

Mayor's New Year's speech 2026 – Municipality Wageningen

(The spoken word is leading)

Because peace is fragile.

Because freedom is not something we can take for granted.

Because together we can make a difference.

Every year, these powerful words resound on 5 Mei Plein during the commemoration of the capitulations, in our City of Liberation.

And it is no coincidence that these words are uttered by one of our city's young residents. In 2025, at the commemoration of 80 years of liberation in the Netherlands, they were spoken by our previous Children's Mayor, Zoëy Erkelens.

Perhaps some people would have shrugged their shoulders a few years ago.

Is peace really fragile? Isn't freedom something we can take for granted?

Can we even make a difference?

Sometimes things move fast: today, this message echoes not just from the past, but as a warning from the future. It is not only sounding from afar, but also coming close. This message from our youth, together with the veterans who fought for our freedom, or who were active in peacekeeping operations. The difference-makers then and now.

Being able to make a difference together. This is not just about war and peace.

It is about the why of liberation and peace: the imperative to protect our democracy and rule of law, our prosperity and well-being, our earth and nature. Protect that which is vulnerable.

How can we make a difference together?

You just heard in the film clear advice from our young people. They may not yet be allowed to vote in the municipal elections on Wednesday 18 March here in Wageningen, or elsewhere in the Netherlands.

But those elections are about their future. About the city they will soon be living in, the world they will soon be living in.

It is always a privilege for me as Mayor to speak to children, young people and young adults, schoolchildren and students, about what is on their minds.

About their hopes and expectations. About the future they imagine for themselves. About how they are making a difference.

One of my personal annual highlights is interviewing candidates for the position of Children's Mayor. The current Children's Mayor and I do this together, so two years ago I did it with Zoëy, and last year with Max. You just saw Max in the film.

What wise answers we get to all our questions then. And what a tough choice out of all these candidates ... this year Eva was appointed the new Deputy Mayor. Max and Eva have had many wonderful experiences together over the past six months. And they have set goals. For example about room for play in our city. They talk about it with great passion.

Another highlight is the annual Children's Question Time. It was officially organised for the second time this year at the initiative of Councillor Barbara Pescadina, with help from the Registry and many enthusiastic councillors and supporting council members, the aldermen and, of course, Max and Eva.

The aldermen and councillors usually have an answer ready for every question when we meet with the city council, but during Children's Question Time, the room sometimes falls silent when children ask a question ... about maintenance of schools and playgrounds, for example, or safety on the way to school.

Every year, we award youth ribbons in Wageningen; in 2025, this award went to Kasper, Fosse, and Nathan. Kasper raised €5500 for Metakids by cycling. Eighty kilometres to the Zwolle edition of SeriousRequest. On his tricycle, because he is still in the process of recovering himself. Fosse enthusiastically organised a school festival and an open stage, arranged sponsors for the school garden, and put on a Halloween party. And Nathan composes his own music. He also performs regularly in the city, for example at the Kindermuziekstraatdag (Children's Music Street Day) and the LEEFfestival (Street Theatre Festival). His music brings people together and often brings smiles, and sometimes even spontaneous dancing.

This is the new generation of residents of our city.

There is a reason why in our city council, the 'Voice of the Future' chair made by children from Thuis Wageningen is present at every council meeting. It is there so that we do not forget the children's voices when we debate and decide on the future of Wageningen. And the chair is well looked after: Councillor Bart Rozemeijer immediately repaired it at the end of last year when a part came loose.

When we vote for a new municipal council on 18 March, I hope we remember the advice and actions of our children and young people. We need to this to be able to make a difference as Wageningen.

When I look at international and national politics, I see people who are far too preoccupied with the craze of the moment. The law of the strongest, gaining power and profit at the expense of others. It may be the harsh reality of this moment in history, but with that attitude, we are certainly not going to make a difference.

Hopefully, a new administration will manage to break with this trend.

A recent opinion by the former Managing Director of ASML Peter Wennink commissioned by the Minister of Economic Affairs shows what is needed to make long-term investments to move our country forward. This requires making tough choices when it comes to nature and nitrogen, housing and infrastructure, but above all science and innovation. Wageningen and Food Valley with Wageningen University & Research and all the companies and knowledge institutions that surround it are mentioned in this opinion paper as one of the focal points where the future of our country is created and which should be strengthened.

That is how we make a difference together in Wageningen.

To effectively tackle the problems facing our country, we do not want politicians who are out to win the popularity contest. Both nationally and locally, many of the issues we now face can only be solved through long-term goals, focus on implementation, and sticking to decisions once they are made.

In The Hague, cabinets are now succeeding each other so fast that it is impossible to keep up. By comparison, local politics is a beacon of stability. Unless things take a very strange turn, and as Mayor, that is not my expectation ..., this municipal executive will sit out its full four-year term with all aldermen on board. And the average time a councillor is active in Wageningen is five years. This is different from the situation in other municipalities.

Although a council term of four years is far too short to address all issues and seize all opportunities, we in Wageningen show that together we can make a difference.

With a progressive income security policy that allows our most vulnerable residents to be best served, with the building of affordable housing for our residents, with a revamped *bblthk* (one of the best-attended libraries in the country!), with humane asylum for refugees, with the beautiful greening of our city centre, with last year's national commemoration of 80 years of freedom.

We also took a critical look at ourselves with a survey of our governing capacity, in which we scored excellent as a city. We punch above our weight as a city, thanks largely to the deployment of so much ambition and engagement from residents, organisations and businesses, and the staff at the City Hall, the city depot, and the Startpunt Wageningen.

These are just a few examples, but they reflect how we can make a difference together.

Not everything can be accomplished in four years, so there is plenty to work on in the coming period.

Which brings me to one of the lessons from the governance study: we have to make tough choices and not everything can be done at the same time. Even though we often want to in our city and also at the City Hall.

There is nothing wrong with ambition, I say as Mayor, but one has to be realistic.

The atmosphere and mutual cooperation in Wageningen is something to be cherished. At the same time, I see the harshness of the national political climate affecting the municipalities around us, and ourselves. When it comes to the emergency accommodation or refugees, there are municipal councils in our province where local politicians have to make decisions while being threatened. And our city is also affected when threatening or insulting language is hurled at national and local politicians in comments on 'social media'.

Yes, this happens even here in Wageningen. As Mayor, it not only shocks me, I also want us to do something about it.

With all the political parties in our city, I want to agree on one thing: despite our political differences, we will stand together against hate politics and for a debate motivated by collaboration and grounded in the content. It's okay to clash about the content; there's nothing wrong with that. And we call the people in our city out when they cross a boundary.

I ask you all to do this. In this, too, we can make a difference together.

Back to the advice of Wageningen's children and young people. They are all optimistic. While we adults can become quite gloomy from all the podcasts, talk shows and newspaper articles we consume daily, it is precisely this optimism that we need.

Our optimism is also fed when we are enriched by art, sports, culture and nature. Enjoy the sculptures at the Depot, or an evening at the Junushoff, an exciting korfbal match at KV, or a walk through the Binnenveldse Hooilanden.

Wageningen is a vibrant city with plenty of arts, culture and nature on offer, mostly made possible by volunteers. Their commitment is invaluable.

Tonight we want to take all that and bring it inwards, which also suits the Junushoff. We will be listening to one of the highlights of Woetstok 2025: the Riverstreetband. With Seppe, who we saw last in the film just now, as the youngest musician. I hope we can enjoy this together in a moment.

I am happy to toast the new year with the band and with you.

Yes, peace is fragile and freedom cannot be taken for granted. But I do believe that here in Wageningen, together, we can make a difference. Thanks to all our residents who help each other when necessary, thanks to entrepreneurs who energetically work together, thanks to the innovation of our university, knowledge institutions and companies, thanks to our cultural sector and our sports clubs, thanks to our emergency services, thanks to our politicians who are willing to take responsibility.

Let us together pledge to continue to do all this with confidence and optimism in 2026.

Let's continue to make a difference together in 2026!