

2015 Edmonton State of the City

Mayor Don Iveson

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Check against delivery

Nearly a hundred years ago, Edmonton almost met its end.

One Sunday in June of 1915, a short but foreboding telegraph arrived from Rocky Mountain House. It read, “My God Edmonton — look out. The River is up 24 feet.”

With a war overseas and a grave financial crisis taking hold, Edmontonians already had other things on their minds. But as the river continued to rise nearly a foot every hour, the hard truth came sloshing right to the city’s doorstep. Edmonton was in trouble.

The city sprang into action. Residents frantically drove wagons and carts down flooded streets to help neighbours find higher ground. Rescue boats ferried furniture to dry land. The CNR parked an entire train on the Low Level Bridge to prevent it from being swept away.

The following day, the river was up 42 feet, power was out across the entire city and 2,000 people were suddenly homeless. Stores, businesses and entire industries were gone in a matter of hours.

The very heart of our young city was decimated — at an already fragile moment in its history. Other places in similar circumstances might have let all their hope and promise be swept away.

But not Edmonton.

Instead, we seized the opportunity and turned devastated flood banks into parkland, now North America’s largest, and one of our city’s greatest assets. And, we emerged more resilient for the next inevitable surge of the North Saskatchewan.

And though some business owners like John Walter never recovered, others seized the opportunity and rebuilt even stronger businesses above the bank.

In 1915, they all pitched in to help one another, to pull themselves collectively out of the mud. They didn't panic. They learned. They adapted. And they made smart long-term decisions in the face of adversity.

Just as we must today.

Let's start with the economy. We've all focused on the low price of oil, but our main export market, the U.S., continues to surge. We've focused on layoff numbers in Alberta, but Edmonton continues to add jobs.

In spite of national headlines proclaiming a province in economic decline, we know that's not the whole story in Edmonton.

Edmonton is weathering this downturn — to the surprise of many. The Conference Board of Canada recognizes our economy as one of the country's most diversified — and therefore more resilient to the roller-coaster ride of resource dependence.

Diversification doesn't happen by accident, and we're working alongside Edmonton Economic Development and other partners on a re-invigorated Port Alberta, the TEC Edmonton Heath Accelerator, Startup Edmonton, and an aggressive new approach to tourism attraction. As well, we continue to build on our established strengths by working with the Industrial Heartland to attract value-added petrochemical and manufacturing investment.

Meanwhile, we can feel the continuing confidence around us downtown, with the arena taking shape and an unprecedented number of cranes lifting our core to new heights. We can see local confidence, too, with the recent news that Edmonton investors are jump-starting the stalled Glenora Skyline Project.

Given the contrast between national perception and local reality, it's never been more important for us to tell a clear and consistent story about Edmonton.

But what is that story?

Through tough debates on things like entrance signs, we become a little more certain that who we are is far more interesting than any single tagline could capture.

Confident, diverse, thriving cities don't need taglines.

This conversation isn't about a logo. It isn't about festivals, or oil, or gateways, or the river, or champions.

Our city is all of those things. It's also friendly, creative, entrepreneurial and part of a long and deep indigenous storyline.

And that won't fit on a sign.

Make Something Edmonton brought us an authentic, shared narrative that we built ourselves. This work begins to answer the question that many of us have been asked: why Edmonton?

This is a place for people who like to take risks, who like to build — and who care more about ideas than the weather.

Each of us plays a role when speaking to friends and family elsewhere, when recruiting to our city, and when speaking to the world.

I, most of all, bear this responsibility, and it's a message I recently took to China and South Korea, and a message I will bear in Toronto next week when I speak at the Economic Club of Canada on the new Edmonton, our new attitude and new opportunities.

For one thing, last year, the Edmonton region became Canada's fifth-largest in population. It was a quiet but important milestone that indicates the continued westward shift of economic dynamism, and the increasing importance of both of Alberta's large cities to Canada.

To sustain this momentum and Edmonton's role in Canada's prosperity, we must ensure people and goods move as quickly as possible. This means investments in our trade corridors like the Yellowhead — and yes, a completed LRT network.

Mass transit has the potential to transform a city in a way that few other infrastructure investments can. Efficient transit networks are the backbone of every competitive city. By announcing a new permanent fund for building public transit, Ottawa is finally beginning to recognize that mobility in our big cities is critical to this country's competitiveness.

This is all good news for Canada's future.

It could also be good news for Edmonton's future — but only if our Province steps up and matches this ongoing commitment.

Also critical to our continued prosperity is the competitiveness of the entire Edmonton region.

Our region is vying against hundreds of mid-sized cities around the world for investment and talent. And we risk being outperformed by regions that present a clear, unified proposition to investors.

To underscore my point, a quick example. If you were an investor in Dubai or Shanghai, and you googled "capital region," you'd find capital regions in the US, India, Denmark ... and the list goes on. To improve our ability to get on investors' radar, the Capital Region Board is now working towards a more focused, coordinated approach to marketing the entire region to the world.

Because when we're united, our voice is that much stronger and our story that much more compelling. At 1.3 million-strong, Edmonton Metro will be a force to be reckoned with.

I continue to build this strategy alongside other like-minded mayors and business leaders, and by the end of the year, progress must be made — or our region may be left behind.

All of what I've talked about so far — our economic diversification, our brand and reputation work, our transportation infrastructure needs, and our regional economic development — all of this this is essential to building on this city's prosperity.

There remains a gap, however, when it comes to sharing that very prosperity with all Edmontonians.

The reality remains that far too many Edmontonians live in poverty, and too many of them are children.

In last year's address I announced my intention to bring the weight of the mayor's office to elevate the profile of ending poverty. Created with Council's unanimous support, the Mayor's Task Force to Eliminate Poverty is hard at work on the goal of building a plan to end poverty within a generation.

As a task force, one of the most encouraging things we've discovered so far is that there is incredible will in our community to fix this. Thanks to many leaders across sectors speaking up in the last year, the idea that "poverty is solvable", as the United Way puts it, is taking root.

Many businesses we've engaged want to focus their philanthropy and want to engage new workforces. Social agencies want to resolve this issue for good. Faith groups continue to rally to the cause. Individuals, especially young people, want to lead, volunteer and raise money. And City Hall has sent strong signals that we're committed by taking steps towards implementing a low-income transit pass.

In short, this community is ready to take up the challenge of Ending Poverty in Edmonton.

But just writing the report won't be enough. It never is.

Alberta's Social Policy Framework was unveiled with much fanfare and optimism back in 2013 — but, aside from passing mentions in campaign platforms, the framework's implementation plan has barely registered in this election. Edmonton is well-positioned to deliver services and direct resources where they're needed most, and we're ready to partner with the Province on a goal we share with them: ending child poverty.

Edmonton is a compassionate, humanistic kind of place. We celebrate our diversity every chance we get, and inclusion is the Edmonton way. Whether it's rallying around our immigrant and interfaith communities when incitements to violence came from abroad, or simply lighting up the High Level Bridge ... we stand up for each other.

Through our Year of Reconciliation, we began a journey of rebuilding trust and healing relationships between Aboriginal and non-aboriginal Edmontonians.

And in doing this work, we took a deeper look at ourselves as a country and as a city.

We've started a lot of good work.

We've educated City staff about the trauma inflicted by Indian residential schools. We've started the work to build ceremonial sites for Aboriginal peoples to practice their traditions within City limits. We've committed to telling a more authentic Aboriginal story in Fort Edmonton Park. And soon, Alex Janvier's beautiful mosaic will come to life in our new winter garden.

All of this has been important.

But when Elder Gary Moostoos was confronted in City Centre Mall last October, we realized just how far we still have to go on this road to reconciliation.

How the mall reacted in the days and weeks after this event was a truly Edmonton kind of response. They accepted the responsibility. They built bridges. They committed to changing.

Was it perfect? No. But these are the profound moments that mark a change in our relationship with Aboriginal peoples in this city.

I see the surging, young population of First Nations, Metis and Inuit people as a very positive change pressure on our city. We can show the way for a new vision of a Canadian city that lives and breathes the treaty spirit.

There are other change pressures that are less inspiring but no less essential.

We continue to invest more money on resurfacing and rebuilding our roads. In fact, this year alone, we'll invest close to \$450 million on hundreds of roads, bridges, sidewalks and interchanges.

But there are clear warning signals, much like the 1915 telegram from Rocky Mountain House, that trouble is on its way.

As you saw this winter, our freeze/thaw cycles are occurring with greater frequency, causing more potholes. Our summer storms are more violent, which means we need to spend more money upgrading our drainage system to accommodate the dramatic increase in water levels. Make no mistake: climate change is a clear and present threat to our cities and we are not prepared to deal with it.

The proposed Energy Transition Strategy comes again before Council in two days and it offers us a critical decision point: do we continue patching the roads and upsizing the pipes — or do we actually start solving the problem?

Within the strategy are ambitious goals to reduce our city's greenhouse gas emissions by 35 per cent and cut our energy use by 25 per cent a person, by 2035. These targets can't be met by a single action but through many: like generating our own heat and power through proven district energy systems, creating a more efficient urban form, and making it easier to choose sustainable transportation options.

These aren't outlandish ideas. They merely allow us to keep pace with what other cities around the world are already doing.

Recently, I was in South Korea attending a global congress on cities and sustainability, and it became clear that we are well behind other cities when it comes to adapting to the challenges of a changing planet. While we are still leading the way in waste management and biodiversity, there is room to do more.

Much more.

There is no question that our approaches must be aligned with other governments. The opportunity for them is simple yet profound.

By integrating our plans, we can improve our country's reputation and demonstrate that Alberta and Canada are serious about tackling climate change. Our Energy Transition Strategy

recognizes the important role Edmonton can play in changing a conversation that has — for too long — hurt the way the world sees us.

We know that Edmontonians alone cannot save the world from itself. But when those waters rose back in 1915, no one stood on the riverbanks and asked whose job it was to fix the problem. They simply rolled up their sleeves and got to work.

Cities are increasingly the places where the work is getting done. We're the agents of change in Canada and, today, we matter more than ever.

Because cities are the crossroads where resources and creativity intersect, we become thriving labs where ideas reach their tipping point and become reality. Nowhere is that more true than in Edmonton.

We know this about our city and, through Edmonton's Open City initiative, we are looking at new ways of improving the efficiency of city services, and enhancing your ability to co-create Edmonton right alongside us. Under Open City, we continue to expand the data we're making available, partially to help you make better business decisions, but also to trigger innovations and create connections where none existed before.

This initiative also provides us with a canvas to do things like Open Lab, a new partnership with Startup Edmonton that aims to solve municipal challenges in a more entrepreneurial way.

When I was elected, I challenged city staff to explore opportunities for innovation, improvement and greater efficiency. Last year, we found nearly \$15 million that was reinvested in new services without having to raise taxes. But we've also started a broader conversation about how ideas can come directly from the shop floor and put into practice.

Ideas like ETS supervisor Neil Gaske's invention that cleans snow and ice from LRT crossings, saving us hundreds of thousands of dollars in staff time as well as wear and tear on the City's equipment.

My hope is that, every year, stories like Neil's become more commonplace and we use the wisdom of our staff to continue finding better, more cost-effective ways of serving Edmontonians.

We know we don't get everything right, and we understand the high expectations you have for us. But for every bent girder or late steel shipment, we paved hundreds of kilometres of new roads without incident.

Last year alone, we completed the new Clareview and Meadows recreation centres, opened the Highlands library and expanded the Valley Zoo — all on time and on budget.

This Council is one of the most balanced, skilled and constructive groups of people I've worked with, and we're all committed to delivering City services in the best way possible.

Two weeks ago, for example, we reduced our effective tax increase by over two per cent, recognizing the challenges your households might be facing. This makes it one of the lowest tax increases residents have seen in a decade. This decision by Council ensured we took only what was absolutely necessary, and not a penny more.

And this kind of approach is what you can expect from this council going forward.

One hundred years ago, Edmontonians worked together to solve a very real and immediate problem.

Today, we must talk about working together in a different kind of way — specifically, how we partner with other orders of government.

I want to be clear about what partnership means to me. It means that both parties recognize their mutual interest in achieving something great together.

If we want to build a strong and resilient Alberta, we need a strong and resilient Edmonton. If we want to diversify our economy, we must recognize that our urban areas are where diversification is happening.

A provincial government that sees advantage in working with municipalities — where the government is closest to the people — is a provincial government that will achieve results.

We've taken some important steps in our city charter talks so far, and it's my expectation that once the election is concluded — no matter the outcome — the provincial government will continue the important work that has already been started.

To abandon or shortchange the charter work would be to miss the chance for Edmonton to be a true partner in building this province.

For example, if we want to reduce greenhouse gases, improve air quality, and keep people and goods moving, give Edmonton the ongoing funding required to build our LRT. Because we can deliver results.

If Alberta wants to end homelessness, give us the responsibility and the resources necessary to get to the finish line. Because Edmonton has shown we do deliver results.

If, as a province, we want to manage healthcare costs, invest in our ability to provide recreational opportunities, preventative social services and early childhood programming. Because Edmonton will help deliver results.

Every time we've risen above a flood, a tornado, a recession or — for that matter — a playoff drought, we've shown just how strong, how resilient our city truly is.

That's because this city is filled with people who stand up for Edmonton every day. Many of you are in this room today — the business and community leaders who bring Edmonton's new story to life.

Edmonton is too important to Alberta's future to be ignored ... there's no flood big enough to change that.

That's why I'm confident ... that no matter what Albertans decide on May 5 ... together — you, along with our City Council — will not stand for any provincial government ever forgetting about Edmonton again ... thank you.