

Committee of the Whole (2) Report

DATE: Tuesday, April 14, 2026

WARD(S): ALL

TITLE: ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL PARTNERSHIP – GRAND RAPIDS, 2026

FROM:

Michael Genova, Deputy City Manager, Strategic Initiatives

ACTION: DECISION

Purpose

On the advice of Ontario's Agent-General in the Northeastern United States, staff in Strategic Initiatives have evaluated the City of Grand Rapids, Michigan, as a potential cultural and economic partner capable of advancing the city's economic interests in the region. This report seeks Council's approval to enter a Cultural and Economic Partnership agreement with the City of Grand Rapids, Michigan, in accordance with City Policy 02.c.01 – Cultural and Economic Partnerships (the "**Policy**").

Report Highlights

- The Great Lakes St. Lawrence Region is a highly industrialized economic area that generates \$8 trillion in Gross Domestic Product (GDP).
- Vaughan is at the heart of the Greater Toronto Area and is deeply integrated into the Great Lakes St. Lawrence Region.
- The City of Grand Rapids, in Kent County, is the second-largest city in Michigan, with a population of 198,890 as of the 2023 Census.
- To help Vaughan's companies connect to the global supply chain and diversify their markets, Vaughan's Economic Development department works with economic development partners to facilitate access to target geographies.
- Grand Rapids has been identified, with the help of Ontario's Agent-General in Chicago, as a partner for Vaughan in the heart of the Great Lakes St. Lawrence Region.

Report Highlights continued

- The establishment of a formal partnership aligns with the City of Vaughan’s existing Cultural and Economic Partnership Policy.
- Since the spring of 2024, staff have been working to advance a partnership with Grand Rapids. The partnership has passed a series of milestones, including staff-led delegations, meetings between City Managers and the cities’ respective Mayors, and it has received endorsement from Grand Rapids Sister Cities International.
- The City of Grand Rapids Council has formally approved a partnership with the City of Vaughan. This report will reciprocate approval and enable staff to finalize a partnership workplan.
- Cross-border partnerships in the Great Lakes St. Lawrence Region are key drivers of collaboration and a best practice across North America.

Recommendations

1. That Council approve entering into a Cultural and Economic Partnership agreement with the City of Grand Rapids (the "**Agreement**"), and authorize the Mayor and City Clerk to execute the Agreement on behalf of the City, in a form satisfactory to the City Solicitor (or designate) and content satisfactory to the Deputy City Manager, Strategic Initiatives (or designate), in accordance with the Policy, together with any ancillary, related or supplemental documents as may be necessary or desirable in connection with the Agreement;
2. That Council direct Strategic Initiatives staff to develop the Work Plan Addenda contemplated by the Agreement, setting out activities, measures, responsibilities, budget considerations, designated contacts and other matters deemed appropriate under the Policy, in a form satisfactory to the City Solicitor (or designate) and content satisfactory to the Deputy City Manager, Strategic Initiatives (or designate), in accordance with the Policy; and
3. That staff report annually to Council on activities, outcomes and progress under the Agreement and any Work Plan Addenda, consistent with Policy.

Background

The Great Lakes St. Lawrence Region is a highly industrialized economic area that generates \$8 trillion in Gross Domestic Product.¹

The Great Lakes and St. Lawrence regional supply chain accounts for more than 50 per cent of Canada’s cross-border merchandise trade. This trade spans several advanced manufacturing and logistics sectors, including automotive, food processing, construction, mineral processing and machinery development.

¹ See: Great Lakes St. Lawrence Cities Initiative: <https://glslcities.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Cities-Initiative-CA-Resolution-February-6-2025-GLSL-Strong-1.pdf>

Vaughan is at the heart of the Greater Toronto Area and is deeply integrated into the Great Lakes St. Lawrence Region.

Vaughan is York Region's largest economy and accounted for 47 per cent of York Region's total exports in 2019. Vaughan generated \$27.6 billion in real GDP in 2024 and achieved an average annual growth rate of 2.33 per cent between 2015 and 2024. Vaughan's economy is highly diversified, with strong groups of companies in the automotive sector, supply chain and logistics, construction and building materials, medical technology, and food processing, among others.

To future-proof the economy, the City has undertaken a series of major initiatives over the past few years. These include:

- Advancing a destination for the development of the future of healthcare at the Vaughan Healthcare Centre Precinct in partnership with Mackenzie Health, York University and ventureLAB.
- Becoming a site for municipally tested automobility innovation in partnership with the Ontario Vehicle Innovation Network and the Ontario Centre of Innovation.
- Incentivizing complete community development through a Community and Economic Development Fund to attract office and neighbourhood amenities like grocery stores, retail and cultural and knowledge economy spaces.
- Supporting strategic investments through an Investment Concierge service.

The City of Grand Rapids, in Kent County, is the second-largest city in Michigan, with a population of 198,890 as of the 2023 Census.

Like Vaughan, Grand Rapids is an economic leader in its region. The city generates a nominal GDP of \$82.3 billion, supported by a diversified economy led by advanced manufacturing and industrial production.

Grand Rapids boasts several economic and cultural assets. These include:

- The Grand Rapids Smart Zone to support innovation, incubation, and commercialization.
- A "Medical Mile" anchored by healthcare, research, and educational institutions.
- The Michigan Manufacturing Technology Center-West, which supports small- and medium-sized manufacturers and is a historical hub for furniture manufacturing.
- An international soft-landing program called the Right Place to help companies work with the local ecosystem and help them integrate into the supply chain.
- Home to major industries and corporations in the manufacturing, health sciences, IT and food processing sectors, such as Steelcase, Bissell and Meijer.

Complementing these economic and cultural assets, Grand Rapids is actively advancing transformational city-building and infrastructure investments that integrate

mobility, housing and placemaking to support its sustained economic growth. These include the:

- Grand Rapids Soccer Stadium to support sport tourism and downtown development.
- Michigan State University's MSU Innovation Center Campus expansion to support knowledge-based economy growth and talent development.
- Market Avenue Gateway as a comprehensive vision for future development on the east bank of the Grand River to connect with and serve diverse communities.
- Gerald R. Ford International Airport to support logistics, business travel and export connectivity.
- Active downtown residential development and public-private partnerships to support affordable housing.
- The development of a 14,000-seat outdoor amphitheatre contributing to year-round programming, tourism and talent attraction.

To help Vaughan's companies connect to the global supply chain and diversify their markets, Vaughan's Economic Development department works with economic development partners to facilitate access to target geographies.

Under the leadership of the federal and provincial governments, Vaughan has undertaken a series of initiatives since 2022 to enhance connectivity to Europe and Asia.

In each trade area, specific markets have emerged as gateway economies for Vaughan. For example, Italy has been identified as a gateway to the European market, and Taiwan and the Philippines are gateways to Asia and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations region.

To support our companies and grow our economy in the Great Lakes St. Lawrence Region, staff have sought a partner in the Midwest and Northeastern U.S. to focus activities. Vaughan's ongoing participation in the Great Lakes St. Lawrence Cities' Initiative is an example of the City's engagement with this region.

Previous Reports/Authority

[INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC RELATIONS – 2025 RECAP AND 2026 ACTIVITIES](#)
Committee of the Whole (1) Report, January 26, 2026.

[PROGRESS UPDATE: GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN SISTER CITY AGREEMENT](#),
Intergovernmental Relations Sub Committee, October 6, 2025.

[INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC RELATIONS 2025 – EARLY 2026 ACTIVITIES](#),
Committee of the Whole (2) Report, June 17, 2025

[INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC RELATIONS – ITALY 2024 – SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS](#), Committee of the Whole (2) Report, September 17, 2024.

[VAUGHAN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ACTION PLAN, 2024-27](#), Committee of the Whole (Working Session) Report, April 10, 2024.

[CITY OF VAUGHAN – CORPORATE POLICY - CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIPS](#), January 21, 2024.

Analysis and Options

Grand Rapids has been identified, with the help of Ontario’s Agent-General in Chicago, as a partner for Vaughan in the heart of the Great Lakes St. Lawrence Region.

Because of its geographic proximity, sectoral alignment and commitment to inclusive and sustainable cultural and economic development, Grand Rapids was recommended as a partner by, amongst others, Ontario’s Agent-General in the region.

The assessment of this partnership has been supported by Grand Rapids Sister City International, a non-profit organization established by the City of Grand Rapids to administer and foster relationships with jurisdictions worldwide. Grand Rapids Sister Cities International is part of the Sister Cities International network, which has promoted more than 1,200 relationships between 780 U.S. cities and cities in 86 other countries.

The City of Grand Rapids’ deep commitment to public art and culture, embedded within a strong focus on building diverse and inclusive communities, mirrors Vaughan’s values and strategic objectives. This alignment is reflected in the City of Vaughan’s ongoing investment in cultural infrastructure, including the McMichael’s Canadian Art Collection and the future of the Cultural and Performing Arts Centre.

The City of Grand Rapids’ investments in transformational projects that integrate cultural infrastructure and city-building vision with economic development present a strong opportunity for knowledge exchange with Vaughan, particularly as the City advances the development of the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre.

The City of Grand Rapids’ clusters in Life Sciences and MedTech, driven by its unique approach to the Medical Mile Cluster, align closely with the City of Vaughan’s vision for the Vaughan Health Care Precinct. This alignment presents a unique opportunity for cross-border collaboration and knowledge exchange, particularly as Vaughan continues to develop its own life sciences ecosystem. Both cities share core economic priorities in advanced manufacturing, healthcare and food processing, creating a solid foundation for mutually beneficial partnerships and innovative initiatives.

Grand Rapids’ strong manufacturing ecosystem, supported by the Michigan Manufacturing Technology Center-West, aligns closely with Vaughan’s strong advanced

manufacturing sector, creating a strategic opportunity for cross-border collaboration focused on technology adoption and supply chain integration to support export readiness in both cities.

The City of Grand Rapids' investments in transformational projects that integrate cultural and city-building goals with economic development present a strong opportunity for knowledge exchange with Vaughan.

Shared strengths across industries provide a strong foundation for collaboration, including business-to-business engagement and supplier matchmaking between companies in both cities.

The establishment of a formal partnership aligns with the City of Vaughan's existing Cultural and Economic Partnership Policy.

Consistent with the City's mandate on cultural partnerships, this Agreement would promote cultural diversity, strengthen bridges of mutual understanding and respect, and facilitate collaboration, providing local cultural organizations with the opportunity to act as cultural ambassadors. It also creates opportunities to enhance tourism while advancing international engagement.

From an economic perspective, the proposed partnership supports the City's economic development objectives by encouraging collaboration and the exchange of best practices, enabling joint initiatives, attracting investment into the City and promoting export development. Collectively, these outcomes would enhance the City's economic and business profile and increase economic development opportunities, supply chain integration and market access for Vaughan businesses and industry associations.

Since the spring of 2024, staff have been working to advance a partnership with Grand Rapids. The partnership has passed a series of milestones, including staff-led delegations, meetings between City Managers and the Cities' respective Mayors, and it has received endorsement from Grand Rapids Sister Cities International.

Progress made to date:

- **Spring 2024:** The City of Vaughan and the City of Grand Rapids were identified as potential partners by Ontario's Agent-General and the City of Grand Rapids Sister City International.
- **Summer/fall 2024:** Initial meetings were held between staff in Grand Rapids and Vaughan. Grand Rapids Sister Cities International formed a local Vaughan Inquiry Committee and initiated preliminary conversations with the City of Vaughan's Economic Development department.
- **April 2025:** Vaughan hosted a staff delegation led by Grand Rapids' City Manager, Mark Washington. City Manager Zoran Postic and City Manager Washington met to discuss city-building priorities.

- **June 2025:** Council adopted an international plan of activities that included the continued work towards a partnership.
- **June 2025:** A delegation from Vaughan, led by Deputy City Manager, Strategic Initiatives, Michael Genova, visited Grand Rapids.
- **July 2025:** Mayor Steven Del Duca and Mayor David LaGrand met at the City of Vaughan.
- **October 2025:** Vaughan's Intergovernmental Relations Sub-Committee received an update on Grand Rapids.
- **January 27, 2026:** Grand Rapids Sister Cities International's leadership presented an overview of next steps to the City Commission in Grand Rapids.
- **February 10, 2026:** Deputy City Manager Genova presented to the City Commission and the Mayor in Grand Rapids Council, followed by the Commission's vote in favour of expanding the Sister City program to the City of Vaughan, adding Vaughan as the seventh sister city of Grand Rapids and the first in Canada.

The City of Grand Rapids Council has formally approved a partnership with the City of Vaughan. This report will reciprocate approval and enable staff to finalize a partnership workplan.

Following approval of the partnership with Vaughan by Grand Rapids' Council, a staff delegation from Grand Rapids is joining the April 14, 2026, Committee of the Whole (2) meeting to provide support for the future partnership.

If Vaughan Council approves this report, a signing ceremony will be held in Vaughan in May. Following the signing, staff will finalize a workplan that may include:

- An annual business mission to encourage cross-border trade.
- The creation of a Grand Rapids-Vaughan economic gateway program.
- A staff-led partnership working group to facilitate:
 - Cross-border learning in city building.
 - Public art celebrations, including a future ARTonBOXES (Vaughan) activation and an on the SLATE exhibition, celebrating the partnership.
 - Talent and cultural exchange, internship opportunities or short-term workforce exchanges to support skills development (e.g., in the food or culinary sector).

Financial Impact

N/A

Operational Impact

All activities are accounted for through the Economic Development department's action plan.

Broader Regional Impacts/Considerations

Cross-border partnerships in the Great Lakes St. Lawrence Region are key drivers of collaboration and a best practice across North America.

While Grand Rapids does not currently have a formal Sister City relationship with an Ontario municipality, Michigan and Ontario have a long-standing relationship. This is enhanced by active partnerships between Ontario and Quebec municipalities and various U.S. partners in the region. These include:

- Kingston, Ontario, and Syracuse, New York
- Barrie, Ontario, and Saginaw, Michigan
- Toronto, Ontario, and Chicago, Illinois
- Quebec City, Quebec, and Albany, New York
- Windsor, Ontario, and Detroit, Michigan

Conclusion

Establishing structured cross-border municipal relationships is integral to advancing the City's municipal economic development strategy, reinforcing integrated regional economies and strengthening supply chain connectivity and resiliency. This approach is reflected through frameworks such as the Kingston-Syracuse Pathway, the Windsor-Detroit cross-border manufacturing and automotive partnership, and the Toronto-Chicago Sister-City collaboration model.

Advancing a similar Sister-City relationship supports Vaughan's active participation in the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative. It enables the City to serve its business community by expanding market reach, facilitating key partnerships and fostering meaningful exchanges.

For more information, please contact Raphel Costa, Director of Economic Development.

Attachments

N/A

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