

Mayor wants better, faster planning

New council warned about rising costs and project delays

Gordon Kent

The Edmonton Journal

Wednesday, October 24, 2007

EDMONTON - Mayor Stephen Mandel warned Tuesday that Edmonton won't be able to complete a long list of essential projects unless the city finds better ways to plan and pay for them.

Work on proposals, such as an LRT line to NAIT and a new downtown bridge over the North Saskatchewan River, must move ahead more quickly, he told several hundred people watching the new council be sworn in at City Hall.

"Council approved the southwest recreation centre three years ago, but we still don't have a shovel in the ground, and frankly, that's just not good enough," he said.

"We need to look at different financial models, improved consultation processes and quicker, more cost-effective results for our citizens ... If we fail, the list of priority projects that will have to fall off the table is simply too big to contemplate."

The overheated Alberta economy is pushing up the cost of many construction projects by more than 20 per cent a year, with contractors often unable to find the staff and equipment they need.

The only acceptable bid this fall for the Terwillegar recreation centre sought more than the \$58-million budget, so managers are considering a public-private partnership to build the facility.

Mandel also continued his campaign to win Edmonton a better deal from the province, repeating concerns the city is being shortchanged under the government's recent 10-year infrastructure funding program.

As well, he pushed Premier Ed Stelmach to carry through on his vow to improve the way the capital region functions, arguing Edmonton faces expenses for transit, homelessness and other services that should be the responsibility of the entire area.



CREDIT: Candace Elliott, The Journal
 Mayor Stephen Mandel, left, and new councillor Amarjeet Sohi share at the ceremony.

"The premier has promised that he will finally deal with these long-standing issues and we will hold him to this promise, because opt-in and opt-out responsibility doesn't work in a region that needs to share challenges and success," Mandel said.

"The economy that attracts major industry here does not come for a population base of 83,000 people (the size of Strathcona County). It is attracted to a population base that is one million people and growing."

Politicians and bureaucrats from Edmonton and 23 surrounding communities have been given a January deadline to come up with plans for handling the area's infrastructure and social services needs and a new regional political system to manage growth.

However, Strathcona County Mayor Cathy Olesen said in a speech following last week's election that she's done with talk of "regional dysfunction," saying the Alberta Capital Region Alliance which Edmonton quit last year had plans to work on these issues.

"Mayor Mandel's scheme was to create a regional crisis and have the province impose a regional government. Edmonton would have control of our planning and have access to our property taxes," she told the Sherwood Park Chamber of Commerce last week.

"But through a calm, creative strategy with our regional partners we were able to demonstrate to the province what was going on.

"The province has since ordered Edmonton back to the regional planning table. Regional government is off the table."

Although Mandel insists the government's new \$11.3-billion funding program will shortchange Edmonton by \$400 million over the next decade,

Olesen called it a "generous reinvestment in municipalities."

She hopes it will "wipe away" the possibility of property transfer, entertainment and other new taxes suggested by Mandel, Calgary Mayor Dave Bronconnier and other civic leaders in a report last winter.

gkent@thejournal.canwest.com

FOR THE RECORD

Read the full text of Strathcona County Mayor Cathy Olesen's Oct.17 speech.

Go to Online Extras at edmontonjournal.com

© The Edmonton Journal 2007

CLOSE WINDOW

Copyright © 2007 CanWest Interactive, a division of [CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.](#) All rights reserved.