

**Mayor Stephen Mandel's
State of the City Speech
Tuesday, April 24, 2012**

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

[performance by ESO – 5 minute NYC medley]

Introduction:

Thank you to the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra. In celebration of their 60th Anniversary, they have been invited to perform in...you guessed it, New York, at the legendary Carnegie Hall.

Over 1100 Edmontonians are going to New York to share in this special experience – showing how much we are all eager to share Edmonton's talent with the world.

Thanks to all of you for being here today.

[brief comments]

Thanks especially for coming just one day after the provincial election. You'd think people might be sick of politicians, but perhaps City politics is a pleasant change of pace.

And on hearing that this is a record State of the City audience, I know I must be somewhat right. Our city is a passion we all share.

I always welcome this opportunity to reflect on our progress and to set the stage for what's ahead. From here, we have the chance to evaluate more than seven years of investment, planning and strategic moves forward. From here, we can judge our plans against the expectations that first set us on this course.

I look back to a time when this city held itself back - arguing more about what we shouldn't do, than what we should. We all can remember countless examples where the simplest change, like redoing Churchill Square - could get caught up in endless argument over whether change was good - or necessary.

I remember the first time I stood here, and I uttered the words "no more crap". On that day, I not only got away with cursing in public, but touched on a sentiment we had all been feeling for many years.

On the surface, I was making a comment about architecture – but it resonated at a much broader level too. We were frustrated with a "good enough" mentality.

We knew that holding too tight to the status quo stalled our progress and left a lot unexplored.

It halted LRT expansion. It delayed work on our roads and overpasses.

It led us to accept the decline of core neighbourhoods.

We would casually point to issues of homelessness or integration of newcomers as someone else's problem.

We accepted our downtown as "less than," a place that lacked inspiration, at the centre of a neglected core.

And it wasn't just the downtown that needed some TLC. Our city neglected the needs of the suburbs as well – and offered few opportunities in either the downtown or suburbs for living a modern, sustainable, high quality lifestyle.

Seven years ago, we were a city organization with no big plans, that avoided dealing with significant challenges and left our true potential unexplored.

But the idea of good enough, status quo city had one major problem. It did not, in any way, reflect the true dreams and ambitions of our citizens. And it didn't begin to prepare us for what was ahead, the strains on infrastructure, a massive inward migration of close to 150,000 people and an economic boom that has solidified us as a major hub.

Seven years later, we are Canada's fastest growing city at the core of the country's second fastest growing region. And we have shaken off a "good enough" pattern by taking care to invest in ourselves and our future.

We invest smarter and for the long-term - at a pace that speaks to the demands we consistently hear from our citizens and businesses.

We remain challenged to deliver on our growth agenda, by the need to effectively balance resources with the ongoing drive of our people, communities and businesses. We have embraced all that has changed around us to be equal to the challenges good fortune has placed at our door.

Council Focus:

It is within this context that City Council and our City staff view the way forward. It is truly a point of pride that Council has pulled together to keep pace with all that is changing around us.

A cohesive Council hasn't meant an end to politics. But a strong consensus means you can make bigger decisions.

This Council has stood strongly behind investment in infrastructure: expanding our LRT, revitalizing communities, building new libraries and community centres and rebuilding neighbourhoods at a faster pace than ever before.

A constructive, cohesive Council has focused on structural investment in a way that ensures tangible benefits in all parts of the City.

It means our administration is given clearer direction, one that resonates within a broader strategy and in turn, gives the public a clear view of our performance.

It means a broader view of our role - understanding the importance of getting to the root of issues like homelessness, safety and community revitalization - and building effective cooperation between the public, community and business leaders to frame made-in-Edmonton solutions.

It means we haven't been afraid to make hard decisions and balance how we spend our taxpayer dollars with what we must ask of our citizens.

I think I have been clear in the past that I feel property tax is an unfair regressive tax, but I think it's worth pointing out that the amount of tax we pay on \$100,000 worth of property assessment has actually gone down by approximately \$100 over the past 6 years. And the average wage in Alberta over approximately that same time period has increased by nearly \$20,000.

The growth in this province - especially in wages - drives what we must spend, but we have managed to keep control over our capital.

We have used a balance of debt, savings and grants to build almost \$6.9 billion in new infrastructure once our plans are complete.

As the cost of running the City continues to rise, this City Council has, I think, remained aware of the financial realities facing our citizens and urgency of balancing what we need, and what we desire with what we can afford.

I am grateful to my Council colleagues whose effective leadership ensures this atmosphere is nurtured in their wards and throughout the whole city.

A More Customer Focused City Hall:

Our effectiveness in managing our City is tied to our fundamental understanding of the role of City Government.

We know that our City is more than a straight input and output of dollars and cents. It can be a powerful tool to facilitate the dreams and hard work of our people. At City Hall, our ability to do this is always underlined by core service growth.

Following years of under-investment, we have made so much progress - investing billions in the core structures that make our City work.

But that is not all. We are also transforming how we work with our citizens, with an increased focus on customer service, and an increased willingness to embrace new ideas. We are a more strategic organization than in the past – a credit to the leadership of Council and our City Manager Simon Farbrother and his senior team.

I know we are a large and often bureaucratic organization. Change can come slowly here. But there is increasing evidence that we are adapting better, becoming more responsive to business, communities and individuals.

We see it in a new customer service focus in the Sustainable Development department, where efforts are underway to streamline approvals and ensure timely decision-making.

We see it in an understanding of how changing demographics - and a growing seniors population - must change the services we provide to facilitate recreation and housing options for seniors in their communities.

We see it in more effective funding models like the one we applied to our neighbourhood improvement programs. We have increased the pace of renewal by more than 10-fold through the creation of a sustainable neighbourhood fund, the only one in North America.

We see a willingness to fix what hasn't worked well enough, like snow clearing - though we can happily agree to wait till next year to really test our progress.

And we see clear examples of leadership. Our waste management system will make us Canada's first essentially zero waste municipality. To reach this incredible benchmark, we have creatively combined made-in-Edmonton innovations along with effective private-public partnerships.

This success underlines a broader entrepreneurial culture in our City, and was a major focus of our recent Asian mission, where it is so clear that the value of what we created here resonates on a world stage.

More effective community work:

New approaches at City Hall have underlined how we work in communities too, linking the energies of motivated business, communities and individuals to benefit our whole city.

Last year when we faced a serious challenge with our homicide rate, the City worked closely with the Edmonton Police Service and REACH to put a violence reduction plan in place. This plan committed to a number of initiatives that will positively impact our community safety over the long term. And so many organizations and communities worked closely together to bring new ideas forward. I believe we are seeing a difference already.

On 118 Avenue, community and business leaders are leading transformative change, with the City's help. Today new restaurants and cafés are gaining strength side-by-side with local businesses community services and neighbours.

The new Commonwealth Recreation Centre and new upgrades to Borden Park and the Abbottsfield Recreation Centre will provide much needed recreation opportunities to our central communities.

We've rethought how we manage other assets, like at Fort Edmonton Park where a new community-led management board is bringing new ideas, new vision and new tools to boost the attractions and appeal at the Park.

Our Africa Centre for newcomers is showing leadership in integrating newcomers through a growing array of services offered across multiple cultures and religions to our highest need communities.

As a city with one of the fastest growing multicultural communities in the country, our investment in these new communities is critical to ensuring all our success.

Major new investments in downtown's Boyle Renaissance – a new community centre and new partnerships with the YMCA Melcor Village and our many other partners – will help bring much needed services to a highly challenged community, and it will provide assurance to investors about the potential of this downtown neighbourhood to support our CRL for the Quarters.

And on the arena and entertainment district, I know there are outstanding questions and concerns. We haven't done enough to communicate how the deal aligns with what citizens have told us they want to see.

But we will all get to see preliminary conceptual drawings for the design on May 16th. This work will become the focus on an important next level of consultation on the arena - where Edmontonians get to have their say. I know that together we will create a vision that is worthy of Edmonton.

We have an amazing opportunity to capture the imagination and spirit of our City here.

And I am so pleased, that alongside of this project, we can now be confident that a new Royal Alberta Museum will be built in our downtown - this incredible project will do so much to tell Alberta's story to the world.

Our Mayor's Task Force on Business and the Arts, has envisioned the museum as the centre of an already thriving arts district - one with even more possibility.

While our look at this vision is preliminary, I would suggest that we have the potential to entrench in our city the idea that the centre of our northern culture - of ideas and art and identity - can dig even deeper roots here - along the lines of what the Banff centre has done for Southern Alberta.

And as we consider all of these possibilities, we cannot forget that we are a Winter City. Council is committed to investing in a 12-month program that insures the vibrancy of this city shines through 12 months a year.

Important Work Ahead:

When I think of all that we've accomplished, I see how much the expectations and capabilities of our city have changed along the way.

At our core, we are about basic service. But in a modern world, a competitive city not only manages infrastructure, it attracts labour, markets its wares and addresses fundamental quality of life issues. And as much as we have made good progress here, there is much more work to do - and there are some important challenges ahead.

We must continue to build on the core structural elements. This means ongoing investment in road and LRT network expansion.

Our NAIT line is nearing completion. The next major expansion will be to Millwoods with our Southeast line, and it is essential that we finalize a financial model for this line before the end of the year to stay on track for completion in 2017.

From here, we must also continue to develop plans to extend LRT into our Northwest - through Castledowns and on to St. Albert - and to finalize plans for LRT to the west end and to our International airport.

A major bottleneck in our road network will be addressed with construction of a new Waltherdale Bridge which starts this year, easing traffic into and around our downtown.

Doing this work opens up the opportunity to focus on plans for our Rosedale Power Plant which is now decommissioned. This facility - literally at the heart of our City - must be a major redevelopment priority.

Our efforts here must honour its historical, archeological and natural significance. But they also must imagine the potential to anchor new activity in our river valley.

We are close to finalizing our overall plans for the City Centre airport lands - this new community will be nothing short of a model of urban sustainability - one that aligns well with our position as one of Canada's most sustainable cities.

It will bring new housing options for families into our core. It will enable a significant expansion of the NAIT campus and it will instill some of the latest advances in waste, water and power management into a zero impact site.

This incredible transformation is one which has been made possible by choosing to move forward with the closure of our City Centre airport, a process which is already significantly underway and which will continue to be carefully managed.

Last year, I asked Michael Phair and Theresa Spinelli to lead the Community Sustainability Taskforce, which brought together stakeholders – communities, school boards, City, Province – in the pursuit of creative partnerships and strategies to address challenges facing our mature communities.

Their recommendations for building stronger, more vibrant communities in our core can be found in the ELEVATE report, released in the fall. These recommendations will serve as a 'blueprint' for achieving vitality in all our communities.

In addition, our ongoing transition of surplus school sites across the City for seniors housing and first-time homebuyers housing provides another significant opportunity for infill. It preserves important greenspace, brings more young families into aging neighbourhoods and helps seniors to age in place. The next phase of this program will kick off this year.

When we talk about infill - we can build on the successful model of 118 Avenue in other areas.

The current west end MacEwan campus - a key recommendation of our business and arts communities - will set the stage for a similar revitalization in this area. Weaving this campus into the fabric of the community alongside our arts and multicultural community will be a springboard for success. Once again, the use of arts and creativity will help draw out the character of the community and help it shine.

On the social side, we have made important progress on the homelessness file with our Homeless Commission and its ten-year plan to end homelessness. Nearly 1800 people have been housed under this program. But what is clear is that there are those – the hardest to house - for whom deeper commitments must be made.

That is why I was so excited to see many of the recommendations of our Homeless Commission addressed through provincial plans for Alberta Hospital Edmonton – providing structural upgrades that are urgently needed and service support that is simply essential if we are going to make a difference in the lives of our City's most vulnerable citizens.

Urban Aboriginal File:

When we talk about Edmonton being the fastest growing City in Canada, we must note how much of this story is due to a thriving Aboriginal community. Edmonton's Aboriginal communities, be they Metis, First Nations or Inuit – are made up of people who are prospering with us and helping to build this city and our success.

This success is too often an untold part of Canada's Aboriginal story. It is something we need to highlight much more.

We need to find ways to celebrate our Aboriginal community. Two such projects are Fox Farms – now known as Kihciy Askiy (Keechee Askee) "Sacred Land" – and Fort Edmonton Park through the Indigenous Peoples Experience.

And we can do more. When we re-imagine Rosedale, the Aboriginal component of Edmonton's founding story must be told.

As a City we've worked to build better relationships between the City and our Aboriginal communities through Wicahitowin and our Aboriginal Accord.

Our Office of Diversity is working to ensure that the face of our City administration is a truer mirror of the community we serve.

A new economic development initiative is looking at ways to mentor Aboriginal businesses in our community.

But our successes – and they are many – are not the whole picture.

In the midst of Canada's most successful city, we hear far too much about what isn't working, about child welfare systems, family violence and social challenges with a disproportionately high Aboriginal face.

As much as our national Aboriginal story is now an urban story - the resources dedicated to these communities do not follow people into urban areas. Too often people - and any access to support - get lost in transition.

And it's time for this to change - to bring Cities fully into this discussion - along with Aboriginal communities and our Federal and Provincial partners to ensure that scarce resources help the people they are meant to help - no matter where they live.

I plan to work with my fellow Western Canada Mayors to elevate this discussion and bring a proper focus to the urban face of our Aboriginal communities.

Edmonton Economic Development/Image/Identity work:

How we shape our community, how we include newcomers and Aboriginal communities into opportunities here, how we cultivate creativity and innovation and act to make the most of our advantages - all of it shapes the story that we tell to the world.

Our ability to present a competitive, dynamic and creative image is more important than ever.

This simple truth was so obvious on my recent trip to Asia. From there, one can truly understand how much the world is changing and how very much more competitive we all must be. We have so many natural advantages, but none to take for granted. (pipeline)

Our future success will depend on our ability to build a city that attracts those who can live and work anywhere. And the best City in the world will fail if it does not learn to market itself - something that we have not done nearly well enough.

I have heard so much justified frustration from our business community and local institutions that we haven't done enough to build Edmonton's image. They know - as we all know - that the outside perception of our community doesn't do justice to the incredible life we have here.

We start new marketing initiatives but only make half-efforts and we run from our critics. This has happened time and time again.

We are too complacent. We see all of our growth and we take it for granted.

We don't listen well enough to our business community - led by the boards of our Chamber and EEDC - to guide our efforts here.

And we have to do better.

In the coming months an important initiative will set the stage to reposition our economic development and promotion work. The Way We Prosper will consider the broad foundation of economic development in this city and it will include recommendations about how we must adapt the way we work today to be ready for tomorrow. It will focus on how the incredible advantages we have today can energize our future growth.

The Way We Prosper will help to answer the question of how Edmonton's economic development should be structured. It is now gathering input from our business community. We hope we can better rally our business voices and better coordinate our overall efforts along with our institutional and regional partners.

If you haven't been asked to participate yet - you should have been - and I invite you to contact my office to get involved.

I can't tell you what the final product will look like but I can tell you two essential outcomes.

First, we must have an economic development organization that better demonstrates its understanding of the competitive environment our City faces. It must be hungry enough to undertake a relentless effort to sell our City.

Second, we must finally look past all of our reluctant half-efforts to actually work at promoting Edmonton's story. Without a commitment to this, the former will be very different.

We must be willing to put proper, long-term resources behind a true effort to sell this City to the World.

Our provincial partner:

I started this speech with a brief nod to the provincial election. While our focus today is our City, there is no question that our provincial context is important to Edmonton's future.

I want to start by congratulating Premier Redford and on a hard fought campaign and on articulating a vision that won the confidence of Albertans. This was a tough campaign - it brought a lot of emotion to the surface.

I will mostly leave it to the pundits to analyze what it all means. But I do recognize a message about change - and this election was about the pace and direction of change that is occurring in our province.

Change is essential - we can't resist it and shouldn't even try - but strong leadership and good cooperative relationships can shape its outcomes. So much change is coming to this province and it is clear that Albertans expect new thinking, new action and new ideas. It is clear that Albertans want to continue to work to build this province.

And it is so clear that Edmonton has strongly endorsed this view and that our City agenda is well aligned with the direction our province has chosen.

Change is exciting - embracing it has helped us usher in everything we have done over the last seven years.

From our perspective, this election demonstrated how clearly Alberta's growing urban reality is a major change that has fully dawned on the Provincial stage. This election presented near unanimous agreement that it is time for a new deal for Alberta's big cities. I look forward to working with Premier Redford and Mayor Nenshi to move this agenda forward. I hope this is a discussion we can begin to have very soon.

Meeting change head on:

Because Alberta's Cities are changing - the face, the economic outlook, the competitive global environment in which we live, presents more challenge and more opportunity than we have ever seen. But we know that Edmonton can rise to any challenge.

This capital city has so much talent on its side.

We are an open city - we celebrate diversity and embrace the thousands of new people who come here each year.

Our education base underlines all our success with primary schools ranked among the world's best and a post secondary base that will open doors to our future success.

We are a creative city - one which has shaped a unique, irreverent character out of this unique prairie setting.

We are a city that can both laugh at itself and build passion, acceptance and understanding into the changing character of this place we call home.

We are an entrepreneurial city - lead by an incredible business sector that has helped to create the Alberta story, and is positioned to carry it forward.

I am always so encouraged by the willingness of city leadership, partners, businesses and citizens to go this distance, to get excited by the endless possibilities for building an ever stronger city.

Our place in this great Province, our unique economic advantages, our strong cultural identity, our skills at cultivating knowledge and innovation - and most of all, the passion and drive of our people - are the things that are going to ensure our future success.

Thank you all for being here today.