



Mayor's Perspective: Downtown Vision

as presented at the
City Council Meeting
Monday, June 1, 2009

ST. ALBERT DOWNTOWN

This council has taken many bold steps in several areas of economic development. We have worked with the developers in South Riel. We have sold the corresponding lands to allow North Campbell to be developed. We have plans to deal with the study areas in the Northwest. We have worked with the many landowners in the north end of the city.

We have done many other things with respect to changing the myths and culture; whether it be marketing, branding or policies; we have done a lot.

We have begun work on the downtown vision and tonight is a great overview of what Council has heard from many and we are now more completely sharing it with the public. There is indeed much more to come.

Let me be perfectly clear; what I am going to share is certainly not Council's list of needed changes; as we have not agreed on one list of changes, but as Mayor, this is what I would like to share as we embark on more detailed planning for our downtown. I am very aware of the criticism and skepticism this may evoke. I am also acutely aware of the sense of responsibility that I have to provide leadership in the face of that same criticism.

As Harry Gaffney, one of the focus group individuals said "Council cannot be just a facilitator in this process. Council must become the innovators and the visionaries or this process will fail, if not struggle for years."

VISION STATEMENT

"Downtown St. Albert is an exciting, vibrant place where residents, visitors and businesses come together. It is a place to shop, celebrate history and the arts, and enjoy outstanding events and entertainment."

DOWNTOWN VISION EXPANDED

Downtown St. Albert is recognized as the centre of a well balanced, inviting and thriving community. It is the central gathering place and the heart of St. Albert. A mix of small city charm, big city amenities, community activities, recreation, and parks with a strong consideration for the environment and its heritage has established St. Albert's downtown as a "first choice" destination for business owners and patrons alike. Interactive maps, websites and brochures all show the entire interconnectivity of downtown and the community.

Attractive gateways frame each approach to the city center, hinting at the friendly atmosphere and unique character awaiting everyone within. This provides the visitor with a sense of place and belonging, and reveals the proud tradition of public and private investment that has made downtown St. Albert a convenient and desirable place to live, gather and do business. Signs leading to and from downtown make it easy to find and welcome visitors and residents. This provides a sense of arrival and departure. Signage within the downtown effectively directs and encourages residents and visitors to further explore our city.

In downtown St. Albert, the past and the present come together to form an engaging, vibrant sense in which one can celebrate the past while anticipating the future. Historically significant buildings have been preserved or artfully renovated for new uses. A healthy mixed-use approach is used that provides distinctive retail shops and quality commerce for everyone. These retail uses are predominant on the street level with offices and residences above. Housing options vary and satisfy the needs of residents who choose to live in the downtown.

Our downtown is home to St. Albert Place, which houses central government activities and provides for important services for St. Albert such as the library, arts guilds, a museum, a performing arts theatre, tourism needs, and other important cultural, heritage, and arts amenities and services.

Central gathering areas, numerous community events and activities allow residents and visitors to regularly enjoy time together. Downtown St. Albert is a place that evokes a sense of belonging. People want to be in downtown St. Albert.

Storefronts and sidewalks exhibit a colourful, inviting mixture of merchandise, flower-filled planters, benches and other amenities. The tree-lined streets and wide sidewalks in downtown St. Albert are visually appealing and pedestrian-friendly. Citizens stroll along the pleasantly lit streets and trails enjoying the shopping, arts and entertainment options amidst the public art, landscape schemes and tributes to the city's past. All this makes living in or a trip to downtown St. Albert enjoyable for people of all ages and backgrounds.

The Sturgeon River is clean and healthy and enjoyed year-round as it provides both winter and summer recreation activities. The adjacent parks are pristine, safe and utilized fully by residents and visitors. Trees have lighting, benches are abundant and green spaces are where summer relaxation is evident. Play and recreation areas form part of the river banks.

A complete and varied set of quality goods and services is offered by businesses in the walk-able downtown. Functional roads, accessible parking and public transit help maintain a steady stream of people throughout the day, and into the evening. Parking is provided in perimeter parking areas which are easily accessible but situated so as not to detract from the tightly woven, pedestrian-friendly character of St. Albert's downtown.

These features, coupled with a strong business retention and recruitment program, enable the St. Albert downtown to attract and retain tenants. Over time, numerous businesses have seen the value of choosing to locate in downtown St. Albert, and as retail offerings increase, so too do the number of shoppers and visitors.

Downtown St. Albert is the showcase for a community that values its businesses and its citizens. It is where some residents call home, and where others gather. Downtown St. Albert is, quite simply, a great place to be.

COUNCIL'S OBJECTIVES FOR THE NEXT PHASE OF DOWNTOWN WORK

1. Establish a geographic boundary for downtown that provides focus yet maximum potential for amenities, liveability and business.
2. Increase the desirability of our downtown as the place to live for people of all ages.
3. Create a mix of businesses that ensures growth and sustainability within our downtown.
4. Create a central gathering place that supports the downtown's year round attractions and events.
5. Offer convenient transportation connections to downtown that are safe, walk-able and accessible to all.
6. Establish an architectural theme in the downtown that captures the eclectic nature of St. Albert.
7. Strengthen the look and feel of the downtown through beautification, signage and infrastructure enhancements.
8. Improve the Sturgeon River as an attraction for year round activities.

MAYOR'S ASSERTIONS OF THE FUTURE DOWNTOWN

1. Geographical Boundary

To allow for focus of resources and to provide greater clarity, it is my personal opinion that for the next 10 years the downtown geographical boundary should be defined as the area which includes Perron Street, St. Thomas Street, St. Joseph Street, St. Michael Street, St. Anne Street, Tache Street, Lions Park and Millennium Park. Furthermore, this area should be solidified as an Arts and Heritage District. As Roger Brooks said: "you only really need three city blocks to start – decide what to focus on and then do it".

2. Land Use

I believe that land use policies should be updated to reflect the desire to provide for improved downtown commerce while also continuing to make the downtown a desirable place to live.

3. St. Anne Street

It is my opinion that a traffic assessment should be done to see if we can redesign St. Anne Street, St. Thomas Street and Perron Street such that we can create an area that will become known as "*The Downtown Plaza.*" Intersections and other traffic changes would have to be reconstructed to reflect any possible changed traffic patterns. If possible, I would like to see us close St. Anne Street to motor vehicle traffic.

4. Perron Street

There have been several suggestions that Perron Street could be narrowed to allow for wider sidewalks, better shopping convenience, two lanes of traffic and accommodate angle parking. I would want the traffic assessment work we will do to review what can truly be done; in fact it likely cannot be done if St. Anne Street is closed.

5. St. Thomas Street

I also believe that St. Thomas Street is not conducive to good traffic flow and should be reconstructed to better serve traffic and parking.

6. St. Thomas Street City-owned Lot

There remains a large unanswered question as to whether any expanded St. Albert Place or City Hall needs to be at the site of the old RCMP building or the St. Thomas Street empty lot. I believe that perhaps the best use of financial resources is rather than a branch library being planned outside the city core, that the empty lot on St. Thomas Street (that the city owns) has the potential to become the home of a new library; relocating from St. Albert Place to this location to a 60,000 square foot area which could be double the existing size. Such a new building and new venue could also include some main floor commerce and perhaps substantial underground parking. As it will be several years before anything would be built in that area, I also suggest that between now and the time any use of that land is determined, that this lot should be transformed into a temporary parking lot.

Remember, if we want people downtown, having a larger improved library in this area will bring more people downtown. Just imagine what is possible.

In the mean time, the old RCMP building needs to be used by those who need it the most until its long-term future is determined. The fact that it still sits empty is unacceptable.

7. Parking

Realistically, limited surface parking will always be a challenge in the downtown core. Underground parking beneath the plaza and beneath the new library and civic building should be studied. We will also need to review the current parking agreements that exist in contracts with current businesses on Perron and St. Thomas Streets to ensure they are current and reflective of the needs to nurture economic and tourism development. As part of the overall plan, an update of the December 2000 Parking Technical Review is required.

8. St. Albert Place

St. Albert Place must remain un-altered and unchanged with respect to its architecture. As the building was intended when built, uses within it could allow for even more arts and cultural activities and amenities. I suggest that if a new library could be built in the downtown on the empty lot, which is something I propose, the current library location could then become home of a new museum, relocating from its existing location or even perhaps expanding the existing St. Albert museum.

9. Pedestrian and Transit

More pedestrian-friendly approaches should be included in all downtown changes such as the elimination of unnecessary curbs and the addition of sidewalk bulbs, lighting, signage, ramps etc. Transportation improvements should be made to enhance public transit use and walkability such as upgraded bus stop shelters and more bicycle parking racks.

10. Millennium Park

Changes to the tree line, access, egress and other inclusive-like changes should be made such that Millennium Park becomes an integral park within the downtown and a natural gateway to the Legion, the Seniors Centre, Lion's Park and the Sturgeon River. Millennium Park could become the downtown green space where outdoor activities occur and are coordinated from - for the downtown. Today it is isolated and unused and that must change. Changes in this area would embrace these aforementioned amenities and bring Tache Street more into the downtown core. Otherwise, this park could become a parkade or an outdoor amphitheater – but let's create a better use for this area.

11. Architectural Theme

Residences and businesses should be required to conform to an updated architectural theme. Storefronts should move toward perpendicular signage and canopies. Numerous standards would need to be included within a new set of architectural guidelines that provides for the continued brick and stucco appearances to the downtown – similar to that which has been constructed under the 1995 DARP (Downtown Area Redevelopment Plan).

12. Sidewalks

In my opinion, sidewalks should be widened and additional sidewalk bulbs be constructed. Sidewalks should be added near the court house and be changed substantially around St. Albert Place to allow for a Plaza design and configuration. Linkages to the Red Willow Trail system and Founders Walk will all need to be considerations in design and changes.

13. Civic Plaza

Either the existing parking lot east of St. Albert Place or Millennium Park should be converted into an open air plaza. If underground parking is a technically acceptable solution for downtown this civic plaza would allow for a great street level open space.

14. Amphitheater/Central Pavilion

A rain-protected amphitheater should be constructed in the Civic Plaza wherever it is constructed; my vision is either in the current parking lot or within Millennium Park.

15. Community Hall

The Profiles Art Gallery and the Community Hall “frame” the architecture of their time and should be protected. If the Community Hall is structurally and environmentally sound and if it is to be preserved and maintained as a heritage building, it should be integrated with the Profiles Gallery to provide for a larger area for art, and transform this area into an amenity where thousands will visit. The appearance of the building outside and inside would need to be upgraded and the parking enhanced.

16. Environment

Specific improvements that reflect environmental stewardship are necessary. More garbage receptacles, better foliage, improved drainage and significant signage improvements are all examples of what will need to be done downtown.

17. Sturgeon River

The study that is planned for the Sturgeon River will establish the plan for its future and the potential for summer or winter recreation will be determined once the overall river study is completed. Additionally, there are opportunities for “river edge” improvements within the downtown core that would allow for a more embracing approach of the river by the downtown. This should include lighting, a playground, more amenities and a revisit of the notion of river skating. We should even consider forming a “River Society” who could have such an impact on the river valley in many ways.

18. Public Art

Public Art must be added to further enhance and to articulate the downtown. Our past must be celebrated in part through art. Our branding must become more clearly articulated through our art and vice versa. Public buildings must better display our history and downtown businesses should consider displaying local art and historical photographs showcasing our past to everyone.

19. Heritage

As already agreed to, the *Community Recognition Tribute* and the *Founders Walk* will soon be constructed in our downtown and maintained as two additional infrastructural components that contribute to the celebration of our past.

20. Farmers' Market

Both the current indoor and outdoor Farmers' Markets need to continue in our downtown on Saturdays. Perhaps as the downtown becomes more vibrant, the number of days to operate the markets can actually increase.

21. Activities and Celebrations

Additionally, we need to add to the already popular downtown activities. The fireworks events, Rock 'n August, Art Walks, the Children's Festival and the Christmas Light-up are outstanding events and are not enough. Additional activities and festivals should be encouraged and planned for in the downtown. Even expansion and growth of these mentioned current activities will need to be encouraged and nurtured.

22. Street Furniture and Beautification

Functional and more artistic street furniture needs to be strategically added within the downtown. I suggest that we should engage businesses on how to beautify their businesses, both front and back.

23. Landscaping, maintenance and appearance standards

A "standards guide" should be developed to ensure a consistent standard of excellence in the overall appearance of the downtown. Snow, grass, tree and debris maintenance standards will need to be developed to allow for improved overall appearance, use and safety. As the opportunities present themselves, overhead power lines should continue to be moved underground in the future as we have in the past.

24. Signage within downtown

It is my opinion that a standard for all signage within the downtown needs to be developed such that signage is more visible, trilingual, effective, consistent, and reflective of the city branding. Shoddy signage and posters should no longer be

allowed in the downtown. Improved banners and signage for activities, venues, directions and education is all required.

25. Signage at Entrances

Entrance signage should be added that features the key entrances into the downtown. Any extra large signage should be reflective of the branding and such signage would establish clearly when one is entering or leaving the downtown. Specifically, signage at the intersection of St. Albert Trail and St. Anne Street is required. Signage on/off Sir Winston Churchill and downtown is required to distinguish the downtown area.

26. Boardwalk

While the boardwalk area is currently deemed to be a part of the downtown footprint, I do suggest no further work be done in this area at this time.

27. Buildings

Building height standards for the newly established boundaries will need to remain consistent in the years ahead with the same standards that are in place as of today. Views and vistas are important for both fronts and backs of buildings to celebrate equally the direction that the buildings face.

28. Ambiance

Christmas lights, tree lighting, art, lamp posts and other appearance-related improvements need to be implemented. Standards will need to be established for adherence to be assured.

29. Brand and Theme

The City of St. Albert branding will need to be evident within the downtown and in fact specific downtown theming will be a key component in demonstrating the branding that persists throughout the rest of the city.

30. Downtown Businesses

Attraction and retention of businesses within the downtown core is the entire community's responsibility and marketing of such will be important for the benefit of all stakeholders and must be shared by many.

If we want economic and tourism development to take a stronger foothold in the downtown, a lot must change; mostly the addition of human traffic. I look forward to helping solidify that vision. I will invite everyone to view our future downtown and I expect that will best be done, not with a paper document but rather through the development of a virtual tour. That too I will expect to be done at some time in the future.

I look forward to it all.

Current Funding Plans

Funded			\$
1	River Study	2009	\$100,000
2	DARP Revision	2009	\$189,000
3	Community Tribute	2011	\$160,000
4	Founders Walk	2009	\$800,000
5	Branding Action	2009	\$90,000
6	Public Works Downtown Marketing Strategy (not all DT)	2009	\$75,000
7	Parks (Lions/Millennium)	2009	\$108,000
8	Signage	2010	\$400,000
9	Public Works St. Albert Place Community Tourism (not all DT)	2009	\$125,000
10	Public Works St. Albert Place Community Tourism (not all DT)	2011	\$400,000
10	DT)	2009	\$100,000
11	Petro-Canada Parking Lot	2009	\$10,000

Un-Funded

1	Traffic Study
2	New Civic Building and related P-3 study
3	Underground Parking/Parkade
4	Pavilion/Square
5	Public Art Plan
6	Event organizational improvements
7	Engineering plan for the downtown vision
8	Community Hall Plan
9	Museum
10	Virtual Tour of downtown
11	Bus stops
12	Christmas and decorative lighting

13	Hosting plan
14	Marketing 2010 and beyond
15	Update 2000 parking study
16	Old RCMP building and surrounding area
17	Music capabilities

Community, business and tourism initiatives

1	Community events on river
2	Community events downtown
3	River bank committee
4	Brochures, maps and information booklets
5	Walk of fame
6	Tourist office downtown
7	Business signage plan
8	Artwalks
9	Murals and sculptures
10	River Society
11	Streetscaping and engravings
12	Business recruitment