



CITY OF YELLOWKNIFE

**Mayor Ben Hendriksen**

Friday, September 12, 2025

**State of the City Address 2025: “A New Playbook for Northern Prosperity”**

Good afternoon, everyone.

Thank you for being here today and thank you to the Yellowknife Chamber of Commerce for inviting me to present this State of the City.

I want to start by acknowledging that we are located today in Chief Drygeese territory. From time immemorial, it has been the traditional land of the Yellowknives Dene First Nation. As the City of Yellowknife, we respect the histories, languages, and cultures of all other Indigenous Peoples, including the North Slave Métis, and all First Nations, Métis, and Inuit whose presence continues to enrich our vibrant community.

Over the past few years, and as we look to the future, we’re experiencing numerous challenges... and changes...as the economic, national, and geopolitical world around us continues a seemingly endless churn, we need to write a New Playbook for Northern Prosperity.

Today I present this 2025 State of the City as Mayor, but also as just one member of Council who all bring our individual views, ideals, connections, and passions to the governance of Yellowknife.

Since being elected in 2022, this City Council has focused on grounding its work in our Strategic Directions. At the heart of these directions is a simple but important commitment: putting people first.

That commitment has informed us of everything we do;

From how we respond to emergencies, to how we plan our growth, and how we support our local economy.



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### **Emergency Preparedness & Resilience**

In our work since 2022, we've faced challenges.

In 2023, and again in the last few weeks, we hosted evacuees from our neighboring communities, providing them shelter and support during their time of crisis.

In 2023, this support came during the worst wildfire season in living memory.

At that time, we also did something I never expected when I ran for Council; we declared a state of local emergency and called on the business community to help protect our city from the worst-case scenario. Two days after we called that local state of emergency, we experienced a city-wide evacuation – a moment in time that will be etched in our memories.

The wildfires of 2023 forced us to rethink how we respond to crises. Emergency preparedness and placing residents at the centre of our planning is now a permanent part of how we operate, both as a City and in collaboration with our neighboring communities in N'dilo, Dettah, and Behchokò.

After our return to Yellowknife post-evacuation, the first thing Council did was commit to a publicly transparent and third-party review of the City's response to the wildfire season.

Coming out of that After Action Assessment, we have hired a dedicated Manager of Emergency Preparedness, implemented the Voyent Alert system, and invested in additional training for our Emergency Operations Centre staff.

We have also transitioned leadership at both the administrative and political levels. Administratively, we welcomed our current City Manager, Stephen Van Dine, and showed our appreciation to Sheila Bassi-Kellet for her years of public service.

And then, of course, only in the last few months I have stepped into the seat as Mayor following Minister Alty's election to Parliament.



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Most recently, at the start of June, we welcomed the newest Councillor, Rob Foote.

Through all that churn in a little under 3 years, we have worked to stay focused on the future.

While we have been pushed off track for moments with each change and challenge, our focus on creating a city that prioritizes the people who call this place home hasn't wavered.

Ultimately, this Council has asked itself time and again... Is it enough to simply recover from challenges, or should we aim to improve? We are doing our best to improve, and we need the help of every person in this room and in our city to succeed.



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### **Economic Support**

When we look at the economy, we need to URGENTLY adapt as a city, region, and territory again. While Yellowknife has been fortunate to have had massive deposits of gold and diamonds on its doorstep, our mineral future looks like it will be tied to smaller, though hopefully more numerous, critical mineral and rare earth deposits.

Yet despite the risks and resources being spent by a handful of exploration and junior mining companies, these opportunities are not assured.

In one of my first meetings as Mayor, Council unanimously passed a resolution calling on the Governments of Canada and the NWT to support the Arctic Security Corridor as a project of national interest and to do so in full collaboration with Indigenous Governments.

This resolution signaled that the city will not stand by passively on subjects of regional and territorial economic significance that directly affect our future. The fact that this Corridor has now been mentioned as a potential future project of national interest is good news.

Going forward, the city is ready to work with all other governments and the chambers of commerce and mines to attract the investment needed to make this project successful.

Last December, the City passed another resolution highlighting Yellowknife as a reliable and welcoming community to Canada's Armed Forces.

To this end, Council directed Administration to reach out to the Armed Forces, the Department of National Defense, as well as the GNWT, and Yellowknife Airport to facilitate potential investments, identify lands of interest, and help prioritize capital project plans.

This year, we have finally taken the steps to create a destination marketing office through an agreement with NWT Tourism that markets Yellowknife as a tourist destination of choice around the world.



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We're also committed to supporting Aurora College in whatever governance form its future holds so that it can continue to offer a rich learning experience with quality programs and facilities in Yellowknife.



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### **Strengthening Relationships**

However, the most central aspect of our vision is recognizing that Yellowknife serves not just as a city, but as a capital and meeting point for all residents and regions.

This responsibility as the capital city extends beyond our municipal boundaries and calls us to create meaningful partnerships with the GNWT, Indigenous governments, and other municipalities to strengthen the territory as a whole.

We are actively building stronger working relationships with Indigenous Governments and partners, including the Yellowknives Dene First Nation, the Tłı̨chǫ Government, in particular Behchokǫ̀, and the North Slave Metis Alliance.

These relationships, both with their Governments but also their investment corporations, are about recognizing that our collective prosperity depends on working together, sharing knowledge, and respecting the deep connections to this land that have existed since time immemorial.

As the capital city, we are taking a position that allows us to support the leadership of Indigenous Governments as economic drivers of our territory. Supporting Indigenous Governments to take this lead role while giving them support to succeed when we are asked.

The City of Yellowknife, like many of you in this room, also has a keen interest in seeing remaining land claims move forward, understanding that resolved land claims create certainty for everyone—first, it creates certainty for Indigenous Governments themselves, but after that, it creates certainty for businesses, residents, and governments.

Settling land claims is foundational work that benefits our entire region and is critical now more than ever as we face the long-known-about wind-down of the diamond mining industry.



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## **Housing and Development**

Even as the economy shifts, one of the most pressing economic and social barriers we face is the need for more housing.

Yellowknife residents, like all Canadians, struggle with housing, need safe, affordable, and accessible housing. In 2024, Yellowknife was successful in securing \$8.4 million from the CMHC Housing Accelerator Fund.

To create a city where everyone has a place to call home, we must also work collaboratively. After significant engagement, we introduced new development incentives in 2024, with a focus on providing a variety of housing and density, particularly downtown.

Nova Pine Hills and The View are now complete.

Ground was broken on the Housing NWT Project on 50th Street earlier this summer, a collaboration of the City, GNWT, and the Federal Government.

All these projects increase housing supply on underused land, which is located on existing infrastructure, meaning that the capital and O&M costs to the city for these new developments are not increased substantially, thereby slowing the growth of tax revenue needed to build and maintain our city.

At a time of increasing cost of living, doing our part to slow that tax burden on Yellowknifers is critical.

And – our push for land continues with applications to the GNWT.

To be responsible in managing land for future planning and growth, we should realistically have several years of land ready to be sold.

So that when a need arises for housing or economic investment, there is not a multi-year delay that sees investment leave Yellowknife for somewhere else. Right now, we do not have that land.



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For those of you unaware, the city owns 9% of land within the City's boundaries, and that 9% includes the land that City Hall, the Fire Hall, Aquatic Centre, and other facilities sit on.

7% is in Federal ownership, and approximately 75% of the land within City boundaries is Commissioner's land, with the rest in private ownership.

The city has little influence at present on how to develop land outside of our ownership.

We make policy statements and requirements in our Community Plan and Zoning By-laws, but we are limited by what we ACTUALLY CAN GET DONE on lands we don't own.

With regards to the amount of Commissioner's land within City boundaries, there is, in effect, another city-sized amount of land within the city boundary. I need to ask you all in this room... Is this status quo serving the business community? Is this status quo serving the public?

As part of Budget 2026, Council has asked Administration to come to us with research and proposals about how to ensure that vacant land in our city is utilized.

The incentives we have are the carrots for development, but the other options we are seeking to understand are the stick side of the policy equation, so that we can disincentivize vacant land within parts of the city that are otherwise developed.

I speak for a lot of Yellowknifers when I say that it is a hard pill to swallow when we talk about building on cherished land, whether that is existing greenspace within neighbourhoods and on publicly accessible areas near shoreline; or on greenfield development on the edges of our city, when there are several prime locations of vacant private and commissioner owned land sitting unused within our existing built environment.

To be honest, though, the City's success at getting land to market has not been what any member of Council had as our vision when we were elected in 2022.

Every one of us who serves the public on Council spoke about the need to see a bulk movement of land from the Government of the Northwest Territories to the City of Yellowknife. That goal of a bulk transfer now seems out of reach.





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While I won't deny that we, as Council and City Administration, need to up our own game when it comes to the speed of supporting housing and land development, what we truly need to meet the needs of Yellowknife and the territory is more land to move from ownership of the Commissioner to the City.

Since jumping into the Mayor's Chair, I can say that Administration and I are actively and regularly speaking with the GNWT, including as part of their upcoming draft budget, and advocating for unlocking land opportunities.

I have also lobbied our MP and former Mayor to see ownership of underused Federal lands move to the City, and she knows these issues well. Without land, we can't build housing or encourage investment for the people who are already here, or for the people we need to welcome to the North. Without people to power our economy, we can't take advantage of the economic opportunities in front of us.

On land, my ask of each of you in this room today comes in three parts:

1. First, to hold our feet to the fire as a city around improving our processes and customer service on these issues of land access.
2. Second, let the territorial government hear from the business community that land needs to move to the City so that we can plan for the City's growth and NOT BE IN A CONSTANT REACTIONARY STANCE of using postage stamp properties currently at our disposal in a desperate attempt to keep up with demand. AND
3. Third, when working with the City, remember that we are working together. Just as you have requirements for your investments, the City has legal requirements that we must meet to ensure everything is solid from a regulatory standpoint.

Though we can and need to do more to remove the friction from our own processes, I guarantee that the City IS NOT trying to stifle growth, though I hear that refrain more often than I'd like. Working collaboratively will always get everyone where they want to go faster and with greater long-term community buy-in.



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## **Construction**

Regarding the construction industry more broadly, the Aquatic Centre, our city's largest capital investment in years, was recently completed, and we've welcomed thousands of visitors since its opening.

The City's work to replace Lift Station #1 also started this summer.

But we know there are still hurdles. We're addressing these through the current Community Plan review and upcoming Zoning By-law amendments, including issues like work camps, that need to be addressed to ensure that workers coming from outside Yellowknife have a place to stay when building our City, BUT without impacting our rental housing stock or taking from potential tourism investment by filling hotels.

Based on our permit data, the construction industry in Yellowknife is experiencing a downturn due to a combination of factors, including elevated interest rates, increased construction costs, supply chain challenges, and, once again, the lack of available land.

While the downturn presents challenges, it also highlights opportunities for our city.

At present, one of the tools available for all of us to have these meatier policy discussions is the Mayor's Task Force on Economic Development.

This task force has not met in over two years. Leaving here today, I would ask everyone in this room, and I ask the Chamber specifically, to think about whether this City taskforce is the right platform for future conversations about business investment.

I have to say – philosophically, I have my doubts that the best place to lead and advocate for business investment is from City Hall and the Mayor's office, but that is a point where I would like your feedback... I would like to hear from you how you believe that the City can best support these conversations.



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### **Business & the Downtown Core**

Despite the challenges, there is a clear sign of resilience in our local economy. Investment is being made. Properties are changing hands, and business licenses have increased year by year.

While we've seen the closure of some long-standing establishments, we're also seeing new businesses open. As with a lot of small businesses across Canada, many are being opened and managed by new Canadians who have new ideas and new energy.

Centre Square Mall is becoming more vibrant again. There are new tenants upstairs, and Nunastar has recently purchased the lower mall and tower, bringing new opportunities there. Having a company that understands the challenges and opportunities of northern investment, which sees the potential of that space, is great to see.

Downtown revitalization is a clear priority for this Council as it has been for several past Councils, and to prove it, we will be considering concrete actions for downtown investment through Budget 2026.

We know that Yellowknife's success is linked to how safe and supported people feel in the community. The City continues to work with and support territorial and federal partners to address homelessness, social service gaps, and encampments, even though these areas are technically outside our jurisdiction.

Safer streets make Yellowknife more welcoming for visitors, businesses, and all of us who call this place home.

I think it is important to remember that we can hold two truths in our minds at the same time.

We can and must be supportive and advocate on behalf of the people in our city who have more challenging lives than anyone in this room.



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We can also agree with the words of the Chief of Behchokò a few weeks ago when she said that we need to do whatever we can to recognize the impact that drugs are having on NWT communities and use our frustration to mobilize for better outcomes for Northerners.

Through funding provided by the Federal Government Reaching Home program, the City is contributing \$3.5 million annually to support organizations in Yellowknife that provide frontline services to the most vulnerable members of our community.

Through \$887 thousand in funding from Health Canada, we are also able to fund the Line Drive outreach program, which provides tangible and immediate support on the ground.

This service reduces costs to the City, Territorial Government, and Federal Government by respecting the precious time of our emergency first responders, the Yellowknife Fire Department, Stanton Hospital, and RCMP, and ensuring that the care and assistance that someone needs is the appropriate care and assistance they receive.



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### **Economic Diversification & Infrastructure**

As Council and Administration, we recognize that the health of our city and its residents is intertwined with the prosperity of businesses and other governments, not just within Yellowknife, but throughout the North Slave region and ultimately the NWT as a whole.

The recent suspension of the open pit mine at Ekati underscores the urgency for diversification of our economy. This recognition of both urgency and opportunity is why, on August 25th, the Council invited the leadership of the 4 local Indigenous Development Corporations to come and speak with Council about the short-term challenges and longer-term opportunities they see ahead.

As these development corporations discussed, to thrive in the future, we can't run the same playbook.



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## **Yellowknife and the World**

Building on the successful visit of Ambassadors and High Commissioners on their Northern Tour in May, as well as Federal Ministers over the summer, we're positioning our city not just as a place to visit, but as a Capital City of the global North; a place of opportunity that connects Canada to the circumpolar world.

I plan in the coming months to again meet in person or at least virtually with both my counterparts from Whitehorse and Iqaluit to continue working together and amplifying the voice of a strong North, and perhaps in the new year even welcome some of the Ambassadors who visited in May back to Yellowknife for further discussions about investment opportunities and what we can learn from one another across the Arctic.

While our challenges and opportunities are unique to us, by looking beyond the NWT and even Canada, we can learn from similar experiences that others have confronted and overcome.

Part of this work to broaden Yellowknife's voice includes our participation as a member of the Arctic Mayors' Forum, an organization first joined by Mayor Alty, and which, as of this month, includes a second Canadian member community from Inuvik.

This Forum brings mayors together across Arctic countries, from Alaska in the west to Finland in the east and allows the chance to share experiences in Arctic governance, economic growth, housing, and infrastructure. Just this week, I hosted several municipal colleagues and young professionals in Arctic policy as part of a pan-Arctic Mentorship program.

The City and I are also participating in the European Union-funded project called the Arctic Urban Regional Cooperation, which again allows sharing information with colleagues across the circumpolar region at a municipal level.

When we think about Pan-Canadian and global connections, the Yellowknife Airport remains a crucial economic driver for the City, the Capital region, and the territory - and the



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City is exploring the feasibility and more bluntly, the cost, of expanding infrastructure services out Old Airport Road.

The airport is yet another part of our city that is disconnected from the City infrastructure, like water and sewer services. Unlocking opportunities for commercial and industrial investment by connecting existing and future businesses to these services is an opportunity we need to pursue in collaboration with the GNWT and the Federal Government.

With the frequency of power outages this summer, we are again reminded of the fragility of our northern power grid. I won't pretend to have the solutions to these issues, but what is clear is that we need meaningful investment now as electrification becomes the societal norm globally.

Put simply, we cannot have a 21st-century economy or 21st-century expectation of capital investment coming from outside the NWT when much of our city and territory continues to operate on mid-20th-century infrastructure. There are other places for investment to go if we can't show the world that we are a modern 21st-century Arctic City.



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## **Environment**

While seeking economic opportunities, we also must not turn our back on the land we call home. It is all our responsibility to balance the realities and demands of modern life with the necessary respect for this land.

As a City, our strategic directions promote initiatives that respect our environment, including reducing waste and protecting our natural resources.

We can't only give lip service to climate action, and comprehensive engagement on the City's upcoming Climate Action Plan has been undertaken, and development of a new Transportation Plan will include guidance for how the City must support low and no-carbon transportation.

Actions around climate are something where I challenge everyone in this room to ask: what are you doing or planning to do differently (big or small) in your personal and professional lives that has a meaningful impact on reducing carbon emissions?

Even if you personally believe you are unaffected by climate change, future generations are being affected, just as we are being affected by past generations' actions today.

If we don't change our northern playbook on the environment, future generations will not have the same physical, never mind economic, or social environment around Yellowknife that we otherwise are working to provide.

Beyond Council, I personally am involved with the Climate Caucus and the Elbows Up for Climate Campaign, groups of municipal leaders from across Canada who are focused on hammering home this message around urgent climate action.

Climate action doesn't mean economic catastrophe. But an ongoing underinvestment in climate action does mean long-term economic hardship. The voice I bring to each of these groups is about how we need to speak about the long-term economic opportunity of action and the ongoing costs of inaction.





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The costs of evacuations, increasing insurance premiums, costs to our health, both physical and psychological, and costs to traditional ways of life are all undervalued when people say that moving to a low-carbon future is too costly.

In the NWT only, 2023 alone cost all levels of government in excess of \$200 million.

Together, we can build a more sustainable Yellowknife... the examples from other parts of the Arctic are out there.



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### **Modernization**

Finally, how do we get all of this work done and done well? How can we expect growth if we don't modernize our playbook at City Hall?

As I have said throughout my remarks today, with challenges come opportunities, and we have opportunities for improvement.

As a governance geek myself, in the year I have been Mayor, I am working with my colleagues to review our own Council procedures so that decision-making and the administrative inputs required for good decision-making are modern and reflect best practice.

We won't nail things down perfectly, but I hope that if we can work toward making improvements before the end of our term, then that sets the next Council up for success and the ability to make further progress.

At the Administrative level, the City Manager is leading his staff through a much-needed organizational review to ensure our structures meet the needs of residents. Cities can't constantly change outside City Hall without the governments that serve them changing too.

While those are modernization points of the internal workings of City Hall, we are also working on public-facing service improvements, such as making our website more client-focused and advancing a new 311 service.

Anyone who has ever communicated with City Hall knows the pain of the dozens of potential emails and phone numbers to contact, depending on your issue.

The goal of 311 will be to create one front-facing point of contact for your engagement. 311 will be like Service Canada is for the Feds. 311 is an ambitious change, but it is a change that is needed and is part of our new playbook at City Hall.



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### **Conclusion**

As I come to a close, I want to first thank you for your patience.

I hope I have authentically recognized both the challenges and opportunities ahead.

As someone who valued my now non-existent anonymity and who, despite standing here today, still describes myself as an introvert, if I thought that things were perfect, I wouldn't have run for Council in 2022 or put my name forward for Mayor in 2025.

I do this work because of the opportunities to improve life for Yellowknifers.

When I think about the work ahead, my goal as Mayor and for this Council is to tackle as much of our current workplan as possible and ensure that the next Council has a running start on many of the big issues I spoke about today, and a solid platform from which to build.

Though things may not be perfect, it's also true that this city, its people, and its business community are resilient. I fell in love with Yellowknife and chose it as my home because of the endless opportunity that exists here.

I do my work because I believe that the opportunity so many of us see can be transformed into reality.

The oral and written history of the land that today we call Yellowknife shows that the people who have inhabited this place since time immemorial have weathered enormous challenges and always seem to come out stronger, more focused, and more unified.

If we commit to working together, building one another up, we continue to welcome newcomers, and acknowledge that the way we've always done things has got us this far, BUT also needs to evolve with the times, then we will continue to build a Yellowknife we are all proud of.



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We will be a Capital City that remains strong and benefits all of the NWT, Canada, and the Global Arctic.

Yellowknife has written and rewritten its playbook before. It's time for a New Playbook for Northern Prosperity.

Thank you, Merci, Mahsi.