

Downtown Business Association 30-Year Vision of Downtown

Introduction:

Good afternoon and thank you all for being here.

I know there are a lot of people who are wondering if I'm just going to invite Lyle Best up to read from the arena report.

Indeed, I'm sure a lot of you are wondering how I could pick today – arena day – to talk about a downtown vision.

I get it; hockey and the Oilers trump everything.

One of the local radio stations was actually going to carry this speech live and we got all excited, but then my staff told them I was going to be talking more about downtown than just an arena.

So instead they covered the Lyle's press conference.

It's pretty humbling for a Mayor. On the other hand we're now thinking of releasing the City budget on trade deadline day.

So is "arena day" the right day for this downtown speech?

Well, I think a funny thing happened on the way to a final "arena" report.

Lyle and his committee realized that it's not really possible to have a discussion of a new arena or sports and entertainment complex, without placing it in the context of urban redevelopment.

And it's not really possible to talk about urban redevelopment on this scale, without going where Lyle and his group went and their report says it perfectly.

"It has to be downtown."

So it may be arena day, but it's a downtown show.

And that's what I want to talk about today – how Edmonton's downtown will grow, about where a new facility might fit inside of that vision, but also about how very much more there is to consider.

Lyle issued a challenge to us all – to use the energy, excitement, and ambition that is wrapped up in this report, and channel it into a downtown vision that is broader than we have ever considered before.

[Some Thank Yous]

And I want to talk about that, but first I want to say some thank yous.

To Lyle Best and his committee, especially Charlotte Robb, Pat McKenzie, Greg Christianson, Randy Garvery, Bard Golightly, Bob Normand and the many members of the subcommittees – both volunteers and city staffers - who poured countless hours into this report.

I thank you for all you gave to this project.

And I thank you for the food for thought that you have provided to a not-easy-to-satisfy public.

Seriously, I know there was always a big microscope over all your work that made the job more challenging. The time and effort is only more appreciated because of this.

Thank you as well to Northlands and the Oilers who participated in and enabled this process. Both groups are represented by strong leaders who are first, foremost and always, strong, passionate Edmontonians.

Well beyond the actual impact of any single building, or any group of individuals, today needs to be seen as the start of a new direction in our city.

Those proponents on the arena side, specifically Northlands and the Oilers have a lot of work to do. They have to take forward what they have learned in this process, and the expectations of our citizens, to shape a new deal.

I am not going to prejudge the outcome of their efforts, but I am excited by the potential, as I know they are.

I know they share the ambitions and support of the community.

Before I move forward, it is appropriate to acknowledge some of those who brought us to this point.

Every great city has its boosters.

Dedicated individuals who believe passionately in their city, and, in this case, who literally put their money on the table to prove it.

The fact that Edmonton is a great hockey city is a major part of any measure. And at a time when we were going to lose that, they stepped forward and protected one of Edmonton's greatest sources of pride.

So before talking about next steps, it is appropriate, on behalf of the City of Edmonton, to thank the Oilers Ownership Group for their belief and investment in this great community.

[Looking forward]

Now today is about looking forward and it's about a lot more than an arena.

It's about our entire city, because no matter where you live, it's your downtown.

We all believe downtown has to project what is best about Edmonton.

We all know that in any great city - downtown is where you find its heart.

It's a showpiece. It's a magnet. A city lives in its downtown.

Edmonton is no exception.

In the past we have not always been the best stewards of downtown. Our focus drifted. But that is no longer the case. Today, our core is increasingly where people want to live, work, be entertained or just hang out.

It's where we all go when we have something to celebrate. It's one of our fastest growing neighbourhoods.

And it's exciting. Every time we see a new crane on the skyline, or watch something old like the Bay Building become new, or witness new towers taking to the sky, we see the proof, even more, we feel it.

When we visit the farmers market on 104 street, or pop into one of the new cafés on Jasper Avenue, or gather up our family and friends to take in an event on Churchill Square.

We can feel the change.

We can feel Edmonton's emerging downtown lifestyle taking shape.

It's in the jobs and shops and restaurants and events that can all be accessed on foot or by transit by the growing numbers who live here.

It's in the new real estate that is rising everywhere, in some of the most beautifully designed buildings we've seen in a long time.

It's in the busy parks and play areas, shops and theatres, markets and cafés.

It's in a business and commercial centre – one that has a commercially steadily falling.

And more and more, it is drawing us together, weaving more and more into the fabric of our everyday lives.

[Size of change that's coming]

And our scope of what is downtown is changing too.

It runs the entire length of Jasper Avenue, from West Glenora into the east edges of Highlands.

From McCauley to Oliver, from the North Edge to the North Saskatchewan, what we regard as downtown - our core - is growing. And so too is the potential of all communities linked to our centre.

All are earning more attention, more residents and more investment. But hand in hand with all this promise comes a list of important challenges.

Not the least of which is understanding the scale of change that is coming. And that our city has to grow higher, and be much more compact.

That lifestyles will change as the city changes. Edmonton will offer more diversity, more downtown. Many will choose to leave their cars behind, and make public transit an everyday solution to busy roads.

And if you think you are seeing these changes already, then think about this. The recent Radke report on the Edmonton Capital Region projected our population would reach 1.9 million by 2041.

And the financial, social and environmental reality of this growth is that almost all of these 900,000 new citizens must find homes within the existing footprint of our region, because our existing footprint already stretches much too far.

We are only a sustainable region if this happens. And downtown has a major part to play. A thriving downtown, is both a solution and an opportunity as we contemplate this scale of growth and the impact of 900,000 new citizens.

More of them will work downtown. More will study here – at McEwan or the U of A downtown, or Norquest or at so many others. More will be on our transit system, some everyday, from St. Albert or Stony Plain or Sherwood Park.

More will be on the streets, walking from downtown homes to downtown jobs.

More inner city challenges will be faced by a city that is getting more compact and more expensive.

900,000 more people will want to be downtown at least some of the time, whether for events or entertainment, whether with friends or out of town guests who might overnight in new hotels..... downtown will be the centre of the lives of almost 2 million people by 2041.

And if only 5% of these new people want to live in the core, that's almost 50,000 more people by 2041.

It could be more. So we need a broad downtown plan that is ready for what's coming. And I want to talk about how that happens.

[Community of Communities]

I recently heard 'community' being described as "essentially diverse".

The speaker simply meant that in a true community everyone has a place - rich and poor, young and old, in homes and highrises and on the street, it includes aboriginals, immigrants and those whose roots run 2 or 3 generations deep.

Everyone has to have a place. Downtown has to be that place. Change will come downtown no matter what we do, but if we're smart, we will embrace it and shape it.

We already have great communities in our downtown – but they are grossly underdeveloped. And anyone who thinks we have already achieved a high level of density, or become too built up, or too traffic-jammed – well, just look at this image before you say that.

Because this is our downtown today. Based on what you see above you, I hope the one thing we can all agree on is that our downtown has an abundance of room.

Now I need to say that we are not about to play the arena version of "*where's Waldo*." These are not scoped out plans. I haven't measured heights or density but inside these artist renderings, you can get a sense of how space fills up.

Until, maybe it starts to look like this.

But what's inside? What do these communities look like?

What do they have to offer? Who lives in this downtown?

Well let's look inside some examples, starting with the Quarters.

The Quarters

You can see how things might take place as plans move forward on the Quarters and indeed with a community within that community called the Boyle Renaissance.

Two years ago we started to talk to the community about revitalizing the area that we are now calling the Quarters. And we heard something a lot that we took to heart, including that breathing new life into a community cannot take the shape of a windstorm that blows out what is there now.

There was an almost desperate hope that this area, long neglected, could finally find its own revival. We learned that this community, of barely 2500 people, actually has room for closer to 20,000.

And now this area is becoming a very important area of focus. Plans for the Quarters, (some of which you see imagined on the screens), are underway to transform this neighbourhood from one of neglect into one which is one of our most green, diverse and vibrant.

Planning for the area includes efforts to link the community to Louise McKinney Park. It will make way for an expansion of the Province's judicial district, including, we hope, a new courthouse.

It means new museums, like the Ukrainian Archives and Museums providing a place to wander to and around, along with new galleries, shopping, restaurants and cafés. And many, many places to live.

And at the centre of it all is a great green space, that makes the Quarters a showpiece in itself – a green promenade that links to the parks in the south with McCauley in the north and that has potential to be an outdoor art gallery where community members and all Edmontonians will feel welcome.

And within this revival, plans are underway for Boyle Renaissance.

I am personally so excited about its potential to be a real community within a community. To replace abandoned buildings, businesses that focus on the vulnerable and a scrap yard that sadly is not beautiful. The whole plan for the Quarters only works if we can build Boyle Renaissance at the same time. It simply doesn't work if we push people away with the blind hope that they won't return, or worse, won't push back.

Last year our city experienced one of its greatest shames as tent city laid down a claim to space in our core. More than anything, tent city was an incredible expression of frustration. And as a city we had to face how little we had to offer.

For many it helped to make our choice clear - blind eye or real solution. Real communities know which way to go.

More than anything Boyle Renaissance is about facing reality, not sweeping it away. It will integrate new projects and services at the same time we are building up a new and vibrant community in the Quarters. It isn't separate from the Quarters – it's part of it.

It will contain projects like a renewed Inner City High School which will provide not just a place for street kids to learn, but a warm bed and the security of regular meals – basics essential to real learning.

It will include transitional housing – for people who are new to town, just getting settled and for those who are ready to take back their lives and start again.

It will contain desperately needed continuing care beds for the many, many elderly citizens - including many of our Aboriginal elders – some of the very people who may otherwise be pushed aside by growth.

I am so excited about the Quarters and Boyle Renaissance. I like the idea that we can give a neighbourhood a fresh start. I like that we are breaking new ground with this idea – by integrating solutions and solving-in-place.

But there's a lot more to be excited about in a new downtown vision.

[Arts District]

Like the fact that everyone living in the Quarters will be walking distance to an even more thriving Arts District. The new Art Gallery of Alberta will be eventually joined by an expanded Winspear Centre and a renovated Citadel Theatre.

The last major piece of this arts district is in the look of the downtown Library. I'd like to see the building get a face-lift, possibly a re-wrap of the building with a more modern, attractive façade. Similar treatment could also spruce-up Chancery Hall - which is a really neat building and make it a better fit.

But once these cosmetic changes are done I think what the Arts District most needs is attention in terms of activity that enhances the role it already plays as the centre of festivals and celebrations all year long.

We need to warm up our winters with activity - with festivals and events that embrace the winter and bring us all outside to celebrate Edmonton as what it truly is, one of the best and winter cities anywhere.

Down the road we should have so much going on that the road closures that happen for summer festivals need to be permanent and maybe we can look at some sort of festival/domed enclosure that claims some of this space.

[104 Street]

We all know that nothing makes a City feel alive more than people on the streets.

We see it happening on 104 street, where a whole new downtown neighbourhood is coming to life. It's so new we haven't even named it yet. We're looking at closing this road to traffic and turning it into a walking street.

The hope is that the feel of the summer marketplace can begin to expand year round and that the hundreds of people who will be living in some of our city's most attractive downtown residences will continue to inspire this type activity on their doorsteps.

[Rossdale and River Valley Communities]

We can't look at downtown without considering how much more emphasis there will be on our river valley and some of the communities nestled in this area.

I don't think there's a lot of room for development per se in these areas, but there is room for us to consider discussions about dressing up what we have.

With cafés and small restaurants that provide meeting places and destinations to those who enjoy our spectacular urban parks.

And we know there will have to be some decisions made. For example when Rossdale is no longer a functioning power plant. As a new bridge into the downtown is contemplated. As activities take shape around a redeveloped legislature grounds.

Or as we look to bring more activity, whether sports or entertainment-based onto TELUS Field. Change in the downtown will mean change there too and we have to integrate our plans so everything becomes complimentary – so it all fits together in the best way possible.

Whatever else we do, I think it's time for us to formalize one thing – and that's the spiritual link that the area has always had to our aboriginal community.

More than anything else, Rossdale Flats is where Edmonton started. The new memorial now in place on the former burial grounds justly acknowledges this part of our past. But it runs so much deeper. And finding some way to integrate a better, living acknowledgement of the full history of this area will have to be considered, hand in hand with anything else we bring forward here.

I think Edmonton has finally grown into a city that can pay proper respect to its roots. I know we will have another opportunity here. Just as we do with what needs to happen on the Legislature grounds.

[Legislature Grounds]

We can work with the Province to make this a reality.

From the south we have an opportunity to open up the view of the Legislature Grounds and to link its park areas with our river valley as a whole.

From the north, we will have a chance to integrate our plans for a rejuvenated 108 Street – one that makes a proper statement about our capital. It starts, I hope, with a new purpose for the old Federal building.

But ultimately it extends far beyond and it gives Edmonton an opportunity to enter into a visioning, redevelopment opportunity that involves the entire province in their capital city.

[Jasper Avenue]

The new vision must of course consider the role of, Jasper Avenue – the road that runs through it all.

Jasper Avenue is our storefront; it's our main street, it's literally the face we show to the world, and it needs a face lift – from a basic cleanliness aspect and more.

I know the Downtown Business Association has some ideas of how they would like to present the street, literally in a new light – all year round.

Perhaps we can widen out the discussion, to talk about façades or street level art and activities that make us proud of the street – that can make it shine.

And for every bit of possibility I've mentioned here today there is so much more to say, literally about every street, every corner.

There are so many directions a new integrated downtown vision can take – along 104 Avenue and into the Northedge, from Chinatown and Little Italy to 109 Street – we have so much potential, so much to do.

[The Arena]

But I do want to take a moment or two on the topic of the day, the arena. Because there is clearly an opportunity for a new sports and entertainment district to be part of a broad, integrated downtown vision. Our committee has shown us it's possible. They've told us ***"It has to be Downtown."***

The scale of change and growth that will come to our city shows that now is the right time to make some determinations about what the shape and scope of this part of our downtown will be. About where it will go.

The next, most essential step is for the key stakeholders – the Oilers and Northlands – to step up. The City Manager will work closely with these groups as needed, as will our new Planning manager, who will have overarching responsibility for an integrated downtown plan.

Once we see what they can craft together, we will have some decisions to make as a city. But it's clear today that this deal can work as part of an overarching revitalization effort. And making that work for all Edmontonians will be essential.

It means developing a strategy to use the promise of growth to create the opportunity for it to occur. It's a valid strategy to examine here, just as it was on Fort Road and as it will be for the Quarters, and possibly, down the road, for 118 Avenue.

What the report does best is speak to opportunity and to us having a city that is ready to act to create and seize opportunity when presented.

It will be a wonderful discussion to have.

[What needs to change]

But as it always does, it starts with the basics, with the City stepping forward to take charge of the countless elements and activities that impact a broad downtown vision.

It means everything we do in our downtown needs to start being better coordinated, better planned and much more integrated – starting now.

It means building an activity centre within our City Corporation as a whole that is very downtown focused and capable both of delivering the big broad plans and taking care of the little things that really make a difference: the garbage pick-up, clean streets, the street patrols and policing, the flower beds and maintenance and upkeep on the benches and artworks that line our streets.

The keeping up and dressing up of our city must go hand in hand with all of the major ideas of our growth. I know our citizens feel these efforts often look overdue.

But I also know a great city with a great core can work it all out. And a major focus for this Council in the coming months will be in setting direction for this all to happen.

[Conclusion:]

You know, I don't really comment on things the media says but I think I do want to, on something I read a couple of weeks ago. It was about the debate over what kind of entrance signs our city needs.

And while it's fair to comment on whether this particular move is the right one, the writer went on to explain that the artwork was too grand, too bold and in the final analysis, just not Edmonton. I think he was trying to say that Edmonton is not ambitious, or maybe that we don't want to stretch very far.

Well, I'm here to say that it's the writer that doesn't get Edmonton.

Not at all. Edmonton today is a City that is capable of grand visions, of belief in itself, of dreaming about and planning for something that is bigger and bolder than what we have ever seen – in our downtown and across this city and region.

We have already achieved so much together. We all know our potential is to do so much more. We feel pride of ownership in all parts of our city. We feel impatience when we do not do well enough.

We all believe in Edmonton. We all see that our dreams and ambitions can have life. We all will play our part.

Thank you very much.