

2021 State of the City Address
Edmonton Mayor Don Iveson
May 5, 2021



Hello, and it's a pleasure to be here. In this empty ballroom. But I'm glad you're staying home and staying safe. That's how it needs to be right now.

I didn't have the opportunity to speak with you last year due to obvious reasons. But I'm going to resist the temptation to make up for the lost time with a speech that's twice as long.

Given that it's the last time I'll have the privilege of delivering a State of the City address, I hope you'll indulge me as I do a bit of taking stock.

When I delivered this address for the first time, seven years ago, I said there was a new consensus emerging here: that Edmonton can be one of the best places to take a risk, to innovate, to launch ideas.

And that, with some strategic city-building, we could help bring that consensus to life in tangible ways that march us forward.

I stand here today, confident that we've done that. More than ever before, we're building something extraordinary here on the banks of the North Saskatchewan.

When I use the word "we", I don't mean just city hall. I mean all of us.

Don't get me wrong. There are things I'm proud of from my time as mayor.

One of the most significant is building out the LRT network.

There's the building we've actually done — the new Valley Line Southeast, which is rapidly taking shape. There's the building we're commencing: the Valley Line West and the Metro Line deeper into Blatchford. And the planning and engineering we've done to make the south extension into Heritage Valley shovel-ready. Plus, securing long-term federal funding means we can cross the Yellowhead and go northwest to Castledowns.

Between all of this, we've done more during the past seven years to build out the LRT network than any mayor and council have done in the history of this city put together. And we've managed to do this while maintaining a strong balance sheet.

We've built beautiful bridges. We've replaced libraries in many corners of the city, not just downtown. Using evidence, we're flood-mitigating areas based on risk, and repairing neighbourhood roads and sidewalks based on condition, as opposed to prioritizing based on socioeconomic power and privilege or whom people voted for.

And we've kept our infrastructure program intact in spite of Covid and multiple provincial cutbacks so we can support jobs and prevent the city from falling behind again. And we made good on a tax freeze for all ratepayers. This is particularly significant, given how this once-in-a-century-scale pandemic has caused upheaval for civic finances — just as it has for many Edmontonians.

We were one of the first cities in Canada to make changes to the municipal budget in response to Covid. This involved tough decisions about trimming costs and reducing the workforce, while still directing grants and cutting red tape from parking to patios to help the business community weather the economic impact.

Edmontonians ought to know that, by every professional measure, the City of Edmonton has more than made the grade on financial management. In fact, S&P has maintained the City's AA credit rating, noting we have proactively and effectively managed the Covid roller coaster.

So there are certainly things I'm proud of — yes.

But when I say we are building something extraordinary here, I'm talking about the great people of this city. The spirit and achievements of Edmontonians. Because, as I've said many times, you are the real city builders.

At best, as mayor, you find yourself carrying the hopes and concerns, the dreams and the fears of a million people. It's unlike anything else I can describe.

And doing that, in this day and age, comes with some unique challenges. But it also means getting to meet thousands of remarkable people — to be inspired by their work, their service, and their decency ... to share in the celebration of their accomplishments and triumphs and sometimes to be moved in their loss and suffering. Altogether, and I mean all together, to feel community.

To hold our city's heart in one's hands.

And, through all those moments, I've witnessed and felt it over and over the unique and earnest spirit, heart, and ambition of Edmontonians ... of the kind of city we are building and yet aspire to be ... a transformation in energy, and possibility, and in pride.

There's Connie Stacey, who founded Growing Green Innovations here in Edmonton, bringing her IT experience to bear on battery technology. Her company's mission is to end energy poverty in the world, and she's getting North America-wide attention and support for her technology, including a U.S. Defense Innovation Award. Her company's blend of purpose, energy know-how, and innovation is very Edmonton.

Take the folks at Bitcoin Well, and their founder Adam O'Brien. He started in 2013 when many hadn't even heard the word "cryptocurrency"... saying, "we're going to help people understand it and help bring it to the mainstream". And then proceeded to bring some of the first bitcoin ATMs into Alberta and Saskatchewan. Now, eight years later, they've got over 100 machines across Canada. They've staked out a unique leadership position in buying and selling digital currency. And Adam's in the process of moving his growing team to a new 35,000 square foot headquarters ... right downtown.

James Kierstead of Levven Electronics started out manufacturing hot tubs. As their tub control systems grew in sophistication, they branched into wireless control for industrial and residential light and power. And they expanded their factory here, adding to our advanced manufacturing base. Levven's shown that you can pivot from what you're making today, to something new. Something different.

But these stories of leadership have increasingly become the norm rather than the exception. We're looking ahead. And thinking differently.

We seem to have this outsized capacity to make things better — often out of step with established norms or the traditional way of thinking in Alberta.

Take the case of Chandos construction, one of Edmonton's first B-corps, employee-owned and dedicated to changing the way things get built ... such that, instead of handing off work from designer to engineer to builder to client, everyone sits around the table at each stage of the project to collaborate. This approach helped to deliver the Mosaic Centre, Canada's first net-zero commercial building. And as business was slowing in Alberta, this proud Edmonton company got hungry and expanded hard into BC and Ontario.

Or Backbeat, for instance, a music school founded by Dan and Nella Sabo. They reflected on their experience as kids and realized it hadn't changed much. They figured that someone had to break the mold and they went about doing just that. At Backbeat, kids can join a band, take creative risks and build a sense of community.

On top of that, the Sabos made a conscious choice to locate their family business centrally, on the eastern side of Whyte Avenue amidst all the culture and history of the district. It's also a gathering area for people experiencing homelessness, which has gotten more complicated in Covid. They noticed that when Mustard Seed opened up the nearby Cessco shelter over the winter, a safe place for people meant less disorder in the district.

Nella joined a business community housing town hall I hosted last week and added her strong voice to community-wide calls for proper supportive housing for vulnerable Edmontonians. The Sabos see the merit in addressing the root causes of homelessness from both a practical and compassionate perspective. They know that tackling systemic causes with supportive housing will restore vulnerable Edmontonians' health and dignity, and will help our main streets — and that's good for their business.

If we look after each other better, everybody wins.

All these examples reflect a heartwarming truth about Edmontonians: We want to make each other better. Make our neighbourhoods better. Make our city better.

We want to lift each other.

I don't think it's a coincidence that the first president of the University of Alberta spoke about "the uplifting of the whole people". That was 113 years ago. Even way back then, it was a touchstone in the hearts and minds of Edmontonians.

What else are we here for... if not to uplift one another?

Which reminds me of Bishop Jane Alexander, who recently retired as Bishop of the Anglican Diocese. I got to know her as co-chair of our Task Force to Eliminate Poverty. I can still hear Jane offering the following bit of clarity: we shouldn't stand for anything other than *ending* poverty ... because, if it's within our means to end want in our community, it's morally indefensible to be tolerant of anything less than doing so.

Another leader and dear friend whom I respect for moving hearts and minds is Gary Moostoos, the respected Cree elder who was kicked out of City Centre Mall in 2014. He

was saddened by what happened but used the opportunity to make the case gently and also with unshakable moral clarity — for better training and compassion in supporting vulnerable Indigenous people. He made a huge impact on the mall's thoughtful and compassionate response. And we took his calls to heart when designing our workplace Indigenous awareness and reconciliation training for all city employees.

Or Susan McGee who, as CEO of Homeward Trust, has relentlessly advocated for, cajoled and championed work to end homelessness in our city. She's put incalculable hours into the cause of moving Edmontonians out of homelessness and into housing stability putting them on life-changing pathways. Her team and their partner agencies have housed 12,467 human beings using the housing-first model, as of yesterday — 1,960 since the beginning of the pandemic.

We have not ended chronic homelessness — yet. But we can. It's happening every day, one life at a time.

Because we are here to uplift everyone. But not everyone is included yet.

Which is why, as Edmontonians, we must continue to lean into these uncomfortable conversations. We need to take meaningful steps to dismantle inequity. Because it's the only way to move forward together and build a stronger city. An inclusive city — one that's equitable and safe for everyone. I know that Edmontonians can do this. I know that you want this kind of city for your kids and your neighbours. I know because I am reminded of our commitment to inclusion all the time.

We saw this again, this past year, when we lost Joey Moss — someone we will never forget. Joey's story is emblematic of how we are tied together. Not only through love of sport or passion for a team, but through human values of care and compassion and humility and citizenship. It was so Edmonton that Joey dropped the first puck at Rogers Place because he spoke directly to our hearts and served as a beaming example that every person in this community belongs.

And even during the darkest and bleakest of times, we connect and fashion a strong sense of community where we can reflect together, grow closer together and comfort one another.

But that doesn't happen on its own. It takes people like Reza Akbari from the Iranian Heritage Society of Edmonton who led, with such grace, amidst his own grief, the community response to the Ukrainian Airlines tragedy — exemplifying the spirit that keeps heritage alive and community strong. For those of you who attended or watched

it, I'm sure that, like me, you'll never forget the memorial at the Saville Centre attended by Edmontonians from every walk of life, who showed their support. It wasn't just a University tragedy, or an Iranian community tragedy, it was a Canadian tragedy.

Even in the face of unbelievable tragedy, we are here to uplift one another.

The Covid-19 pandemic offers too many stories in that vein. But even as we continue to slog through the third wave and suffer the loss of friends and loved ones ... even as we count the empty storefronts and hear of more job losses, I know that we'll get through this.

Because we just do the work. We could use more help on certain fronts. But sometimes you need to make your own investments to deliver your own results.

For example, we need to keep the momentum going for downtown, both for construction jobs and to add more residential population to support street life and demand for service. So I'm pleased to report that our recent Covid construction incentives are spurring at least five more high-density residential projects to go ahead this year, supporting over 1,300 jobs. There're more applications under review — so we can see that our strategy is working.

We can see this in the tech sector growing in our backyard. In 2020 alone, more than \$246 million of capital flowed into our region's tech companies.

And with the restructuring of Innovate Edmonton and injection of new resources to support our tech economy, Council is stepping up to entrepreneurs' call for help.

This is the beginning of something exciting: Edmonton's next big act.

And we're not starting from scratch. After all, we've seen Google's Deep Mind choosing to locate its first international artificial intelligence research lab here, drawn by the widely recognized talent and work of the U of A and the ecosystem around it.

And on the health and bio front, there's Entos Pharmaceuticals which has pioneered a made-in-Edmonton, DNA-based Covid vaccine that's now in Phase 1 clinical trials. That's happening right next door to Dr. Michael Houghton's Nobel Prize-winning work on Hepatitis C.

It isn't by accident these things are happening in Edmonton. There's a reason for it.

Vision and pride in Edmonton made this happen. Years of sustained investment in talent and research made this happen. It is this indomitable spirit that no amount of austerity can cut away. But imagine what more we could do — what Edmonton could be — with a willing provincial partner.

Nevertheless, we persevere. Control what we can control. Influence what we can influence.

For instance, we have long laboured to build peace and co-prosperity in our backyard. From new collaborations with indigenous governments and organizations on tourism and economic development, to linking arms with municipalities in the Edmonton Metro Region: we are redefining the possible for economic development.

Specifically, last month's announcement around our new collaborative economic development pact is a tremendous step forward. It finally, on paper, recognizes the reality that our 13 municipalities' fortunes are bound together.

Now, you've all earned a short break from me. This short video deciphers the significance of what I'm talking about.

Where we live, work and play aren't limited by municipal boundaries, and our opportunities shouldn't be either. For years, I've been championing a borderless, metropolitan approach to planning, services, infrastructure, and economic development. This matters for attracting industrial investment and the jobs our region needs — now, more than ever, as part of Covid recovery.

It's far too easy, especially in a climate of scarcity, to look at everything as a zero-sum game. But we've worked hard to shake that off. And our collaboration is night and day compared to eight years ago.

None of this has been easy. And it wouldn't have happened without leaders who worked hard with me during my time as mayor in bringing about a new era of collaboration in our region ... too many to list all, but a few stand out.

Mayor Cathy Heron from St. Albert, who's been a true champion of the regional growth plan for higher density and more efficient growth.

Mayor Alana Hnatiw from Sturgeon County, who has positioned us to be a big winner in the hydrogen boom I'll talk more about in a minute.

Fort Saskatchewan Mayor Gale Katchur, who's been a long champion of the regional transit commission and better regional transportation planning.

Mayor Rod Shaigec from Parkland County, who sees the value in preserving agricultural land and building our food economy, and has been unwavering on ESG issues like climate change.

And Mayor Stuart Houston from Spruce Grove, who has been relentlessly making the case for united promotion of the Edmonton Metro Region for more than a decade, and helped to form Edmonton Global.

Altogether, we are now set to build an Edmonton Metro Region that is easier to get around — that's better for business, that grows more strategically, and that makes room for, and uplifts, everyone of us together.

That's a region poised to reach for big opportunities like hydrogen. Thanks to our unique energy assets, decades of energy expertise, plentiful feedstocks of natural gas, good geology for CO2 storage plus the Alberta Carbon Trunk Line — that's a very powerful value proposition for building a global hydrogen hub.

This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to evolve and expand our energy industry and write the next major chapter of Northern Alberta's economic story. It's a \$100 billion export opportunity because of the Paris Agreement and ESG imperative. So let's seize it.

Ultimately, on all fronts, our most outstanding advantage is our people — that we're young, educated and we're growing.

Together, that's a recipe for enduring success. For brashness, one could say. For being willing to buck trends, or start new ones. And for tackling problems and pursuing ideas with a why-the-hell-not kind of attitude.

As I reflect on my time as mayor, I think that's a big part of the reason I feel very privileged to have served in this role. Not just because I have a passion for city-building — but because of what local democracy still represents to me. It's the politics of the possible — which is in short supply these days.

It's also the politics of getting on with it, and getting things done without worrying about getting the credit — especially during a global pandemic.

Still, I do hope Edmontonians have some sense of just how hard your City has worked for you through this crisis. From the frontlines to the heart-wrenching decisions, we never stopped working.

We're still tackling homelessness. Poverty. Mental health. Systemic racism. The role of police. Regional collaboration. Economic development. Climate change. Democracy. And yes, streets and roads and sidewalks.

These are serious issues to tackle. They require focus and serious people to solve them. We cannot let ourselves be distracted from these matters in this fall's elections. Maybe I'm a little close to it, but I think Edmontonians deserve a council and mayor committed to carrying on the work that has been started. You deserve a council that is wise, diverse, substantive and caring.

Lazy thinking isn't going to cut it. I'm of the view that citizens can be entrusted with the full picture. And they have the ability to judge for themselves.

Mischief thrives in confusion. And lies thrive in darkness.

That's why I've been a champion of our open government efforts. I'm proud to say that, for the fifth consecutive year, Edmonton has been named the most open city in Canada, and, for the first time, in North America.

Because when you shine a light on what's actually going on, people can have intelligent debate. They can see for themselves.

That's the power of open data. It's not a flash in the pan. It's not about winning an award. It's about transparency for the benefit of an informed citizenry. So that we can have informed debate. So that we can answer with evidence-based solutions. So that we can have a better city. And that leads to opportunity.

The pandemic has shown us that we can do certain jobs from anywhere, and that includes those highly sought-after jobs in software and coding and machine learning.

Our kids and our grandkids are going to choose to live in a place that offers a great quality of life. A place that offers a great public education. A place with a reputation for inclusion and openness and transparency. A place that is relevant in a globally competitive world where upwards of \$30 to 40 trillion in assets worldwide are now being managed for sustainable investment.

As a city and a province that depend on international investment for big-ticket items like energy assets, we must grapple with this reality.

Personally I'd rather ride that wave than be crushed by it. Which is why our energy transition plan is as much a plan for jobs as it is a climate response.

By 2050, Edmonton will have balanced its carbon budget, transitioned to net-zero emissions, and generated a new era of economic development along the way anchored in our long-standing connection to energy, but with a dynamic and strategic position in new energy markets.

Our community is already pursuing these pathways.

Notably Edmonton International Airport, which is only Canada's third organization and the world's first airport to sign the international climate pledge. They're on track to be net-zero by 2040.

Stantec, headquartered in downtown's Ice District, has pledged to achieve carbon neutrality by 2022 on its path to ultimately net-zero status across its vast global operations by 2030. And they have the technical leadership others will need to make this transition with.

Or take longtime leader Reza Nasserri, who founded Landmark Homes decades ago. Even after establishing the company, he's not been content to coast. Instead, he's continually innovated when it comes to delivering net-zero homes — and, all along, being a strong, tireless supporter of community causes, including giving millions to the U of A's Nasserri School of Building Science and Engineering. He's laying the groundwork to grow generations to come of pioneers, innovators, dreamers and entrepreneurs.

And we've got a whole new generation of developers who are wholeheartedly embracing the concept of sustainable and emissions-neutral building. People like Tegan Martin-Drysdale who, years ago, presented to City Council on what would eventually become Blatchford.

Fast forward many years later, there's Tegan, sitting in one of the beautiful net-zero townhomes that she has built on the Blatchford site. She didn't just call for change. She believed in the opportunity. She saw a need and she started up a company to build it.

This is Edmonton today.

Youthful, energetic, adventurous, unconventional.

Edmonton has found its voice. We're carving out our niche. It has endured and it'll endure. We're going to rise out of this pandemic, assuming a clever, captivating and confident place in Canada.

Edmonton's success is tied to so much more than the price of oil.

Think about everything I've talked about in ESG terms. On the environment, we're serious. In terms of social inclusion, our uplifting spirit is in our DNA. And on governance, we're high in trust and out front on open government. That's for investors.

But if you're a young person today thinking about where to build your life and chase your dream and start your family, there is no better place in Canada to do that today than the Edmonton Metro Region.

Most of all, because you'll get to be part of these unique, incredible, inspiring and community-building stories.

It's been an absolute pleasure and honour serving as mayor of Edmonton.

I truly love this city. I'm proud of Edmonton and Edmontonians. I'm excited about the next great chapter of our region's story and evolution.

And, to Edmontonians, I say this: thank you for giving me the chance to lead such an industrious, inventive and incredible group of people. You have challenged me. You have inspired me. You have helped me grow as a person. And you will forever have a special place in my heart.

I'll repeat what I said seven years ago: Edmontonians are the real city builders

My final message?

Keep on building.