight's sponsors.

- Blue Cross/ Blue Shield of Michigan
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- Public Affairs Associates
- Progressive AE
- The Right Place, and
- Warner Norcross and Judd

Please join me in a warm, West Michigan thank you!

**ACKNOWLEDGE ELECTED OFFICIALS**

I would also like to acknowledge the elected officials and staff who are here with us today. Will you all please stand and be recognized? Thank you for your leadership, collaboration and service.

**PROUD WEST MICHIGANDER**

I am humbled and really kind of amazed that I'm standing here before you tonight in this capacity. About 20 years ago, I was dating this guy named Alan Bolter, a proud "West Sider." Things were getting serious and he very bluntly informed me that if this was going to work out, I was going to have to move to Kent County.

I mean, 20 years ago, this place looked a lot different! There wasn't a Starbucks in sight, and I was calling some guy named "Ambassador Setch-e-uh" to help me on a project. A rite of passage for many of us newbies. I have grown to love our community – its work ethic, passion, collaboration. Our cities, farms, neighborhoods and school and especially our "West Michigan nice!"

I am honored to serve as the second youngest Kent County Board Chair and one of only four women to hold the seat since the Commission, as we know it, was formed 50 years ago.

**SUCCESSION PLANNING**

That speaks to the changing culture and demographics in our county. We are an 872-square-mile rectangle, comprised of 9 cities, 21 townships and 5 villages with a population of roughly 650,000 people. Our population is growing younger, more educated and more diverse every day.

Did you know that 50 percent of our residents are under the age of 35? That speaks to two quick issues I want to discuss in this short time: succession planning and service.

Wayman is going to give you much more detail about our 25 departments, offices and agencies that are serving you. But as the chair of the County board, I want to be sure we are both serving our communities *and* planning for the future.

I'll say it again – 50 percent of our population is under 35! This is a huge opportunity for us! We need to make sure our county government and all that goes with it is planning to support you, the community, your businesses and families so our kids and grandkids want to either stay here or at least come back and establish their roots.

One of the things I am encouraging with our staff is to be more intentional about succession planning. It isn't only our community leaders who are retiring, it is a lot of our key county staff and many leaders who serve on the important boards we appoint as a county. We are going to be more intentional about training our staff to succeed those who leave and to mentor the new members who join us. And as community leaders, I ask that each of you look at the generation below you and find someone to mentor. We have been so fortunate for so long to have many huge pillars in this community but my generation and the generations that come after need these community leaders to step up once more and ensure that their commitment, passion and know-how are not lost.

### **SERVICE**

The second, and last thing I want to reiterate is service. I can promise you that every board member – every one of the 19 people who serve on your Commission – are committed to serving you. We want to double down our efforts and have proven that by “taking care of what is ours.”

“Taking care of what is ours” is the best way we can provide service. It is what has made us great in the past and will continue to make us great in the future. In West Michigan, we take care of each other. This is evidenced by how we conduct ourselves both in public service and private enterprise.

We take care of our families with some of the best schools in the country and a strong safety net of private, non-profit and county-operated services. We take care of our health by partnering with world-class, non-profit and public health systems, both along the medical mile and all across the county.

And one of the best examples of taking care of those we serve is how we've pulled together to take care of our veterans. If you know me, you know I am no fan of mileages but a few years back, county and state leaders saw how veterans were being neglected. We pulled together as a community to take care of the men and women who have served us. We passed a Veteran's millage in 2014. Since that time, our community has generated enough emergency funds that we have effectively ended veteran's homelessness in Kent County!

Our service to the county continues with innovative ways to keep people out of our criminal justice system and help them get back on track. Kent County established several specialty courts including a Girls Court, Truancy Court, a Mental Health Treatment Court, and a Veteran’s Treatment Court. These courts are not only saving tax dollars, but they’re improving lives.

We take care of and support our business community. We collaborate.

We also take care of the economic interests of our region. The estimated annual economic impact of the Gerald R. Ford International Airport is \$3.1 billion. That’s BILLION, with a “B.” And that makes the airport a great example of how public-private partnerships can drive regional growth. In 2016, we transitioned policy and oversight of the airport to the Airport Authority Board. And business has never been better. In 2018, continuously outpacing other airports its size, the airport set an all-time passenger record and marked its sixth straight year of growth. Things are going so well that in the near future, there are plans for expansion and ticket prices will continue to be more competitive and more jobs will be created. Best of all, this regional transportation hub is self-sustaining – not publicly funded. And it is thriving.

Finally, we are “taking care of our own” by being mindful of your tax dollars. The AAA bond rating is your assurance that the County is providing the best management of public funds. And you’ll be happy to know, it has saved County taxpayers millions over the past two decades. For instance, the City of Grand Rapids was able to use our bond rating to finance their flood mitigation walls, saving real tax dollars.

In these ways, we have been meeting the needs of the community. And we want to be even more accessible in the years ahead. The past couple of years we have included more evening meetings, established a monthly newsletter and are hosting this event tonight and we will continue to work even harder to ensure our county residents know we are here to serve.

I am so honored to chair this amazing group of commissioners – though we are almost split between Republicans and Democrats, I and many others have worked to put solid public policy ahead of politics. I feel in this crazy, divided national culture Kent County can lead and be a great example of how to get things done.

I am also honored to work with our incredible, dedicated County staff – the 1,775 people who work for Kent County in law enforcement, victim advocacy, public health, senior services, and so much more!

And, of course, the board's partner in getting the job done – our County Administrator Wayman Britt. As you know, Wayman has been in the post since January of 2018, when he was unanimously appointed by our board. As part of the search committee, I will tell you that we conducted an exhaustive, national search when we were looking to fill this position. Wayman rose above 67 solid candidates for many reasons. Then board chair, Jim Saalfeld stated one of the most important things you could say when trying to find someone for this role. He said, "I think you have a servant's heart." And I think we can all agree - he does.

Please join me in viewing a short video about our awesome county and then welcome our Administrator, Wayman Britt.

## KENT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR WAYMAN BRITT



Welcome to all of you! I am so happy you're here today to hear about this great County. If you walk out of here today with one message, I'd like you to say to yourself, "I'm ready to partner with Kent County to improve the quality of life for ALL who live; work; and learn here." As you saw in that video, together, we have so much to celebrate and so many great things to build upon.

That includes our County leadership. A special thanks to Chair Mandy Bolter for her dedication to Kent County. We appreciate your sound leadership on the Commission and the valuable contributions you make daily for the people of Kent County.

I would also like to extend my appreciation to our Kent County Board of Commissioners; past and present. We know you don't do it for the notoriety – and you certainly don't do it for the compensation. You're there because you want to serve the people who live in this incredible place called Kent County. Thank you for that.

So, what do you picture when you think about Kent County?

Perhaps you think of an economic and manufacturing powerhouse, because Kent County boasts one of the fastest growing economies in the country.

Maybe it's the combination of a diverse urban environment with outstanding natural landscapes. Or it could be that it's the home of the state's second largest city with 15 colleges and universities, high-quality healthcare, a world-renowned botanical garden and sculpture park, over 7,000 acres of County-operated parks, greenspaces and trails, and one of the best apple-growing environments in the entire country.

Our community is repeatedly ranked among the nation's top places to live, visit, start a business, buy a home, raise a family, start a career or retire. We are attracting a younger and increasingly diverse and educated population – twenty six percent identify as ethnically or racially diverse and 50 percent are under the age of 35. When I think about Kent County, I take pride in all of these things.

But, today, I ask you to join me in also thinking about the business of Kent County government – and the role you play in helping us do our jobs better. Through 25 departments, offices and agencies, we provide vital services to improve the quality of life for nearly 650,000 Kent County residents every single day.

We are a highly diverse and multi-faceted business. And we get the job done with a diverse and multi-talented staff. Could the Kent County staff members who are here today please stand? Please join me in thanking them for their service. So, what business are we in?

**First, we're in the health and wellness business.**

Adam London and the entire team at the Kent County Health Department are a part of our county's healthcare safety net and our first line of defense when it comes to public health.

The stats are impressive. In 2018, they provided:

- Over 80,000 appointments in our public health clinics,
- Nearly 60,000 WIC appointments for 15,000 women, infants and children, and
- More than 6,000 home nursing visits to support pregnant women and new moms.

They are preventing disease and catching problems early. For instance, in 2018, they conducted:

- Nearly 15 thousand immunizations
- 39 thousand hearing screenings
- And 54 thousand vision screenings at schools, Great Start Readiness sites, Head Start sites and kindergarten assessments.

The department is also supporting food security and safety for our residents. Last year, they:

- Distributed thousands of pounds of fresh, Michigan-grown fruits and vegetables through Project Fresh,
- And they conducted more than 4,000 food safety inspections at 1,700 restaurants and 627 temporary food stands at festivals, fairs, and sporting events throughout the region.

The Health Department's impact is undeniable.

Yet access to behavioral healthcare remains a challenge in our community – as it is in communities nationwide. The unfortunate truth is, the behavioral health system in the State of Michigan is inefficient and isn't accessible for many of our residents.

As a result, the state, local governments and nonprofit providers must come together to create an effective system that addresses mental health and substance use disorders. The rise in suicides and opioid deaths are just two reasons we need a collaborative, non-bureaucratic approach to address behavioral health issues at their core.

We need to create and expand early intervention solutions that mitigate problems early. One example of this is the Kent School Services Network. For over a decade, the County has worked with the Kent ISD, local school districts, and several area foundations including the Frey Foundation, Grand Rapids Community Foundation, Steelcase Foundation, Doug & Maria DeVos Foundation and Keller Foundation to help fund school-based services that address mental health issues among our children. Carol Paine-McGovern has been an outstanding leader in this endeavor, and she has worked tirelessly to make the Kent School Services Network a model for others to follow. Carol is not able to be here today, but when you see her, please say thank you for all she does.

We also need to reduce lag time, inefficiencies and costs by getting people who need behavioral healthcare to the right services right away. We commend our community partners who serve people

with acute psychiatric needs and work to alleviate the burden on our local emergency departments. This is a big step in the right direction. But we need to expand on this effort.

The Kent County Population Health Consortium is working on this issue, and I would like to thank Mike Jandernoa for his leadership and willingness to co-chair with me in this important work. In collaboration with Spectrum Health, Pine Rest, Mercy Health St. Mary's, Metro Health, Mary Free Bed, Cherry Health, network180, Grand Valley State University and HealthNet, we are developing a plan to address the mental health crisis in the community. Our aim is simple - to improve the health of all Kent County residents.

**An important aspect of our work in public health is the role we play in monitoring, improving and protecting water quality.**

Working in conjunction with the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality and the Environmental Protection Agency, staff from the Kent County Health Department and Department of Public Works established plans to identify areas of concern and educate the public about PFAS contamination. We are working alongside many partners to assure that our residents have safe drinking water in Plainfield Township, Algoma Township, the City of Rockford and throughout all of Kent County.

We are also conducting a thorough exposure assessment of the people in the contaminated area of northern Kent County. It is important that we gather as much scientific evidence as possible about what happened. Residents and leaders in these communities continue to recognize our work as being instrumental in providing direct, straight-forward communication about this complex and ever-changing issue.

**Our 3<sup>rd</sup> area of business is supporting our veterans.**

Last year, we assisted nearly 3,000 veterans in obtaining benefits and community resources. And we honored our vets and their families by providing burial assistance for nearly 500 local veterans. We also invested significantly in the Veterans Treatment Court – where Veterans work with Judge Pablo Cortes to address systemic issues that brought them into contact with law enforcement.

**4<sup>th</sup>: We're in the business of alleviating poverty and providing support to the most vulnerable children and adults in our community.**

Kent County, along with several non-profit organizations and the State of Michigan, created the West Michigan Partnership for Children. Our goal is to do a better job for children in the child welfare system.

We are leading change by piloting a performance-based model that supports children and families. After one year of operation, we have already seen a six percent reduction in institutional child care placement. And WMPC is taking this a step further by working to place children with foster families within their own communities and neighborhoods. That keeps kids in their own schools, close to their friends and things they are familiar with.

We're also supporting our seniors. This past year, the Senior Millage provided more than \$11 million in funding for services to help seniors maintain their independence.

Our Kent County Community Action Agency supported over 1,400 households with direct assistance to prevent homelessness. And we assisted another one hundred and seven homeowners with funding to rehabilitate their homes. A big shout out to Kristen Peck from WMPC and Susan Cervantes from Community Action for their great work.

Despite this and the work of many others, housing remains a very important issue in our community. Within the past year, we have seen a 30 percent increase in homeless families with children. These are not unemployed families. They are people who are often called the working poor.

We need to recognize that housing affordability and accessibility are not singular issues. They're linked to a broad range of societal issues, including economic disparity. We are all very proud that Forbes ranks us among the fastest growing economies in the United States. But we take no pride that we are ranked 2<sup>nd</sup> worst in Forbes' list of cities where African-Americans are doing well economically.

The Grand Rapids Center for Community Transformation points out that the 49507-zip code – where 89 percent of residents are people of color – has experienced some of the greatest economic declines and least significant recoveries in the region. In fact, no Michigan zip code had more lead-poisoned children than 49507.

Even more broadly, a limited supply of workforce housing limits access to the American Dream. As a community, we need to work together on a comprehensive solution to these housing issues. This will demand a collaborative effort and will require local, state and even federal resources to address these problems.

Kent County looks forward to helping lead these discussions. We will work with local philanthropic partners like the Frey Foundation and the Grand Rapids Community Foundation, and nonprofits like SEEDS of Promise and the Grand Rapids Center for Community Transformation to get at the root of the economic disparity problem.

We will continue to work with our community stakeholders to address the lead paint issue in our community. We will work with the boots-on-the-ground community-based organizations that know our neighborhoods, our people and *their needs* better than we do. We will seek the advice of organizations like the Homebuilders Association, The Right Place, the Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce and others to bring a business perspective to this puzzle. And we will continue to work with our local units of government to develop innovative solutions to *close* the gap and address these complex issues in a comprehensive way.

We recognize that, for all people to have equal opportunity to thrive in our community, we need to remove barriers starting with our youngest residents. That's why the County backed the *Ready by Five* millage in 2018. And it's why our staff will work with First Steps Kent to develop and implement the delivery system for early childhood services funded by the millage.

**The 5<sup>th</sup> area of County business is public safety.**

Our 911 Emergency Communications Center answered more than 374,000 calls for service last year. This averaged over 1,000 inbound calls per day! In addition, more than 95 percent of the 911 calls were answered within 15 seconds and generated nearly 143 thousand law enforcement and fire department responses. Many of those calls were answered in some extremely challenging conditions.

Even though spring has arrived, I'll bet no one has forgotten this winter's Polar Vortex. With a foot of new snow and wind chills pushing 40 below, conditions throughout West Michigan were downright dangerous in late January and early February. The way you and I are able to adapt to severe weather may be quite different than our neighbors' ability to adapt. If you're homebound and rely on food aid, for instance, what happens when your power and refrigeration go out? You can't just run to the store for supplies.

During the February ice storm, Emergency Preparedness Specialist Pat Draper recognized this. She called on the networks she has built through her years of county service. With their help, she was able

to identify people who were most vulnerable. She and our Sheriff Deputies checked in on these people to make sure they had what they needed and were safe and warm.

Thanks to the dedication of people like Pat, Kent County had no weather-related deaths during this extreme weather event. Pat, where are you? Please join me in giving Pat and our entire Emergency Management Team a hand.

In 2018, we bid farewell to Sheriff Larry Stelma after 40 years of service and 18 years as our County's top law enforcement officer. And we also welcomed Sheriff Michelle LaJoye-Young – the first woman to serve in this post. She is a consummate professional and a highly-qualified law-enforcement officer... and she demands the same of her staff.

They have a big job. Our Sheriff's deputies patrol nearly seven hundred and fifty SQUARE miles of our county. They serve as the primary local law enforcement agency for nearly 400,000 residents. The Sheriff's Office also operates our County Jail, providing a safe and secure correctional facility that is shared by 13 other local law enforcement agencies throughout Kent County.

**6<sup>th</sup> - We're in the justice business.**

Kent County operates the 63<sup>rd</sup> District Court, 17<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court and Probate Court serving communities throughout the county.

And, as a result of the passion and commitment of court officials like Family Court Judge Patricia Gardner, 2018 marked the first full year of operation of our new Girls Court. This specialty court is designed to help at-risk girls thrive in our community. Of the sixteen girls participating, twelve have successfully graduated from the program. Two have graduated high school and are now attending college. And one even earned the YWCA Tribute Award for students. Risk assessment scores for Girls Court graduates dropped by over 8 points. And, parents support each other as they see they are not alone.

Our courts are moving the needle.

So is Chris Becker and his team at the Kent County Prosecutor's Office. They launched several innovative programs in 2018. They started a pilot program with the West Michigan Therapy Dogs where they can provide dogs for children and vulnerable adults as they wait to testify. Studies show that dogs

can reduce stress in vulnerable witnesses and may even improve their ability to give accurate testimony.

The Prosecutor's Office has also partnered with the Dispute Resolution Center of West Michigan to provide a restorative justice program for juvenile offenders. The aim of these programs is to steer young, non-violent offenders away from a life in the criminal justice system.

But beyond our courts and our Prosecutor's Office, we are working to ensure justice on the streets and in the neighborhoods of our communities. Over the past year, many in our immigrant community brought concerns to our Board of Commissioners and County Administration. In response, County leaders have joined with several organizations serving the immigrant and refugee communities to establish ongoing dialogue and engagement. We're posing the questions: Is Kent County welcoming to the refugee and immigrant communities? And, what does the County need to do to better to serve them?

Our goal with these efforts is twofold: First, we want to learn about the barriers facing refugees and immigrants who seek to receive our services. We also want to learn about the barriers they may face in trying to do business with the County. Ultimately, as a result of this engagement, we want to break down those barriers, while establishing solid working relationships with the members of these communities.

I want to thank some of the community partners in these important efforts, including:

- The West Michigan Hispanic Chamber of Commerce
- The Urban Core Collaborative
- The Hispanic Center of West Michigan
- Grand Rapids Community College
- And local school districts.

The work they have undertaken, along with participating Commissioners and County staff, is commendable and greatly appreciated. Many of these individuals are in the room this evening. Please join me in thanking them.

**Our next business is waste, recycling and conservation.**

Our Public Works Department manages our waste-to-energy, landfill, transfer station and recycling facilities. In that business, growth can present some challenges. Think about it. The county's population is increasing, and we've enjoyed sustained business growth. But that means our municipal solid waste continues to increase, too. It has now surpassed 700,000 tons annually.

Dar Baas and his team aren't out looking for more trash. In fact, they have some of the most aggressive goals in the state when it comes to recycling and conservation. They aim to reduce landfill waste 20% by 2020 and 90% by 2030. As part of that effort, they're partnering with The Right Place to develop a sustainable business park that is estimated to bring \$500 million in private capital investment once it's complete.

**9<sup>th</sup>: We're in the recreation and leisure business.**

This is the fun part. Kent County operates one of the oldest and largest park systems in Michigan. In total, 42 County parks, greenspaces and trails span 7,040 acres. Kent County Parks maintains over 80 miles of hiking, mountain biking, regional paved, and water trails that wind through county parkland and connect communities throughout our region.

With 1,400 acres of rolling terrain and six miles of Grand River frontage, Millennium Park is one of the nation's largest urban parks – even larger than Central Park in New York City. It's become a local favorite on hot summer days, with the beach there attracting anywhere from 85 to 100,000 visitors each year.

Guided by our recently approved Parks Master Plan, we will continue to partner with the Kent County Parks Foundation and Sam Moore in their efforts to beautify, expand and make our parks and trails more accessible to a broader cross section of our community.

**10<sup>th</sup> on our list: We're in the business of advocating for local amenities, infrastructure, cultural institutions, environmental protections and other critical services.**

State Senator Pete MacGregor, former State Senator Dave Hildenbrand and former State Representative Rob Verheulen were instrumental in helping us strengthen our foster care system and finding solutions for juveniles in our criminal justice system.

Last year, we lobbied for and received over \$500,000 from the Michigan Legislature for our important work related to PFAS contamination. I want to thank State Senator Winnie Brinks and former State Representative Chris Afendoulis for their strong support around PFAS and water quality.

And finally, thanks to support from our West Michigan delegation, we received 16.5 million dollars in 2018 state appropriations for John Ball Zoo, the Grand Rapids-Kent County Convention Arena Authority, Grand Rapids Whitewater, and the Gerald R. Ford International Airport. Several members of our West Michigan Delegation and their staff are here. Let's thank them for looking out for our region.

### **LEADERSHIP AND FINANCIAL STABILITY**

To get the diverse and challenging business of the County done, we need strong leadership and financial stability. You didn't think you'd get out of here without a word about the County's AAA Bond Rating, did you?

If you hadn't heard, Kent County is one of only a few counties in the country to be AAA Bond Rated by Moody's and Standard and Poor's. It's a rating we've maintained for 21 years. So, why is that so important? The same reason you want to maintain an excellent personal credit rating. It allows us to finance at the lowest possible cost - critical infrastructure projects and quality of life venues like the DeVos Place – investments that drive game-changing economic impact in our community.

We're also proud to report that the County's pension plan is fully funded and our other post-employment benefit liability has been significantly reduced. These financial successes are a testament to the strong leadership of our current and past Board of Commissioners and County staff. We remain committed to solid financial planning and strong financial management.

### **A LOOK AHEAD**

So, what's in store for the balance of 2019 and the coming year?

Building on our strong foundation, we'll work together with our community partners to advance current initiatives and focus on new priorities in the year ahead.

We are committed to reviewing ways to sustain a strong agricultural economy.

We will continue to work with community stakeholders to assess the vexing problems of Economic Disparity and Housing Affordability.

We will continue to communicate with, and learn from, the refugee and immigrant communities about their concerns.

We will increase our Parks Department's engagement with local units of government, philanthropy, business and residents.

We'll continue to lead on environmental issues including PFAS and lead remediation.

We'll leverage technology to improve the performance and capabilities of County operations and increase access to information.

We'll address our health care and human services problems from an integrated systems perspective.

We'll continue to be a vital partner to our business and philanthropic communities, including the Chamber of Commerce and The Right Place.

We'll empower creative thinking among our staff and continue to grow our leadership capacity, so we are capable of serving as a trusted partner in transforming our community.

**WORKING TOGETHER**

But we won't do any of this alone.

An African proverb says it well: If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together. We will never sit in isolation and only do what we're mandated to do. We're in a unique position to convene public and private partners to make Kent County an even better place than it is today.

Join us.

A diversity of voices will complete the picture and ensure the program, service, place or project is meaningful and welcoming for all.

Join us as we increase access to healthcare, support safe and healthy communities and promote the economic prosperity of our county.

Join us as we build a place where all can contribute to this wonderful home, we call Kent County.

Join us.

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