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Here we go again! It’s time for our annual members-only print edition.

In 2017, I launched The Sprawl as an experiment: a pop-up journalism project to cover Calgary’s municipal election. Four years later, here we are to cover the 2021 municipal elections in both Calgary and Edmonton, with an open race for mayor in both cities.

This is The Sprawl coming full circle. It sounds weird, but municipal elections give me hope. They are democracy at its most local. They give us the chance to engage with the future of our cities and ask: What now? What can we build on? What needs to change around here?

It’s a time when people become more curious about the place that they live.

And because we don’t have parties in municipal politics (at least, we’re not supposed to), citizens actually need to find out and think through where their candidates stand on different issues. And that leads to interesting conversations in community halls, at doorsteps and in coffee shops in the run-up to Election Day.

At The Sprawl, this is the first time we’ll be covering two elections at the same time—Calgary’s and Edmonton’s. Much like we covered the Calgary election as an experiment in 2017, we’re doing the same in Edmonton. We can do this thanks to our members who pitch in every month to support our work. You are the engine that drives The Sprawl—so thank you for being a part of this.

Stay tuned for more of our election coverage online. And hey, don’t forget to vote!

Jeremy Klaszus
Editor-in-Chief, The Sprawl
What Edmonton’s Ward Names Mean

By EMILY RIDDLE

The City of Edmonton was built on Indigenous land that has always been an important place of ceremony and trade for many Indigenous nations. iyiniw iskwewak wihtwawin, a committee of Indigenous women from diverse Indigenous nations, have gifted names to Edmonton’s 12 new wards through ceremony and consensus.

O-day’min
O-day’min is the Anishinaabe word for strawberry, which means “heart berry.” This ward is in the centre of the city and contains important ceremony, trade, and burial sites that have been at the heart of amiskwaci-wâskahikan, long before it was the City of Edmonton. The strawberry has its seeds on the outside, which teaches us about vulnerability. The stem of the strawberry represents the North Saskatchewan River, the vessels on the berry are the waters, and the veins make up the people. This ward contains a site where local chiefs adhered to Treaty 6 in 1877, where the Alberta Legislature now stands, and a burial ground in Rossdale that was the site of Camp Pekiwewin in the summer of 2020.

tastawiyiniwak
The name tastawiyiniwak is one of the nehiyaw (Plains Cree) terms that refer to diverse genders. Traditionally, nehiyawak did not have a binary view of gender and recognized eight genders within the culture. The term tastawiyiniwak roughly translates to “the in-between people.” The ward chosen for this name is in the north of the city because one of the deities that cares for tastawiyiniwak is located in the north. This ward name honours all the gender-diverse Indigenous people within the city whose traditional roles have been eroded by settler colonialism. It calls for a more equal future where nehiyawak again honour all eight genders.

Dene
The name Dene means “people of the land and water.” Dene from Cold Lake First Nation are signatories to Treaty 6 and there are many Dene people from communities in various provinces and territories who live in Edmonton. Ward Dene is located in the northeast portion of the city because it contains a route that Dene would have used to travel into the area, and because most Dene communities are located in the north.
Edmonton. The name was given by community members from the Alexis Nakota Sioux Nation, who signed Treaty 6 in 1877 at Fort Edmonton. In 1880, they moved to a reserve on Lake Wakamne.

Anirniq
Anirniq means “breath of life” in Inuktitut, an Inuit language. This ward contains the former Charles Camsell Hospital, which is now under a transformation to become a condo building, but was at one point a tuberculosis hospital for Indigenous peoples, including many Inuit. Indigenous patients at this hospital were subject to medical experiments and forced sterilization. Many patients of this hospital did not return to their home communities. The name Anirniq honours those whose lives were lost at the Charles Camsell Hospital and the many Inuit who make Edmonton home.

Métis
Ward Métis straddles both sides of the river and this is significant because it was the Métis people who established the river lot system. Many Métis who worked at Fort Edmonton later developed farms on river lots. The Métis are a distinct Indigenous nation that emerged during the fur trade with their own culture and political history. Edmonton is historically and contemporarily an important centre in the Métis homeland.

Sspomitapi
Sspomitapi means “star person” and was given to this ward in honour of the meteorite that was once located near Viking, Alta., and is now housed in the Royal Alberta Museum in Edmonton due to its violent removal. The stone was taken to Ontario by missionaries in the 1800s, but it was returned to Alberta in the 1970s. It was prophesied that prairie Indigenous peoples would fall on hard times if the meteorite was ever removed and that the bison would go away. It has yet to be returned to its original location. The meteorite was considered sacred and was shared by all Indigenous nations in the area, and Blackfoot would often travel to the place where it landed to conduct ceremonies. The Blackfoot believe that Sspomitapi were sent to earth by Napi, a Blackfoot deity, to help maintain good relations between the bison and the Blackfoot.

Karhiio
During the fur trade, Haudenosaunee men from the east joined the Hudson’s Bay and North West companies as traders. As such, they spent extensive time on the Prairies and many of them married nehiyaw and Métis women. One of the communities that emerged out of these marriages was the Michel First Nation. Michel Karhiio was the chief at the time Michel Band adhered to Treaty 6. Of course, this treaty was not upheld and life under the Indian Act was difficult. Under the Indian Act, Status Indians could neither sell their grain without permission from the Indian agent, nor receive the same benefits as other veterans, and were required to send their children to residential schools, among other stipulations. These are some of the reasons why, with the pressure of Frank Oliver, Chief Johnny Rodgers sought to enfranchise their band in 1958. The Michel people are still fighting to restore their status as a First Nation and Ward Karhiio honours them and refers to the tall trees that once stood in the ward.

Emily Riddle is nehiyaw and a member of the Alexander First Nation in Treaty 6. A writer, public library worker and researcher, she sits on the board of advisers for the Yellowhead Institute, a First Nations-led think tank.
In 2021, Police Budgets Are an Election Issue

By ANMARIE BAILEY

Fallout from the May 2020 murder of George Floyd at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer, and the ensuing global protests, were widely seen as a watershed moment.

At issue is systemic racism and policing in local communities, particularly of racialized minorities.

The relationship between law enforcement and racialized people has a long and uneasy history. Whether it’s Indigenous people, Black people or other people of colour, trust in law enforcement in many racialized communities has been frayed.

In the aftermath of Floyd’s murder, calls to “defund the police” along with other policing reforms rang out, both globally and locally.

If recent decisions made by city councils in Edmonton and Calgary are any indication, policing and police funding are poised to be issues in Alberta’s municipal elections.

“This will be something to observe as the election comes near: How are candidates going to handle the police funding question?” said Irfan Chaudhry, a criminologist and hate crime researcher at MacEwan University in Edmonton.

Chaudhry notes that historically, policing has not received the same energy during civic elections as it has at the federal level, where parties and candidates regularly use the language of law and order.

But with the recent scrutiny and policing accounting for 15% to 16% of city operating budgets in both Calgary and Edmonton there is a groundswell of support for the idea of more accountability and reallocation of police funds.

Edmonton chose not to freeze cops’ funding

In the fall of 2020, Edmonton’s city council struck a temporary community and wellness task force to “develop recommendations to address racism, discrimination, excessive use of force, poverty and homelessness.”

Several recommendations came out of the committee, including the freezing of the police budget.

Of 14 recommendations made, 13 were approved by council—but the freezing of police funds was tabled until 2022, pending additional investigation into the issue.

PHOTOS PAULA KIRMAN
In 2021, Police Budgets Are an Election Issue

Chaudhry, a member of the task force, believes funding will be a campaign issue in Edmonton’s upcoming election.

“Due to the task force on community safety, as well as a dialogue in Edmonton about freezing the police budget, a number of candidates have policing as a specific item on their platforms,” he noted.

But he suggests that some who support maintaining current levels of funding or even increasing police funding are using various strategies to distinguish themselves.

“I think some [candidates] are utilizing fear tactics to suggest they do not support defunding the police,” he said. “When it is framed this way, it creates a political division between fund versus defund, and takes away from the bigger issue of equitable distribution of funding for community safety.”

He believes the Floyd murder played a role in this being an issue compared to previous elections—but adds that the issue is local.

“The more informed candidates will be able to elevate this discussion to connect it to Edmonton, while the uninformed ones will likely try to utilize the defund language to try to gather support and votes,” Chaudhry said. “While still early, it will be interesting to see if a candidate frames themselves as the ‘police defender’ candidate.”

Calgary also avoided cutting police

In Calgary, city council initially decided to cut police funding—but ended up reversing that decision. In October 2020, Coun. Evan Woolley put forward a motion to explore the reallocation of $20 million of police funding to community supports. This sparked vigorous council debate.

The Calgary Police Service offered to shift $8 million per year from police coffers to a new community safety investment framework to address gaps in crisis response, but instead, council approved a proposal made by Coun. Jeff Davison to allocate a one-time transfer of $8 million from city reserves to fund it.

Doug King, a professor of justice studies at Mount Royal University in Calgary, agrees that historically, policing has not been an election issue in Calgary. He notes that previous discussions around funding have always been to increase, rather than to decrease, funding.

Given that history, he does not believe it will feature as prominently in the upcoming election as some might expect.

“I expect that there will be more discussion of restricting police funding among some candidates and among some in the public,” he said. “I still question if there is a broader public appetite for any significant cuts in police funding.”

King suggests that the public is in favour of increased funding—as evidenced by Calgary city council’s reversal.

“I think Calgary city council’s decision to move away from its proposal to redirect $8 million from the police budget was a direct consequence of public opinion,” King said.

Anmarie Bailey is an Edmonton writer and journalist.

“The fact that Calgary council ended up giving Calgary police more than it originally requested was also influenced by voters in those communities that are expanding—and who wanted sufficient police to cover calls-for-service in these growing communities.”

According to the results of an Angus Reid survey released in October 2020, only 20% of Alberta respondents said police should receive less money, while 64% thought that police funding was either fine as is or lacking.

But as demographics in Alberta’s major cities continue to shift, creating more diversity, the issues that are seen as important will likely change.
Can you tell me about the moment you first decided to run for mayor? What was going on in your life?

It wasn’t a single moment, but I remember over a year or two ahead of the 2013 municipal election, I just had a sense that we could aim higher on urban and environmental policy, and that we were going to need to do that to be sustainable, to be competitive, and to attract and retain the talent and investment we were going to need.

We had been doing a lot of early work around energy transition and climate change, and trying to depolarize that issue. There was a moment where I thought, “OK, this is doable. It’s possible for Edmonton to take leadership on climate change and energy transition.”

One of the things that gave me hope to do this, even though I have taken a fairly audacious position on the environment and on urbanism and on inclusion, was a citizen assembly that we did with the University of Alberta, where 60 Edmontonians from diverse walks of life were brought together to look at energy and climate issues—a representative group of people in terms of diehard greens to skeptics and deniers. They spent six weeks listening to experts, asking questions, having debates, and making sense of the science and policy recommendations.
Despite all their divergence and diversity of opinions, there was more than 90% agreement on these recommendations, which are now more or less embedded in council’s recently-approved energy transition strategy, the goal of which is to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050.

People still scratch their heads and say, “How can the City of Edmonton—in the heart of oil and gas country in Alberta—take that position?” The answer is very simple. Edmontonians, confronted with the same scientific information and analysis, will come to the same conclusion as thoughtful people from anywhere in the world, which is that we have to make this transition.

That exercise really gave me the hope that this community was up for those complex conversations, and that city hall and a mayor can have an impact by bringing people together to tackle complex issues like that. We’ve done it since with poverty, we’ve done it subsequently around the innovation economy, and we’ve done it with our neighbours in the region on a number of initiatives ranging from public transit to economic development.

I absolutely believe that it is possible to end chronic homelessness…
That’s the biggest sense of unfinished business I have.

When you decided to run for mayor, did you have a sense of the kind of mark you wanted to leave on the city, and did you accomplish that?
Yes and yes. I think so. But time will tell because some of the things we’ve set in motion will take longer than eight years to bear fruit.

Between the financial sustainability of the city and the region against the meteoric growth that we had seen through the mid-2000s boom, I could just sense we were building a city and a region that was not going to be very efficient or cost-effective.

Over that time, we reduced homelessness every year until this year because of the pandemic, and the economic situation in northern Alberta—which means people come to the city looking for services or they’re pushed by other circumstances.

I absolutely believe that it is possible to end chronic homelessness, which doesn’t mean nobody’s ever homeless ever, but that homelessness, to the extent that it presents in our communities anywhere in this province or in this country, is brief and non-recurring. Housing First and housing-focused shelter and transition services are critical to that. We’ve come a very long way, and the federal government has come a long way in the injection of resources through the national housing strategy, and the rapid housing initiative in response to COVID.

I helped secure the rapid housing initiative as chair of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities’ Big City Mayors’ Caucus. I helped convince the federal government to raise their ambition from reducing it by half to ending chronic homelessness in this country. Through that initiative, dollars are being invested in communities across this country to rapidly deliver housing.

There are two streams in that project for funding. We were eligible for a little over $30 million in the first. We applied for $68 million from the second stream, which is more of a merit-based rather than an allocation-based pot, and we were turned down because the Government of Alberta will not commit to fund the embedded services to make this supportive housing successful—so that people will stay housed.

Do you wish you did anything differently? Was there anything you wanted to tackle but never had the chance to or couldn’t?
Before I was even on council, the previous mayor, Stephen Mandel, had started some work around a Housing First initiative. That ultimately culminated in the City of Edmonton’s 10-year plan to end homelessness, which is now in its 13th year of relentless implementation.

I thought we needed to really raise our level of ambition when it came to efficient and sustainable growth for the city and, necessarily, for our region.

Fast forward eight years later. We have a city plan, which will accommodate the next million people within the boundary of the City of Edmonton through secondary suites, through transit-oriented development and through a lot of densification as the city matures.

We’ve modeled that the city will have considerably lower emissions, a lot more transportation alternatives and a much more robust public transit system—not just LRT to all corners of the city, but also a revamped bus system, which we’ve just redesigned. All in all, the urban character of the city will increase.

After talking to and working for Edmontonians for 14 years now, I’m reasonably confident that these are the things that they want. They want the city to be more efficient and compact and well planned, to be more cost effective, and to have a smaller environmental footprint.

So I think we’ve made a lot of progress on urbanism while maintaining the affordability of housing, which were my key goals eight years ago.
I believe that it was achievable to end chronic homelessness as a COVID response.

The federal government has stepped up on grants to build and acquire units necessary to house people. But the absence of the provincial government on this file is a humanitarian tragedy and a public policy failure to the extent that the Government of Alberta is insisting on the status quo through their inaction, where tens of millions of dollars a year are spent supporting vulnerable people in the health-care and justice system on a reactive basis. There are also COVID construction jobs and federal relief dollars that are going to go to other jurisdictions that bought into this approach.

There was an opportunity to do more, and I lay this squarely at the feet of the provincial government—that we don’t have a clear pathway to supporting vulnerable people, cleaning up our business districts, getting savings where they need them in health care and justice.

To the extent that it’s veterans, refugees, and Indigenous Canadians who are overrepresented because of trauma in the homeless population, there is an opportunity to reframe a series of historic wrongs and provide justice to people who’ve been struggling on the margins in a country that can afford to do right by them, and just hasn’t yet.

So that breaks my heart because I see what’s possible. I see what we’ve achieved with the units we built and the lives that have been turned around and saved and are giving back in the community. That’s the biggest sense of unfinished business I have.

What’s the biggest challenge facing the next mayor of Edmonton?
The biggest challenge facing the next mayor is the Government of Alberta—same as the challenge facing this mayor. We have a provincial government that does not see the value of local democracies. It is arguably actively undermining them with the campaign finance rules that they brought in to loosen up dark money, and also bringing clickbait referendum questions into our mix. I think those are all impositions on local democracy.

I think the way local governments have been treated with respect to funding, with respect to grants, with respect to promises made to us that were even embedded in legislation and embedded in the UCP platform—those were promises made and promises broken. So that’s where you’re starting from with the Government of Alberta to be crystal clear about it.

But it’s also an opportunity too, because it has brought together urban and rural mayors. Wedges were being driven between urban and rural, and yet we all find ourselves in the same situation with the Government of Alberta, being treated like a second-class or third-class government—glorified community leagues at worst and economic development commissions at best.

And so that’s created a lot of unity among urban and rural municipalities. It’s created sympathy for the situation that they find themselves in, with orphan wells, and oil and gas companies that won’t pay their bills, and the Government of Alberta not supporting those municipalities in their fiscal challenges.

I think this election may be an opportunity for Albertans to send a signal about how they feel about their communities, how they feel about the vibrancy and importance of their local democracy and how they feel about the provincial government right now as well.

What advice do you have for mayoral candidates?
It’s always easier to divide than to unite. But we need uniters now more than ever in a fractured time like this, where politics has gotten so nasty at other levels. And I think that is what Edmontonians want, in their heart of hearts. It’s what I’ve seen them respond well to time and time again. So, as tough as things are right now, and as easy as it would be to blame other people, ultimately we’ve got to stand up for justice when an injustice is occurring.

I’ll continue to do that with respect to the Government of Alberta’s position on a number of issues. But ultimately, we need to take our destiny into our own hands, control what we can control, and influence what we can influence.

We need to build and work with coalitions of our neighbours in the region—with other municipal governments across Alberta and across the country—to get things done that Edmontonians and Albertans and Canadians want done—on the economy and economic recovery, on social inclusion and justice for people, on sustainability and climate change in the environment.

Hamdi Issawi is the Edmonton editor of The Sprawl. This interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.
Naheed Nenshi Reflects on His Purple Reign

Interview by JEREMY KLASZUS

Naheed Nenshi was first elected as Calgary’s mayor in 2010. He’d previously worked as a professor of non-profit management at Mount Royal University, moonlighting as a civic activist on issues like urban sprawl and campaign finance reform. He was reelected in 2013 and 2017, making him the third longest serving mayor in the city’s history. The Sprawl sat down with Nenshi to discuss his legacy—and what’s ahead for both Calgary as a whole and its next mayor.

When you ran for mayor, what mark did you want to leave on the city? And when you look back did you accomplish that?

When I ran, there were 12 things that I wanted to change. And I think we’ve accomplished all 12 of them. But really, the broader question was around a new kind of discourse for a new kind of future. When I ran in 2010, politics here was very rigid. It was very scelerotic. Voter turnout was very low. And we tended to think of government as something that happens to us, rather

“This is not a moment where we need a caretaker mayor.”
I need to ask about sprawl, of course. When you ran, you spoke very openly and forcefully about changing the way that the city grows. When you look back, how would you surmise your legacy there? You’ve had some wins, you’ve had some losses—I’m thinking of the 14 new communities that council approved on the city’s outskirts.

You’d have to look, I think, at the broad arc here. The city has grown enormously over the last 11 years. We’re more than a third larger than we were 11 years ago. But that growth has happened in a very different way. When you go to the brand new greenfield neighborhoods now, they look completely different than the neighbourhood I live in, which was completed in the ’90s and early 2000s. They’re much more walkable. They have much more diversity of housing and different kinds of people living in them. And even the local retail—the strip malls and so on—looks different. They’re less auto-oriented. And they’re much more dense than they were before.

So from the outer ring, I think that we’ve succeeded. We ended the capital-project sprawl subsidy, and what subsidy is still paid towards new development is now very transparent and explicit. But we ended most of it.

When you think about redevelopment in the core of the city, the economy has shifted that somewhat—we still need more people living downtown. But by and large, we have far more people living in the core of the city than we did before.

The area where a lot of work remains to be done is the doughnut around the core—the neighbourhoods that were built between the 1950s and the 1980s. And as those neighbourhoods start to change—as kids leave home, as the population starts to shrink in those neighbourhoods—we are still not where we need to be in terms of sensitive redevelopment of those areas, so that they remain attractive while still remaining affordable for families. There’s still a lot of work to be done there.

When you look back on your 11 years, what do you wish you did differently?

Number one is the Olympics. I maintain that that would have been a great thing for Calgary. And I think it was badly managed by me and by others, in terms of really helping citizens understand that. So we’re in a situation right now where I’m really trying to find the funding for all those athletic facilities. So we’re going to have to spend the money anyway—without the Olympics at the end. I wish that we had made that much more clear for people.

And I wish I had been much more aggressive with the provincial and federal governments at the time, who, frankly, I don’t think did a great job on that file at all. I wish I’d actually said to the federal and provincial governments: If you guys aren’t serious about this just save me a lot of time and heartache and money and just pull out now, long before that plebiscite. But they always said they were serious about it. It’s just their actions didn’t show that. And so that was frustrating for me.

But I think that that whole period—end of 2017 to mid-2019—was just very problematic. New councils always have growing pains, but this particular council took a long time, and frankly, made some big mistakes. I think that the mid-year budget cut in mid-2019 was a big mistake. We had to reverse most of that anyway. But it was a council that was panicking, because they had badly mismanaged the conversation around the 2018 budget. And so I really regret that I didn’t really take much more firm leadership.

“I maintain that the Olympics would have been a great thing for Calgary. And I think it was badly managed by me and others.”

Ultimately, I think council works much better now. I think that they themselves are able to get their agendas through much better now than when everyone was just fighting with one another. And the only thing that unified them is that they were all fighting with me. I think we lost a year and a half of work that could have been much better.
The next mayor’s big job will be to create the post-pandemic city.

What do you think will be the biggest challenge facing Calgary’s next mayor?
The ability to create a post-pandemic Calgary. Because it’s going to be hard. The Calgary of 2022 and forward will not look the same as the Calgary of 2019; it shouldn’t look the same. We should be able to build back stronger. And so their big job will be to create the post-pandemic city.

The biggest and most important part of that is economic recovery and economic resilience. But there’s also environmental resilience, there’s also social sustainability. And I’m really optimistic that the new mayor and council will be in what I call a “wet concrete phase” where anything is possible and you can create molds.

It’s likely that the majority of council members after the October election will be new. Are you torn on that? I imagine after investing so much in the city in this role, you’d want some level of continuity. On the other hand, you’ve been very outspoken about campaign finance reform, about the need for municipal democracy to be strong and for a level playing field and all that. So I’m curious how that sits with you as we head into this election.

I’m totally torn on it. Everyone has ego. You want the ability to say: These things that I did will continue. And I think most of those things will continue. But we also have to remind ourselves that ego aside, the city doesn’t work because of the mayor, right? The city works because the people in the city make it work.

Way back in 2010, the first line of my victory speech, in that sweaty basement on Macleod Trail was: Calgary is different than it was yesterday. It’s better than it was yesterday. And it’s not because of me, it’s because of you. And sometimes those of us who have titles need to be reminded that there are 1.4 million people in the city who love the city, and who are doing extraordinary things every day to make the city better.

So while I’ve been lucky to be the voice for that—sometimes I was the firestarter, sometimes I had the idea that I threw in—ultimately, I didn’t do the work. It’s the people of Calgary that did the work. And at some point, we have to put the work back to the people and not just rely on the mouth or the voice in the mayor’s chair. So I want to create that space for new voices. I want to create that space for diffuse and diverse leadership.

The next mayor will not be like me. The next mayor will be different in small ways and in large ways. And ultimately, that’s a good thing, because it will really allow us to build the community in a thoughtful way, I think.

I’m curious how your own approach has changed, since you decided you’re not running. It seems like since you’ve made that decision, you’ve been a little bit more outspoken.

That’s an easy frame, but it’s totally wrong. I’ve always been like this. To my own detriment, I’ve always spoken my mind. I think people are just seeing that as a convenient frame. The “this is the give no F’s Nenshi” is just not right. I have always been like that.

But I mean, your relationship with the province has changed. I’m curious, is that what has changed dramatically?

No, not really. I’ve had six premiers since I’ve been mayor. The first one, Premier Stelmach—we had a very good and collaborative relationship. And ever since then, it’s been different shades of not great. Whether it was PC, NDP or UCP, I always felt like the province wasn’t championing its largest city, but rather used its largest city as a foil.

With this government, believe it or not, the pandemic’s been very helpful for that relationship. Because when this government was elected, they were kind of itching for a fight. They were kind of fighting with everybody. And then once the pandemic happened, we ended up in a situation where we had to work together. We really had no choice in the matter, because we had this common enemy. And in fact, I believe that my relationship with the premier at the moment is very good. And I hope that continues post-pandemic.

What advice do you have for mayoral candidates who are running in 2021?

My biggest advice would simply be: Don’t rely on personality. So far this election seems to be about: “I’m collaborative. I’m nice. I will fight for you.” And in my mind, it actually really needs to be about: What is your vision? This is not a moment where we need a caretaker mayor. This is not a moment where we need someone who is charismatic and talks about low taxes all the time.

And so my advice for the candidates would be to assume that citizens can handle a tough conversation and put out a bold vision. Make some choices on what you stand for, and put that out to citizens.

Jeremy Klaszus is editor-in-chief of The Sprawl. This interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.
The Political Arena

By JEREMY APPEL

In 1981, Calgary city council went against the advice of city staff and greenlit a new coliseum in Victoria Park as part of its bid for the 1988 Olympics. This is the aging facility now known as the Scotiabank Saddledome.

While city admin and the Victoria Park Community Association cautioned that this would be a death knell for the surrounding neighbourhood, then-mayor Ralph Klein dismissed their concerns. “This is not the death of Victoria Park, it’s the chance for revitalization and it will remain an exciting enclave,” Klein said in March 1981.

Fast forward 40 years and Calgary city council’s latest arena deal, which will see the Saddledome replaced, is looming over the upcoming election and the mayoral race in particular.

University of Alberta sociologist Jay Scherer, who co-authored the book Power Play: Professional Hockey and the Politics of Urban Development, says with these massive arena deals, benefits to the community are ancillary.

“The main beneficiaries to these deals... are the owners of the teams,” said Scherer. “The deals are the results of an orchestrated cycle of facility obsolescence that the owners of major sports franchises have initiated and done so very cleverly.”

Coun. Jeff Davison was the biggest proponent of a deal to split the cost of a new $550-million arena 50/50 with Calgary Sports and Entertainment Corporation, which owns the Calgary Flames. In July 2019, council voted in favour of this deal 10-4, with councillors Jeromy Farkas, Druh Farrell, Evan Woolley and George Chahal opposed.

Echoing Klein, Davison pitches the project—which has already gone over budget—as part of a broader revitalization effort. “It re-establishes downtown as the place to be,” he said, adding that the arena will be the centrepiece of an arts and entertainment district that will also benefit Calgary’s tourism industry. “Having large scale event centres or arenas in the middle of parking lots doesn’t do any of those things.”

“The deals are the results of an orchestrated cycle of facility obsolescence.”
What’s the deal—and how’d it go down?
Here’s what the city agreed to in 2019. The city would pay $275 million in exchange for ownership of the building and impose a 2% tax on ticket sales to recoup $155 million over the arena’s lifespan.

In addition to their half of the cost, the Flames would pay $75 million to fund local amateur sports. Meanwhile, the city pays 90% of the costs for demolishing the Saddledome, or $12.4 million.

The cost of the arena has already ballooned to $608 million, up from the $550 million that council originally approved. The city has agreed to pay $12.5 million more—with the Flames responsible for any further overruns.

The origins of this project go back to 2015, with CSEC’s ill-fated CalgaryNEXT pitch, which would have built a new NHL and CFL megaplex on sparsely-occupied land west of downtown.

That plan fell through, but the Flames were obstinate in their desire to get a new arena with city funds. In the runup to the October 2017 election, the City of Calgary’s talks with the Flames were at an impasse, with Flames CEO Ken King and NHL commissioner Gary Bettman dangling the prospect of moving the franchise.

In September 2017, the Flames’ proposal that the city pay $225 million for a privately-owned $555-million event centre was leaked to the public.

But even after the election, the threats continued
Steve Allan, whom you may recognize as the leader of the Alberta government’s $3.5-million inquisition against foes of the province’s oil and gas industry, was the chair of Calgary Economic Development and a member of the arena committee in January 2019. At that time, he suggested the option was either to subsidize a new arena—or the city would be on the hook for the costs of keeping the Saddledome operational without the Flames.

Then-city manager Jeff Fielding called Allan’s ultimatum of the Flames leaving town “totally inappropriate.”

Although Mayor Naheed Nenshi practically ran in the 2017 election against the Flames offer, he said the council-approved deal, which had the city paying $25 million more than the Flames’ previous offer, was qualitatively different.

“For some years now, I have been saying that any investment of public money in this project must come with public benefit,” Nenshi said to explain his apparent reversal. “This deal does that.”

This deal was approved quickly just before council was to break for the summer, at the same time as the city was implementing $60 million in cuts to transit, fire services and affordable housing to help fund a property tax cut. The public was given just a week to weigh in before the ultimate arena vote.

Coun. Woolley put forward a motion to delay the final debate on the deal to give more time for public feedback.

In response, Davison echoed Allan, King and Bettman’s threats to council: “If this passes, this deal is done tonight, and you will forever be known as the council that likely lost the Calgary Flames.”

Woolley’s motion failed.

When council returned for the fall, Woolley proposed a motion to scrap the arena deal and dedicate those funds towards the Green Line, community housing and a new downtown police station, which was also defeated.

The cost of the arena has already ballooned to $608 million, up from the original $550 million that council originally approved.

How was Edmonton’s deal different?
Edmonton’s arena deal, which it reached in 2014 under then-mayor Stephen Mandel, is a bit of a different beast, because it was part of a $1.4-billion entertainment district plan on land that was mostly owned by the Katz Group, which owns the Oilers.

The City of Edmonton agreed to pay for about 70% of the $480-million Rogers Place, while much of the broader revitalization was privately funded, with property taxes on downtown development helping subsidize the city’s portion of the arena costs.

But, unlike Calgary, the arena is privately owned.

In Edmonton, the Katz Group had rumbled about the team moving if Rexall Place wasn’t replaced as early as 2011, which Mayor Don Iveson characterized as “emotional blackmail.”

“When you look at the script of these types of political debates, the relocation threat is the classic card that’s played by the owners of these businesses,” said U of A’s Scherer.

“And it’s used persuasively to extract significant concessions from cities.”

Meanwhile, in Edmonton, the old Rexall Place sits unused—a “white elephant,” as Scherer calls it. The city had to forgive a near-$50 million loan it gave Northlands, which owned Rexall Place, that it couldn’t pay back. As in Calgary, the city has to pay the cost to demolish the old arena while figuring out what to do with all that public land.

To take power back from team owners, Scherer suggests future arena deals go to plebiscite.

“I’m not saying plebiscites are a great way to make decisions, but in terms of something that is controversial, with significant use of public resources, I think that should be left for citizens to decide,” he said.

“It takes a lot of courage to say no to them, but when you look at other examples across the country—Montreal, Toronto, Ottawa, Vancouver—they’re privately built. Winnipeg had a much more modest contribution from the public. It can be done if cities are prepared to push back.”

Jeremy Appel is The Sprawl’s Calgary politics reporter.
Tips for Hitting the Campaign Trail

By MIRANDA MARTINI

With mayors in Edmonton and Calgary stepping aside, and numerous incumbent councillors from both cities deciding not to run, we’re likely to see sweeping change in Alberta municipal politics this October.

Mike Brown, a campaign strategist and organizer who has worked on more than a few Calgary city council campaigns since 2010, encourages anyone who cares about city politics to get involved.

“It’s a way to shape how you want your city to look,” Brown said. “Too often, people say politicians are all the same. No, they’re not. They have their own viewpoints. We need to get beyond this cynicism and look for what we can actually do for our city.”

If you’ve never been involved in a campaign before, it might be hard to know where to start. With that in mind, we asked a couple of veteran campaign coordinators to share their tips for first-time campaigners.

1 Take stock of what matters to you.

Eric Peters, who co-chaired Calgary Coun. Gian-Carlo Carra’s 2017 campaign, suggests that anyone on the periphery of municipal politics start by taking stock of what matters to them personally. “Whether it’s a cracked sidewalk, the neighbourhood pool, parks, taxes, roads, cycling, infrastructure,” Peters says, a campaigner needs to know what those issues are, why they matter, and what their vision is for them.

From there, he adds, it’s much easier to start reaching out to candidates that interest you because “the more thoughtful and thought out [your] messages or questions are, the more likely you are to get a substantive response back.”

2 Find a candidate you’re passionate about.

You may be primed to get involved in a municipal campaign, but how do you figure out which candidate best reflects your values? Brown says that looking at candidates’ social media presence, past media interviews, and job or volunteer history can be far more telling than campaign websites.

“I want to have an understanding that they know what the job entails,” he said. “Has [the candidate] talked about parks or development or transit in whatever community they’re running in? Have they been on a community association in the past? What’s their volunteer track record? Those are the things that I would prioritize when I’m researching ahead of helping out a candidate.”

If you can’t get excited about any of the candidates in your own ward, Brown adds, consider volunteering outside your ward—or better yet, get involved with a mayoral campaign, as these often have an even greater need for volunteers than councillor races.

Once you’ve found a candidate that excites you...
Reach out!

The campaign period is a great time to get to know candidates because they have a vested interest in being accessible. “They want your vote,” Peters said. “They want donations, they want to build an infrastructure to win the election. So reaching out to them, asking them their opinions on those issues that matter to you, is really the first step.”

Most campaign websites will include a general information email address and an email address specifically for new volunteers, Brown adds. “You may not get to talk to the candidate right away, but you’ll talk to the volunteer coordinator or the campaign manager, and they’ll set you up with whatever they need.”

Find the role that’s right for you.

When we talk about volunteering on political campaigns, many people picture door knocking. This indisputably an important part of campaigning, but there’s always tons of other work to be done.

Volunteering at a phone bank is another popular way to help out. Brown points out that phone bankers are always given a script, and that a senior volunteer or campaign staffer will supervise your first few calls until you get into the swing of things. But there are a number of other ways to help out, including some you probably wouldn’t expect.

“Some of the best campaign memories I have are around food,” Brown said. “We had some great older ladies who weren’t able to do the long walks that you need to do for door knocking and flyer dropping, so they’d drop off lunch or dinner for all the campaign staff. I’ve had some of the best meals ever on the campaign trail.”

That said...

Don’t knock door knocking ‘til you try it!

Brown encourages even the introverted to give door knocking a go, saying you might be surprised by how fun and rewarding it can be. It’s a good way to get to know your neighbourhood and your neighbours.

“The goal is to chat for maybe a minute or two and not take up someone’s whole afternoon or evening, but sometimes you just hit it off with someone and have a nice conversation for a few minutes about issues that are important to them,” he said.

Sure, you might encounter the odd cranky or rude person, but there are also interactions that make the work worthwhile.

“I liken it to a golf game,” Brown said. “I’m a terrible golfer, but I get that one or two shots a game where it’s fantastic, and that’s what keeps me coming back.”

Once you’ve gotten a taste for the campaign trail, he adds, you might find it hard to stop.

Keep going. Elections are just the beginning.

If you discover a love of volunteering on municipal campaigns, then here’s some great news: municipal politics don’t stop after the election. Whether your candidate wins or loses, you have a voice as a constituent, and there are plenty of opportunities for you to use it.

Peters cites issues-based groups like LRT on the Green (a Calgary-based group that advocates for the Green Line LRT) that can help burgeoning activists stay involved in municipal issues outside of campaign season and be around like-minded community builders.

“You have these groups that advocate to make the city better, but they’re not necessarily attached to any particular candidate,” Peters said. “Especially in a pluralistic society, I think that is a great thing to have.”

Happy (campaign) trails!

Miranda Martini is the associate editor of The Sprawl.
IT'S MUNICIPAL ELECTION SEASON. A CHANCE TO ELECT GOOD LEADERS!

BUT I'VE JUST BEEN THROUGH A PANDEMIC ... & I'M EXHAUSTED.

HOW CAN WE EXPECT ANYBODY TO CARE ABOUT ELECTIONS RIGHT NOW??

EVERYONE'S EXHAUSTED.

HOW'S IT GOING?

OH... OK.

OF COURSE, I CARE ABOUT DEMOCRACY! AND FROM WHAT I CAN SEE, IT NEEDS OUR HELP!

INTERNATIONAL NEWS: DEMOCRACY IN PERIL!!

(I WAS NOT EXPECTING THIS PROBLEM!)

1989

THE BERLIN WALL IS NO MORE!!

WOW. HISTORY IS OVER! DEMOCRACY HAS SOLVED ALL THE PROBLEMS!

BUT... NOPE.

NOW YOUR DEMOCRACY'S GOT SOME ISSUES...

BUT IT WAS WORKING SO WELL!

FIX IT SHOP
Vote!

and I've had it easy during the pandemic, compared to many!

Albertans have been through so much.

How can we be expected to do any more??

DING DONG

I remembered you like mushrooms!

My neighbour
OH, THAT’S SO NICE
HELLO?
RING RING
HELLO, I’M CALLING FROM YOUR MOM’S DOCTOR’S OFFICE...
JUST WANTED TO CHECK THAT SHE’S DOING OK!

gee... THANKS!
GOOD WORK, STUDENTS! NOW, FOR OUR NEXT ASSIGNMENT...

WOW... ALBERTANS MAY BE EXHAUSTED, BUT THEY ARE AWESOME!

Have I been UNDERESTIMATING
WHAT WE CAN DO?
HISTORY IS NOT OVER!

LET’S GET THAT DEMOCRACY WORKING AGAIN!
IT’S NOW!

NOW THAT WOULD BE AN ELECTION I COULD GET EXCITED ABOUT.

WHATEVER WE DO... IT’LL HAVE TO START CLOSE TO HOME.

GUESS I’D BETTER GO HAVE A SHOWER!

VOTE

VOTE
The best part of the mini election sign? Its portability. Where will your sign live—propped next to a garden gnome? On your desk, between the houseplant and the pencil cup? Taped to a popsicle stick and waved proudly at a protest? The possibilities are endless!

Want to advertise your election priorities to candidates and neighbours, but don’t have room for a big splashy lawn sign? Go small instead!

Fill in the blanks below—and be sure to show us what you come up with by sharing it on social media, and tagging us on Twitter and Instagram (@sprawlalberta).

The best part of the mini election sign? Its portability. Where will your sign live—propped next to a garden gnome? On your desk, between the houseplant and the pencil cup? Taped to a popsicle stick and waved proudly at a protest? The possibilities are endless!