

National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy

On September 30 2003, Mayor Bronconnier was invited to address the first session of the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy (NRTEE). Mayor Bronconnier joined renowned architect and urbanist Peter Burgener and Roger Gibbons, president and CEO of the Canada West Foundation to share their thoughts on encouraging sustainable growth in Canadian cities and the role of the Federal Government in supporting and funding initiatives that will help Canada's urban centres meet sustainability goals.

Mayor Bronconnier shared a number of examples where Calgary is already well ahead of the curve on inner-city renewal and sustainable suburban development. He challenged the federal and provincial governments to demonstrate their commitment to sustainable urban development with partnerships that encourage new vision and new practices in the growth of our cities.

Delivered to the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy September 30, 2003

"There was a time when growth was seen as a positive thing. The ultimate goal for a city was to grow – to attract new people and new businesses. Growth used to mean progress and prosperity. People's perceptions are changing. Some people no longer see growth as an opportunity. They see it as a curse. Something to manage, or cap. But, when a city has the right combination of jobs and quality of life, growth happens.

For years, Calgary has led the nation in per capita growth and we are at the forefront of cities who declare that growth is a good thing. We are becoming Canada's growth management expert. The reality of our situation demands it. Our population grew by more than 17,000 in 2002 and by more than 28,000 the year before. This growth trend is projected to continue, with our population passing the million mark in 2007. Along with these new Calgarians comes the demand for new housing, new schools, expanded park space and recreation facilities. Most notably, we have requirements for new transportation infrastructure to accommodate the more than 50 additional cars on our roads each and every day. Meeting the demands of our growing population puts significant strain on our budget, our existing infrastructure and services, and our environment. As a city, we have redefined many of the traditional planning models to better reflect the goal of sustainable growth. Initiatives, such as a move to higher density, inner-city residential development, help draw people into the city core and revitalize our downtown. We've also developed regional suburban employment center strategies to allow suburban Calgarians to live closer to their work and reduce commuter traffic to the core.

Water Management

Other growth initiatives encourage the protection of important natural resources. For example, The City of Calgary Parks Department, with the help of Ducks Unlimited, has mapped more than 14 thousand wetland areas in Calgary. This data is used by city staff to assist developers in incorporating key wetlands into the design of new residential sub-divisions. Bridlewood Creek, Calgary's first fully developed wetland community, represents a successful integration of environmental management and residential development. We also recognize that Calgary is not alone in its need and desire to manage our water systems responsibly. Through the Calgary Regional Partnership, we are working with neighbouring municipalities to protect the Bow and Elbow Rivers. We share Calgary's superior wastewater treatment facilities with neighbouring centres and are in discussions with bordering municipal districts to provide wastewater services replacing their aging septic systems.

Parks Initiative

As our City approaches a million people, we must plan and act, for the future. We must plan for a day when we will approach two million people. A milestone only 40 years away. Recently, City Council approved a plan that will ensure Calgary continues to be a world leader when it comes to public parks. The ENMAX Legacy Parks Fund will establish 3 new parks on our borders, protecting more than 2400 acres of natural park space. A portion of the fund will also be invested in revitalizing existing city parks to ensure they continue to serve Calgarians for many more years to come.

Public Transportation

Park space is one area where our plans will keep us ahead of growth. But Calgary's transportation network is an area where our challenges are complicated by growth. In the past year, we have managed to make some headway by fast tracking 3 new interchanges on Calgary's most congested corridors. But freeing traffic flow is only part of a coordinated transportation network. Improvements are also coming for our public transit system. Traditional transit buses and smaller community shuttles work together to offer transit service in our newest outlying communities. The smaller shuttle vehicles, which use considerably less fuel, contribute to an integrated and efficient transit network. A unique agreement with ENMAX Corporation and VisionQuest Wind Energy allows us to operate our LRT system entirely on wind generated power - eliminating the release of more than 22,000 tonnes of CO2 emissions into our air each year. Each of the three legs of our LRT system is being extended, but the cost is high. Which means we can't extend the LRT as far and as fast as we need to. If the federal government truly wants to encourage the development of sustainable communities, it needs to demonstrate a commitment in the form of investment and support for efficient public transit systems for our cities.

Inner City Development

The suburbs aren't for everyone. Development in the inner city has taken off in recent years. High-rise condo projects line the banks of the Bow River. Far enough back to leave acres of green space and pathways, and close enough to downtown to make owning a car optional. In May, the City unveiled plans for The Bridges, a new development on 37 acres of inner city land where the former Calgary General Hospital stood. The Bridges will be a walking neighbourhood... with almost anything residents could need just steps from their front doors. For any needs that lie outside the community, The Bridges is served by a nearby LRT line. As well, a unique series of environmental design guidelines will help make The Bridges not only one of the most attractive neighborhoods in Calgary, but among the most energy efficient. The Bridges development follows on the heels of the successful completion of Garrison Woods, one of the largest inner city redevelopment projects ever undertaken in Canada. Due to developments like this, last year close to 30 per cent of housing growth in Calgary was redevelopment of existing lands, not expansion. Cities across Canada understand sustainable development.

We understand the value of redeveloping the inner city. Where walking replaces driving and parks replace parkways. We understand the value of providing commuter options in our suburban community. Where getting on the bus or LRT is just as easy, if not easier than taking a car. We understand that wetlands and natural areas can and should be integrated into new communities rather than seen as impediments to further development. And we understand that our natural resources... our water... our air... our grasses and trees... are finite and worthy of our protection. We also understand, however, that to continue sustainable urban development, we need the help of other levels of government. We need tax credits that encourage energy efficient retrofits of existing buildings. We need dependable, dedicated funding that will allow us to invest in enhanced public transportation.

In short, we need a partnership.

A partnership with the federal and provincial governments that recognizes cities must be sustainable, but further recognizes that cities lack the resources necessary to meet that goal alone. The most promising opportunity coming out of this Round Table process is evidence that the federal government is listening. Calgary is ready to show the country what is achievable with vision, effort and even limited resources. We are already well ahead with programs that commit Calgary to a more sustainable future. The most notable evidence of this, is our corporate wide registration under ISO 14001... the first North American urban center to achieve this status. Now we look to our partners in Edmonton and Ottawa for evidence that they wish to take these steps with us. Encouraging sustainable growth in our cities is a concern for all levels of government. It will take tangible support from each level to carry sustainability forward.