



STATE OF THE COUNTY-NOVEMBER 2, 2023

STAN STEK REMARKS

Opening

Thank you, Lisa.

And welcome to all of you . . . our partners. Fellow government, business and community leaders. Friends and residents of Kent County. We are glad you are here.

As our partners, you have a fairly good idea of what Kent County government does.

But, we know that we have some work to do to help our residents better understand the vital role we play in making Kent County a great place to live, work, do business, learn and visit.

To help build that understanding, we undertook a process to better align our brand communications with our vision, mission, and the work we do in and for the communities we serve.

After months of assessment and market testing, this past January we finally launched our new Kent County brand.

Those of you who know me, know how impatient I can be with the pace of government. So, after we completed the process of approving the new brand and considered a new County seal, I asked our Administration staff to just come up with something and save the time and hassle of a lengthy vetting process.

While I appreciate the effort, this will probably take some more work. I think they did a pretty credible job. Don't you?

Seriously, we worked very hard to develop a brand that reflects who we are—both Kent County government and the place we call home.

We are in the process of incorporating this brand into the many departments of the County.

Through responsible budgeting and thoughtful planning, the core mission of Kent County is to provide those public resources and services that promote a high quality of life for all within our jurisdiction . This is what we mean when we say we are committed good government.

Our new brand further acknowledges that good government requires us to be a good partner. And good partners collaborate to create a great community—a place where people feel welcome, can thrive and *want* to call their own.

When you think of home, what comes to mind? Beyond the address where you live, what are the things that truly make a place *your* place?



The answers to these questions are likely as diverse as the people you ask.

Kent County is home to more than 664,000 residents—a place where 29% of residents identify as racially or ethnically diverse and 55% are under the age of 35.

With nine cities, five villages, 21 townships and more than 157,000 acres of farmland, Kent County has a place for everyone.

When you add a low unemployment rate, 130 international manufacturing companies in the region, 60,000 health science jobs, \$1.5 billion in regional agribusiness, nine colleges and universities, home to the best healthcare systems and services in the state, nearly 7,800 acres of parks and public greenspaces, 140 miles of trails, four professional sports teams, and arts and cultural festivals and institutions that include an international art competition, the nation's *first* community-wide annual comedy festival, Michigan's *only* professional ballet company, a nationally-recognized symphony orchestra, the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Museum, an acclaimed art museum, a children's museum, a public museum undertaking a \$50 million expansion, one of the top mid-sized arenas in the country, a world class performance hall and convention center, and a 30-acre botanical garden and sculpture park that is one of the 100 *most visited* in the world, it's no wonder that Kent County is the fastest growing county in Michigan and a place we are all proud to call home.

Thank you to all the people in this room who we partner with to build and serve this great community.

That includes my fellow Board of Commission members, many of whom are here tonight.

This year brought several changes to the board. With redistricting, the board grew from 19 to 21 members. In January, we honored 6 outgoing members and welcomed 8 new commissioners meaning nearly 40% of the Commission are new to this process. Of the 21, 57% are Republican and 43% are Democrats, but 100% are dedicated, hard working public servants.

This past month we also approved a fundamental restructuring of the standing committee structure to improve our ability to provide effective oversight.

We know that, to be a good partner, Kent County must be a good fiscal manager.

This year, we transitioned to an October 1 - September 30 fiscal year. This correlates with the fiscal year and budget cycle of our major funding sources—the State of Michigan and the federal government—adding efficiency to our fiscal process.

We're proud that, in April, for the 23rd year in a row, the County was [awarded the Certificate of Achievement for Excellence in Financial Reporting](#), the highest recognition of its kind in North America.

So, you know what comes next, and in the spirit of collaboration, say it with me....



Kent County remains financially strong, earning the Triple-A credit rating from both S&P Global and Moody's Investors Service for the 25th consecutive year in 2023.

So, why do we talk about this every year? Because it's tremendously important for our community. One example is, Kent County's Triple-A bond rating will save our community more than \$20 million over the life of the Gerald R. Ford International Airport bond. Indeed, every time we bond for long term public projects, we save the taxpayers millions of dollars with these ratings.

Congratulations to our Administrator, our fiscal services team and our Board of Commissioners in ensuring the County's finances are managed effectively and our fiscal story is communicated clearly and consistently.

Last fall, we cut the ribbon on the New Kent County Parks Department offices on Butterworth and moved them out of the temporary trailers they had been in for years. This new facility equips our parks staff with the resources needed to maintain our public spaces across the County for years to come.

On June 1st, we celebrated the opening of our North County Campus in Cedar Springs. The 14-acre site is home to a new public health clinic and Sheriff's Office substation that allow us to better serve the growing population in northern Kent County.

In September, we opened the new Kent County Fleet Services building on Ball Avenue. It is a centralized maintenance and repair hub to keep more than 300 county vehicles on the road and serving our community.

And, this next month, the board will take up a proposed new countywide facilities plan.

The proposal calls for a new County administration building and a state-of-the-art medical examiner's facility to be constructed on our Fuller campus. Both of these projects would significantly improve service quality and access for the people of Kent County and increase efficiency of our operations.

But I assure you that, with this move, we would not be abandoning our presence in downtown Grand Rapids. We would sell our building at 82 Ionia but move the Prosecutor's Office to newly renovated space at 300 Monroe, a location directly across from the Kent County Courthouse and more convenient for the team.

We would also maintain services and activities at 300 Monroe unique to the downtown environment, including space for administration and board activity.

And, finally, would be retaining other County services in our offices at 324 Ottawa next to the State of Michigan building.

Watch for more news coming soon on these developments.

In other infrastructure news, we celebrated two major milestones with our friends at the Gerald R. Ford International Airport this year.



In May, they broke ground on a \$156 million consolidated rent-a-car facility. And in June, Ford International Airport completed Phase 1 of its two-phase Concourse A expansion, slated for completion in 2024.

And, congratulations to Tory Richardson and his team. The Gerald R. Ford International Airport was recently voted *Best Small Airport in the Country* in a USA Today Readers' Choice Award.

From a position of fiscal strength, Kent County also serves as a capable partner and convener of essential community initiatives.

For instance, effective and accessible mobility solutions are critical to achieving economic prosperity and a high quality of life across the county. The Kent County Mobility Task Force has convened community stakeholders from state and local government, nonprofits, business, economic and community development and transportation to **evaluate** current mobility services, identify service gaps, and recommend integrated solutions to meet the needs of people throughout Kent County.

Our work together began in October with a \$300,000 State grant to fund the study and the gap analysis.

Thank you to all of our partners participating in this important work.

In other innovative partnerships, the Board will vote this month on a proposal to establish a countywide Brownfield Redevelopment Authority.

The backdrop for this is a recent amendment to the state Brownfield Redevelopment Financing Act. The Act now includes "housing development activities" to be eligible for tax increment financing incentives. This presents another opportunity for Kent County to address its housing shortage.

So, in August, I appointed the Kent County Brownfield Redevelopment Authority Advisory Committee and charged it with making a recommendation on a countywide Authority. Just this week, the committee recommended that we move forward.

The authority would ensure that local governments that choose to use this vehicle will have better access to incentives for a variety of developments, including housing projects.

In a law enforcement partnership between the Kent County Sheriff's Office, the U.S. Department of Justice, other state and local law enforcement agencies and victim service providers, the Task Force to Combat Human Trafficking identified 35 trafficking victims and arrested 9 traffickers between January and September of this year.

But this is only one of many ways we are striving to provide a safe, secure and just community.

Our growing population and the changing dynamics of criminal activity over the past few years has required more investment in public safety operations.



To address this, Kent County Sheriff Michelle LaJoye-Young commissioned a comprehensive study to determine the staffing levels needed to meet current and future demands within the Kent County Correctional Facility. Based on study findings, the board approved funding this year for 20 new corrections officers. We also approved funding for significant improvements in the correctional facility and in law enforcement tools.

The Sheriff has also expanded contracted services adding six new contracted school resource officers to enhance student safety and one new contracted patrol car for Algoma and Courtland Townships.

All of these investments aim to achieve higher operational efficiencies, increase safety and security for correctional facility staff and inmates, improve patrol officer response times and improve school safety.

Another major investment in school safety will address what has been identified as the *most significant point of failure* in school safety incidents, including school shootings . . . and that is communications.

Enabled by over \$2.8 million in Kent County ARPA funding, the Sheriff is implementing an 800 MHz radio safety system in **every Kent County K-12 public and private school building that chooses to participate** . This best-in-class 2-way communications system allows schools, dispatch and first responders to immediately establish direct lines of communications in an emergency.

The system is the first of its kind in the state of Michigan and will enable schools to communicate critical, factual, real-time information to first responders. It also will enable our dispatch centers to relay emergency notifications directly to schools, such as the need to lock down buildings or the threat of inclement weather.

We are also very proud to continue to expand the mental health co-response team initiative throughout Kent County.

Over the three years of this collaboration, Kent County Sheriff's Office and Network 180 co-response teams have realized significant progress in bridging the gap between law enforcement and mental health care when responding to behavioral health emergency calls. In 2022 alone, co-response teams responded to 798 suicide threats and successfully mitigated the threat in 771 of the cases.

Now, with the infusion of Kent County ARPA funding, the co-response team project will embed Network 180 social workers directly within the dispatch center. This will allow dispatch to immediately assess the need for mental health services and tailor the response to address those needs from the onset of the crisis. In short, this new approach will expedite crisis resolution and diminish the need for law enforcement involvement.

The Sheriff's Office and Network 180 are dedicated to advancing this model to serve the residents of Kent County and build a blueprint for communities nationwide.

We are also making important investments in our courts. Last year, the board voted to add a new Probate Judge to address increasing population and court caseloads.



On January 1st, we welcomed new Probate Court Judge Avery Rose to the bench.

And, thanks to legislation sponsored by State Representative John Fitzgerald, we're optimistic that we'll be authorized to move forward with the board's decision to add a 63rd District Court judge, to be elected in November 2024.

Additionally, we are expanding our specialty courts. In response to a troubling rise in domestic violence, Kent County Prosecutor Chris Becker has worked with community partners such as Safe Haven and the YMCA to create the Domestic Violence Action Network. This collaborative aims to establish a domestic violence court. Fueled by \$4 million in Kent County ARPA funding, the new court will provide support services for the entire family and will do a better job of holding offenders accountable, with the aim of preventing future violence and fatalities.

We also know that behavioral health issues are increasingly a factor in crime.

That's why we continue to prioritize investments in innovative behavioral health solutions.

Last fall, Network 180 and Hope Network partnered to open Still Waters Peer Respite Center. As the first peer respite center in West Michigan, Still Waters is a new option for people who need support for mental health or substance use disorder. It will serve as a voluntary first step for people who are looking for assistance in preventing their situation from escalating into a crisis. In fact, people who utilize peer respite are 70% less likely to require inpatient hospitalization.

In May, we were excited to join our partners at Network 180 and Trinity Health for the Behavioral Health Crisis Stabilization Unit wall breaking ceremony.

Targeted to open on the Trinity Health Downtown campus by April of 2024, the facility will provide 24-7 behavioral health crisis services. This crisis stabilization unit will allow for rapidly accessible intensive treatment that can stabilize most behavioral health crises within 24 hours. Patients can then be released or referred to appropriate providers for further care.

This facility is the result of years of tireless work by area leaders in health care and mental health systems, education, law enforcement, and government, plus insurance providers and community advocates. Once open, the Behavioral Health Crisis Stabilization Unit will make crisis mental health services accessible to everyone and will fundamentally change the approach to behavioral healthcare in West Michigan.

With \$3.9 million in funding, the Behavioral Health Crisis Stabilization Unit was just one of 30 projects advanced or made possible by Kent County ARPA investments.

The process to select projects for ARPA funding began in May 2022 when we launched a rigorous community engagement effort. Through an interactive website, six community forums, 33 meetings with leaders from disproportionately impacted communities, an online survey and online portals where people could submit ideas



and proposals, residents helped identify community spending priorities for the bulk of the \$127.6 million Kent County was awarded through the American Rescue Plan Act.

We received more than 320 proposals totaling over \$3 billion. On December 1, 2022, the board unanimously approved a resolution awarding over \$108 million to 30 projects that would have transformational and generational impact on our diverse population and communities countywide.

Here are a few of the projects that have already started in 2023.

A \$4 million investment is fueling phase one development of the Boston Square Community Hub, a multi-purpose \$25 million facility dedicated to enhancing the health and well-being of neighbors. Amplify GR, along with neighborhood and community partners kicked off development in February.

Seeded with a \$6 million ARPA investment, the Kent County Youth Agricultural Association is leading development of a \$36 million venue for hands-on agricultural learning, arts and cultural programming and an indoor arena for livestock and equestrian competitions and exhibitions in Lowell Township.

With the help of an \$8.5 million ARPA investment, Kent County Road Commission is improving the quality of our road network throughout the county. The Road Commission is partnering with 11 local units of government that are matching Kent County's investment to complete more than 20 road construction projects at a cost of over \$17 million over the next two years.

A 500 thousand dollar ARPA investment enabled Senior Neighbors to complete the Lowell Senior Center's move to a renovated space in June, and to create a new Walker Senior Center, which opened in September.

The County's \$6 million ARPA investment in the Wyoming City Center and trail activation project will fund two new pedestrian bridges, 4.6 miles of new trails, and civic space as part of the \$14.4 million public portion of the project.

The John Ball Zoo used the County's \$6 million ARPA investment to complete the construction of three new classroom buildings that opened this summer. Funding will also support installation of a new otter exhibit due to break ground in 2024.

Kent County took a critical step in addressing our affordable housing shortage when we allocated \$17.5 million in ARPA funding to establish the Kent County Affordable Housing Loan Fund. In October, the County finalized a contract with nonprofit lender IFF to administer the fund and, on October 12, the Board approved the creation of the Kent County Affordable Loan fund Authority Committee to provide oversight for implementation.

The first projects are already being vetted.



Administrator Vanderberg will talk more about this important tool shortly, but I would like to thank all those involved in moving this project forward in 2023. This fund will be transformative for individuals and families throughout Kent County who desperately need more affordable housing options.

These are just a few examples of the 30 broad-reaching initiatives that will have a transformational impact on Kent County for generations to come. We look forward to sharing more progress on these projects in the year ahead.

I will conclude my remarks by expressing our appreciation for your presence here tonight and our gratitude for your partnership as, together, we continue to make Kent County a great place to live, study, work, operate a business and visit.

Before I turn this over to Administrator Al Vanderberg, let me say a few words about his leadership.

Al has been providing transformation and leadership in Kent County since his return two years ago. He has addressed a daunting spectrum of challenges, initiatives and crises.

In acknowledgment of his leadership, Al was recently selected as one of the top six civic leaders by Crain's Detroit Business, a testament to his unwavering commitment to Kent County. Congratulations, Al!

Now, please join me in welcoming our Kent County Administrator, Mr. Al Vanderberg.

STATE OF THE COUNTY-NOVEMBER 2, 2023

AL VANDERBERG REMARKS

Thank you and Opening Anecdote

Thank you, Stan. And thanks to all of you for carving out time to join us this evening. We truly could not make the kind of transformational impact that Chair Stek described without your wisdom, support and partnership.

That's a big part of what drew me to city-county management service 40 years ago when I began my career as an Intern in the Spring Lake Village Manager's Office. The excitement and fulfillment I found working with Village staff and community members fueled a strong passion for public service that continues today. I'm proud to say that 39 years later, my son Peter Vanderberg, who is here tonight, finished an internship in Spring Lake and now serves as Assistant to the Village Manager.

Investments in Better Government

Of course, our purpose is to provide resources and services that promote a high quality of life for the entire community. But to do that well, we need to make investments internally in our team and in our infrastructure.

So, I'd like to begin with some of the investments we've made over the past year to ensure that we're ready to deliver our best for the people of Kent County.



Last year I told you that we planned to adopt practices from the private sector to build better government and ensure more effective service delivery for our community. We've put a number of those practices into action.

Over the past 12 months, 574 of our 1,750 team members have participated in Kent/Disney Way customer service training. A positive workplace environment and a supportive and innovative culture set the context for everything we do, including our service delivery.

They also enhance employee well-being and job satisfaction and improve the quality and effectiveness of the services we provide for residents.

Think about it. We have five generations at work at Kent County! Your organization probably does, as well. We need to be sensitive to generational differences if we're going to improve workplace culture.

We take it seriously, but we also try to have fun with it -- usually at the expense of the old guy. Like the time I said, "Alright, let's win one for the Gipper." . . . Dead silence. . . then, with true sincerity, "who's the Gipper?" Or when I observed, "Wow! They really read them the riot act." . . . Dead silence, again. Then, "what's the riot act?"

But, I've also learned a few things from Gen Z, like "we're bussin' "-- by the way, that's excellent, in case you're as old as I am. The worst was when I said, "I'm just a working stiff" . . . Well, moving right along.

More important than our language differences, is what we have in common. Each generation wants to feel appreciated, work in a healthy environment, and make a positive impact through the work they do.

Improving organizational culture is a hot topic as organizations struggle with today's challenges in talent attraction and retention.

We know culture either improves or declines -- it doesn't stay the same. So, we've implemented the 6 C's Cultural Improvement Initiative to make sure we're on the right side of that equation.

This year, 129 department directors, countywide elected officials, and health department staff have participated in the Robertson Brain Health program. After completing a complex assessment, staff were given individualized diet and exercise recommendations to achieve positive health outcomes and a balanced brain chemistry.

If every participant follows their brain health recommendations over the rest of their career, the County could save a projected \$618,000, and participants could each save more than \$26,000 in healthcare costs.

And, we've begun to implement Toyota Kata LEAN continuous improvement practices to improve efficiency and customer service -- with tremendous early results.

For example, the Kent County Community Action Weatherization Assistance Program enables households with low-income to reduce their heating costs by making homes more energy efficient. It's a terrific program, but there was a problem.



In early 2022, we learned that from the time a resident applied for home weatherization services to the time those services were delivered was running an average of 257 days. That was simply unacceptable.

So Deputy County Administrator Jenny James, our new Kent County Community Action Director Gustavo Perez and his team, and Consultant Richard Fleming mapped out each step of the application process and, over the course of this year, brought response time down to 91 days. Work continues to reduce that time to 45 days or less.

We will continue to put these types of private and public best practices to work for the people of Kent County, and we're committed to developing some of our own NEXT practices along the way.

For instance, in April, the Kent County Board of Commissioners established the Kent County Insurance Authority.

We did this for four primary reasons:

- To offer our organization the broadest coverage possible,
- To keep our premium dollars local,
- To create a revenue stream for investment, and
- To bring decision making on managing claims and lawsuits fully in-house.

My administration will be partnering with the Kent County Building Authority to create the insurance authority. That means Kent County will assume financial and operational responsibility for all matters relating to risk retention, risk management, and insurance coverage, except employee benefits. Under Michigan law, we can plow premiums into a wide set of investments, including the stock market.

So, we see this as a tremendous opportunity to build another financial tool to redirect cost from the taxpayer funded general fund and to invest in the financial strength of Kent County.

We have also made significant investments in our team and department infrastructure.

We created a new strategic impact function and welcomed Josh Spencer as our first ever Strategic Impact Director. His role is to help secure funding for major County and community projects and get them off the ground.

Many of you have had the opportunity to work with Josh as he's led implementation of our ARPA funding, Affordable Housing Loan Fund, Grand River Greenway Trail, and 13 additional initiatives. To date, he has helped secure more than \$19 million in grant and DGRI ARPA funding and has more than \$7 million in funding requests still outstanding.

I also implemented a planned redirection of our administrative team over the past 18 months. In August 2022, we welcomed Mark Rambo as our Deputy County Administrator focused on general operations and parks. And last



fall, Lori Latham was promoted to Assistant County Administrator maintaining focus on government relations and communications. We also hired a new Board Liaison, Regina Macmillan.

At the department director level, we welcomed several new leaders including Deputy Emergency Management Coordinator, Scott Corbin, Parks Director, Ben Swayze, Equalization Director, Megan Van Hoose, Facilities Director, Tim Bradshaw, and, as I just mentioned, Kent County Community Action Director, Gustavo Perez.

We also expanded Hollin de la Cruz's position as Welcome Plan Coordinator from part time to full time.

And finally, on July 1 of 2022, we launched a new structure for animal shelter and animal control services.

The Kent County Animal Shelter was moved out from under the Kent County Health Department and structured as a stand-alone department reporting directly to the administration. This change, made after consulting with community members and subject matter experts, allows the Health Department, and specifically the Environmental Health Division, to focus more exclusively on human health.

At that time, animal control operations were reassigned to the Kent County Sheriff's Office. We made this change because animal control operations are largely a function of law enforcement.

Best practices in animal welfare and animal control were and remain our top priorities in this restructured operation.

We're pleased to report that the partnership between the animal control team and the Sheriff's Office has been very successful, with 24 of the 35 jurisdictions in the county updating their ordinances to allow the Sheriff's Office to enforce animal violations.

Our Kent County Animal Shelter team continues to experience an extremely high level of intakes. In the first six months of this year, the shelter took in more than 920 stray dogs and cats.

They continue to partner with a network of volunteers who foster animals -- but they're always in need of more help. If you have time to volunteer, or if you have space in your heart and home for a new dog or cat, please get in touch with their team.

Kent County Treasurer

We saw another outcome of best practices in the Kent County Treasurer's office, which saw the lowest rate of foreclosures in 20 years. This bucks national trends which show foreclosure rates up 36% from a year ago.

This was no accident. It's good government by design.

Since taking office three years ago, Kent County Treasurer Pete MacGregor and his team have proactively worked with residents in threat of foreclosure and made a real difference for the people of Kent County.



Kent County Clerk

Kent County Clerk Lisa Posthumus Lyons has also taken deliberate steps to protect the property of Kent County residents. This year, the Register of Deeds is finalizing a new program to alert property owners of potential fraud in an effort to guard residents from property rights theft.

Her office is also working with the municipal clerks, preparing to implement significant changes in the way elections are administered in 2024. These changes were prompted by the passage of a 2022 ballot initiative that called for the introduction of nine days of in-person early voting and automatic absentee ballots.

When you layer these changes with the heightened level of scrutiny that continues to fall on our local elections officials, we can expect demands on the Clerk's staff and volunteers to be **unprecedented** in the year ahead as they work to ensure secure, transparent, fair, and accurate elections.

Sustainable Business Park

Another looming challenge is how we manage our trash. Kent County landfills nearly 2 million cubic yards of trash each year. That's simply not sustainable, and that's why a Sustainable Business Park project was developed by the DPW.

A Stakeholder Advisory Group -- comprised of leaders from the DPW, County, cities, townships, the Grand Rapids Chamber, The Right Place and a local waste hauler -- came together around a recommendation on how to move this complex and transformational project forward.

We are looking at employing the latest industry technology, working within new state policies and accommodating strong public opinion that we don't want to build more landfills.

We commend the DPW on their vision. They have made tremendous progress on plans for an extraordinarily innovative Sustainable Business Park. It would be the first such park to house waste handling and the anaerobic digester in the same facility. These technologies employed to manage waste differently are used around the world and are sound.

However, as you know, we had a setback this year when our anchor tenant experienced significant financial challenges that slowed the project.

In the spirit of Theodore Roosevelt, when he said, "do what you can, with that you have, where you are," we're not going to give up on this challenge. We'll work it, either until it *works*, or until we're *absolutely* certain that it won't. Stay tuned.

Lead

Another long-term issue that will remain a priority in years ahead is lead. We've all heard our Health Department Director Adam London say that there is no safe exposure to lead.



The health department has completed 154 lead investigation and remediation services throughout Kent County. We've achieved a 28% increase in testing year-to-date from 2022.

And, in partnership with community organizations, we educated and promoted lead prevention strategies and lead services to more than 3,500 families in Kent County.

In our Lead Action Task Force partnership with the City of Grand Rapids and others, we've leveraged \$6.3 million in Kent County ARPA and Department of Housing and Urban Development dollars as well as millions in State funding for lead remediation contractor training, resident education and lead prevention strategies and services.

Housing

Broadening out from lead, Kent County is partnering with several community organizations on strategies to address the shortage of affordable and market rate housing and help build housing stability in our region.

Starting with safety net programming, the board appropriated funding for a Kent County Community Action partnership with the Heart of West Michigan United Way to conclude a multi-year state-funded rental assistance program. It provided assistance to eligible individuals and households with the aim of preventing homelessness and creating housing stability. To date, more than 16,400 people received assistance.

And, I am serving on the Housing Kent and Housing Next boards. Housing Next is implementing strategies to address the acute shortage of nearly 35,000 workforce housing units in Kent County.

This year, Housing Next launched the Kent County Municipal Grant Program. This program empowers local municipalities to approve changes to their Master Plan or zoning ordinances to pave the way for increased housing supply. Grants cover changes that allow for more diverse types of housing and increased density while removing other barriers to development. The grant program was made possible by a \$500,000 Kent County ARPA grant.

And, of course, we are getting ready to launch the Kent County Affordable Housing Loan Fund. The purpose of the fund is to encourage development of more affordable housing by reducing the cost of capital for nonprofit and for-profit housing developers. A special thank you to the Grand Rapids Chamber and Housing Next who were integral partners in the development of the fund.

As Chair Stek mentioned, the board finalized a contract with nonprofit lender IFF to administer the fund, and IFF is now accepting applications.

The fund, which was seeded by a \$17.5 million Kent County ARPA investment, now stands at \$58.3 million thanks to IFF's commitment to raise an additional \$40.8 million. And the great news is, if you or your organization contribute to the fund, you'll trigger additional match dollars.

This monumental initiative will make a generational impact for families who desperately need more affordable housing than is on the market today.



Parks & Greenspaces

As we work to address our need for more housing, we are also making significant investments in one of the things that makes Kent County such a beautiful place to live -- our parks and green spaces. To paraphrase, the popular show Parks and Recreation, “parks are the soul of a County.”

The board of commissioners allocated a total of \$15 million in ARPA funding to expand our County parks and trails and bring us closer to realizing our vision for a Grand River Greenway extending from Lake Michigan to Downtown Grand Rapids to the eastern border of Kent County.

We’ll use \$5 million for acquisition and development of five park projects that will serve all of Kent County.

The remaining \$10 million will augment \$19.5 million in ARPA funds secured through Downtown Grand Rapids Inc. and the State of Michigan to help advance the Grand River Greenway.

Using this funding, we will complete a 23-mile “backbone section” of the trail that runs through Plainfield, Cannon, Ada, Cascade, and Lowell Townships. This project will include trailheads at Johnson Park and Chief Hazy Cloud Park.

#Sidebar . . . You might wonder what we will do with the over 9 million dollars in remaining ARPA funding. We are holding the funding to ensure that sufficient resources are available to complete our County funded initiatives. At this point, with the challenges with material and supply chain delays and rising inflation, I will submit a proposal to the board to use all of this funding to complete the internal County projects.

Now we return to our regularly scheduled programming.

In a partnership with the Kent County Parks Foundation, we will launch a capital campaign with a goal to raise \$15 million in private philanthropy to complete the Greenway project. These public/private partnerships are vital to bringing world-class outdoor recreation amenities to our region.

Kent County 2050

Visual: Kent County 2050

All of Kent County’s work that you heard about this evening, like that of many of the organizations represented in this room, has been driven by three to five-year strategic plans. But our world is constantly changing. Even those relatively short-term plans quickly become outdated.

So, as we work to address the most pressing challenges our communities face today, we also must look to—and plan for—our future. We need to do that together. There is a better way for each of us to do our own short-term planning, while also coming together to create and then fixate on a shared vision for our community.



To help get us there, Kent County partnered with leaders from every sector of the community to launch Kent County 2050—a countywide visioning project.

We selected nationally renowned futurist Rebecca Ryan and her team at Next Generation Consulting to facilitate regional community planning. Through this process, our aim is for our community to develop a vision for where we want Kent County to be in 2050, while recognizing the trends that impact our future.

I think of this process as finding our North Star. I love that analogy because, while the star is a constant guide, its place in the sky moves a bit—as will our vision for the future. But we’ll reorient to that point as a shared beacon guiding our path.

Visual: Kent County 2050: Engaged 300+ organizations

Since launching in September 2023, we've engaged over 300 local organizations in this conversation.

Over the next several months, we’ll continue to collect community input to help us identify current trends and facilitate meaningful partnerships that will impact the future of Kent County communities.

In fact, Rebecca Ryan will be in Grand Rapids on November 8 and 9 to facilitate a game she calls “The Big Sort” during which leaders will consider various scenarios for the future.

As of October 31, 96 organizations had already agreed to participate. If you would like to join one of these sessions, and I urge you to do so, please see me or a member of my team this evening.

When we look at the potential for a new amphitheater, soccer stadium and aquarium, 2024 will be an exciting year of decisions and developments.

Because strong partnerships are key to good government and a strong community, I hope that we can all embrace this process, increase collaboration and break down silos that hold us back as a region.

Thank you for being here tonight to share our journey. And for the Gen Z-ers in the room:

#StanandAI

#StateoftheCounty

#FitOnFleekPeriod

And with that, I’ll turn it back to our emcee, Lisa Posthumus Lyons.