

Transcript of the 2025 State of the Region

Mayor Sandy Bowman

Fort McMurray Chamber of Commerce Luncheon, presented by Pathways Alliance

Wednesday, Jan. 29, 2025

Suncor Community Leisure Centre

Thank you, and good afternoon, everyone!

It's great to see so many friends, and familiar faces as we share the State of the Region for this year!

It's also great to be here at MacDonald Island, the heart of our community, situated at the confluence of these historic heritage rivers.

My appreciation goes out to the leadership, staff and members of the Fort McMurray Chamber of Commerce for the opportunity to connect with all of you.

To the Chair, Sangram Hansra and the entire Board of Directors...Executive Director Dianna De Sousa and the team:

Thank you for all that you do to champion the business community, and also the entire community.

Your work on Council's Pro-Business Advisory Committee is a great example of this, and there are many, many more.

I feel like our friendship and partnership has never been stronger, and like many in our region...

You have always understood that economic and social prosperity must go hand in hand.

Looking back on 2024, it was a year of relative stability following what were successive challenges over the last decade.

At the same time, we know there is more work to be done in setting up the region for the future.

Just when we seemed ready to take off again...

With the hope of a new federal government in Ottawa that truly values our energy, our role, and our place in Canada's future...

The new President of the United States is talking tariffs, talking trade wars, and is even talking about Canada as the 51st state...

In this case, talk isn't cheap...and whether the ideas are real, perceived, a negotiating tactic, or some combination of all three...

It has highlighted what we have been saying up here, and in Alberta all along.

Many times, for many years, in many ways.



Canada and the world needs more Fort McMurray.

And Canada and the world needs more of our region.

As the late Guy Boutilier used to say, we have the energy.

Yes, we do.

With this whole situation, with this new challenge, it would be easy to be concerned.

It would be easy to be worried.

But through all this noise, I choose instead to see a major signal through all the smoke being thrown around.

I see a clear signal that what we do up here, with Canada's most important and strategic resource right in our backyard...

It's here to stay.

It's needed now, more than ever.

And while there may be some uncertainty, and even short-term pain ahead...

I am confident we are headed for a new day.

A new day for workers and industry.

A new day for our energy.

A new day for our place in Canada and the world.

A new day for the people of our region.

Because after all, as great as our energy is...

I have always said that our greatest resource is not what's in the ground...

It's the people on top of it that are the real difference.

The real difference, those real people from Fort Chipewyan to Fort McMurray to Conklin, and all points above and in between.

Now, it's too bad it took a crisis for people to wake up to what's really driving the 'Team Canada' bus...

But as the saying goes, never let a good crisis go to waste.

We won't.



We owe it to you, and we owe it to this community.

Against the backdrop of this conversation, of course, is the Government of Alberta.

I'd like to thank Premier Danielle Smith for her leadership on this and many issues.

Including listening to us as we successfully advocated for the return of EMS dispatch to our region, in the capable hands of our own emergency responders...

Emergency responders that live here at home, and that best know their neighbours and communities.

It's clear we have a great partner in the Premier and her government, alongside local MLAs, Minister Jean, MLA Yao, and also MP Goodridge working for us in Ottawa.

Premier Smith and her team understand our region.

They listen to our concerns and ideas...

And they value and appreciate what we mean to Alberta, and what we mean to the entire country.

She – and Minister Jean – also understand that we need and want more people living and working here in the community.

Nowhere, and I mean nowhere...

Is the Alberta Advantage more real, and more alive, than in Fort McMurray and in this region.

We have the people.

We have the facilities – just look at the one we're in.

We have the land.

We have the infrastructure.

We have the lowest taxes anywhere, and a Municipality with no debt and no deficit.

We have the highest disposable incomes, and compared to what's happened elsewhere across the country...

We have affordable housing, skilled workers, and cost of living that is under control.

We also have an incredible, diverse, generous, hardworking Canadian culture.

A place founded on a special northern and Indigenous heritage.

But also a place that has gone from a small town to a boom town to a home town.



Where people – like you and me – have come from across Alberta, Canada and around the world to make a better life for themselves and their families.

As you may have heard me say over the last few years...

While we sometimes have the same challenges as other communities.

We are blessed to have way more advantages.

Way more.

This is not to say that things are perfect.

Far, far from it.

We need to do more, and we need some help, too.

Some businesses and organizations are doing really well, better than ever in some cases.

Some are getting by.

Some are facing challenges, too, and we need to think of them when we make our decisions.

We have leaders from industry here today, and it comes as no surprise that a major goal of ours is to maximize the localization of the workforce.

Where at all possible...

If you work here, you should live here.

But I also recognize there is no good in dwelling on the past, or on what was done during a boom to grow the economy and support a community that was truly bursting at the seams.

I am encouraged by regular, good dialogue with industry – Suncor, Syncrude, CNRL, Imperial, the Pathways Alliance and member companies.

The relationship is strong, and we are moving things in the right direction...

With a 12 percent reduction in the work camp accommodation population, since 2022.

The 2025 Census will tell us more, too, as we build a better friendship in the days, weeks and months ahead.

We need industry to thrive, and we need the community to thrive.

Our story, and our success is linked, and I believe our approach needs to be one of finding areas where there's a win-win for everyone.

One area where we've put this into action is through the new Natural Resource Extraction Tax Incentive Program.



Long name, yes, but better results.

It's already paying off for the community in a major way, with more good news on the horizon.

We recently signed and announced a new partnership with Wolf Midstream, and I believe Mark Rideout and their team may be here today...

Because of this new incentive program, Wolf Midstream is making a \$500 million investment in a new facility, creating close to 300 jobs and injecting resources and confidence into the local economy.

We thank you for this partnership, and I thank my Council colleagues for unanimously supporting this new program.

I also thank CAO Henry Hunter, members of our administration, the team at Fort McMurray Wood Buffalo Economic Development led by interim CEO Lisa Sweet, and others for working to make this a reality.

What started out as a coffee meeting with Wolf Midstream and a visit to its facility in Mariana Lake...

Has led to what I'm talking about today.

This is only the beginning, and expanding and growing this program is a major key to growing the population and doing our part to support the local economy.

If I ever get to do this again, my hope is we'll be talking about dozens of these partnerships in the years ahead.

Speaking of growing the community, and also honouring those to which we owe everything...

We have seen growth in the seniors, Elders and retirees' population in recent years.

We are still a young community by all accounts, with almost 30 percent of the population 18 years of age or younger...

But older adults are choosing to stay, choosing to move, and choosing to be with their children and grandchildren.

We are now an official Age-Friendly Community, designated by the Government of Alberta...

This is a testament to the hard work by organizations like Council's Advisory Committee on Aging, the Seniors Resource Committee, St. Aidan's Society, Golden Years Society, Alberta Health, Wood Buffalo Housing, and many, many more.

The Continuing Care Centre at Willow Square has been a huge positive, but we need to take the next step.

I'm pleased to share today...



That we have secured additional land from the Province for the purpose of delivering a long-awaited Aging-in-Place facility at Willow Square.

There is work to be done, but I am committed to making Aging-in-Place at Willow Square a reality.

We must always remember that we stand on the shoulders of our seniors, Elders and those that built this great community.

We must always be guided by their journey.

Speaking of a journey, we will never stop championing the absolute need for a secondary access highway connecting Fort McMurray...

We are pleased to see the Minister of Transportation, Devin Dreeshen and the Province are committed to expanding Highway 686, connecting Fort McMurray to Grande Prairie.

This would be a game-changer for the local economy and also improve community resilience and public safety.

This is something that has to be a top priority, as we again learned last spring and summer during the wildfire season.

Thank you to the Province for acknowledging this and thank you to all those that have long advocated for this type of project.

Including most recently Chair Bryce Kumka and members Wood Buffalo Development Advisory Committee.

Transportation priorities will remain top of mind, whether it's this one, and also:

Rural emergency egress roads – including for Janvier.

A potential all-weather road for Fort Chipewyan

Safety improvements to Highway 881; and

Continued enhancements and full twinning of Highway 63

At Council and the Municipality, our fiscal house continues to be in order, although we will need to make smart, accountable, responsible decisions in the years ahead.

At \$645.6 million, the 2025 Budget is the second straight year in which we've increased our investment in the community, while setting the stage for maintaining the overall lowest property tax rates anywhere in Alberta.

Much of this is due to two successive years with a stronger capital budget, including a focus on:

Rural Water and Sewer Servicing, the largest capital project in the Municipality's history



Completion of Flood Mitigation to help protect downtown

The Northside Twin Arenas

Waterfront Park development; and

And while not a capital project, the Downtown Revitalization Incentives Program continues to be well received.

Council approved an additional \$2.4 million for this program last May, and at last update, there have been:

Over 275 projects approved

Over 160 completed

Representing some \$27 million in overall spending on this downtown program, including over \$9M by the Municipality.

If you want to see how much this program has worked...

Take a drive around downtown.

And if you want to know how much it matters...

Talk to a local small business owner who will tell you that it made the world of a difference to them.

If it works for them, it works for me.

When it comes to downtown, this is working for us, just like our commitment and investment in community policing, public safety and the Community Plan on Homelessness.

We're hearing from those downtown that things are a lot better than at this time last year.

It's safer, it's cleaner, Wood Buffalo RCMP and Bylaw are present, and from speaking with Chief Superintendent Mark Hancock last week, we are down to three people in three encampments living downtown.

Yes, you heard that right.

That's three people.

I believe we are very close to functional zero homelessness, which would be an incredible achievement.

What this tells me, and what common sense tells me, is the old saying...if it ain't broke, don't fix it.



We're doing something right, well, a lot of things right, and it would be doing everyone a disservice to go in a different direction right now.

Getting back to the downtown revitalization program, for programs like this to truly work, it also takes staff committed to reducing red tape and barriers to development, while being customer- and community-focused.

Along these lines, there is always more to be done.

Thank you to the Planning and Development team for working alongside the community to drive major changes in how business is done at the Municipality.

We have seen this in real time with the downtown incentives program...

By recent recognition by the Minister of Red Tape Reduction, Dave Nally.

As well as through the approval of a major new land development in Parsons Creek...

We haven't seen interest like this in the community in a decade.

It will improve quality of life, grow the economy, show that we are open for business, create jobs, and generate funding we can then invest in the community.

This is another win-win-win, and we thank them for it.

Other major highlights in the 2025 Budget include:

\$49 million for community partnership initiatives, up \$11 million since 2023; and

over \$100 million approved for Regional Emergency Services, Wood Buffalo RCMP and Bylaw Services, up almost \$10 million over the last two years.

These decisions clearly show our focus:

Enabling the community.

Public safety and community resilience.

Building the right facilities, for the right reasons.

Balanced budgets, no debt, and the lowest taxes anywhere.

And investing in people and workers that deliver the front-line public services we all depend on.

One area where people have really made a difference is in our commitment to better partnerships and relationships with rural and Indigenous communities.

Reconciliation requires this truth, but also listening, learning, dialogue, but most importantly...

Reconciliation requires real action.



And that's exactly what we're doing, walking alongside Indigenous leaders and communities, our Indigenous and Rural Relations team, and all those dedicated to this journey.

This action has been demonstrated in many ways, through:

Ongoing, annual support of the ATC Cultural Festival and other cultural celebrations

Advocacy for a federal inquiry and meaningful recognition at Moccasin Flats working with the McMurray Métis...

Support of the Murdered or Missing and Exploited Indigenous Peoples (MMEIP) and the Murdered or Missing Indigenous Women, Girls and Two-Spirit+ (MMIWG2S+) Task Force

Tangible protocol agreements with Indigenous communities of the region; and

Support of ACFN, ACDEN, and the creation of the first urban reserve in Alberta history

Progress on the Fort McKay Community Centre

These are just some examples, but I want to emphasize our commitment to ensuring we respect and honour our relationship with the original stewards of this shared home...

The traditional lands of the Cree and Dene here on Treaty 8 territory, and the unceded territory of the Métis Peoples.

There is something special and fitting that the key to our future is tied to making sure we reconcile the very real truth of our past.

As I wrap up, I want to acknowledge my Council colleagues:

Councillors Ball, Banjoko, Bussieres, Cardinal, Dogar, Grandison, Lavallee, McGrath, Waquan and Wigle.

We agree on a lot of things, and we disagree on others, and no matter what I will always respect the ideal of public service and standing up for the community.

Thank you.

The same can be said of the staff at the Municipality I get to work with every day.

Please know I appreciate everything you do to keep the region on track.

I know that the best days are still ahead of us.

Finally, we lost a lot of community leaders over the last year.

I want to recognize them before I stop talking – which I know will be welcomed!

Elder Lina Gallup, Guy Boutilier, Peter Hansen, Jane Stroud, Doug Faulkner...



I know there are others, too.

They are forever in our hearts and memories.

We will carry the torch and the responsibility and will work to make them and their communities proud.

As a fighter myself, these leaders were fighters in their own right, so with that in mind, I'll leave you with a quote from another great fighter, Bruce Lee:

“The doubters said,

You cannot fly.

The doers said,

Maybe, but we'll try.

And they finally soared

In the morning glow

While non-believers

Watched from below.”

Thank you, everyone, for attending this year's State of the Region.

I wish you – the doers – all the best...

Here's to a great year, and a great future ahead.

Thank you!

