

Mayor's State of the City
Wednesday, May 13, 2008
Noon – SHAW Conference
CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Thank you Patrick.

- Council Colleagues
- Regional Mayors and MLAs
- Ladies and Gentlemen

This is the second time my state of the city address is being used to set a theme at the start of a new Council term.

And I have to say that I have always enjoyed doing these speeches, ever since the first state of the city where I got to say "crap" and was then applauded.

I was still pretty new at this job so I thought, "wow, that's what the Mayor can do."

Sadly, I soon came to realize it wasn't true. As Mayor I get told to watch my words by a much wider group of people than ever before.

But despite that setback, this podium has proven to be a good place to spark discussion and set expectations.

It was here that one word touched off a bigger discussion across the city.

And helped to bring to the forefront a strong, latent desire to expect and demand more in terms of designing better, and in calls for cleaner streets and better general upkeep.

And expectations have stayed high in terms of making sure our city puts its best face forward for our citizens and visitors everyday.

Every bit of that expectation was heard and felt at City Hall.

And it changed priorities.

That process started right here.

You know, as Mayor I have, been known to be less than patient.

Impatience is not something I apologize for.

Indeed, I have seen time and again that I barely keep pace with our citizens in this regard.

But as much as impatience is an asset, it is also important to recognize progress has been made.

In preparing for this speech today, I spent time reflecting on my first speech here.

And I know that as much as we saw good times ahead, we were still uncertain about our potential.

As much as we imagined challenges would come, they weren't fully in focus.

As a city we still felt the effects of years of economic uncertainty.

We hadn't dreamed any big dreams for a long time.

Three years has changed a lot.

We see it in many ways, like in the working relationship between the Mayor and Councillors. Three years ago, there wasn't one. It was unheard of that Councillors would work beyond their own wards.

We changed that.

Today whether it's Councillor Leibovici's leadership on the homeless and affordable housing files, Councillor Anderson's passion for the recreation, Ron Hayter's commitment to our Aboriginal community, Kim Krushell's efforts to inspire our youth or the fact that Don Iveson is on his way to represent Edmonton at a global environmental conference, each and every councillor has taken up one or more city wide issues.

And while all Councillors, and trust me when I say this, are very, very, very passionate ward champions, all have a city and region-wide vision.

Three years ago, our administration seemed stalled. After so many years of just getting by, we'd stopped planning bigger things or looking long-term.

Today, City Manager Al Maurer's Senior Management Team is almost entirely new and renewed and the corporation is being transformed.

But our changes pale compared to those of our city.

Three years ago, our downtown was still a little shaky.

Now when you hear about big things happening in Edmonton, you think downtown first.

It's the core of a booming region. And from the new Art Gallery of Alberta to seeing EPCOR Tower break ground, which is our first new commercial highrise in 20 years, the signs of a busy downtown are everywhere.

And this is exciting to all of us because downtown is our heart, it is our main gathering place, it is where we go to find our city's soul.

And we see Edmonton rising, along with each new commercial development, and every new piece that comes, adds to the life and livability of our city.

It's in the shopping and residences on 104 Street, in the growing momentum around the Quarters and the complimentary vision that Boyle Renaissance reinforces of our diverse and inclusive city.

Three years ago, the Bay Building was a problem with no solution.

Today Enterprise Square, is the U of A's downtown presence and home to TEC Edmonton.

Today it heralds our future potential.

Activities downtown are countless. New neighbourhoods like the Northedge are getting ready to rise. Jasper Avenue is being renewed, Railtown continues to flourish and an Edmonton-based bid for the National Portrait Gallery looks so attractive.

I am even told there has even been some quiet talk about a possible downtown arena.

But the changes are not just downtown.

Councillors Sloan and Leibovici are focused on Stony Plain Road's potential and Councillors Gibbons and Caterina are moving Alberta Avenue and Fort Road forward with just as much energy as Councillors Batty and Henderson are dedicating to downtown and the Quarters.

And just like it's happening in neighbourhoods all across the city like in Century Park and Strathern.

And the change is regional, at last it is regional.

Just last week I, along with 24 other regional mayors and reeves attended the first-ever meeting of a new, empowered regional Board.

And we are all now getting down to work on a new regional plan, one which our Premier is expecting by March 31, 2009.

Three years ago we talked a lot about Edmonton's need to improve its image.

Today we can reflect on recent journeys onto the world stage during the World's Masters Games, the LPGA, the World Cup Triathlon and the Champ Car Series, and through a fabulous year as Canada's Cultural Capital.

This summer, Northlands will host our first Indy.

And this city is going to be brash enough to start to work on a bid for the 2017 World's Fair, a major effort that has the potential to galvanize our whole community and country during Canada's 150th birthday year.

Three years ago, we were just starting to think of how much work was needed on our core structures.

And while our to-do list is still unacceptably long, it's only really been in the last three years that we've even started to work on jobs that piled up over 30 years.

Because only in the last three years have major investments from the Province and Ottawa allowed us to move forward.

And the pay off has been quick. This year, the LRT will arrive at the Neil Crawford Centre, followed closely by Southgate and Century Park in 2009.

The NAIT line is going to start soon, and we've finally started planning a route into Millwoods – a community that Councillors Thiele and Sohi always remind us has been patient for too long.

More than \$2 billion in three years has been spent on major structural improvements across this city, in neighbourhoods and communities, on roads and bridges on libraries and all emergency services.

And this year, if you've driven anywhere, or perhaps been stuck in traffic anywhere, it's because we're in the middle of our busiest construction season ever.

You know impatience pays off. It gets things done.

And we're going to need a lot more to tackle what's ahead.

Three years ago, we talked about a Capital City agenda, about ensuring Edmonton would act, plan and feel like a capital city again.

It's a goal that will always be relevant, but our ground has shifted over the last three years.

Today we must think regionally in every single thing we do.

We must transform our city and regional landscape into a much more compact form at a time when there is so much pressure to sprawl even further.

We know we have to work effectively with our neighbours and private sector to ensure a diversity of housing options in a region that is much less affordable than just three years ago.

And we need to plan ahead to determine where the 900,000 new people we expect by 2041 will live, work, retire, go to school and have fun.

There has never been so much pressure on our Council or those of our neighbours to make decisions with such far reaching effects.

Because the cost of failure will be too high. If we fail, opportunity will depart, so we simply cannot fail.

But things are going to change at a very fast pace.

We are going to have to find the trade-offs and the wins.

We're going to give in some areas, in order to gain in others.

And we must find the right balance to finally position this city and region to make the most of its potential, the best potential of any region in North America.

It's a tall order.

And that's what I want to focus on now, on what it's going to take, about where we are, and where we're going, and what our citizens should expect.

Thinking regionally must be our overarching theme, but there are three others that will consistently effect everything we do: the environment, fiscal capacity and a continuing, absolute, commitment to quality of life.

I'm not going to spend a lot of time in the provincial arena today but there is something that our Government has started to do that I applaud as an absolute necessity.

This is to arm ourselves with a much more effective environmental file, both in the doing and in making sure the world knows what we're doing.

Our province is showing it understands that sustaining prosperity means we must develop our resource base under an increasingly targeted and critical global microscope.

And in Edmonton, a city that benefits so much from resource development, we must think about this too.

Edmonton has a big role to play.

The Heartland region already has the base for an upgrading industry.

Our north is already the focus of a global resource development effort.

And in cooperation with this effort, our northeast industrial strategy and our regional Port Alberta strategy will be major, complimentary pieces of an effort to make this region one of the world's most important petrochemical and logistical hubs based upon the best eco-industrial principles anywhere.

The potential is huge. When the Prime Minister talks about making Canada an energy superpower, he is talking about us, our region.

Transforming resource extraction into a long-term, diverse manufacturing, logistics and transportation base is challenging under the best conditions.

But now we all must understand the new complexity that now accompanies our efforts.

It's why the work EPCOR is doing to advance clean coal and carbon sequestration is so important.

It's why we see so much research focus at our university going into efforts to reduce the impact of our vital resource industry.

But as good as industry can and will be, it will never be a zero-impact.

And as much as we can point the finger at industry, we know the bulk of environmental impact is urban and consumer-based.

Edmonton has to do its part.

The risks of getting it wrong are monumental in terms of loss of reputation, economic potential and financial sustainability.

But our biggest risk is one of legacy, we must leave future generations a region with the same potential we have been given.

Edmonton is a green city. We were making environmental choices before it was fashionable.

We have a decades-long commitment to the preservation and responsible development of our river valley, North America's largest urban parkland.

Our investments in waste management processes have helped us reduce landfill in a way most other big cities cannot imagine achieving, by 2010, 90% of our household waste will be diverted from landfill.

We see it in the water management record of EPCOR and city departments who not only protect our resource but whose innovation is helping to make industry greener.

And we see it in our citizens.

In the 90% plus participation in one of Canada's first city-wide recycling programs and in growing citizen efforts to create limits on idling, demand better building standards and even through our growing capital city clean up program.

We do well. Now we must do better.

We have the second largest footprint of any metropolitan region in Canada and this alone threatens to devalue other progress.

Because when it comes to building a financially and environmentally sustainable city it is only by building up and becoming a much more compact city that we will really have the type of impact we must.

And we need to do so much more to create that kind of city.

Like investing in LRT, but not just investing, we must build a system that will provide real sustainability benefits.

The only reason to invest in a massive expansion to our system is if it helps people leave their cars at home.

Only then is LRT a green investment.

It's not a green investment if everyone who uses the system drives to a park and ride and then jumps on, then it's really just a very expensive way of helping commuters save the cost of parking downtown.

It is a worthwhile investment if we actually, finally start to fully integrate transit plans with our overall land-use plans, and if we use it to support a more compact, more walkable city and region.

This recognition is tightly woven into the requirements of our new regional process.

But Edmonton is lagging behind.

For years we planned transportation separately from our land use planning. In fact, it was only last year that Council finally linked these processes.

The legacy of disjointed planning is very much with us still.

Catching up will require a lot of hard work and a lot of tough choices but at least the conversation has finally started.

And it's finally starting to happen in the proper context, around Transit Oriented Development, around setting density targets along LRT lines and in a way that should finally consider trading quickest and cheapest for a far superior standard of highest and best use.

Because LRT is not a bargain if it's empty.

And frankly I don't care what the routes are as long as LRT supports a more compact city, with downtown as the hub, and as long as it catches the maximum number of passengers and community development opportunities all along the way.

And I welcome our regional partners into this discussion, because LRT can be their solution too.

Transit must be tightly linked to higher density targets throughout our region.

Building up must be our goal and this Council gets that. It's why projects at 142 Street, Strathern and the Century Park have moved forward.

It's why we're going to see so much more investment in neighbourhoods like the Quarters, Alberta Avenue, Fort Road and Stony Plain Road.

It's why our downtown plan is so important, it's why things like our LRT plan can't pull people or focus away from downtown.

It's why it's important that we invest in upgrades to our mature neighbourhoods.

And it's why this must happen despite all the NIMBY debate that always rises.

Too often we hear long, eloquent arguments about why density is important but just not in "my" neighbourhood.

There is much that we can debate about the scale, scope, process and design of new density, but we cannot debate the "if" or the "where".

Every community and every regional partner must play their part.

And as we think about building a new, more compact urban environment, we can't forget to integrate a lot more thinking about more energy efficient building standards in new home and business construction.

And as the province and Ottawa come to appreciate how much impact cities can have in helping Canada meet emissions reduction targets, I hope we'll have much more discussion about incentives to promote new standards, better city plans and about the next generation of innovation that will help us to do even better.

A more green city will provide a successful base for our economic aspirations.

We can't think about our economy without thinking about our energy industry, but neither can we consider this alone.

There is so much more to Edmonton.

There is so much potential here to build upon like our incredible manufacturing sectors.

And there is so much more that is bubbling up all through our educational sector that will create the next generation of opportunities.

Our region of just over one million people consistently has North America's best rated public school systems and an incredible diversity of post secondary opportunities.

Over 150,000 people in this region attend a post-secondary school, more than 10% of our people.

We are increasingly a research centre too, with more and more investment pouring into our institutions and their potential, in turn they are gaining global reputations for their expertise and attracting more and more bright minds to our city.

This foundation, from kindergarten to graduate school represents the incredible future potential.

We already see the kind of dividends it pays.

It's in the innovations migrating into TEC Edmonton, it's in EEDC's efforts to expand activities in our research park, and it's in the incredible success that Capital Health has enjoyed in making Edmonton, Canada's health capital.

And it's in the advancements of our researchers at the U of A where the potential of our oilsands was first unlocked. And it will be here that innovations will increase its viability while lessening impact.

Our city plays an important role by investing in this potential and in working with our partners to enable new opportunities and innovations that will be so important to our future economy.

And we need to do more, with our Chamber and EEDC to galvanize our business sector and our educational institutes and build a better road map that captures our full potential.

It's important that we play this role, even though it can be financially challenging.

And there is no question that financial capacity is central to our thinking in all matters.

Our motivations in transforming our urban landscape are as much about financial sustainability as they are environmental.

I have to admit, I've had to evolve my own thinking here over the past three years as I've come to fully understand our challenges.

I know that sprawling suburban neighbourhoods offer lots of appeal. But when you start to add up the costs of serving new areas in roads, transit, libraries, fire, EMS and police, community and recreation centres, well frankly we can't keep pace.

Extending even the most basic services to new areas pulls resources and creates competition between old and new.

And when you start to layer in competition for scarce provincial dollars for schools and health centres, highways, freeways and overpasses in and around our region, it's a growing issue.

And all the dollars we all expect from municipal, provincial, and federal budgets will not be enough.

Which means there will be hard choices ahead.

It means if we are going to make transit a financial priority, we better get it right.

It means more medium to high density projects will be approved downtown and all through our city, because these projects build on existing resources.

But we can't externalize everything.

We have to do so much better.

I am continually troubled by a growing legacy of cost escalations on projects in Fort Road, on 23rd Avenue, at the southwest recreation centre.

And I know that every time a project goes over budget, something else waits or some other area goes without.

Our new CFO hasn't even started work, but I do not envy the pressure I know he will face to get this under much better control.

Only by mitigating inflationary impacts, bringing forward new financial management strategies and by rationalizing our project management practices to get things done more efficiently, will we even have a chance of meeting the reasonable expectations of our citizens.

And we have to get it right, because we have such a big job to do in maintaining this city we love.

We have to be able to invest in a strong downtown, not just because it's good planning, but because it's a destination that reflects the energy and character of Edmonton.

We have to be able to support plans in our River Valley not just because it's a green asset, but because it makes our city beautiful, and it's the best recreational asset we have.

We have to be able to invest in recreational facilities and parks to give our children a place to play and to help build on the incredible sense of community we already have.

We have to be able to invest in our economic development activities, because we love the diversity of this city and we know that only by maintaining a range of options will our next generation thrive here too.

We must be able to bring our new 10-year cultural plan into reality. This extraordinary document is nothing short of a blueprint to transform Edmonton into an even more vibrant, diverse and captivating city.

There is so much we have gotten right about Edmonton, but there is one major issue that still troubles us all.

When it comes to crime and community safety our record is mostly sound, but some of the milestones of our past three years have not been ones to celebrate.

Edmonton is a safe city, and it is a city with an excellent police force and with strong, caring communities. We have an incredible community spirit here.

But maybe it is because we care so much that we know we can do so much more.

When we see things slip, signs of what Chief Boyd calls "community disorder". We cannot let it pass by unaddressed.

Whether it's graffiti, transit safety, litter, homeless camps or panhandling, all contribute to a general feeling that Edmonton can do more as a whole community, to prevent and address elements of disorder.

We feel we can do more to help those in need, or steer young people away from trouble.

There are a few things I think I've learned in my time here.

I understand that as much as an excellent police service can be proactive, you need a lot more than police if you really want to get ahead of an incident, to prevent it before it occurs.

I have seen good examples of proactive effort, through activities along 118 Avenue and Whyte Avenue, for example. Here we have seen how targeted bylaw and police cooperation, a strong, dedicated community, and even effective lighting and street design help improve the safety of communities.

On 118 Avenue in particular, we are seeing slow but steady improvement thanks to the relentless commitment of an entire community.

And we see here too that bringing more people into a community helps , and yes I am talking about density again.

More people in the community means more people in cafés and shops.

It means local schools stay open, it means parks are busy and it means communities are safe and welcoming places.

There is a lot that can inspire us in the successes we have seen.

We realize what a positive impact a responsive community can have, working with the police.

We understand that, especially with youth crime, we only really succeed if we can get ahead of the problem and provide resources and tools at a community level to steer children in a better direction.

I know this is an issue the province will be dedicating a lot of resource to in the coming years. Our community needs to get behind this province-wide effort.

An excellent example is being set by our 10-Year Committee on Homelessness.

Led by Linda Hughes but with the efforts of countless other volunteers, so much energy, focus and cooperation is being put into this urgent problem.

And what seems to be working best about this committee isn't that we've struck yet another committee.

It's in the business-focused, results oriented approach that is actually brave enough to examine the problem at its roots and recommend a long-term solution, not just more ways to swat at symptoms.

Cities that have followed the recommendations of these committees have experienced real substantial and measurable impact.

There is merit in considering the same approach with issues of community disorder.

Over the last few months we've looked to galvanize several fragmented city efforts under the Safe City banner, but I think we need to go even deeper.

I want to talk to my Council colleagues about empowering business and community leaders to follow a similar model as our homeless committee and to get right down to the root of the issues and to create a blueprint that will help us make measurable, sustainable progress on this crucial issues.

I'd like to see this new committee take shape over the summer and start its work by September, to line its efforts up with those of the province and have a report back ready by the spring of 2009.

And just as we've done with the homeless committee, I'd like to see the politicians take a step back and let our community speak first.

Because the real solutions, the ones that will not just respond to incidents of crime are the ones that tackle it at its roots before it happens.

And there is so much urgency in the crime prevention file. There is so much we can invest better to shift the focus to prevention, and not just impact after a crime occurs. We simply have to change direction on this now.

Just as there is with every issue in front of us.

And we're going to need a lot more impatience to get it all done.

Edmonton is not the city it was three years ago. We are working at a faster pace, and chasing bigger goals than we ever have before.

And it doesn't matter what perspective you apply, whether it's regional, environmental, financial or entirely about quality of life, all add up to the same thing, we must get on our way toward being a much more compact place.

The challenges will be extraordinary but the benefits will surpass them by far.

If I am back at this podium in three years, I hope it will be with a message that we got it done.

That we met expectations, stretched our resources, and brought a new level of creativity and openness to work for this city and region.

That we worked with our regional neighbours and proved how much we could do together.

That Edmonton, a place that has already been the first to prove the worth of so many environmental strategies, is setting even new standards and is helping to bring the prospect of eco-industrial development to a level that no one would have thought possible.

That we continue to find the right balance throughout our city and region, between the structural and the esthetic, between community and economy, between our core and our edges.

I hope that we will all be able to say that our actions and our impatience have made things better.

Because Edmonton, and its region, are worth every bit of the effort.

Thanks very much.