We are here tonight to celebrate a year of wins and look forward with hope to the future.  The businesses on Concession Street have demonstrated that they are responsible, strong, imaginative and adaptive during the pandemic.  We are so proud of you.

The Concession BIA, beyond promoting and beautifying the area is mandated to make our street safer and act as a hub of communication.  Cristina has done an amazing job developing our Covid library, sharing provincial and municipal guidelines as well as grants and opportunities throughout the COVID pandemic. From billboards to TV spots to radio interviews to filming with social media experts the BIA has done everything to keep Concession Street in the minds and hearts of those in Hamilton.

As stewards of the neighbourhood we have a responsibility to be good citizens and prioritize communal wellness.  We know that science-based guidelines protect ourselves and others.  A good leader shields and sacrifices, they listen to those with expertise, in short, they care and that care manifests in actionable ways.  We are so grateful to the businesses that comply with public health orders.  We appreciate the struggle of challenging and changing mandates.  We thank you for safe-guarding our community's health, well-being and local economy.  You're all warriors.

Safety is also about who feels welcome and valued on our street.  To that end I am so proud of our new Black History Audio Tour that celebrates the roots of our street, brings to life some notable figures of Little Africa, and concludes at our gorgeous, important and affirming Black Lives Matter mural.  Created by Tottering Biped Theatre and written by Hamilton poet, Klyde Broox, this piece explores the history of early Black settlement on the mountain, and invites us to consider how stories – and, more importantly – whose stories are told, shared, and remembered.  Hamilton is unfortunately the hate crime capital of the country. We cannot turn away from inconvenient, awful or uncomfortable truths.  Black History in Hamilton has traditionally been shared with a colonial lense, one that deliberately distorts and erases the contributions of Black Hamiltonians. I am elated we are a small part of undoing this complex, current and nefarious harm.  We must commit to this work with open hearts and steadfast determination.  We mustn't be deterred by hardship, unease, discomfort or objections rooted in oppression and ego.  Black Lives Matter is not a political cry, it is a humanitarian effort and human rights action.

2021 also saw the BIA commissioning a beautiful Woodland-style mural that honors the Seven Grandfather Teachings from Kyle Joedicke, who is Cayuga from Six Nations of the Grand River with the Turtle Clan. The mural has attracted loving attention from our community members and also been lauded in the press, most notably by Canada's national broadcaster, the CBC.  The Grandfather Teachings enlighten us on moral, community guidelines, a timely gift for all of us.  The Beaver represents Wisdom.  He cherishes knowledge.  His actions are environmentally friendly and sustainable. The Eagle represents Love.  The Eagle is strong, has great perspective and is peaceful.  The Buffalo represents Respect.  He gives everything of himself to sustain the community. He is not wasteful or hurtful.  He lives honorably.  The Bear represents Courage.  Bravery is doing what is right, facing yourself earnestly, protecting those in your charge, and not letting fear dictate your course of action.  Honestly is represented by The Sabe.  The Sabe is a reminder for us to live in harmony with nature, to be natural and true to ourselves, as we were created.  The Wolf represents Humility.  The Wolf reminds us to honour our pack, to live selflessly, to shy from arrogance and ego.  Truth is represented by The Turtle.  One of the oldest animals on our planet.  The Turtle is meticulous and deliberate.  He values not just the destination but also the journey.  He doesn't judge the way others walk their path.  He carries the lessons of life on his back.  We are honored to have this installation that champions Wisdom, Love, Respect, Courage, Honesty, Humility and Truth as our community values.

Our street murals also appeared on our limited edition puzzle runs! They were so successful we are already on our second run.  We got to give the artists a little bonus, as well as support local charity while engaging our community.

2021 saw us offering up 10 Virtually Sidewalk Sounds concerts filmed at The Zoetic by Hamilton Rising.  Streaming the show allowed us to responsibly and accessibly connect with our community. We focused on creating an inclusive, diverse and fabulous line-up of artists so that all of our neighbours can see themselves represented on stage.  We saw greater connection, innovation, inspiration and creativity than ever before.

This year we launched Fall For Concession our first in person event series since the pandemic began.  We are excited to continue to explore how we can elevate these experiences in the coming year.

While preparing this speech I found a clipping from The Spectator in July 1936 describing our humble beginnings

"Hamilton Mountain in pioneer days was an unbroken forest, with Concession Street cutting through it no wider than a cow-path. Later the cow-path became a road, lined on both sides by stump fences.  Later still it became a privately owned stone road, with toll-gates at intervals, so that those who used it might contribute to its upkeep. All other concession roads were left in a natural state and it was at this time that "Barton mud" gained it uneviable reputation."

In these times when we feel frustrated or like progress has been impeded or sabotagued perhaps we should reflect back to our cow-path origins and remember how far we've come.  Or just be grateful we're not adorned and dripping in Barton mud.

The Concession BIA is a beautiful community that cares deeply for one another.  We are strong and resilient and we will continue to thrive together guided by both wisdom and heart.