

**Great Lakes Restoration Conference
Grand Rapids, MI
September 9, 2005
Hon. George K. Heartwell, Mayor**

It's up to cities to save the world.

I know, that sounds a little overblown. You're thinking, here's an arrogant mayor with an oversized ego...and a messiah complex to boot!

But think about it: given the abandonment of fundamental environmental values by the federal administration, it may not be too much of an exaggeration to say that "it's up to cities to save the world."

In July, 46 mayors gathered in Sundance, Utah, to address the threat to the globe posed by greenhouse gas emissions. While the collective egos there may have rivaled the towering mountains of the Wasatch Range around us, the magnitude of the challenge ahead made us all appear ant-like, painfully aware of our own limitations.

But here was Greg Nickels, mayor of Seattle. Mayor Nickels was so incensed at the abandonment of the Kyoto Protocols by President Bush that he launched an initiative of cities to pledge ourselves to reducing greenhouse gasses using a covenant that mirrors Kyoto. Grand Rapids was the 168th city to sign on. To date there are 177 cities which have said, in effect, "Mr. President, you may not care, but we do!"

And here was Richard Daley, mayor of Chicago who, frustrated at the pace of efforts to protect water quantity and quality, formed the Great Lakes Cities Initiative, led by David Ulrich who is here

today. Grand Rapids was the first inland city in the Great Lakes basin to join the initiative and I am proud to have represented the Great Lakes Mayors at the Michigan Public Hearings on the Great Lake Lakes Covenant and Agreement and to be signatory to the Great Lakes Collaborative Agreement.

And here was John Hickenlooper, Mayor of Denver, whose commitment to public transportation rivals that of any mayor in America; and David Cieslewicz, Mayor of Madison, Wisconsin, whose innovative sustainability initiative has caught the attention of mayors all over the country; and Peter Clavell, Mayor of Burlington, Vermont, whose agenda includes some of the most aggressive environmental protection measures found anywhere.

Awed as I was to be among these luminaries, I soon discovered that Grand Rapids is far from being the little sister among cities committed to environmental stewardship. Consider the following:

- Over a two-decade period Grand Rapids will invest over \$350 million, that is \$1,750 for every man, woman and child (and a few dogs and cats!) living within our borders, to improve Grand River water quality through combined sewer separation.
- We are well on our way to achieving a goal I established of satisfying 20% of our municipal power needs through the purchase or generation of renewable resource electric power by the year 2008.
- We are removing toxics from our environment. We recently abandoned the 70 year history of wastewater treatment with chlorine and replaced it with treatment by ultra-violet light. We have established an aggressive program to remove the hazard of lead in low-income households, and we have taken on the threat of mercury contamination.

- Grand Rapids has a rich history in the construction of sustainable and energy efficient buildings. On a springtime visit to Grand Rapids, Rick Fedrizzi, President of the US Greenbuilding Council stated that Grand Rapids has more LEED certified buildings per capita than any other US city.
- Our recent establishment of Sustainable Community Partnership between the City, our Grand Rapids Public Schools, Grand Valley State University, Aquinas College and Grand Rapids Community College – funded by Peter Wege – is a model for the country. As I presented our partnership to the mayors at Sundance light bulbs went on: few cities had thought to engage their higher education community in developing sustainability plans. Our process will involve the co-development of five individual sustainability plans with indicators using a common template and shared evaluation, accountability and reporting mechanisms.

Now in light of what I've just described, consider that the federal Administration has, in addition to abandoning Kyoto, pushed forward to permit drilling, mining and cutting on federal lands – including sensitive wildlife areas, adopted an energy policy that emphasizes fossil fuel consumption and coal-generated power production, established a standard for mercury that permit even greater concentrations than we presently have, reduced funding for combined sewer separation by municipal sewage treatment facilities, taken a hands-off posture on aquatic nuisance species and wetland protection and generally sacrificed environmental regulation in the remote hope of benefiting business.

So I say again: It's up to the cities to save the world!

Greenhouse gasses will be reduced because mayors commit to reduce them. Water quality will improve because mayors commit to improve it. Contaminated soils will be remediated and homes will be purged of heavy metals that threaten children's health because mayors say "ENOUGH!" and commit to eliminate these toxic hazards.

Mayors will do it! One mayor here and one mayor there. It doesn't take everyone getting on the bandwagon at the same time. Suddenly citizens will be demanding improved water, air and soil quality and electing mayors who pledge to direct resources to this end.

Malcom Gladwell, author of Tipping Point, argues that "little changes have big effects" and that the accumulation of little changes can bring about massive shifts of consciousness...not gradually over time, but suddenly in one dramatic moment. Gladwell also wrote:

"...to bring about a fundamental change in people's belief and behavior, a change that would persist and serve as an example to others, you need to create a community around them, where those new beliefs could be practiced and expressed and nurtured."

Where does this happen better than in cities where the power of ideas can change behaviors overnight? A small band of water quality advocates led by a vocal mayor begin to challenge the status quo, change the context, and suddenly "save our river" becomes everybody's cry.

And where better than cities to create a community of practice that reaffirms the correctness of the original impulse to protect water quality and sustains the mass understanding of the importance of "our river"?

So what is my advice to you who are playing on the national stage?

- Is it to abandon efforts to convince the White House and the Congress to invest in clean water and clean air?
Certainly not!
- Is it to encourage you to redirect resources from the federal to the local (or even the state level)? No, no, no!

But I want to say to you nation-striders, you big-picture advocates that this President is not going to save the world, and this Congress is not going to save the world...

It's up to cities to save the world. Mayors will save the world!

Work with the mayors!

After I was elected mayor of Grand Rapids I asked the West Michigan Environmental Action Council to assemble a high-level advisory council of environmental leaders to help me develop – and promote – my environmental agenda.

This group of 35 leaders has been meeting monthly for nearly two years and the energy level among them only grows. I brought an interest in the environment to office but meeting with this group monthly for nearly two years has taken my interest and converted it to a passion.

We feed on each other. They have a champion for environmental issues...and I have a team of experts to educate me, help shape and promote my environmental agenda, and hold me accountable for results. The product of this partnership is that little old Grand Rapids, Michigan, is recognized as a leader in the nation on environmental sustainability.

Each of you lives in – or near – a city. Maybe your mayor already gets it. Maybe your mayor is Daley, or Hickenlooper, or Nickels, or Clavell. Lucky for you! Take advantage of your mayor's prominence on the national stage. But maybe your mayor is struggling. Maybe she can't figure out how to grow her economy and yet remain environmentally sensitive. Or maybe his triple bottom line is drilling, mining and timbering yet on a late May evening he slips into the river with a fly rod just as the gray drake spinner drop begins and the hungry rainbows dimple the surface.

Anyone who lives well, who catches his breath at the beauty of a Great Lakes sunset or tunes her soul to the whisper of wind through the boughs of a 100 year old white pine; anyone who measures himself against the incomparable magnitude of the western mountains and canyons and comes up short...that mayor is ripe for the picking, ready to join the legions who line up to save the world.

I am grateful for the commitment of my Congressman Vern Ehlers to Great Lakes restoration.

I am grateful that the Administration has pledged its efforts to this Great Lakes Collaborative and I look forward to the fulfillment of promises made by the Administration to clean and protect the Great Lakes.

But cities will save the world. And mayors will continue to guide their cities. Help the mayors of America to guide our cities toward a holistic vision of environmental sustainability, social equity and economic integrity.

Then stand back and watch; and be amazed.