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Edmonton Social Planning Council

Social policy and the 2004 civic election

ELECTION BULLETIN October 2004

What kind of civic leadership and vision does Edmonton need to tackle the city's social deficit and build a healthy, just, and inclusive city?

The Edmonton Social Planning Council is publishing this election bulletin to highlight the social issues facing this city. To provide some 'big picture' perspective we hear from two local experts (see pages 1 & 4). We also profile four major issues that will need to be dealt with by the next city council (see pages 2 & 3).

Leadership, Choices and Edmonton's Social Deficit

by *Judith A. Garber, Associate Professor of Political Science, University of Alberta*

Edmonton's mayor and council members can make a meaningful contribution to resolving the city's social deficit. They must first acknowledge that such a deficit exists. Edmonton has undergone a period of rapid growth, where the city's population has become more diverse and its social needs more pressing. Once this is acknowledged, then the mayor and councillors must make a collective political investment in issues such as affordable housing and civic engagement that comes close to the attention they give to road-building and cat licensing.

Like all Canadian cities, Edmonton is legally and constitutionally constrained in its ability to marshal resources to address complex problems located even within its boundaries – e.g. child poverty in inner-city neighborhoods. Cities are also limited by conditions that originate across governmental boundaries or levels – e.g. sprawling development or settling immigrants. Such issues are impossible for a city to resolve, since no single actor can produce intergovernmental coordination.

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Help Wanted: A City Council With a Social Conscience

by *Allan Bolstad, retiring City Councillor*

One of my goals in each civic election was to spend a considerable amount of time door knocking in the poorest parts of the constituency. Not that this was a very smart move politically. In fact, as I went from house to apartment to house in the Delwood and Spruce Avenue communities of Ward 2, I was acutely aware that very few of these people were likely to vote. Few of them knew that an election was underway. Few of them knew who I was, despite the fact I had been in office a number of years already. And a good percentage had little interest in local government.

But I made a point of going up and down these streets anyway. Why? I knew these areas needed help. I felt it was important that I see and hear first hand about the problems these people were facing, and what they thought needed to be done.

There is no question our city has growing social problems. The big challenge, of course, is to find some ways to address these issues. For that, I look back on the successes the city has had in developing various partnerships. I remember about 10

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15.4% of Edmonton families are living below the low income cutoffs

26% of Edmonton children aged 12 and under live in low-income families
Federation of Canadian Municipalities, Quality of Life Report, 2004

Aboriginal people make up 5% of Edmonton's population. But 34.6% of children in the child welfare system are aboriginal, 28% of the young offenders are aboriginal, and the unemployment rate for aboriginal people is 14%, twice the rate of the population as a whole.

Statistics Canada, 2001

Edmonton's infrastructure and social deficits

In addition to physical infrastructure that supports daily life – roads, sewers, electricity and communications systems – cities need a strong social foundation that fosters health and well-being.

Caledon Institute of Social Policy, Commentary, 2002

The City of Edmonton pays out \$88.3 million for services which are not properly its responsibility, or for which the province inadequately compensates the City.

City of Edmonton, *Pillars of Urban Sustainability: New Fiscal Deal*, www.edmonton.ca

81% of Albertans believe that the federal government should assist cities/municipalities even though municipalities are creatures of the provinces

84% of Albertans want cities/municipalities to receive more revenue from a portion of the revenue collected by federal and provincial governments

COMPAS poll, May 2004

Canadian municipalities should be able to levy a wider range of taxes than they are currently permitted to. A mix of taxes would give municipalities more autonomy and flexibility to meet the demands for services and capital infrastructure.

Special Study: *New Finance Options for Municipal Governments*, Canadian Tax Journal, 2003, Vol.51, No.6

It's become widely known that cities such as Edmonton are faced with a "sustainability crisis." Cities no longer have enough money to pay for all the municipal services expected by their citizens. "A major gap is developing between the responsibilities of municipalities and their revenues," says the City of Edmonton's 2003 Annual Report.

The main focus has been on the infrastructure deficit – crumbling and aging roads, sidewalks, sewers, and public transit systems. There are voices however pointing to the equally troublesome social deficit – "severe social inequality, homelessness, and unsafe neighbourhoods" (John Sewell, *A New City Agenda*, 2004).

The social deficit has been acknowledged (as recently as this summer) by both Edmonton and Calgary City Councils in a joint report sent to the provincial government. "As the provincial government has now eliminated its debt, both Cities are looking for provincial investment to address matters such as ... support for low income Albertans." The cities specifically asked the province to increase welfare, AISH, and minimum wage rates and to create a transit subsidization program for low income Albertans (Joint Edmonton-Calgary report, *Sustaining the Alberta Advantage: A call for provincial investment in Calgary and Edmonton*, July 2004). These city leaders understand that large numbers of low income people puts a strain on city resources and impacts on the city's sustainability.

New deal for cities

Coming to the rescue of the cities is the highly promoted "new deal for cities," a federal government commitment to "make available, for the benefit of municipalities, a portion of the federal gas tax, growing over the next five years" (Speech from the Throne, Ottawa, Oct. 5, 2004). Edmonton, along with the other major cities in Canada, is lobbying to have Ottawa implement a five cent per litre federal fuel tax sharing agreement, and to have that in place by the 2005 federal budget.

What this new deal highlights is one of the core reasons why cities are facing a sustainability crisis in the first place: "property tax and other current revenue sources are insufficient to meet citizens' requirements for municipal services" (City of Edmonton, Communications Strategy, New Deal for Cities, August 2004). Edmonton City Council has begun to appeal to the province for legislation that will give the city "access to new municipal tax tools" (Joint Edmonton-Calgary report, *Sustaining the Alberta Advantage: A call for provincial investment in Calgary and Edmonton*, July 2004). And there are indications that the Alberta government may be receptive to such a change: "Through ongoing consultation and innovative policy, Alberta can be the first to offer municipalities a more diverse set of tax tools" (Alberta MLA Committee on Strengthening Alberta's Role in Confederation, August 2004).

There are some who are suggesting that along with the cities getting more diverse tax tools, they should also take over responsibility for major social areas. "Canada's large urban regions could manage a great deal more than they do now, in fact, most of what a province does, ie. health and education" (Caledon Institute of Social Policy, Commentary, June 2002).

Affordable Housing and Homelessness

Edmonton Homeless Count
836 in 1999
1,915 in 2002
The next homeless count will be held
October 19, 2004

37.9% of Edmonton renters spend
more than 30% of their income on
shelter
17.4% of Edmonton renters spend
more than 50% of their income on
shelter
Federation of Canadian Municipalities,
Quality of Life Report, 2004

During the past decade while federal and provincial governments were pre-occupied with deficit and debt retirement, social housing programs were virtually abandoned. Cities have felt the impact directly, with a growing crisis of large numbers of homeless people and a lack of affordable housing for low income families and individuals. Cities such as Edmonton have simply not been in a position to finance this "downloading" from the other orders of government (who share a constitutional and historical responsibility for housing).

Only recently has social housing once again seen a commitment of dollars by the federal and provincial governments.

Local and national housing groups are pressing for much more significant financial help, in the order of one percent of federal and provincial budgets being dedicated to housing. And City of Edmonton officials are advocating for long term sustainable funding, as they point out: "the Province's 2004/05 provincial budget continued to focus on capital expenditures for the delivery of affordable housing, without providing dedicated and sustainable funding to support the operation of these projects" (Joint Edmonton-Calgary report, *Sustaining the Alberta Advantage: A call for provincial investment in Calgary and Edmonton*, July 2004).

An Inclusive or Exclusive City

We want our cities to be more than engines of economic growth. We want our governments to focus on more than physical infrastructure. We'll be calling for an urban agenda with a social dimension.
Christa Frieler, National Coordinator, Inclusive Cities Canada,
Toronto Star, Sept. 3, 2004

Despite the constraints facing cities in dealing with the social (and infrastructure) crisis, civic leaders cannot avoid the reality that citizens look to their local governments to provide the basics of urban life: accessible and safe roads, sidewalks, neighbourhoods, community services, etc. "Municipal governments provide services that are fundamental to quality of life" (City of Edmonton, Communications Strategy, New Deal for Cities, August 2004).

The full scope of local responsibility is being mapped by a new initiative being conducted by the Edmonton Social Planning Council (and four other social planning council's across the country). The initiative – Inclusive Cities Canada – is exploring the extent to which cities are inclusive or exclusive places. The question being asked in over 20 focus groups and community soundings is: are all citizens of Edmonton included and able to participate in the city's social and economic life?

And while the answers have not always been positive (in other words people in this city are being excluded in one way or another), the suggestions for change are concrete and by-and-large achievable (in contrast to tackling the complex financial sustainability crisis). A small example is how some people experience fear of youth just 'hanging out'; a suggested solution is to provide more recreational and social outlets for those youth. Such an inclusive approach may offer a positive tool for finding achievable solutions for the city's problems, while at the same time creating a city where all citizens are included.

Today, a nation's competitive advantage is directly related to the performance of its cities, not just economically, but socially and culturally.

Canadian Policy Research Networks, 2004

52% of Albertans live in either Calgary or Edmonton

90% of new Albertans settle in the two largest cities to take advantage of the high growth in employment found there

Joint Edmonton-Calgary report, *Sustaining the Alberta Advantage: A call for provincial investment in Calgary and Edmonton*, July 2004

The Calgary-Edmonton Corridor has a GDP per capita of nearly US\$40,000 ... this is about 10 percent above the average of U.S. metropolitan areas, and a striking 40 percent above its Canadian colleagues ... (however) there is evidence that the rising tide in the region is not lifting all boats equally. Wage increases for low income individuals and welfare incomes have not been rising adequately to counter sharp increases in housing costs, leading to a growing problem of affordable housing.

TD Financial Group, 2003

Special Report, *The Calgary-Edmonton Corridor: Take Action Now to Ensure that the Tiger's Roar Doesn't Fade*

Leadership and Choices/ Judith Garber Continued from page 1

These limitations do not fully explain though, the fact that within the governing choices that are available, pressing the province and federal government for infrastructure funding for roads and stadiums has taken precedence over seeking funding to mitigate homelessness. Likewise, property tax increases are always treated as more unacceptable than addressing the increasing stress on public recreation facilities, two issues that fall equally within municipal authority.

Putting social issues on the local policy agenda cannot be the responsibility of a few members of city council working individually with community groups and nonprofits. Unfortunately, this situation has characterized Edmonton's recent councils. As well, an engaged, visionary mayor cannot substitute for the collective leadership of council (the election of which presupposes voters who themselves give priority to aspects of the social deficit and demand social inclusion).

Nonetheless, the mayor, as the elected official with a citywide mandate, must make it his/her central task the building of local and intergovernmental support for social inclusion policies. The importance of this role is highlighted at a moment when there is possibly greater federal receptiveness to urban needs than there has been in the quarter century since the abolishment of the federal Ministry of State for Urban Affairs. And Canada's cities are now loudly demanding a seat at the grownups table.

If the election fails to generate the leadership to direct a significant amount of the city's energies towards the social deficit, it will not be because council lacks the tools to do so.

Social Conscience/ Allan Bolstad Continued from page 1

years ago when city council debated whether to spend \$50,000 on a school hot lunch program. Together with other partners, that initiative has grown into a \$1.5 million program (the city's share is now about \$140,000) and goes a long way toward ensuring that young people from disadvantaged homes have something decent to eat so they can learn properly at school. A similar story is beginning to unfold with affordable housing, where the city's annual investment of \$1.3 million has turned into a multi-million dollar exercise (in partnership with the provincial and federal governments).

City Council is also able to lobby other orders of government, as it is currently doing on the issue of the minimum wage, asking the province to raise it to \$7/hour from its national low of \$5.90/hour. And despite its limited resources, Edmonton can sometimes go it alone as it did recently with lowering the monthly bus pass price for AISH recipients.

But all of these initiatives take some courage and commitment by members of City Council. They demand that members of council have some understanding of the social issues facing our community and the need to do something about it. And for that, members of council need to go looking. They need to door-knock in the poorer parts of town. They need to talk to people running homeless shelters. It's not likely to get them many votes. And that's a huge conundrum, given the workings of our political system. But you need councillors who are willing to do it, if you want a city that works for everyone.