

Get ready for a new Edmonton

Signs of major change everywhere as reborn capital city emerges

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The Edmonton Journal

Saturday, November 05, 2005

As veteran stock market traders will tell you, "they don't ring a bell at market tops or market bottoms." The precise timing of key turning points is only clear after the fact, in the rear-view mirror.

The same applies to cities. There's no bell, no blast of

trumpets to mark the moment when a city finally starts to shed its old skin, and begins morphing into something entirely new.

If there was, my guess is it would have begun ringing in the fall of 2004, with the election of Edmonton Mayor Stephen Mandel.

Love him or not, Mandel's win signaled a restless appetite for change -- a profound desire among Edmontonians to see Alberta's capital city become something better. Not just bigger, or richer, but better.

At first, the sound of the bell was almost inaudible. Like that of a distant car horn, or a cellphone ringing on a city street. But since the start of the year, as oil and gas prices have soared, and the number of oilsands megaprojects has swelled, it has steadily grown louder.

This past week, the decibel level swelled to that of a jet aircraft, poised for takeoff. It was impossible to ignore.

Fellow citizens, the old e-town, the drab and dreary Discountville we all loathe, is dead. And a new, hipper, more muscular and sophisticated Edmonton is being born, right before our eyes.

It's not only because Edmonton's BioWare Corp. -- a video game production studio founded by two local docs -- announced the biggest deal in the history of Canada's video game industry on Thursday, a \$300 million US blockbuster engineered by San Francisco's Elevation Partners.

And it's not merely because Canadian Natural Resources unveiled the biggest construction project in the nation's 138-year history on Wednesday -- a mammoth, \$30-billion megaproject that serves as a thundering exclamation point on the growing global impact of Alberta's oilsands.

Canadian Natural's 15-year project will create thousands of long-term jobs, and funnel billions of dollars into the Edmonton region's already sizzling economy.

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Nor is my gushing optimism merely a reflection of the dazzling, \$48-million remake of the newly named Art Gallery of Alberta; or the \$62-million conversion of the former Bay building on Jasper into the University of Alberta's new downtown campus; or the astounding \$647 million worth of building projects unveiled last month by Capital Health; or the forest of sleek new condos springing up around the city core.

Nope. It's not any one of these things. It's the cumulative impact of all of these things -- and much more -- on the psyche, and the collective wealth of a city that is suddenly on the most incredible roll in its 101-year history.

The signs of sweeping, (dare I say it?) historic change are everywhere.

As my colleague Paula Simons reports in a special three-part Journal series that concludes Sunday, a new section of the \$1.4 billion Anthony Henday ring road opens Tuesday.

It will include the first new bridge across the North Saskatchewan River since 1969.

The 80-kilometre-long Anthony Henday, to be completed by 2015, is triggering a tsunami of new residential projects across the southwest and southeast flanks of the city. New neighbourhoods such as Windermere will one day accommodate 63,000 residents -- almost equal to the population of Red Deer.

Although Windermere is still in the planning stages, other new subdivisions that border the ring road -- such as Rutherford, MacEwan, Ellerslie and Summerside -- are already booming, generating demand for new retail services.

There's more. Much more.

Grant MacEwan College, which just completed a new student residence at its downtown campus on 104 Avenue, is eyeing a future \$375 million residential campus in south Edmonton.

Dell, the world's largest computer maker, is building its new \$20 million call centre at Edmonton Research Park, just off the Henday, and east of South Edmonton Common. Dell is so pleased with its local workers that it recently announced plans to hire 250 more people, bringing the total to 1,000 staff.

Nearby, a new, 72,000-square foot, \$14.2 million biotech "wet lab" is expected to open by the summer of 2007, thanks partly to \$2.5 million worth of financial support from the provincial government.

Last month, in another indication the Tories are taking Edmonton more seriously, Alberta Finance Minister Shirley McClellan announced a \$35 million grant to Northlands Park to help pay for a new \$70 million Exposition Centre, next to the AgriCom. Construction will begin next March.

The new centre is just part of a massive \$150 million proposed makeover of the entire 66-hectare Northlands site.

Downtown, the Hall D addition at the Shaw Conference Centre is rapidly taking shape, as it moves toward a spring 2006 opening. And at the legislature grounds, the province is mulling a facelift that would see the much-maligned annex and Terrace buildings torn down.

I could go on. And on. And on. But you get the picture.

A new day has arrived here in Edmonton.

Our bell has just rung.

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