

Middlesex Municipal Day 2023



Warden Cathy Burghardt-Jesson – State of the Union Speech

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, fellow stakeholders and members of our beloved communities, thank you for joining me today as we gather to reflect on the state of our County. As Warden, it is my privilege and responsibility to provide you with an update on our accomplishments, challenges, and the strategic direction we envision for our County into the future.

My hope is that after I have shared this annual Warden's address, you will leave here with a sense of unity and shared purpose, as we all work together to continue to build a bright future for all who call Middlesex County home.

When considering the theme for the address, as I worked with Bill and Paul, all three of us saw there was one obvious choice. Change.

As we gather here today, it is essential that we recognize and appreciate the remarkable transformation that Middlesex County has undergone throughout our history. Once a small collection of humble rural communities, Middlesex County has evolved into a rapidly growing and diverse region, encompassing both urban and rural communities, each with their unique characteristics and challenges.

There is no question that Middlesex County, that sturdy, tried, and true County is changing. It is apparent in almost every meeting I am at. Whether it is with colleagues, residents or provincial representatives, our discussions often lead me to say, this is not the Middlesex County you once knew. We see this internally every day. Recently, I was at a meeting and the volume of change across each service area was more than evident in every report. However, what truly struck me as I sat there in that meeting was not only the amount of change, but how fast it is happening.

This should come as no surprise, as change is happening across the world. At the macro level we have seen fundamental shifts in economics and demographics across the world and in Canada. However, these fundamental shifts have landed at the door of Middlesex County in what largely is a uniquely challenging way.

While I was in that meeting, looking at chart after chart of real-time service delivery reports or models for future service delivery, it struck me that every single one of them was in the shape of a hockey stick.

I've been on Council a long time and I know many of you in the room are used to incremental growth and incremental impact from outside challenges in Middlesex County. Historically we have been able to provide sure and steady services to our stakeholders. We have grown accordingly in a controllable and manageable pattern. We take great pride in who we are and how we got to this amazing point.

With all of that being said, I am here to tell you today, that because of generations of solid leadership, we are ready to respond to any challenge that is in our future. Today however, I might be so bold to say, we are in extraordinary times.

We are in my opinion impacted by four outside global influences. Those four factors are:

- Demographic Change
- Post COVID-19 Service Demand
- Inflation
- Modernization

The shift from larger urban to rural and small urban locations is well documented. I think everyone knows that our region was one of the fastest growing census areas in Canada.

As we look at demographic changes in our region, we can see a clear shift from larger urban areas to rural and small urban locations.

However, this rapid influx of residents to our region has also put immense pressure on municipal governments. What sets Middlesex County apart is the additional outward migration from various cities to our rural and small urban communities, making the impact of this demographic shift even more acute.

The growing population, combined with the increasing migration to our small towns and villages, has created unique challenges in all service areas. Housing demand in our County is at an all-time high, and we recognize that the rising prices have made it difficult for many people to afford the housing they need.

As we plan for the future, we are also seeing a shift towards an aging population. This shift requires the necessary resources and support to ensure that our seniors can age with dignity and respect.

From a planning perspective, the demand from requests for planning approvals is unprecedented. While we are excited about this growth, it also presents unique challenges, and responding to these demands for planning services is no small feat. We recognize the importance of growing in a timely and organized way, but with the pace of change in this area, it is no easy task.

Not long ago, we would have begged for a fraction of the growth we are experiencing now. However, we must also ask ourselves whether it is all happening too fast and whether we can afford the infrastructure required to support this incredible demand?

Intensifying these demographic changes has been the post COVID-19 service demands.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted Middlesex County and has resulted in an increased demand for essential services.

The pandemic challenged our traditional service delivery models and forced us to adapt and respond to the changing needs of our community. In response, we have demonstrated our ability to act swiftly and collaboratively to keep our communities safe and thriving.

Post COVID-19 service demand is a real and ongoing challenge. The pandemic has led to an increased demand for mental health services. According to a recent report by the Canadian Mental Health Association, there has been a significant increase in mental health concerns since the start of the pandemic. This has resulted in an increased demand for mental health services in Middlesex County. One of the ways this presents in Middlesex County is as increases in the number of mental health calls to MLPS.

The economic impact of the pandemic has led to job losses and reduced incomes for many individuals and families, making it even more difficult to afford housing. This has resulted in an increased demand for affordable housing in Middlesex County.

Further, the pandemic has led to an increased demand for online services and digital infrastructure. With many people working and studying from home, the demand for digital services has increased significantly.

Meeting these new and evolving demands comes at a price. Unfortunately, as a result of another macro-economic challenge, it comes at an increasingly higher price.

Of course I am talking about inflation. We are all familiar with the impact of inflation as any trip to the grocery store will clearly show. The media has done a great job of keeping track of the impact of inflation for us. We have all seen stories of 6% or 7% or 8% year over year inflation.

However, what is rarely reported is that while we feel the impacts at the municipal level of that type of inflation, there is a whole other level of inflation happening in

the municipal sector. For many of the goods that we consume in high volumes, 6% or 8% inflation would be a dream.

From the price of asphalt to insurance to construction materials to the price of ambulances and their associated supplies we are seeing inflation that is closer to 60% year over a year.

As the cost of goods and services continue to rise, meeting the demands of our growing population and maintaining essential infrastructure and social services becomes increasingly complex. This puts immense pressure on the County to deliver essential services while managing costs and maintaining financial sustainability.

To address these challenges, we have focused on delivery of legislated, core services, responsible asset management and investment in social and community services.

This is all in an effort to maintain financial sustainability while ensuring the well-being of all Middlesex County residents, regardless of age or economic background.

If all this wasn't enough to consider, evolving technology has transformed the way we live, work, and communicate.

Technology and modernization present both opportunities and challenges for Middlesex County. On one hand, embracing technological advancements can help the County deliver effective and efficient municipal services that meet the changing needs and expectations of its citizens. On the other hand, the rapid pace of technological change and the associated costs of implementing new technologies can pose significant challenges.

One of the main challenges of technology and modernization for Middlesex County is ensuring that all residents have equitable access to the necessary infrastructure and resources to take advantage of these advancements.

While many urban areas have access to high-speed internet and other digital technologies, as we all know rural areas often lack the necessary infrastructure, this leads to disparities in access to information, education, and economic opportunities – this was highlighted over and over during the height of the pandemic.

And what comes as no surprise, the cost of implementing new technologies can be a significant challenge. Upgrading infrastructure, investing in new software and hardware, and providing staff training can all be costly endeavors, and finding the necessary funding can be a challenge. But failure to keep up with emerging

technologies will lead to service disruptions, reduced efficiency, and decreased citizen satisfaction.

All of these factors are creating dramatic, exponential changes in Middlesex County. The pace of change is one that we are not familiar with, however, I am positive and very optimistic that we are prepared and uniquely positioned to take advantage of this environment.

In January 2021, we embarked on a journey with the launch of the Middlesex County Strategic Plan: 2021-2024 - The Middlesex Initiative - Breaking New Ground.

Our strategic plan is built on four key focus areas: Cultivating Community Vitality, Connecting Through Infrastructure, Strengthening Our Economy, and Promoting Service Excellence. Each of these pillars has been essential to our progress as a community, and I am proud of the achievements we have made together.

In cultivating community vitality, we have focused on advancing a diverse, healthy, and engaged community across Middlesex County. By promoting and supporting community wellness, innovating social and community services, and attracting, retaining, and engaging our youth, we are fostering a strong sense of belonging and well-being for all our residents.

Our efforts in connecting through infrastructure have been focused on ensuring our communities are built on a sustainable foundation, connected and thriving. We have championed active transportation and public transit opportunities, advocated for equitable broadband infrastructure, and committed to a sound asset management strategy to maintain and fund critical infrastructure.

Economic growth is vital for the prosperity of our County. Our strategic plan has sought to encourage a diverse and robust economic base throughout the County. We have supported opportunities to create a stronger and sustainable agricultural sector, attracted businesses and investments, and promoted tourism in Middlesex County.

An emphasis on the importance of promoting service excellence has created a culture where we work tirelessly to innovate and transform municipal service delivery.

All well aligning it with emerging needs and expectations. We have engaged, educated, and informed our residents, businesses, and visitors about county services and community activities. Our advocacy and lobbying efforts have been strengthened, and we have collaborated with strategic partners to leverage available resources and opportunities.

As we have pursued these focus areas, we have been guided by a set of principles that have been the foundation of our work. These principles have shaped our approach and helped to create a strong, cohesive vision for the future of Middlesex County.

First, we have committed to balancing the rural-urban qualities of the County, acknowledging that our region is a vibrant tapestry of communities, each with its unique characteristics and strengths. We have sought to foster growth and development that respects and celebrates this diversity, ensuring that both urban and rural areas thrive.

Second, we have prioritized building relationships and working in a collaborative and supportive way. We believe that our strength lies in our ability to come together as a community, working hand-in-hand with our partners, businesses, stakeholders and residents to create a brighter future for all.

Our commitment to leading through innovation, evaluation, and continuous improvement has driven us to explore new and creative ways to address the challenges and opportunities we face. This dedication to progress has been essential in our efforts to transform municipal service delivery, enhance our infrastructure, and foster economic growth.

We recognize the uniqueness of our communities and have worked diligently to support their individual needs and aspirations. This collaborative approach has allowed us to develop tailored solutions that respect the diverse perspectives and priorities of each community within Middlesex County.

Maintaining financial sustainability has been a cornerstone of our strategic plan. By committing to sound asset management and responsible fiscal policies, we have ensured that our County is well-positioned to continue providing the legislated, core services and resources our citizens rely on, today and in the future.

Our focus on diversity and inclusion has been essential in our efforts to cultivate community vitality. We have strived to create an environment where all residents feel welcome, valued, and empowered to contribute to the well-being of our county.

Being flexible and responsive has allowed us to adapt to the rapidly changing landscape and emerging needs of our citizens. This approach has enabled us to address challenges and seize opportunities in a timely and effective manner, ensuring that Middlesex County remains resilient and forward-looking.

In our pursuit of progress and a brighter future for Middlesex County, we must not overlook the critical role that government relations and advocacy play in shaping our community's trajectory.

Establishing and maintaining strong relationships with other levels of government, as well as advocating for the needs and priorities of our citizens, are essential in securing the resources, support, and policies that will propel our County forward.

Effective government relations and advocacy enable us to ensure that the voices of Middlesex County residents are heard and taken into consideration by decision-makers at the provincial and federal levels. By fostering open and collaborative dialogue with these government bodies, we can better align our priorities with those of our partners, identify opportunities for collaboration, and leverage available resources to address the challenges we face as a community.

Advocacy also plays a crucial role in raising awareness about the unique needs of our County, particularly in areas such as infrastructure, housing, economic development, and social services. By championing the interests of Middlesex County at the provincial and federal levels, we can influence policy decisions and secure funding that will directly benefit our community and contribute to our overall growth and prosperity.

A recent example of the success of these government relations and advocacy initiatives is the provincial government's commitment to addressing homelessness in Middlesex County. As we experience the influx of complex urban issues within our County, the funding increase for the Homelessness Prevention Program, will be directed to critical local priorities such as the Middlesex County Interim Accommodation Project. These efforts make substantial impacts in our County and set the course for continued collaboration to address the needs of Middlesex County.

As we continue to implement the Middlesex Initiative, we must continue to celebrate our successes, learn from our challenges, and always look for the opportunity in those challenges and continue to work together to build a better, brighter future for all stakeholders of Middlesex County.

Keeping all this in mind we must consider our actions from the lens of the significant and rapid environmental change forces we are experiencing in every facet of service delivery we conduct. Middlesex County is undergoing significant change in various forms, from demographic shifts, to post COVID-19 service demands, to inflation to technological advancements. As a community, we recognize the challenges that these changes bring and are committed to adapting to them. We are working tirelessly to ensure that we continue to deliver effective and efficient municipal services to our residents, despite the numerous challenges we face.

Change can be difficult, but it is also an opportunity for growth and progress. With determination, collaboration, and a willingness to embrace change in our new environment, we can be confident that we can overcome these challenges.

Thank you for your commitment to our community and for your unwavering support as we forge ahead on our shared vision for Middlesex County: a vibrant, inclusive, and sustainable community where everyone has the opportunity to thrive.