

State of the Region

Mayor Melissa Blake

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Sawridge Inn & Conference Centre

- Two years ago when I stood before you, I spoke of the Ancient Mariners, and their quest to explore, to navigate and brave unknown waters... unknown waters that conjured up fears of monsters, dragons and the edges of the world.
- It was, of course, an analogy for us in Wood Buffalo... uncertain, fearful... saddled with inadequate maps to maneuver these unknowns waters.
- These unknowns included how to deal with ailing infrastructure, a lack of affordable housing, seemingly endless difficulties with transportation, a lack of amenities.... the list goes on.
- Some two years later, we still grapple with those difficulties.
- But they no longer consume us.
- Today, we tell a different story. One with a different direction.
- To explain, I'd like to step back some two hundred and twenty years.
- In 1790, before his fortieth birthday an English cartographer by the name of Philip Turnor was hired by the Hudson Bay Company to map the Athabasca region.

- For two years Turnor explored our region, surveying the Clearwater and Athabasca rivers, and considered the opportunity for trade and settlement.
- Later his protégé, David Thompson, picked up Turnor's cause and while guiding the North West Company, produced the first map of the Canadian west in 1813.
- As time past, many other companies would build on this early map, as they jockeyed for hold in a region that was considered teeming with potential.
- The maps of Turnor and Thompson helped to guide the efforts of these companies and their ventures for decades.
- A map... a guide... is essential. It tells you how to get to where you are going.
- We in Wood Buffalo are no longer directionless. We have found our map.
- A map that Turnor and Thompson would admire...the Municipal Development Plan – the M-D-P.

- Passed unanimously by Council just two days ago, the **M-D-P is our blueprint for the future**, it makes the unknown... known.
- It means we are no longer wandering through the muskeg and boreal forest without a compass, wondering from whom and when help is going to come.
- **Help has come.**
- The M-D-P gives us **a strategy and a vision for the future**, a new way of thinking, a means to steadily maneuver through changing circumstances with a target to aim at.
- It will guide us to the realization of our Municipal vision: “a balanced future with opportunity for all,” a vision the finer points of which were refined by **over 15-thousand interactions** with residents and stakeholders.
- **And help has also come** in a very real form through the Government of Alberta.
- In response to the 2007 Radke Report, the Province has invested nearly 2.5 (b) billion dollars into our region, including a new five lane bridge across the Athabasca River formally opened yesterday; a new facility for the Fort McMurray Family

Crisis Society; and a new 100-space continuing care centre for seniors that will be built at the Willow Square site near the Northern Lights Regional Health Centre.

- Much of the provincial assistance we have received from the Alberta government over the past four years is consistent with the vision we have captured in the M-D-P.
- But perhaps the most significant commitment made by the Province occurred just under two months ago.
- Years from now, we will look back at August 29th 2011 as one of the most significant days in our region's history.
- **It is that day that we took control of our destiny.**
- It is that day that we found what two years ago I called “**our elusive treasure.**”
- It was that day that then Premier Ed Stelmach, and then Minister of Finance and Treasury Board President Lloyd Snelgrove joined me in signing a memorandum of understanding for the creation of an urban development sub-region – or U-D-S-R... which, we expect to be finalized by December 31st of this year.

- So what does the U-D-S-R mean? And why is it important?
- **Six-point-nine million.**
- It's a staggering figure.
- Our region is estimated to be producing six-point-nine million barrels of oil per day within the next two decades.
- Right now we're producing one-point-eight million barrels per day.
- That means **by 2030 our oil production will quadruple.**
- To make that possible, we will be welcoming **over 100-thousand new people** to Wood Buffalo.
- Through residential, commercial, and industrial development, the **U-D-S-R will enable** our region to serve that population increase.
- It means more land for housing, which translates into stability for our housing market.
- It means more opportunity to bring to our residents the services and retail outlets for which they clamour.

- We are one of the fastest growing Municipalities in North America... our population has doubled in the past ten years. It will likely **double again in the next two decades.**
- Our projections, outlined in the M-D-P, suggest we will need an **additional 40-thousand housing units** over the next 20 years to support newcomers in our region.
- The City Centre's population is expected to quadruple.
- **And we are growing new neighbourhoods** in Parsons Creek and the Saline Creek Plateau... Council recently approved the first private neighbourhood development in years, Riverbend Point near Abasand... and we are planning new neighbourhoods between the Athabasca, Horse and Hangingstone Rivers, and across the Clearwater River in Forest Heights.
- Our rural communities will continue to grow, and Anzac especially will develop into a secondary service region in our Municipality.
- And as our neighbourhoods grow, **we need to connect them all together.**

- This means an investment in transportation, which is also addressed in the U-D-S-R memorandum of understanding.
- A **Transportation Coordinating Committee** made up of provincial, municipal, and industry representatives, will ensure the planning and development of a multi-modal transportation infrastructure.
- That means the movement of people, goods and services throughout the Wood Buffalo region using roads, rail and air transport.
- **Bus Rapid Transit** is another project we are keenly pursuing, beginning with priority bus lanes to ease traffic congestion during peak hours.
- One will soon open on Confederation Way, with another to follow on Thickwood Boulevard. These lanes will help to make travel quicker and more predictable.
- Again, with the help of the Province we have upgraded the majority of our bus fleet to **low-floor clean diesel, or blue-technology, which is greener than most gasoline vehicles.**
- This confirms Regional Council's commitment to making our Municipality Canada's most sustainable.

- But we also need further development of the transportation network throughout the region.
- Given the nature of the goods that flow through the middle of our urban centre, it is essential that **a bypass route** is built.
- Right now Highway 63 is not merely the primary transportation route to the north –it is the **only route**.
- It is unacceptable a serious accident could strand our residents for an indefinite period.
- The lack of an alternate truck route has been a danger cited by safety advocates for years.
- I am confident the provincial government will renew its efforts to build a bypass road – to either the east or west – and to join with the federal government to link Fort McMurray with communities in Saskatchewan and, ultimately, British Columbia that will have regional economic significance.
- ... But even with a map, there will be bumps along the way.

- Recently there has been some concern expressed by the Province regarding the **Parson Creek-Highway 686 interchange**.
- This interchange is not only key to the residential development of north Parsons Creek, it is also the foundation of a new link to the east and west.
- It will benefit people far beyond this region.
- We are working with the Province to ensure that this interchange remains on schedule, so that our neighbourhood development remains on schedule as well.
- Though not in the immediate future, we still would like to see an **all-season road to Fort Chipewyan and Fort Fitzgerald**.
- Nestled in beautiful surroundings, these two communities would benefit through recreation and tourism opportunities.
- The M-D-P notes other transportation possibilities, and the U-D-S-R makes them very real possibilities.
- Light Rail Transit, passenger and cargo rail also come to mind.
- Then there is **air travel**.

- On the same day we signed the U-D-S-R, the **Fort McMurray Airport** hosted a groundbreaking ceremony for an impressive new facility to open in 2014.
- That construction is already ahead of schedule and below budget.
- You don't get that too often!
- **Our airport is the first and last thing that many visitors see.**
- The Airport redevelopment will help us to make better first impressions to the **three quarter of a million visitors** who pass through it every year.
- If you think that's a lot, wait until 2030... that magic year I keep referring to... at that point, one-point-two (m) million passengers will pass through the Airport annually.
- As part of the expansion, the Airport Authority is also working hard to secure **new air services, significant air cargo business and designation as an international airport** with regular direct services to the United States and Mexico.

- I have spoken about urban development and transportation, and the incredible growth that we will experience in the next two decades.
- It is certainly no secret that the oilsands are key to our economy.
- But we must also work to create a more **resilient regional economy**.
- If we are completely reliant on the oilsands, we become **vulnerable** – perhaps not in the short-term but during the lives of our children and grandchildren.
- So **we must diversify**, support local businesses, promote a culture of innovation, education and training.
- **A revitalized downtown is key to becoming a smart city.**
- It is a key co-ordinate on our map!
- The City Centre will be the hub for arts, entertainment, and culture.
- And Regional Council's commitment to downtown's revitalization was further solidified in September when we

opened our new planning and development facility... the Future Forward Place.

- It is there that we will showcase our City Centre Action Program to reinvigorate downtown.
- One of the integral parts of our City Centre is **MacDonald Island Park**. Like our Airport, this **premier recreational facility** is undergoing expansion as well.
- From a new outdoor stadium that can accommodate concerts and sporting events, to a baseball diamond... and a professional baseball team we've heard recently!... to space for not-for-profit groups, **this expansion will confirm MacDonald Island Park as a world class facility for years to come.**
- In the spring of 2012, we will also officially open our **Timberlea Community Park**.
- The park includes a C-F-L size football and rugby field, a FIFA sized soccer field, a 400 metre running track, and more.
- The Community Park meets facility standards to host the Pan-American Games.

- Between MacDonald Island Park and the Timberlea Community Park we continue to grow our reputation as a region of unparalleled recreational opportunities.
- In the last few months alone we've hosted Hockey Canada, been awarded the 2013 Canadian Junior Curling Championships, and successfully bid for the 2015 Western Canada Summer Games.
- Education and training are also key to a multi-faceted local economy.
- **Keyano College** is synonymous with education and training in Wood Buffalo.
- This fall the College opened a permanent campus in Fort Chipewyan, while the creation of a Land Trust will give the College an independent revenue stream to support growth for years to come.
- **Keyano has been and will always be an important member of our Wood Buffalo Community...** and perhaps they'll consider offering a course in cartography, if they don't do so already!

- Our grade school residents are also enjoying new educational facilities.
- **In a four week span I attended three school openings.**
- These new facilities offer opportunities that I never would have imagined as a student!
- The schools also illustrate the great partnership between the Municipality and education.
- We have partnered with the new Holy Trinity High School and Ecole McTavish in a joint use agreement for the use of the Timberlea Community Park... and of course Holy Trinity is also connected, quite literally, to the fantastic **Suncor Energy Centre for the Performing Arts.**
- With the opening of the Performing Arts Centre, art galleries, and the growth of our public art and Artist in Residency initiatives, **we support and promote a vibrant and rich culture, celebrate our region's diversity, and honour the heritage of our First Nations and Metis.**
- The arts are an important tool to tell our story.
- It is a story that **we** must tell – if we don't, others will, and we've seen the result of that in the past.

- **Like Turnor and Thompson two centuries ago, we have the map for our future before us.**
- And, like their map guided other explorers across the western Canadian frontier, **it is my hope that our M-D-P will provide guidance not only to the Regional Municipality but to other stakeholders so that we all work together** to create the most sustainable city in Canada with a quality of life to match the best anywhere.
- The Municipal Development Plan offers the co-ordinates not only for the next twenty years, but **establishes the foundation for years beyond that.**
- The **Provincial and Federal governments** are showing increased interest in supporting the course we have surveyed.
- We continue to see an increase in collaborative efforts with **industry and the local business community.**
- And our **public sector partners** in health, education and the non-profit sector are working with us, too.

- We are upgrading our infrastructure to handle the growth the M-D-P forecasts... as a Municipality, we have already **committed three-point-five (b) billion dollars in capital** spending to 2016.
- When Philip Turnor returned to England some two hundred and twenty years ago, I'm sure he never would have imagined the wilderness he surveyed in a far away land, accessible mostly by canoe, would become the focal point of not only the country that would become Canada, but of the world.
- He may not have had the vision to see that.
- His specialty was to map terrain... topography, to note the lines... the longitude... the latitude... to record the co-ordinates, track water courses... to check and recheck his directional points.
- Today, those lines tell the story of a region with endless opportunity, and an equal commitment to sustainability, a complete and vibrant community.
- **I invite all of you here today to join with us in tracing new co-ordinates**, conquering new frontiers and welcoming new residents.

- In two short decades Wood Buffalo will be Alberta's undisputed **third largest Municipality** and Canada's most important.
- And much of that achievement rests upon the shoulders of people in this room.
- I am proud and humbled to represent you at this exciting time.
- I am proud and humbled to work with Regional Council to articulate a shared vision.
- I am proud and humbled to walk with you.
- We are no longer following others... relying on other people to plan our route.
- **We are now leaders**, plotting our own course... and realizing our destiny.
- Thank you.

- End -