

State of the City Address – Mayor Josh Morgan
January 23rd, 2025

Good morning, everyone.

Thank you so much for joining us today. It's a privilege to stand before each of you here at RBC Place which has not only provided us with this beautiful space, but also a wonderful breakfast to start our day.

I'd like to extend my sincere gratitude to the Board of Directors at the London Chamber of Commerce, and Graham Henderson for your leadership and dedication in organizing this event.

To my colleagues on London City Council, senior leadership team, and the incredible city staff who work tirelessly every day to serve our community: thank you. I am so proud to work with each of you.

And to those in this room and those watching remotely—community leaders, business owners, educators, healthcare professionals, entrepreneurs, tradespeople; and everyone who contributes to the vibrant fabric of London—you are the heartbeat of our city.

As we reflect this morning on where we are, and look ahead to where we are going, I want you to feel a sense of ownership in London's story. Because it is your story—the story of people who refuse to give up, people who believe in the power of community, and people who dream boldly about what's possible. Together, we're writing the next chapter, and I could not be more excited about what lies ahead.

We find ourselves now at the midpoint of this term of Council. But it's not just the midpoint. It's also an inflection point.

This is the moment where resolve is tested; where ambitious, bold visions collide with real-world complexities, and where action—decisive, collective action—becomes the only path forward. Yes, we're driving towards solutions, but the issues we're tackling in London are so big, and so complex, the best metric – at least for right now – is progress.

So, let me take a few moments to reflect on that progress -- starting with homelessness, mental health, and addictions.

The longer it persists, the more it becomes a challenge that tests not only the depth of our compassion, but also the strength of our commitment. These are complex crises. And while it's not something we can solve overnight, we are seeing undeniable progress.

Two years ago on this stage, I had the privilege of announcing that a private donor had committed \$25-million dollars to support our made in London solution. Since then, the Fund for Change, administered by London Community Foundation, has raised another \$12.6-million thanks to contributions from Londoners, matched dollar for dollar by the

donor. That's more than \$37-million dollars in total.

No other city in Canada can say they've done this. It's remarkable. But, of course, it's not just about money, it's about results. And all the time, I get people asking 'What's happened to that money? Why aren't you using that money?' – let me tell you, that money *is* being used; it is changing lives, and it is saving lives.

Donations from the Fund for Change, along with support from City Council, local developers, the provincial and federal governments, have helped launch two hubs – one operated by Atlohsa, the other by Youth Opportunities Unlimited. In addition, the Fund for Change has also committed a mix of capital and operating costs for two separate highly supportive housing developments, totaling almost 100 units.

You've heard a lot about hubs over the last two years, and for good reason, but we really cannot overstate the importance of highly supportive housing. Let's look at the House of Hope on Dundas. It's operated by London Cares with support from London Health Sciences Centre, and for just over a year – it has been home to 56 people who were previously on the streets, living with the most complex health needs.

One year later, 98% of those residents have not returned to camping or sleeping rough, and 93% have not experienced an overdose. Previously, some of those same individuals required weekly overdose intervention within the community. But most importantly, these aren't numbers, these are people.

Take Debra, for example. She found herself homeless after a difficult divorce led to financial instability. Before moving into the House of Hope, in just a two-month period, Debra visited the ER 17 times and spent 12 days in the hospital as an inpatient. After moving into supportive housing? She hasn't had a single inpatient stay and has visited the ER just once.

Another resident, a senior tenant, had struggled with alcohol consumption so severe it led to repeated hospitalizations. Thanks to the support he's received, he's been in recovery for ten months, managing his health effectively, and living a life free from substance dependency.

These stories aren't outliers, or one offs -- this is what happens, almost every single time, when those experiencing chronic homelessness with complex medical needs are provided stable housing with wrap around supports.

For me, that is hugely significant. Unlike when we started two years ago, this is no longer a question of what works, or what to do; we have those answers. It's now a question of funding. We need more highly supportive housing, more treatment options, more rehab facilities – and while we've proven we're capable of paying for more than our fair share, we cannot expand these services to the level that's required without additional help from the provincial and federal governments.

Make no mistake, we are incredibly grateful for the supports we have received thus far, and we are working hard to provide more evidence that our approach is one worth expanding here in London, and beyond. Look at the Ontario Government's \$378-million plan to open 19 homeless and addiction recovery treatment centres across Ontario. The Premier and Health Minister both publicly acknowledged London as a model for the HART Hub system.

Based on that, I am fully confident we'll be successful in landing one of these facilities, as part of an application led by the CMHA. This HART Hub would be operational by spring of this year, but we're not stopping there.

Next month, 39 housing units with supports will open at Y.O.U.'s brand new Joan's Place at Richmond and York. Later this year, work will be completed at Elmwood Place near the Coves – resulting in 50 additional highly supportive housing units; a project made possible by Tricar, Auburn Group, Drewlo Holdings, Sifton Properties, Indwell, the Fund for Change, and the City of London. We've also had several expressions of interest from community partners interested in operating new hubs, each with a mix of up to 35 transitional and respite spaces, and a requirement they be located along transit corridors or arterial roads. More information about those will be known in the coming weeks.

And lastly, I am very pleased to announce that the City of London will be spearheading a partnership with St. Joseph's Health Care, and Homes for Heroes, to establish a supervised village of 20 tiny homes on the grounds of Parkwood Institute. This site would accommodate homeless veterans from within our community, providing them with the necessary counselling, life skills and administrative supports for full reintegration into our community. Homes for Heroes boasts a 97% success rate, and we could not be more pleased to tap into our committed funds from senior levels of government to help our veterans, to whom we owe so much.

Compassion must remain the cornerstone of these efforts, and our commitment to that is unwavering.

But, let me be equally clear: blatant public drug use and violent behaviors cannot—and must not—be tolerated. So, after considerable consultation, I can confirm that a new 'open air, public space drug strategy' will soon be implemented by the London Police Service. Chief Truong will share more details in the coming weeks, but understand - this is not about criminalizing homelessness, nor arresting our way out of a crisis. There are ways to deal with public drug use that don't involve throwing people in jail, or saddling them with criminal records. This is about ensuring public spaces remain safe and accessible for all.

To that end, I can also announce last year's expansion of the Community Outreach And Support Team – better known as COAST – will be extended for the duration of 2025. This involves Police, mental health professionals, and representatives from St. Joe's and LHSC, working together in support of those in crisis on our streets. In addition, a new initiative,

one that sees public health nurses paired with Police on mental health calls, will be launched this spring.

This balance between compassion and accountability is not easy to achieve, but it is essential. This is not about one ideological approach over another, it's not about 'left' or 'right' – it's about moving forward. Together, we must forge a path forward that holds space for empathy and understanding, while setting clear boundaries to preserve the peace and enjoyment of our public spaces.

Creating a community where compassion and safety coexist is not just about addressing immediate challenges—it's about building a stronger, more vibrant city for the future. Nowhere is this more vital than in the heart of our city.

The downtown core is more than a collection of buildings and streets—it's the cultural and economic heartbeat of London. It's where businesses grow, where art and innovation thrive, and where people from all walks of life come together. Revitalizing our downtown is central to creating a city that feels alive, and full of possibility.

Decades ago, our downtown found itself in a similar state of transition. At that crossroads, we didn't abandon the core. We chose to think big. We rebuilt its foundation brick by brick. Imagine London today without Canada Life Place, Covent Garden Market, the main branch Library, or the Dundas Flex Street. These generational investments transformed the heart of our city and set the stage for new opportunities. Now, we must act with the same boldness for the next generation.

First and foremost, it needs to be a place where people feel safe, and welcome. This starts with a renewed commitment to public safety. In addition to the measures I just detailed, you will also notice increased Police visibility throughout the city over the coming year, but especially in the downtown core and Old East Village. These actions on their own won't fix everything all at once – but they will undeniably help make the area safer. I have full confidence in the men and women of the London Police Service, and the leadership of Chief Truong. Why? Just look at what's happened in less than twelve months:

- For the first time in four years, we've started seeing decreases in Code 1, 2, and 3 response times. That downward trend will only accelerate in the coming months.
- There's also been a 48% reduction in gun violence compared to the previous year.
- And perhaps most impressive? The largest year over year reduction in the Crime Severity Index in all of Canada. This measures both the volume and severity of crime, and for the first time in over 10 years, London's rate has fallen below the national average. Not only that, but our 14% reduction comes at a time when cities like Toronto, Hamilton, Ottawa, and Windsor have all gone up.

Beyond enhancing public safety, we are keenly aware that there is too much vacant commercial space in the downtown. You'll remember at last year's State of the City, I

announced plans for an 'Office-to-Residential' conversion program. We've been able to move on that thanks, in part, to the Housing Accelerator Fund – which MP Peter Fragiskatos as Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Housing was instrumental in delivering to London. Since this time last year, 109 units have been approved for conversion, representing the transformation of well over 100,000 square feet of unused commercial space. More announcements will be happening on that front in the coming weeks.

In addition, I am announcing today that we have a new incentive program coming -- one that builds on the office-to-residential conversions. This time, we're expanding our focus to commercial occupancy. As part of this new program, financial assistance will be provided to help cover startup and renovation costs for eligible businesses looking to activate vacant spaces in key areas. Applicants can receive grant funding to support projects that align with targeted uses, such as restaurants, arts and culture, tourism-oriented services, or even a grocery store.

These initiatives are by no means the only things we're doing, or will do, to support the downtown area. But, they should stand as proof of our absolute commitment to the core. So too should work being done on a new Downtown Masterplan -- a modern plan that recognizes the challenges we face today, and the opportunities we have as one of Canada's fastest growing cities.

Now, to truly unlock our potential, we need the tools and resources to match our ambition. That's why I am calling for a new municipal growth framework from our provincial and federal partners. We need a new deal for London.

We simply cannot build a 21st century city using a 19th century funding formula. We're making unprecedented investments and commitments towards revitalizing our downtown, addressing homelessness, and enhancing public safety. These are critically necessary, but they have also placed extreme pressure on property taxes – not only here, but in all municipalities across Ontario.

Unlike other levels of government, City Councils cannot run deficits. Every single municipal budget is a balanced budget. What's more -- for every tax dollar collected, municipalities receive just nine cents; nine cents for every dollar. That's despite the fact we're responsible for over 60 per cent of the infrastructure in this country.

The math just doesn't add up. The property tax system is absolutely broken.

Think of it this way, and this is just one example. Right now, we're in the midst of a so-called two month 'tax holiday' instituted by the Prime Minister just before Christmas. The cost of this 'tax holiday' is well over a billion dollars, money the PM doesn't have which means he's running deficits to cover the cost. Like I said, municipalities don't have that option – we're required to balance our books – and so, while we're struggling to provide the

basics: clean drinking water, public safety, garbage collection, parks and rec services; the federal government is giving tax breaks on things like PlayStations, Christmas decorations, and alcohol. They enjoy the holiday, while property taxpayers deal with the hangover.

It just doesn't make sense, and it should be clear that the time for a new funding framework is now. London – in partnership with the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, and Ontario Big City Mayors Caucus - is ready to lead the call for this change, and we urge our provincial and federal counterparts to join us in creating a funding model that works for everyone.

In saying that, ratepayers in London cannot wait endlessly for relief. And that is why, in the coming days, I will be issuing a Strong Mayor Direction to staff to begin work on crafting a series of recommendations that, if approved, will produce a tax increase under 5%.

It will be my expectation that this be prepared well in advance of the next annual budget update later this year, providing everyone with a clear picture on what types of cuts are required in order to reverse the trend of unsustainable property tax hikes. We must decide together how much, where – and whether – we are willing to make potentially painful sacrifices to ensure affordability, while still delivering key services our city depends upon.

While we push for systemic change and fiscal fairness, we also recognize the importance of taking immediate action on the challenges our city faces today. One of the most pressing is housing.

At the midpoint of this term of Council, and especially over the last year, we have seen a remarkable shift in how we address London's housing needs. Bold decisions and innovative policies have positioned our city as a leader in tackling the housing crisis—not just in Ontario, but across Canada.

Let's start with the most recent stats from the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. London's total housing starts were up 101% year over year. That puts us second in Ontario, and third across Canada. That 101% increase is even more impressive when you see Toronto down 20%, Kitchener-Waterloo down 28%, and Hamilton down 29%.

Also, consider this: at my first State of the City address two years ago, City Council had approved 4,430 new housing units for the 2022 calendar year. The following year, that number climbed to 5,337 new units. Last year? It was 22,890 new units of housing – an all-time record for London.

How did we do this? A Council that is absolutely committed to housing, an administration that has re-imagined old ways of thinking, the strategic use of Strong Mayor powers, and a development community whose confidence in London has never wavered. Together, we have created a climate that makes London one of Canada's most desirable places to invest and build.

Among these achievements is a landmark development: the largest housing project in London's history. Over the next two decades, the site at Oxford and Highbury will include the construction of 8,400 residential units, including a mix of low, medium, and high-density, along with commercial space.

In addition to our largest ever development, we've also seen the official opening of London's new tallest building. At just over 40 storeys, Old Oak's Centro highrise at Fullarton and Talbot is a staggering symbol of the vibrant, modern city we're building together. Meanwhile, York Developments expects to break ground this summer on even taller buildings; a pair of 43 and 53 storey towers at the Forks of the Thames on King Street.

But it's not just about individual projects. Last year, City Council also passed the most significant increase in as-of-right high-density zoning in 35 years. This foundational change will empower us to create more housing faster, and remove unnecessary barriers to development while maintaining the quality of life our residents deserve.

Of course, our success in developing housing would not be possible without strong partnerships, including those with the Ontario Government, and Minister Rob Flack. He was there when London secured \$23.7 million in provincial funding to expand sewer capacity in the downtown, enabling us to support an additional 17,500 units in the core.

And we're not slowing down this year either. For one, we're moving forward on converting city-owned surface parking lots in the downtown and core areas into high-density residential projects. As mentioned at last year's address, these sites would be offered under the condition that existing parking be maintained, or even expanded. One year later, we've identified five city-owned surface parking lots in the downtown area to start with, and requests for proposals will be issued next month for two of them – one at 84 Horton, the other at 199 Ridout.

As we build for the future, we must also address the challenges that come with growth—particularly the need for a transportation system that supports our evolving city.

Last year, we tendered a record-breaking \$250 million dollars worth of infrastructure investments. These projects will advance a combined total of more than 90 kilometres of road improvements, and almost 7 kilometres of new sidewalks.

We've also finally reached the point where there is now more rapid transit construction behind us than ahead of us. So far, over 51,000 square meters of asphalt have been removed across the Wellington Gateway and East London Link projects, and all of it will be fully recycled for use in new roadways in keeping with the Climate Emergency Action Plan and our waste management goals.

We've also completed two, "once in a generation" projects. The Adelaide Underpass has eliminated long rail delays caused by trains and provided better accommodation for emergency vehicles, and other forms of traffic. Meanwhile, the new Victoria Bridge on

Ridout creates a much-improved connection for all modes of transportation between Old South and the Downtown.

Beyond that, and thinking more broadly, the ongoing development of London's Mobility Master Plan outlines a long-term vision for how we get around our city over the next 25 years. As the city grows, managing congestion must be a key priority.

While transforming the way Londoners move through our city, we're also creating the conditions for a thriving economy.

According to Stats Canada, over the last four months, our economy has added more than 5,000 new jobs. Despite risks associated with a weakened Canadian dollar, and global economic uncertainty, we remain a highly desirable location for businesses to invest and locate.

One such example, which I'm proud to announce this morning, is the forthcoming arrival of InnoFoods. They're a healthy snack food manufacturer with multiple products available at Costco, Wal-Mart, and elsewhere. Working closely with the LEDC, they've chosen London as the site of their first ever expansion outside of B.C., and will soon be building a new facility at Innovation Park, employing up to 90 people in phase one, and likely doubling their workforce in phase two.

Meanwhile, Italian pasta manufacturer Andriani is nearing completion of its first North American facility right here in London, and should begin operations later this year.

Expansions are also critical, like Coppa Inc., a family-run gelato business located in east London. Over the last year, they've grown from 12 to 30 employees, and are in the early stages of a significant expansion which could see their current workforce more than triple.

London tech companies continue to receive global recognition, including Digital Extremes which recently signed a new 10-year lease at Citi Plaza. And let me tell you about Front Line Medical Technologies. This London-based firm was listed on Time Magazine's Best Inventions of 2024 for the development of a device that can stop life threatening bleeding on our roads, in our delivery rooms, and even on battlefields.

Meanwhile, and in a more general sense, we're working very hard to ensure London is well positioned to address an impending shortage of skilled labour. With the assistance of the Workforce Development arm at the London Economic Development Corporation, you can expect to see new and stronger partnerships with Fanshawe College, local secondary

school programs, and collaborations with organizations like LiUNA.

I also want to talk briefly about the looming threat of tariffs from the Trump Administration. In my role as Chair of the Big City Mayors Caucus, which represents the 23 largest cities in Canada, I've reached out to the Premier and the Prime Minister to offer our assistance. We know individuals and businesses in London will be significantly impacted by any disruption in trade. This is no time to cross our fingers or hide our heads in the sand. All municipalities have a role to play in helping to prevent an economic crisis on both sides of the border – and I want you to know I am actively engaged on that file in my position as Big City Mayors Caucus chair. We will work with Mayors of American cities, and through our provincial and federal governments to protect jobs here in London, and throughout the country. London is open for business, but just like Canada -- London is not for sale.

As we build a city that is economically vibrant, we are equally committed to fostering meaningful relationships that strengthen our community.

This spirit of connection was exemplified last year when London achieved a historic milestone in Truth and Reconciliation, participating in the first ever Council-to-Council meeting with the Oneida Nation of the Thames.

The meeting focused on building stronger partnerships and addressing shared priorities, including housing, economic development, and public safety.

This wasn't just a symbolic gesture; it serves as a foundation for lasting collaboration and understanding. Thank you to Chief Cornelius from Oneida, and to Chief Miskokomon from Chippewas for your friendship, and the ongoing dialogue.

While we work to build a stronger, more equitable city, it's also important to reflect on what makes London truly special. Beyond the policies and investments, London is a city full of life, culture, and creativity—a place where we celebrate our achievements and come together to enjoy all that our community has to offer.

One example of this is the Neighbourhood Parks Improvement Fund, bringing much needed upgrades to as many as 23 parks throughout London -- this is above and beyond improvements already identified and included in our Parks and Recreation Master Plan. Planned upgrades include new and enhanced pickleball and tennis courts, cricket batting cages, playground equipment, outdoor exercise facilities, and basketball courts.

But our progress doesn't stop at parks. Our culture and tourism sectors are also thriving. Overall, tourism spending in London was up 11% last year, surpassing a billion dollars; clear evidence that people are discovering what makes London such a fantastic place to visit. London was also recognized by the Canadian Music Industry as the 2024 Music City

of the Year, and we proudly hosted the UNESCO Cities of Music Meeting last year, welcoming representatives from 30 international cities to London.

After several weeks of previews, the brand new \$23-million-dollar Children's Museum has its grand opening this weekend at 100 Kellogg Lane. And later this spring, London will officially become home to the first Hard Rock Hotel in all of Canada. This 164-room development will push the total investment into 100 Kellogg to more than \$100 million. Meanwhile, plans are in the advanced stages for a significant expansion of the Ronald McDonald House of Southwestern Ontario, one that would more than double their capacity to assist children and families who need it most.

Our reputation on the world stage also continues to grow. Hollywood stars like Arnold Schwarzenegger, Luke Wilson, and Gary Sinise chose London as the backdrop for major productions last year. Thanks to the work of Film London, we've seen a surge in film activity, including projects with Netflix and Amazon Prime. Already this year, we have commitments for two more TV series and four more feature films to be shot right here in London.

Meanwhile, institutions like Western University, Huron, King's and Fanshawe College continue to play vital roles in education, research, and community development, shaping London's future for generations to come.

These stories remind us why London is such a special place. Together, we're building a city where families can grow, communities can connect, and opportunities are abundant.

I said earlier, London is at an inflection point. We have choices to make—not just as a City Council, but as a community. This isn't about picking sides in an ideological sense; it's not about 'left' versus 'right;' it's about moving forward.

Progress is the quiet hero of every great achievement. Too often, we focus solely on the final solution, or the end result, forgetting the value of each step that carries us there. True change is not born in an instant—it's built over time, shaped by persistence, and strengthened by effort. Real change comes not from grand gestures but from the steady, unrelenting force of a community that does not give up. That's London.

I know progress can feel slow when the need remains urgent. But here in London, we don't wait for perfect solutions or final fixes to light the way. We take bold steps, together, towards a brighter tomorrow. In our streets and shelters, in our neighbourhoods and networks, in our places of work, in every home we build, and every life we lift, we are proving that persistence fuels progress.

Let us remember: tackling homelessness is not just housing the unhoused; it's about fostering hope and humanity. Public safety is not just patrolling our streets; it's about building trust and community. Affordability is not merely a matter of metrics; it's about ensuring that every Londoner can live with dignity.

Together, we are the architects of advancement, the champions of change. London is not

only our home – it represents our shared future; so, let's face that future with courage, shape it with determination, and celebrate it with pride.

Thank you.