Good evening, everyone. Thank you joining us on this lovely spring day.

And thank you, Ted, for your sweet welcome in this beloved neighborhood space.

Spring is a time for growing. So it is only fitting we are gathered here at our farmer’s market.

The changing of the seasons reminds us of the march of time.

It was nearly twenty years ago when you gave me the great honor and opportunity to serve, first, as Second Ward City Commissioner and then as Mayor.

Thank you, thank you for giving me this incredible opportunity to serve our community at such a pivotal time of growth.

And thank you all for the civic work you do to make Grand Rapids an evermore beautiful, just, thriving and livable city.

This spirited citizenship and commitment to the nourishment and cultivation of our community is one of our greatest strengths.

Amazing and creative people, working together to make a positive difference in their neighborhood and for our City.

That is what built this Market.

In the early 1900’s the Federation of Women’s Clubs saw a need to connect residents with affordable food options.

So they planted the idea of public markets and convinced City leaders to act.

100 years later, that same spirited grass-roots activism drove the rehabilitation of this Market.

Over ten years ago neighbors had a vision for improving an increasingly tired facility.

Resourceful community leaders like Christine Helms-Maletic and Ted Lott did a remarkable amount of hard work to turn the vision into a plan and rally support.

They planted the seeds.

City government followed their lead.

Philanthropy stepped up with generous support.

But it was neighbors who dreamed of improving this place, led the charge, brought it all together and made it happen.

Today the Market has grown into a vibrant hub of the Midtown Neighborhood and a regional asset connecting farmers, food creators and artists to our community – and bringing healthy, affordable food to all.

This is the story of how our City grows and thrives.
Passionate individuals and small groups of enthusiastic people who genuinely love our community.

They see a common problem or a significant opportunity.

They plant the seed of an idea to do something about it.

They work hard to organize support and nurture a supportive environment where the idea can bloom into reality.

And who do they do it for? Their community. Our community.

Think about some of our most popular and cherished community assets.

The creation of Heritage Hill Historic District, for example, first of its kind in the nation, was led by John Logie and a small group of dedicated neighbors.

It was a group of passionate people who:

Established Huff Park and Pleasant Park.

Built the Van Andel Arena.

Saved Coit School.

Saved the historic Sixth Street Bridge.

Installed La Grande Vitesse, the Calder stabile, now the symbol of our City.

The list goes on and on, with visible results all across our city.

All initiatives led by passionate and focused people who aspire to improve our community’s collective well-being.

It wasn’t local government that reinvigorated Ionia Street, Cherry Street, Wealthy Street, Bridge Street, Leonard Street, Grandville Avenue and increasingly Boston Square.

It was people with a vision and a willingness to act.

It was entrepreneurial investors, small business owners and non-profit leaders who saw the opportunities not only for their own livelihoods but for the long-term betterment of our community.

They planted the seeds of community improvement that grew like big beautiful trees, and today we all sit under the branches, enjoying the shade and benefits.

The seed planters are many, far too many to name, yet the legacy of their stewardship surrounds us.

This legacy is the culture of our city, and it lives on.

Just think about some of the most exciting and important initiatives happening in our City today.
The effort to restore Valley Field.
The rebuilding of MLK Park Lodge.
The ongoing progress to remove the obsolete dams from the Grand River.
The multitude of efforts to eliminate racial disparities across sectors.
The initiative to build a new outdoor amphitheater.
The organizing work around a proposed Arts and Culture Collective.
The establishment and growth of the Center for Community Transformation.
The creation of Plaza Roosevelt.
The efforts to build wealth and opportunities in our Neighborhoods of Focus.
These are just some of the seeds of the next generation of growth for our City.

One of the greatest joys of my time in public service is that I have been fortunate to be surrounded by people who not only believe building an ever better Grand Rapids is possible, but who also act to make that possibility a reality.

Indeed one reason I’m delivering this *Farewell Address* tonight, is because a small group of determined and hard-working residents came together to pass term limits on local elected officials!

So this is my final year of service, and my final State of the City address.

But I’m not done planting and nurturing seeds to continue growing our city, because I love this community, and I know you all do too.

I sincerely hope and expect that you all will stay engaged and involved.

That’s what I plan to do as I step aside from serving in public office.

This active citizenship is a special strength of our community.

It differentiates us from other places.

And the next mayor will need you all - just like I did.

It is important to look at how far we have come to keep in mind how far we can go.

And we’ve certainly accomplished a great deal - together - during my time as Mayor.

Today our neighborhood business districts are stronger than ever. We have Corridor Improvement Districts, not just Downtown like it was when I was first elected, but throughout our city.

We have improved community-police relations, funded Cure Violence, established a mental health co-response team, built greater transparency and trust, and today the City is as safe as it’s ever been.
We enhanced our public park system, and now we’re building the Grand River Greenway, connecting trail networks throughout the region.

We put new policies and tools in place to encourage more accessible housing development. We are investing in low income and affordable housing.

We deployed a community bike, scooter and ride-share program and added 100 miles of bike lanes so it’s easier, safer and more affordable to get around.

We have a healthy budget stabilization fund for the City in the event of financial emergencies.

We are modernizing our fire department facilities and right now we’re building two new fire stations that will significantly improve service on the Southeast side.

We have installed over 70,000 smoke detectors in 13,000 homes.

We strengthened our commitment to build a sustainable, resilient City and have moved closer to reaching our carbon neutral goal.

We’re one of the best places in the Country to start a career, business and family.

Today, we are increasingly a City with more opportunity, possibility and hope.

Yet we must continue to work to ensure that there are opportunities, possibilities and hope for everyone, particularly those who historically have not fully benefited from our city’s success.

This will remain a priority for me as I finish my term and after I leave the Mayor’s office.

And as I look to the months ahead, I am focused on a couple outstanding priorities to keep our city-building momentum going.

The first one is securing support for transformational assets by increasing the visitor-funded Lodging Tax.

It is difficult to imagine our community without our best-in-class Arena, our Convention Center or our Performance Hall.

These seeds were planted in the 1980’s and 90’s and, as they’ve grown, they have catalyzed significant county-wide benefits.

Taken together these assets not only provide Grand Rapidians with amazing cultural and entertainment options.

They have helped elevate the vibrancy and attractiveness of our urban core and driven more than $11 billion worth of investment in hotels, residential towers, office buildings, art and cultural institutions, other entertainment venues and small businesses.

These facilities have been instrumental in our ability to establish Grand Rapids as a premier destination, a destination that today consistently punches above our weight class and competes with larger cities like Nashville, Milwaukee and Minneapolis.
As a result, visitor spending stimulates our local economy to the tune of more than $82 million a year.

That’s local jobs, revenue for local business and local hotel stays.

Those hotel stays are really important for a couple reasons.

One, there’s a lot of them. We welcome and host more than nine million overnight visitors every year.

Nine million, every year and we know for a fact that almost 90 percent of those visitors come from outside Kent County.

Two, our modest existing tax on those hotel and motel stays is a critical piece of the funding dedicated to building and supporting destination assets like the arena and convention center.

In other words, tourism helps pay for Grand Rapids and Kent County.

Our guests come and go.

But their money stays here, providing significant benefits to Grand Rapid’s residents and helps to support our community’s high quality of life.

Today, we have a remarkable opportunity to add two new exciting assets to our destination.

The Amphitheater proposed on the south side of Downtown will transform an obsolete public works yard into a vibrant place for people and entertainment on the river’s edge.

The project will significantly enhance the allure and vibrancy of our riverfront.

Similarly, the soccer stadium proposed on the Westside will transform a grey surface parking lot into a vibrant hub for community sport and spirit.

Both of these projects – just as the arena and convention center did 20 years ago – will catalyze valuable investment in new housing, new business prospects and other opportunities that pay dividends for decades to come.

And while both of these projects are happening in our city, they will undoubtedly deliver county-wide benefits and positive regional impact.

Increasing the visitor tax is critical to building these projects and unlocking the benefits they will most certainly deliver.

In August, we all have the opportunity to vote on this important question and these exciting projects.

I hope you all will join me in voting yes for visitor funded community assets that will benefit our community far into the future.
As we work to invest in important assets, we must also keep our focus on investing in people.

And one of the ongoing critical and challenging issues is ensuring people have access to safe and stable housing.

During my remaining days in office, I will continue to focus my time on improving and growing our efforts to address homelessness.

Over the past several years, we have worked hard to find stable housing solutions for members of our community who experience homelessness.

Homelessness is a problem I am convinced we can solve, and doing just that is key to making us the community we aspire to be.

We have made progress on many fronts. Thanks to many people and organizations in our community.

Last year the City elevated its partnership with Community Rebuilders, which focuses on rapidly connecting families and individuals experiencing chronic homelessness to housing solutions.

Since 2020, Community Rebuilders has helped more than 400 individuals secure housing.

More than 100 people per year in the past several years.

In 2023 alone they secured permanent housing for 23 of the most vulnerable individuals experiencing chronic homelessness, who had been without a home for a year or more.

Earlier this year, Degage Ministries partnered with Trinity Health to open the first bridge housing program in the state, specifically for women experiencing chronic homelessness.

Heartside Landing will provide temporary shelter and permanent supportive housing with personalized programming serving at least 25 women with the most complex needs in our community.

Similar programs across the nation have achieved an 85% success rate and this program fills a significant gap in our system.

Thanks to a partnership between Kent County and Trinity Health, this month we opened the Behavioral Health Crisis Center.

This Center will provide walk-in behavioral health services 24-hours a day, seven days a week.

The heart of the program is delivering rapidly accessible, intensive treatment that helps to stabilize most behavioral health crises within 24 hours.
And later this year, Community Rebuilders and Eenhorn Investors will open the Nexus Initiative, a supportive bridge housing facility for individuals experiencing chronic homelessness.

These are exceptional efforts that are critical to building a more comprehensive housing system, particularly for those who are most vulnerable.

But we have more work to do.

I refuse to accept that it is inevitable that some people fall through the cracks.

If there is any city that can end chronic homelessness, it is Grand Rapids.

Tonight I am joining partners across our community to do just that.

Let's come together with a clear goal to house 100 individuals who have been chronically homeless - by the end of this year.

Tonight I join our Continuum of Care in this important effort.

Yet to reach that goal, requires all of us, from every sector.

The changes we have talked about for years need to be put into action.

We need greater alignment among our service providers.

We need an effective coordinated entry system - that allows us to match our most vulnerable residents with housing resources and the wrap around services necessary to ensure that each and every person can remain housed for the long term.

We need a detailed systems map to identify where the gaps are in services and resources.

We need a Homelessness Impact Dashboard that drives more transparency and accountability into our efforts.

This will help us better understand where we're making progress and what areas need attention.

We must be data-informed and most importantly action-oriented.

The same public-private partnerships and collaborative spirit that we've used to solve other challenges can help drive success here too.

We can make significant strides toward a future where homelessness in our city is not just managed but substantially reduced.

We can build on the great work that has happened for decades and the progress we have seen in the last year.

And we can get to a point where homelessness is truly rare, brief and non-reoccurring.
I believe we can do it because we remain a place where dedicated people get involved and aspire to make a really big difference.

That is a special strength of our community – it always has been.

The global media company Forbes recognized it just the other day. They wrote that Grand Rapids is the best right-size city in America, with the people and the “WANT TO” needed to continue to drive forward.

Think about that … the “WANT TO”… that means the desire, the drive, the dedication to have an impact.

With so many thoughtful, caring and capable people here in our community, I remain optimistic about what lies ahead.

That we can continue to invest in transformational projects, that inclusion can be at the heart of our work and growth - and that we can be a city where people feel like they belong.

We’ve got a lot of positive things going for us.

Remarkable access to educational and career opportunities.

Vibrant and active neighborhoods.

Extremely high quality of life.

But our biggest and most important resource is all of you – our people and your commitment to our community.

It always has been, and always will be.

I will be stepping away as Mayor but Grand Rapids remains in very good hands - because Grand Rapids remains in your hands.

Our City is better because of you.

You inspired me to work harder, always aspire to do better and never give up.

Finally tonight, you know we are not leaving here without talking about trees.

You all know one of my top priorities is planting and caring for trees.

Of course it was Dotti Clune, Barb Rohwer, Ruth Kelly and Carol Moore who first planted the idea of an urban forest plan for our City.

Their advocacy ultimately led to the adoption of our 40 percent tree canopy goal, a better system to map our trees and more effectively managing trees, especially when they’re sick.

We have planted more than 13,000 trees across this City during my time as Mayor and that is one of several accomplishments I am proud of.
Practically, trees are important for so many good reasons. They produce oxygen, filter out air pollution, absorb noise, help calm traffic and manage storm water, improve property values and reduce people’s stress levels.

The latest scientific research tells us that an abundance of trees on your neighborhood block simply makes people feel younger and healthier.

Imagine that.

I also believe trees are something of a metaphor for personal and community growth. Everything begins, just like a tree, with a seed, whether it’s an idea, a dream, a city. The seeds start small, and grow over time. It’s patient work, and sometimes difficult to see progress, as the seed grows slowly and quietly.

This is especially true at the very beginning when we’re most eager to see visible progress.

I know the community organizers among us know what I’m talking about.

And then with good care, attention and nourishment - the seed sprouts, and starts to grow into a tree.

Branching out in new and sometimes unexpected directions.

At times bending in the face of strong winds but with deep roots, not breaking.

Adapting to changing circumstances.

Planting trees in our City is an investment in the future.

A symbol of hope.

A commitment to making our community a better place.

An act to leave a legacy that will continue to grow and flourish for generations. Long after we are gone.

You all see the trees around us.

Please take a tree home with you tonight, plant it and nurture it with care.

My hope is that it becomes a lasting reminder of the unique culture of citizenship and engagement that makes our city so special.

Grand Rapids is a City where you have the opportunity to plant a seed, or a tree, or an idea or a dream, and have an impact on our community for generations to come.

A City where you can be a part of progress and change, if you want to.
The strength of our City is truly in all of our hands.

So please, grab a tree on your way out, get out your shovel when you get home, and keep planting good things for the benefit of our community.

Thank you for coming out tonight.

Thank you for commitment to our community.

And thank you for giving me the opportunity to serve. I am so very grateful.

Good night.