



**2017 State of the City Address
Kent Mayor Suzette Cooke
April 5, 2017
Kent Chamber of Commerce Membership Luncheon
ShoWare Center**

Once again, let's thank **Gerri Jones** for sharing her beautiful voice with us today. Gerri is a probation clerk at Kent's Municipal Court, and I first heard her incredible voice at our own ***Kent's Got Talent***. Known by her stage name, Gerri Lynn, she has performed throughout the country, and is available on contract for events and private parties.

Welcome to my twelfth, **and final**, State of the City address. It has been quite a journey. Soon after I came to Kent in 1975 to direct the Kent Senior Center, I decided to adopt Kent as my permanent home.

Then, we were a farming community of less than 17,000 residents spread over 16 square miles and 97% Caucasian. We were in transition to becoming a manufacturing and distribution hub. We had our own Margaret Thatcher in Mayor Isabel Hogan, the "good ole boys coffee klatch" thought they ran the city, and Burdic Feed and Seed sold grain and baby chicks downtown.

Downtown Kent had clothing, appliance and drug stores adjacent to manufacturers of garbage cans, ladders and glue. West Valley Highway and Central Avenue frequently flooded every year. West Hill had two active landfills - Midway and Kent Highlands. East Hill farms fenced in cows, horses and sheep. Cornucopia Days was called Meeker Days, and had square dancing in the streets. And the Kent Boeing plant, developer of the Lunar Rover, attracted daily protesters against them for also building cruise missiles.

Today, we continue to transition. Kent is now 125,000 in population, spans over 34 square miles, and is the tenth most diverse city in the United States with less than 50% Caucasian and 138 different languages.

We truly are bringing the world home.

As you know, a mayor cannot accomplish anything of value without support from elected council members and dedicated city staff.

I feel fortunate to work with a city council that represents diverse opinions and respectfully deliberates policies. Please recognize our local elected officials:

- Council President Bill Boyce
- Councilmembers Jim Berrios
- Dana Ralph and
- Judge Karli Jorgenson

Some of the City's leadership team is here today.

Newest to our team is **Julie Parascondola**, our Parks, Recreation and Community Services Director. She brings over 19 years of experience to Kent, including best practices from across the US in her role as a member of the national Commission for Accreditation of Parks and Recreation Agencies.

Would Julie and rest of my Mayors Leadership Team please stand ... along with others who serve in Kent city government.

Kent is not an island. We work collaboratively with our neighboring cities. Joining us are:

- Renton mayor, Denis Law
- Auburn mayor, Nancy Backus
- Covington mayor, Jeff Wagner

Once again we are holding my state of the city address at South King County's largest community gathering place, **ShoWare Center**, home to our winning **Seattle Thunderbirds Hockey Team!** After sweeping the Western Hockey League playoffs, the T-Birds will now face the Everett Silvertips in the second round of the playoffs this Friday in Everett.

Last year, ShoWare's **230 events** attracted over **450,000 guests**, resulting in the arena's best financial year since opening in 2009. ShoWare patrons add about **\$23 million** a year to the local economy.

Join with me in recognizing ShoWare general manager, **Tim Higgins**, and his staff.

We often speak about Kent's place as the 4th largest manufacturing/distribution center in the country. The Kent Valley generates **1/8 of our state's entire Gross Domestic Product** – that's **\$49 billion** annually.

Despite our community's large contribution to the state's economy, little of the tax money generated from such robust business activity reaches the city.

According to the Puget Sound Regional Council, Kent loses **\$12.7 million** each year from the destination-based sales tax distribution formula adopted by the state in 2007. We are the hardest hit city in the state.

That was a game-changer in how we finance our infrastructure and operations, and SST as it's called, became the impetus behind collecting business and occupation taxes.

The state has mitigated our loss annually with \$5 million; but that is once again in jeopardy as the state legislature seeks to balance its budget.

Thank you, Kent Chamber of Commerce, for lending your influence to retain SST mitigation funding.

In spite of lingering financial challenges from SST and the Great Recession, where I eliminated 100 positions, we have been able to regain a **positive bond rating AA+**.

Some of the success can be attributed to applying LEAN management tools; some to delaying projects. As mayor, I get to say "No, not yet" a lot. My sincere thanks to Aaron BeMiller, our Finance Director, our department heads and staff, and of course, the City council, who gets the final say.

But a word of warning. Balancing the budget on fund balances and reserve accounts in only a temporary fix.

The next Mayor and council will need to tackle more permanent means to city financial sustainability.

There will never be enough money to satisfy our backlog of maintenance on infrastructure and parks. After all, we have

- 826 miles of water, drainage and sewer pipes
- 320 miles of roads
- 774 acres of open and natural spaces
- 1,178 acres of parks, and
- 28 miles of trails

Last year volunteers contributed **4,184 hours** to maintain and improve Kent's parks. They removed 330 cubic yards of invasive weeds and planted 1,000 trees and shrubs. Their time alone was worth over **\$71,000**: a small, but important contribution toward our \$60 million backlog in maintenance.

Thanks to a **\$1 million** state grant and some funds from King County Council member Reagan Dunn, the **dock at Lake Meridian** will be replaced by June.

Last year we received **\$2 million** in state funding towards a \$25 million **YMCA**, and we've requested another **\$3 million** this year. The future YMCA is nestled between Morrill Meadows and East Hill Parks on SE 248th St.

While fundraising is 2/3 complete, it is hoped we will contribute \$2 million in community giving to complement the Y's private fundraising effort. Thank you to major donors - the Morford family and Oberto Brands - for helping Kent finally get a Y.

Remember playing wiffle ball, that holey plastic ball that hurts a lot less than a baseball when it hits you? As part of a playground renovation project at **Kent Memorial Park**, we are building the first official **Wiffle®ball Field** in the state. Wiffco Field - as we are calling it, was designed with help from the Seattle Mariners, and funded in part by a grant from King County, and a generous donation from the Kent Lions Club.

But recreation is not all parks and sports facilities. A significant attribute of Kent is its recreation, cultural arts programs, and its housing and human services. Our human services division allocates \$1 million to nonprofit organizations to assist people to become more self-reliant or get through a traumatic experience. Half of that amount is dedicated to programs that help the homeless.

Professional staff and volunteers provide after school learning activities, leadership development through sports, creative brain development and pure entertainment through the arts, social skills building for our residents with disabilities, and respect for the natural environment through our Green Stewards Program.

Kent has requested **\$4 million** from our State Legislature for a series of floodplain, habitat, and drainage enhancements in the area around 76th Avenue S. and S. 212th Street. This project will stabilize a critical cross-section of the Green River Valley and prevent frequent flooding and occasional road closure. (You are welcome, Republic Services, their Kent headquarters are there.)

It also happens to be at the front door of **Blue Origin**, a leading space flight research company with headquarters spanning over **300,000 square feet**. In pursuit of its vision of millions of people living and working in space, Blue Origin was the first to successfully design and launch an unmanned space capsule and rocket booster into space and return safely to earth --- repeating that feat **five** times.

The company employs over **750 people** at its Kent headquarters and anticipates adding hundreds more in the coming years. An expansion project is underway on what is known as the "Barnier Property" near its current campus, and Blue Origin has additionally purchased a 120,000-square-foot building across the street for further growth.

In addition to street maintenance projects throughout the city, Kent has several [new road projects](#).

Construction will begin this year on the **S. 224th Street** extension east across 84th Ave. S. and over SR 167 for another route up East Hill to the Benson Highway.

Another is the **S. 228th/Union Pacific Railroad grade separation** project, as it ties into the regionally significant SR 509 freeway extension.

I announced in 2006, I would institute a quiet zone. Well....we're still working on it. Speaking of trains, you may have been stuck recently at a **Burlington Northern**

railroad crossing - with no trains in sight. While the City has no authority or control over these systems, we have expressed our frustration, and we've added pressure to BNSF Railway to repair its system by reaching out to United States Senator Maria Cantwell and the Federal Rail Administration.

You can share your concerns directly with BNSF at **800-832-5452**. We also post malfunction alerts at **DriveKent.com** and the city's Facebook and Twitter accounts. Here's a preview of the new signs that will be placed at the crossings. Use your cell phone to take a picture for reference the next time you're stuck.

Some of our new residents appreciate the convenience of living close to commuter rail and transit access. Just like **The Platform** apartments downtown, the 150 new units at **Dwell at Kent Station** quickly filled up with tenants.

These new downtown residents will also benefit from our **Meet Me on Meeker** project, an effort to develop Meeker Street into a vibrant urban corridor.

We appreciate the efforts by the **Kent Downtown Partnership** to raise money to artistically light up the **SR 167 underpass on W Meeker St.**

Connecting our downtown to the **Riverbend Marquee on Meeker** mixed-use development at our existing par 3 golf course will change the face of our community.

We are working with Auburn-based FNW Inc. /Landmark Development Group. The project will feature two primary buildings about five-stories high with apartments and bottom-floor retail. The rest of the project will include smaller buildings with about 16 units per complex - many facing south toward the Green River and Mount Rainier. The apartments will include one-, two- and three-bedroom units and be targeted to attract young professionals and families at market-rate rents.

A feature of the development will be a bicycle and pedestrian path through the middle of the complex that connects Meeker Street to the Green River Trail.

To complement our Green River Trail, the **Kent Valley Loop Trails** system will open in May for bicyclists of all ages and abilities. It consists of five multi-use trail loops connecting more than 30 miles.

Moving up the **West Hill** along Veteran's Drive, you can see the 261-unit **Grandview Apartments** nearing completion. It is the first major project to be constructed as part of our Envision Midway plan, and will provide high quality, affordable workforce and family housing that will set the standard for future projects in the Midway area. They are expected to be 100% leased by the end of this summer.

In addition to a **Sound Transit Link light rail station** being constructed over the next six years near Highline College, Kent will be served by **four additional**

Sounder trips this year, and site selection has begun for a second **parking garage** at the Sounder station.

From elevated rails to elevated levees, let's move on to the **Green River**.

To date, the City has partnered with the State and the Flood Control District to **repair and upgrade 7.4 river miles of levees at a cost of \$50 million**. This investment protects 100,000 jobs, over 100 million square feet of retail, office and manufacturing space, as well as regional transportation and utility corridors.

The **Lower Russell Road project** currently under design consists of rebuilding the levee from the Joe Jackson Bridge on Veterans Drive to S. 212th Street. Due to its complexity in addressing flood protection, enhancing salmon habitat, moving Van Doren's Park and recreational amenities, private property impacts, and preserving the upland bird natural resource area, the price tag will be over **\$40 million**.

The Green River isn't the only flood concern we have. We continue to deal with flooding from **Mill Creek**, even after we replaced the **James Street Pump Station**, because the creek needs dredging – an action that takes a long time for federal and state permits. Meanwhile, we will go out to bid this month to raise the Upper Mill Creek Dam for increased capacity.

On Kent's East Hill, pedestrians will have a much smoother walk next fall along the west side of 132nd Ave. SE between SE 248th St. and Kent-Kangley Hwy. With the help of a **\$400,000** state grant, we will finally install **sidewalks and paved paths** connecting residents between playfields, the park-n-ride and shopping.

And new to shopping at the **Marketplace at Lake Meridian Retail Center** is **Rita's Italian Ice**: a 25-year old company just made its local debut. With 625 stores in 19 states, this addition is the **first in Washington**.

The Marketplace has gone from an occupancy rate of **38% to 94%**, thanks to reinvestment.

Later this summer, we'll see a **Sonic Drive-In** at 116th and Kent-Kangley.

For those who don't get excited about new hamburger establishments....Keep in mind...one burger joint is worth 500,000 square feet of industrial warehouse space in local revenue!

So don't brush off the contest going on for a new Dick's Drive-In!

I've sent a letter of support to their corporate headquarters...and now it's your turn to be a part of Kent's economic development efforts.

Everyone take out your phones

- go to your web browser
- go to **KentWA.gov/DDI**, and vote for Kent!

The Puget Sound Business Journal is doing a poll on which South County city should be selected...and we are running behind our neighbors. Let's fix this and bring Dick's to Kent!

I am often asked what city issues people complain about the most. While pot holes rank high, we actually get the most calls about wanting fireworks banned.

Well - Take note: fireworks are now illegal in Kent – they are banned - prohibited!

That means the sale – the possession – the discharge – of any fireworks – can result in a **\$250 fine**.

The one exception is public fireworks displays that have a permit...like the one planned on the Fourth of July at Lake Meridian. Kent police will be out in full force to educate and enforce the new law.

In fact, public outreach and education by our police department has helped make Kent safer. Combined with **Intelligence Led Policing and our Neighborhood Response Team:**

- The **overall crime rate** since 2006 has been reduced by **22.8%**
- The number of **stolen cars** is down **49%**
- **Robberies** are down **55%**
- **Residential burglaries** have decreased **54%**
- And **commercial burglaries** are 46% lower than they were in 2006.

And we're making good use of Kent's inmates' time, too. Last year, **supervised work crews from our jail performed 29,895 hours of work** throughout our community.

We're fortunate our police are so effective, especially with **166 employees cramped into a space meant to house 85 people**. We are considering a remodel of the City Hall campus to make room for our growing police force.

Among my first initiatives as mayor was **Kent4Health**, a resident-run program to promote a holistic approach to personal health. They help educate the public on healthful eating habits and water consumption, and organized ShoWalk, a wintertime walking opportunity for all ages and abilities here in ShoWare. Thank you, **Pam Clark** for spearheading this effort.

A new non-profit organization, Living Well Kent, has taken the program to a new level with demonstrations of healthful meals, and a fresh produce market beginning this spring on East Hill.

Another of my first initiatives was establishing the **Neighborhood Program**. After doorbelling throughout the city, it became clear that we needed an incentive to get

to know each other – for personal safety, maintenance and beautification, and simply for fun.

Thanks to the leadership of Toni Azzola, we now have **31 neighborhood councils**. They've completed dozens of beautification projects, established Community Block Watches, created tourism attractions with historic home tours, held neighborhood family picnics, and serve on city boards and commissions. The Councils help us – city government – stay more closely in tune with those we serve.

The role and opportunity for neighborhood councils has taken on a new urgency in light of world events and our growing population. How can we help people feel at home if they experience harassment or do not feel safe?

That is why in February, Council President Bill Boyce and I proclaimed - **Kent as a Welcoming City**. While Kent is not a sanctuary city, everyone, no matter one's race, religion, immigration status, sexual orientation, etc. is welcome to call Kent home.

Neighborhood councils can help neighbors learn the truth about people's different cultures, and can share in traditions and sampling flavors from around the world.

Our residents have a cultural fluency and a worldwide perspective so critical in today's global economy. An example is Seattle Chef, **Lisa Nakamura**, formerly of Napa's famed French Laundry, who combined her talents to help break down barriers at **Ubuntu Street Café**. At **Project Feast** in Titusville Station in downtown Kent, her hands-on program is helping immigrants and refugees learn the ins and outs of the restaurant business as they make food from their native countries.

Our new **Cultural Communities Board** is eager to hold public forums and conversations around the many cultures and ethnicities among us.

Join me in recognizing the Cultural Communities Board chair, **Satwinder Kaur**.

As I said at the beginning, this has been quite a journey, but I have not walked it alone. You have a great team of people working for you, committed to humble service for the public's good.

It takes special characteristics to manage a political body such as the city, to stay on top of everything going on while bridging the legislative branch with the executive.

Our CAO, **Derek Matheson**, provides wisdom and stability as we advance the people's business.

And **Michelle Wilmot**, our Communications Manager – thank you for simplifying-the-complex so our complicated government processes are easier for our residents and customers to understand.

As you know, we are only as good as what we do, as those around us support. I could've imagined no better companion in my mayor's journey than **Patrick Briggs**, my executive assistant.

He knows me – so well. Patrick, thank you for organizing my life, for your insights, and providing the oft-needed humor so necessary when dealing with the mundane to the wildly dramatic situations we have been presented during these past 11 years.

It has been a privilege to live my dream of being your mayor. As I transition the reigns of authority and responsibility over to the next mayor in nine months, I hope that my efforts have helped you realize your dreams.

This is your city. Thank you.