

Stephen Mandel – Speaking Notes
Edmonton Downtown Rotary
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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Thank you for joining me here today to hear a bit of an update on some key City issues.

And I am glad that so many of you could be here, rather than scurrying around buying last minute Valentine's gifts.....

Of course if this comment just reminded anyone of anything, I can try to keep things short.

The fact that today is Valentine's Day makes me wonder whether there's an appropriate theme that this speech should take.

Of course being here in the middle of a provincial campaign – means that there's an expectation of my message travelling into that arena (no, not the downtown one) the relationship one.

But as one does when focusing on any important relationship, and being at a time and place when the occasion can bring things into extra focus.....well 33 years of marriage has taught me a little bit about choosing words.

So as much as I am going to talk about a number of items that are integral to our relationship with our provincial partner, and as much as virtually every item I will talk about today will involve our provincial partners to some degree, I will leave politics to those who are actually playing on the field right now, and will focus instead on the program and progress of a number of city issues.

Except, perhaps in one or two small areas.

As much as anything, I want to use this opportunity to check in on the status of items which I raised as part of a 90-day agenda for the City.

Of course I announced these items in a speech on Halloween – which is suddenly telling me something about the sense of humour – or at least a sense of occasion, of my schedulers.

But really it's more about a sense of urgency. We see so many major issues in front of our city and region. So Council has no time to waste in this mandate.

So I want to start today by bringing you up to date on the items I raised back in October.

A lot of our initial focus has been internal – on working with administration to set a strategic direction for our Corporation to be more focused on responding to our citizens, and better at planning the incredible amount of work ahead.

Cities are economic engines. They are centres of vision and ambition of knowledge and social progress.

But they are – and will always be – about real, concrete foundation, and it is here, first, that a city needs to respond.

We have already seen areas of major improvement. In snow removal for example, I think our people have done an outstanding job. By changing contracting and deployment, they have addressed a major frustration of our citizens.

And there's no better evidence that something is working than by the number of times my phone hasn't rung this winter. Indeed, most of the calls we have received have been to compliment.

It's a big change from last year and it took a change in focus, a different level of investment, an examination of priorities, but it worked and is working (literally right now).

This same type of thinking needs to be applied across a variety of service areas to address clear frustrations of our citizens.

We need to be constantly asking how we can improve, whether we are doing the right things, and to not be afraid to change when we aren't.

Because our strains and challenges will continue to be felt very acutely, as our growth continues to outpace almost all other Canadian cities, and our to-do list grows everyday.

We will need to take advantage of the breathing room we feel right now in our city – and the slight lessening of inflationary pressures we are seeing this year, to get the maximum benefit from our capital spending and construction season this year.

We will need to be willing to embrace new ideas, such as council did in approving a private-partnership model on the Southwest recreation centre.

And all of council will need to take a much more broad view of finance – so we can make informed decisions from a range of options for providing our citizens with the infrastructure they need.

We still have major decisions ahead about how much we can borrow, and what our borrowing can and should buy us, how we prioritize, how we fast-track, and how we ensure our own delays don't ever again become such a major factor in cost escalations as was seen last year.

A new CFO will be a major part of helping Council make the right decisions here – we expect that recruit will be concluded shortly.

And so will the implementation of recommendations from an internal strategic review which our city manager has just completed – and which called for much better alignment of our corporation strategically and in a more integrated manner.

I can see many ways that our City Manager and his team are embracing change and improvement - they have responded quickly to the results of the internal review - and I see the real, ground level improvements taking shape.

Much has been done to review our project management processes already, including consulting with our industry partners.

Much more needs to be done to lessen the time we are spending in bringing projects forward and getting things completed for our citizens.

And as much as I know we have a lot more work to do - I like the direction things are heading.

In addition to moving forward on the Southwest Rec centre, we have made progress in a number of other areas as well.

One of the biggest is in getting our long-range LRT plans in place – not just for Edmonton, but for our entire region.

Council has approved the next major step in our system, LRT to NAIT, which will begin construction this year.

Plans are also underway to fast-track routes to Millwoods, as well as in all other directions, and ultimately into the region.

Our efforts will be limited only by budget - which **does** mean we'll have a lot to talk about with our partners in the Legislature starting on March 4th.

Practically, it's a \$5 billion dollar plan to bring LRT up to the standard our region needs.

And unlike how things have been done in the past, we can't afford to stop and start again, our construction must be continuous and we can't pause until LRT provides a major transportation link for our entire region.

It will be a fundamental part of our City's long-term economic and environmental sustainability and we must work with the province to ensure it's a provincial priority as well.

Transit has been made a primary task for our new regional council, which will be getting to work very soon.

This is probably about the most significant achievement that came forward in our last 90-days – actual progress towards a new regionalism.

Under this new program, we will be planning together, and major projects, like regional LRT will fall to a regional board to plan and pay for.

Decisions will be binding, no one gets to opt out of any decision.

So finally – after decades of being stalled, we will finally be moving forward.

And as much as I know a couple of my regional colleagues are hoping to use this provincial campaign as opportunity to generate doubt and re-examination of this important and positive decision – I know the decisions that have been made are final. Now is the time to move forward.

The decision to form a regional board is the **overwhelming** preference of the citizens of Edmonton **and the region**.

Our citizens have long understood that cooperation of municipalities only reflects a community and economic truth, and that it is long, long overdue.

And while our vision has widened to a regional level on things like planning and LRT, it's also very much focused on our core, with projects like the Quarters.

We now have new leadership in place on this project, and plans are coming together to redevelop this community, including efforts to address some of the major social issues in that area.

A lot of effort is going into working with the community agencies, government partners and community members that will look at how we can address social issues.

Some of this effort will complement the work now underway by our new 10-year committee to end homelessness.

But it will also extend into a major urban revitalization effort, where we lay out the plan that gains the confidence of our development community and our citizens overall.

We need to provide the environment that will earn the confidence of our developers and citizens in a new downtown neighbourhood that can be inclusive, diverse and highly desirable. And this new plan has to move forward quickly.

The same is expected in our northeast lands. We've signed off on the next steps for planning out this crucial area, which will be part of Edmonton's industrial and residential link into the growing petrochemical developments in our region's northeast.

And it's expected to continue in areas like 118 avenue, Stony Plain and China Town, where existing community efforts to revitalize need to be well supported by our City.

Whether moving to rejuvenate an area or do a Greenfield development, we're also thinking much more about the long-term – about urban density and smart growth. And about how we're going to move people and business around an Edmonton and region that reaches 2 million people – and expectations are that's only 30 years away.

A new downtown bridge is part of this equation.

My mind isn't made up on whether the suggested approach is the right approach, but I appreciate the ambition of it.

And I know there are concerns about impacts – some of which make sense, but some which show, once again, the types of issues we must confront as our city and region grow.

There are hard questions we are going to have to answer today – on behalf of our future city. These include managing more and more issues of traffic and density.

We have to expect that areas like Old Strathcona and downtown will continue to be major destinations for people to work, live and head for fun.

We have to limit the reach of our city and region - which are among the worst in terms land use of any urban areas in Canada.

We need to find a balance between transit and roads, between people's desire to have single family space and the growing realization that density and height are economic and environmental necessities.

We have to consider the long-term impacts of all of our decisions – that our downtown crossings need to anticipate traffic levels 50 years from now and that while all communities need to be nurtured and protected – they also need to grow more compact.

And we need to be willing to make hard decisions for the right reasons.

And I think for the most part, this council will not be afraid to do so.

And yes, at least one of these decisions will bring us into the arena of ...arenas.

I expect to receive a long-awaited downtown arena report in early March and it will be public soon after.

In the meantime, I am trying to stay out of the way of our volunteer committee as they conclude their work.

I know this report comes at a time when we are seeing some significant changes and growth in our city – in our downtown in particular.

One of the really positive changes is the increasing position of Edmonton as one of the best entertainment markets anywhere in the world.

Northlands has done an amazing job in developing this.

And then there's a little thing called hockey, which seems to always be on our minds.

The Oilers are about to enter an exciting new era in the team's history under the ownership of Daryl Katz.

Actually in Edmonton, everything about the Oilers seems exciting – they can out-scoop City Hall and the Legislature any-day.

But I know that Mr. Katz has not been afraid to lay his preferences and his own willingness to invest, on the table.

I know he will be a strong partner for Edmonton under any scenario, just as the current owners have been.

So we will have to make this decision – in consultation with stakeholders and communities – and again with a long-term view of what’s best for Edmonton overall in the long-term and in-line with the aspirations we all have for this city.

Which brings me to the last thing I want to touch upon.

And that is how everything we do today, all of our planning and decisions need to consider the future.

We have come through 10 years of consistent growth, and as much as every indication is that we’ll take a slight breather this year, we’re still on an upward trend.

Again seeing ourselves as a city and region with a population of 2 million is not that far into our long-range planning.

So we have to be thinking today about what are the opportunities that will ensure Edmonton and region remains one of the top urban economies anywhere in North America.

That’s why it is so important to have a regional plan –not just to support expected petrochemical development in the northeast, but to look at ways this development can generate downstream, value-added opportunities that will pay even more dividends to our region and province.

That’s why the money we are investing today into TEC Edmonton and our research park is so important – because the future knowledge that will propel this entire province forward is being seeding in Edmonton today.

It’s why a new biotech strategy will be an essential part of planning for the future.

And it’s why it is so gratifying to see Port Alberta - and a vision of our region as a major intermodal port for global trade – taking shape.

Because the decisions we make today will help to create the foundation for the long-term reality.

And because unless we can galvanize the full energy of our city and region towards the bigger, long-term goals – we will not be ready when the huge strength of our resource sector is no longer enough.

People used to say that our city didn't have a vision.

I think Edmonton has a very strong – albeit under-expressed vision.

We know we are the knowledge centre of this province. The ranking of Capital Health and our educational institutions, lead by 100 years of excellence at the University of Alberta have made this so.

There is a convergence of knowledge and innovation here that is quickly outpacing not just anything else in Alberta, but that ultimately will be Canada's best.

We are well on our way.

We are Alberta's financial centre – not corporate, but financial.

And the growing strength of institutions like Canadian Western Bank, Peace Hills Trust, the Treasury Branches, Servus and as the head office centre of the Province's new AIM Corp, we have growing stature in the financial arena.

We are Alberta's working centre. I've often heard our citizens lament Calgary's status as a head office city.

And while they outpace us on this mark, while they have a strong, vibrant economy, it is increasingly clear that the vast majority of the Alberta economy - is either manufactured, researched or transported through Edmonton and region.

We are Alberta's – and western Canada's cultural centre.

And we are one of the most environmentally progressive urban centres in North America.

We are proud to be the Capital of this great province.

We know our City is an asset for all of Alberta.

Our vision for this city is nothing less than of Edmonton as one of the world's most significant northern cities.

It is an achievable vision, especially when you consider the long-term potential of our northern economy.

And I do think Edmontonians understand this vision – but we maybe don't believe it enough.

Because everytime we measure, we do so against another great Alberta city.

And Calgary is a great city. It's a globally important energy centre and the head office capital of western Canada.

It's a city with growing economic clout and incredible promise.

We can share their pride and not lose ours.

It's possible to have win-wins here.

But we have to stop looking at everything as a game of equivalency. This game is played far too effectively up and down the QEII.

But on the whole, our province will be better served if its two big cities can move their own unique visions forward, recognizing that we complement and support each other in so many ways.

In the months and years ahead, I would much rather Edmonton focus on taking on Chicago, and leave Toronto for Calgary.

We can fight about hockey – but all of Alberta should cheer for the Capital Health or the University of Alberta's when they are so clearly not just Alberta's, but Canada's best.

What is best about Edmonton stands apart from the rest of Alberta.

We need to get comfortable this vision and be excited about our City – on its own merits.

Because frankly, I wouldn't trade Edmonton's character, advantages or potential for that of any other city I know.

I just wish we could believe in the worth of what we've built a little more.

And I wish we could take a long-term view, imagine the best possible future, and then work flat out to make it real.

Because we can make that long-term ambition a reality. We're already on our way.