

Mayor's State of the City

Tuesday, May 5, 2009

Noon – SHAW Conference - *CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY*

The video is right. It is our time to imagine, to grow ideas. And to dream.

I am so struck by the power of this message because it gets right to the heart of it.

It helps us see so clearly that now is the time, yes today when we are hard-pressed to find even a glimmer of positive news on our business pages, now is the time to focus on innovating.

Now is the time to think past our short-term challenges toward our long-term goals.

It is a clear challenge to us, even if we are still pretty comfortable and certain of our current positions, now we need to take the steps needed to put their vision into action.

This year, we have so much on our minds: so much change, so fast.

Last year Alberta, and especially Edmonton, was percolating with growth and expansion.

We had challenges in finding enough housing for everyone who was moving to Edmonton.

Businesses were begging for employees.

Oil was fueling surpluses and we were all pre-spending the largesse.

And then it stopped.

For so many who had been driving so hard for so long just to keep up , it started as a chance to catch our breath.

But now it has us worried.

Certainty of recovery is there, but the timeline is elusive.

We're all busy changing projections, streamlining activities and watching for what comes next.

Over the last 12 months, we've gathered some worries but we've also seen some highlights that can give us confidence in the strength and resilience of this community.

For me, one of the major highlights of the last year was the completion of the 10 year plan for homelessness. The plan points to a path for real potential for progress on this issue.

The effort, led by Linda Hughes and Eric Newell was so significant because it made it clear that homelessness is not just an agency issue, or a government issue, but an Edmonton issue, full stop.

Now our homelessness plan is in the hands of a new Commission, who with the full support of City Council, is empowered to ensure the plan becomes action. They will be accountable to Council, and to the Province and to all of us, in ensuring this is so.

We have seen similar progress taking shape at the regional table. For the first time in my experience as Mayor, really for the first time ever, we are thinking about common direction.

And I know today that our regional system has several strong leaders, fully committed to making this new system work. Trust is building and so is confidence that we will be able to tackle the big challenges ahead.

We can see progress all around our City. Every new piece being added to our art gallery changes its shape and peaks our interest and excitement.

We see the foundation poured on the new EPCOR tower and we feel confidence in our business future.

We see new residential towers reaching up, and we know our dreams for downtown are taking shape.

We see a Council that is committed to building our city, planning a record \$1.5 billion in infrastructure spending this year.

And I know we are making progress.

We see it in our neighbourhoods, along 118 (Alberta) Avenue, and Fort Road,

and we see major transportation changes reshaping our journeys along 23 Avenue and Whitemud Freeway.

We've watched the LRT arrive at two new stations, as the next two get ready to open. And as we've added new Federal and Provincial support to get further expansion underway, we can envision a day when this system is finally a part of what keeps us all moving, everywhere.

Each of these steps feels so small until you start to put them all together.

Then we can truly see how our city is changing, and we can recognize each of these small pieces for what they are, votes of confidence in our future, faith in what's to come, and in our collective ability to get us there.

And this gives me confidence in uncertain times.

Community Safety:

We heard some compelling voices from children in the video we watched.

I've heard some other compelling young voices too. Here's what some 10, 11 and 12 year-olds said in some recent letters to me:

"...there are gun shots at least twice a week in my neighbourhood....."

"I was chased by teenagers and cut on my stomach..."

"...I'm scared to walk to the Mac's store across the street..."

"...my neighbourhood is a disaster.... It's not fair for us kids to be scared..."

And one remarkable 11-year-old girl expressed compassion for addicts in her neighbourhood, saying. "...even though the drug addicts made the wrong choice, we should help them in any way we can...I really want to help my city..."

While the kids in the video dream about their city's potential, these ones dream about it being safe today.

Theirs is every bit the same Edmonton.

Last fall, we struck the Edmonton Taskforce on Community Safety to look at the issue through fresh eyes.

Led by Lindsey Kelly and Fred Rayner, they engaged our city in a discussion about safety.

We started by acknowledging we can't just throw more money at the same tactics and expect different results.

We know there's more to the equation than just harsher penalties or stricter sentences.

A strong criminal justice system is important, but it works after the fact. After your property was stolen, or your neighbour was threatened.

The taskforce has been challenged to make innovative recommendations for community safety. They are looking at a different approach, one that has eluded us for years.

But it's not really elusive.

Visionaries like Canada's Irwin Waller show solid evidence that money invested at the beginning of the equation lessens what's needed at the other end. The more you invest in keeping people out of the criminal lifestyle, the more you save on police and courts and, most importantly, lost opportunity.

The taskforce has gathered input from all across the City, from those who feel the effects of crime, and that's all of us.

They've talked with businesses, seniors, immigrants and agencies all across the city.

They've spent time with kids who are at risk of making the wrong choices.

And here's some of what they've learned.

Nearly all agreed there's enough money in the system already; and excellent groups doing effective work.

But resources aren't being applied strategically; some work against each other.

Lots work in silos.

We all must understand that while we can look for short-term solutions, we must take our first steps towards the real solution too, the one that will take a generation to accomplish and thus will require our focused and continued commitment to stay the course.

The committee will be unveiling their 10-year plan in June, and I hope we will all give it our full attention, because no matter where you live in the City, this is part of our Edmonton too and we simply can't afford to forget it.

Economic Development:

At lot of what we are talking about today is looking past the uncertainty of today.

Our University of Alberta President Indira Samarasekera recently said, "downturns create opportunities for forward-looking organizations. Regions and governments that do what is counterintuitive will come out ahead."

She's right. Now is the time to position ourselves to be ahead of the curve and emerge as leaders in new economies.

There are plenty of theorists who talk about the opportunities in economic disruption, that this is when talent and good ideas shake loose from their roots, and can be picked up.

So how will we do this?

We know we're not the only jurisdiction chasing a diversified economy. Regions around the world are anxiously pursuing strategies to broaden their economies.

To be successful, we need to identify and focus on our existing strengths, whether in eco-industrial development or nano-technology or health care or agrifood.

We're already leaders in "green", another existing strength and another natural for us to build-on.

Sometimes our whole economic focus can shift on a single discovery. Just think of the impact of Leduc Number 1 in 1947.

We all know that in the future, the knowledge economy will dominate.

We know that roles will shift, and that global trends will be local trends too.

So we need to look to our leading institutions: NAIT, McEwan, the University, Norquest, Concordia and some of our most innovative business leaders to help us not just adjust but lead in this new environment.

We know we will still benefit from our proximity to resources, but how and what we produce will vastly change.

We know so many local groups are already leading. Like the scientists at the Nanotechnology Institute, and EPCOR on carbon sequestration. There are so many local leaders, in labs where development processes are being analyzed, literally from wells to wheels who will lead efforts to improve process efficiency and lessen impact.

We know we have similar potential in our local health industry, think of the Edmonton Protocol, to develop the know-how that will improve quality of life and overall outcomes, and in turn, attract research-based investment and talent right to our front lines, transforming our health system into North American's undisputed health leadership.

We all need to buy-in.

We need to be support the realignment of priorities and resources.

And I think we need to change some things about how we've exploit opportunity.

We haven't been able to transform great ideas into great opportunity, not as well as we should have.

We've become too bureaucratic, too inclined to think in terms of how many square feet we lease, not how many ideas we spark, opportunities we seize, or partnerships we leverage.

Something in the old models doesn't work anymore. So we need to be open to change.

One of the big challenges for this coming year will be to apply some higher level thinking to these issues, to understand how we can better position ourselves to lead where possible and adapt where necessary.

I plan to engage some business, academic and regional leaders in helping us put new forms and practices in place, to ensure we are ready.

The Next Generation and how we plan:

In the video, young people were asked to imagine Edmonton in 20 years.

Theirs are the voices we need to hear.

Because it will take time and long-term vision to transform Edmonton for them.

So it's important to know what kind of city they want, and we heard them say it.

Part of their dreams are about career opportunities, jobs and income. But increasingly they are about lifestyle, and design and the feel of this place.

The next generation puts a huge emphasis on the things a city offers outside of your day-job.

They value entertainment, recreation, culture and sports.

They want Edmonton to look and feel like a green and global city, and many of them know exactly what this means.

They go to cities where you don't have to own a car, and they wonder, why not here.

They know that downtown living can be family-friendly. They know that young families need space to play and be outside, and they find it in our river valley.

They understand being eco-friendly means changing how we live. They are not scared of this change, they are impatient for it.

They want to see Edmonton as a city that can grow upward instead of outward.

They want to use transit, or bikes as much as a car.

They want to see us invest not just in hard infrastructure but in amenities and institutions that will be the centre of their future lives. Places like our art gallery and our libraries and our festivals and events, like the new winter festival and the Indy.

They want a diversity of opportunity here, so they value the investment we make in our Arts Council, nurtures one of the most active and well attended cultural communities anywhere.

Young people have started to speak up about these things. We do hear their voices more at City Hall. We need to hear them even more.

We need to do more to bring the conversation to them, use technology better, engage them in their language which is mobile and digital.

Events like Pecha Kucha invite them to present ideas about the form and texture of a future Edmonton.

Our NextGen group engages hundreds of young Edmontonians.

These are great starts.

If we are smart, we will listen to what they are saying.

If they are smart, and face it we know that they are, they will not let us do anything less.

So when we bring back our Municipal Plan, or make decisions at the regional board, we will think of the city we are building for the next generation, not just for right now.

And when we invest in Edmonton, we will look to the future, their future, and place priority funding around the things that are important to them.

Things like upgrades to Jasper Avenue, which a number of people spent the weekend visioning.

We all know our main street needs a face lift. We need to make it an immediate priority.

It's fair to move bike paths up our priority list too. We have enough money available through re-allocations or cost savings this year to get going on extending these vital transportation arteries.

It also means staying dedicated to transforming the Quarters, which can play such a strong part of bringing more people into our core. Our investments into this major neighbourhood renewal will appeal to the growing diversity of our City.

And it means remembering another characteristic of our next generation, that it will be increasingly Aboriginal, so we need to do more to build more structural supports including a central welcoming centre for this community too, to provide the help they need when they arrive in our city and to hear their voices as together we plan Edmonton's future success.

The flavour of this is all about investing in the core, and that's deliberate.

Because as much as we have great neighbourhoods all across Edmonton, future growth will focus on transforming and adding density to the footprint we have today.

Because we can't sustain our sprawl. We can't.

We are already forecasting a population in our region of 1.7 million people by 2040 – that's almost 70 per cent growth – can you see us taking-up 70 per cent more space in 30 years?

If we're forward thinking, we'll make better use of the space we have.

Transportation:

And as much as we need to envision a more compact city, we have to consider, hand in hand, how we get around this place.

A transportation system is a competitive strength, of course, but it's also a basic necessity.

It wasn't that long ago that people thought of LRT in NIMBY terms.

Now we see that it can be the artery that brings new life into a community. We see it as a great advantage and as an asset with transforming potential. It is an economic tool.

Imagine an area like Stony Plain road maybe, with tons of shops and cafes and trendy apartments or lofts above each one. You can live and work on the same street and have the LRT connecting you to everything else, and everything else to you.

We already see this happening.

Development around the Clairview station is substantial. Century Park is going to be the same. These have to be the norm.

It will happen because people want a lifestyle of convenience and connection.

And because we've taken steps, by investing outright not only to create the LRT but also because we've used community revitalization-funds to upgrade neighbourhoods and to attract other development.

Investment in the routes has to go hand in hand with investment in the communities.

We must look at all kinds of incentives, such as tax breaks and subsidies to help bring people and business together to make transit-oriented development work, especially in some of our more challenged neighbourhoods.

What makes LRT work is ensuring it goes to where the people are. That means density.

We have to be prepared to go all the way, in all areas from Stony Plain Road into Millwoods and Castledowns, into beyond our borders, into St. Albert and Sherwood Park and to our International Airport.

And if ever there was a place for long-term thinking, it is on the LRT, which requires a long-term, incremental and continuous funding strategy if we are going to build the accessible and connected city we want.

All orders of government will have to help put this in place.

Challenges for the future:

You know, whether it's an LRT, a safety plan or even efforts to build opportunity for the next generation, it all works the same way.

Change happens in small steps, but real change requires these steps to be continuous and purposeful. It requires broad vision and a long, line of sight.

Politics often works against this sort of thinking. We are three or four-year cycle people. And often 3-4 years, breaks down into 1 or 2 when we can really take action, before thinking about votes again.

This political weakness is a very human weakness I think.

This new economic reality is a very current challenge, no doubt.

As Mayor I have lead efforts to see us change some of our fiscal priorities. I have cautioned about carrying too much debt and about putting too much tax burden on struggling businesses.

In this downturn, we see the challenges so acutely, but solving them isn't a short-term task.

We have to think long-term about how to do better.

We have stopped challenging ourselves.

We treated our recent budget challenge like an incident, not part of a bigger spending and efficiency problem that it is.

We can't just gloss over today's problems and just say "good enough" . I frankly don't believe good enough exists.

I know we haven't come close to finding it.

I challenged my office to make do with less this year and we are, without impacting people or service. Councillors did the same.

So why can't we do the same in every single administrative office across our corporation?

Why do we deal with our financial challenges as an 11th hour deliberation where we pick off the low hanging fruit, instead of getting to the crux of our issues?

Why do important policy moves, like having people pay for Park and Ride only come forward in the 11th hour? It might be a fair move, but it's not a reactionary budget solver.

Why do we think it's a good idea to spend windfall dollars on our day to day operations?

Council wisely decided to approve the transfer of Goldbar to EPCOR, in part in exchange for \$75 million which we could have used for capital improvements.

Instead the money will be parcelled out to for five years to off-set our spending.

Money like this does not belong on our operating line. The transfer of a capital asset should have funded capital improvements, or gone into our ED TEL fund.

Five years will end quickly and then how will we replace this money?

We have to stop feeding the machine and take a serious look at the structure and make-up of our bureaucracy.

We have to break down the silo's and the "good enough" attitudes if we are going to be a financially sustainable organization.

Maybe we, as elected officials, haven't pushed administration hard enough in that regard. I'll admit, I have been as guilty as anyone.

But it's time, it's past time, for us do a serious administrative review. We have to get going now, because our problems are only going to grow.

Why it matters:

You know, people will and do ask how I can be so passionate about saving money on one hand, and then look for ways to invest in things like a World's Fair and Universiade?

The answer is simply that I, like all of you, appreciate the value of money.

I abhor waste because every dollar we spend un-wisely, takes from something we could do.

And I know that watching the bottom line does not mean never looking up.

Looking around, there is so much to do for this City.

Indeed, some of the best features of our city are the things that were done when people were looking far ahead.

Like preserving our river valley from development.

Or building a new co-composter. An impractical idea that could never work, now an example of the world's best urban environmental management system.

Not everyone buys in, but change and progress happen nonetheless.

Big ideas challenge us and they spark resistance, every bit as much as excitement.

The Eiffel Tower was hugely controversial. So was the Statue of Liberty.

But sometimes, thankfully sometimes, the visionaries and risk-takers win-out over the nay-sayers.

Our challenge as this City's leaders is to know when to leap and when to hold back.

This will be tested when we start to talk in detail about a new sports and entertainment complex downtown.

We first opened this discussion about a year ago. I hope it continues very soon.

And I know that we will have to have a very thoughtful and careful conversation about it all, because believing in vision doesn't mean you throw caution away.

But uncertainty is a reason to explore, learn and to gain certainty. It is never, ever, a reason not to try.

There is a lot we will need to know, about its impact, how it will make money, about promises made to taxpayers and how these will be kept, about whether we like what it means for Edmonton.

And if there is one thing I hope everyone has learned from watching global financial markets go awry, it is the importance of real, impartial and honest due diligence, of knowing that we've checked it from all angles, and then checked it again.

Visions have to be practical too.

But there is no reason to believe that Edmonton cannot examine the options and, if we find they can work, choose to go forward.

We can have ambition on this scale.

It's the same thing for a World's Fair bid.

Why not position ourselves among the world's most confident cities?

Perhaps you're thinking "the cost, for one thing". And of course, we need the numbers to work.

But who says they can't?

Don't you think they said the same thing when Calgary started talking Olympics? "We're too small. It's too expensive".

Of course some did.

And there will be lessons to be learned from Vancouver and Montreal and Calgary.

But when it happened, when these cities pulled-it-off, it changed them forever.

20 years later, no one remembers those nay-sayers.

20 years later, in Calgary, they still talk like it was yesterday.

Why can't we have that?

Why can't we believe enough in ourselves to know that we can do all of the proper homework and have an extraordinary show?

Why can't we at least try?

Airport:

And you know, these big topics, the arena and the world's fair aren't that different from one other discussion we have to have this year.

About the city centre airport and whether or not to change.

It's a fair question. It has to be asked.

We will hear from those who value the status quo, and from those who think its time for these lands to play a different role. That's the issue before us.

I'm not here today to prescribe change, but I do want to issue a challenge.

When those who value the status quo come to Council to promote their views, don't tell us why we should not change.

Don't deny we will need the infill room over 30 years, when we are talking about 1.7 million residents.

Please understand that environmental costs will have to be paid either way.

Don't tell us that your business status entitles you to special consideration, and that treating you like every other Edmontonian is somehow an affront.

Don't scare people with health issues that are taken out of context by not looking at the whole time it takes to initiate and complete a medical transfer.

Don't act like the 1995 decision was just a "maybe".

Tell us about your vision. Tell us that you understand what kind of city Edmonton wants to be in 30 years, and how the status quo enhances and supports that vision.

Explain where the future is going, and how the status quo enables it.

Explain what you know better, what you see for the future and why we have to listen, and I know that we will.

And if you can't do this, then maybe, just maybe, it's time to let go of the past and move forward.

Uncertainty is a challenge to find out. It's not a reason not to.

So let's find out.

(Close)

One of the hardest things in life is being able to develop a vision for the future and then take the first, tentative steps toward a goal.

Uncertainty is scary. It makes us cling even tighter to the things we know for sure.

But our real challenge, even in this uncertain time, is to loosen our grip a little, to let out enough slack in our ties so that we can explore.

I feel so strongly in the vision we have developed for Edmonton, one that was developed with voices from all across this city.

I know it is one that answers the children whose voices we heard in the video, and tells them that we are listening that we want them to build the futures they imagine right here.

It also speaks to the children who asked for us to think about who they are today, and their dreams for safety and comfort in their communities. I know our city is smart enough to hear these dreams to know that our vision of a successful Edmonton is not one where such questions have to be asked.

Moving to the future doesn't mean cutting ties with the past. It means picking out the important parts, the things we value in our community, and shaping them so they stay with us and continue to define who we are.

This is Edmonton's time, to have vision and to dream.

It is our time to check our progress, as we take steps forward.

Edmonton is a city that understands this. The mere fact that we are thinking about some of these big issues means that this is so.

We are a city that weathers the bad, while imaging the future.

We are a place that continues to move forward.

We have confidence, and certainty.

We all want what is best for Edmonton.

We all can get there together.

Thank you.