



2010 St. Albert Municipal Election Candidate Survey
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September, 2010

Introduction

The St. Albert Taxpayers Association (SATA) would like to invite you to take part in its 2010, St. Albert Municipal Election Candidate Survey. The Association has prepared a series of questions dealing with issues facing St. Albert, as well as questions dealing with matters of interest to voters who will be casting their ballots on October 18th.

Although initially the Association set out to prepare two sets of questions consisting of written answer and Yes/No questions, we soon realized that it was not fair to simply pose Yes/No types of questions to what in some cases may be complex issues. For this reason, and to be fair, we have confined the questionnaire to a series of written answer questions. We hope you will take the time to study each of the questions, and for each provide a written answer. Wherever possible we would like you to limit your answers to 100 words or less.

Please answer in the spaces provided. The spaces will expand to accommodate your replies.

The replies from all candidates will be posted on SATA's website at www.stalberttaxpayers.org.

Questions

- 1 a) Do you believe that growth is essential to the long term sustainability of St. Albert? If so, what should be done to promote growth? What types of development will you support, and where?

Answer:

I believe growth is desirable and hope that it is inevitable. If we don't grow we cannot remain competitive with other communities in the capital region. We have newly annexed lands to the North that require well thought out and well planned Area Structure Plans. These plans need to offer a variety of residential and commercial zonings. Residential alternatives allowing for multifamily, allowing for single family, and within this category we need a variety of lot sizes. We also need to set aside a percentage that is designated as affordable housing and parameters with what is viewed as "affordable".

All new Area Structure plans need to also include commercial development consistent with an objective of achieving the 80/20 tax split. We need to reduce our reliance on residential taxes. Neighbourhoods benefit from the small convenience stores just down the street and we should not always view "commercial" as a negative connotation when close to our homes.

As we grow we need to remember what makes St. Albert a great place to live: a place with lots of green space, connecting neighbourhoods through paths

such as Red Willow Trail. Locations for communities and residents to gather such as halls, parks, skating rinks etc.

I would support developments that are innovative and unique. This will make St. Albert a draw and focus of attention in the capital region I support growth in St. Albert provided it is consistent with who we are and aligned with a well thought out long-term strategy

- b) What is your view on the “infill” of current St. Albert green spaces with mid to high density developments, e.g. Akinsdale, Grandin Pond, etc? Would you do anything differently?

Answer:

Conceptually, I agree with infill. It reduces urban sprawl and provides an effective use of already existing lands within our boundaries. Unfortunately, it leads to difficult decisions and compromises to those closest to the affected area.

Many of the mature neighbourhoods did not have adequate Area Structure Plans from inception. Although there were green spaces, there were plans initially to infill at some point. Having said that, infill is especially difficult when it occurs years after the fact, without proper consultation with residents.

I would like to identify all “infill areas” and then start a process where we consult with those residents about possible opportunities, years beforehand. This will allow residents become aware of the long-term plans and consult with the City to reach a viable solution.

I would never support an infill project on land zoned as park (green space) or disrupted the areas current character.

- c) What is your position on the redevelopment of St. Albert’s downtown as proposed by DARP? What do you support or not support, and why?

Answer:

DARP is a vision, a concept. We cannot afford to NOT plan. It will bring new life to our downtown, it will increase our city’s density which is recommended by the Capital Region Board, it will reduce urban sprawl and it will be driven by the market with each step analysed and voted on by many future councils. As of yet, there are no tax dollars attached. I support the concept of DARP. Once the detailed implementation plans are delivered to council next spring, priorities on capital projects will be set and the real work will begin.

- 2 a) What is your view of the increasing burden on St. Albert's taxpayers, and how do you propose dealing with this problem?

Answer:

St. Albert has a revenue problem. Despite having one of the highest property taxes in Alberta our total revenue per capita is below average. We also spend less per capita than the average municipality. To reduce the tax burden we need to find other sources of revenue. I have noticed that our transfers from other levels of government are also lower than other municipalities on a per capita basis. We have not been successful in identifying other commercial sources of revenue. Put simply, there is lots of room for improvement. We need to broaden our revenue sources and reduce our reliance on property taxes. This can be done by increasing the density and a plan to get closer to the 80/20 tax split. Attract more business, stick to commercial zoning, and maintain our fortitude and discipline to ensure our revenue problems are solved and not compounded.

- b) Other than cutting programs and services, what specific ideas do you have to use tax dollars more wisely, so the same amount of money can go further? What ideas do you have to control spending?

Answer:

Historically, St. Albert actually spends less per capita than the average of all other Alberta cities. We don't necessarily have a spending problem, we have a revenue problem.

When it comes to spending decisions, we need to ensure Administration follows a framework whereby they answer the following three questions:

- i) Will this additional expense provide a tangible benefit to all residents, and not just to a small special interest group?
 - ii) Does this fit into a long-range plan? We don't want to be committed to capital projects where we cannot afford the ongoing operating costs.
 - iii) Is it a strategic expense? Will it generate future revenue, either through new fees or broadening our tax base and attracting new businesses and residents?
- c) Would you support limiting annual total tax increases (including property tax, utility fees and user fees), in the next three years to:

- The regional inflation rate as measured by Statistics Canada?
 - To 1.5% per year until St. Albert Taxes are in line with other mid-size cities in Alberta?
 - Other?
- Why or why not?

Answer:

We absolutely need to benchmark our taxes increases to an inflation rate index to ensure that we are not losing ground with what we can afford. I would propose that our tax increases are benchmarked against a five-year average of the regional inflation rate as measured by Statistics Canada. There may be some years where we do not increase at all, and others where it may exceed the average, but over a five-year term, we cannot exceed inflation for that same period.

- d) Would you support a City Hall hiring freeze over the next 3 years? Why or why not?

Answer:

I do not support a hiring freeze over the next 3 years. I would challenge Administration to get us the best people to fill the most required positions at City Hall, so long as they can demonstrate a need for that position and more importantly, demonstrate St. Albert can afford it!

- 3 a) How will you respond to special interest groups and City Administration that want their projects built?

Answer:

Special interest groups have the right to be heard at council. They are passionate about their cause and often experts in their field. They are excellent spokesmen to provide Council with the background and a different perspective. I would always carefully and respectfully listen and then make my decisions based of what is in the best interest for all of St. Albert.

- b) What will you do to ensure Administration provides enough of the right information for decision making, including at budget time? How will you respond if you think your questions are not being answered?

Answer:

Council needs to make sure we have the right people in the right positions. Council places a high reliance and significant trust in Administration to ensure that they do their job properly. Having said that, Council needs to be informed in its own right and if it becomes apparent that Administration is not providing the reliable and well-balanced information at budget time, then obviously changes are required.

- 4 a) Do you believe that the current budget process, where departments only describe what they will do with the extra money being asked for in the new year budget, gives Council enough information for decision making? Why?

Answer:

I believe all departments need to annually identify what are “core expenses” and what is a “discretionary expense”, assigning \$’s to each. Administration needs to defend those items listed as “core”, and then defend how those “discretionary costs” are enhancing services and programs used by most residents.

I do not support a budget process whereby incremental costs are simply added on top of the prior year. This system does not require Administration to prove that it is effectively meeting the core needs of residents, nor does it ensure that they evaluate whether those existing discretionary items are successful.

- b) Would you support use of a zero-base budgeting process? Why or why not?

Answer:

The concept of “zero-based budgeting” is often referred to as an effective mechanism to ensure Administration does not continually escalate costs. It is a “clean-slate” approach where the programs are built from the ground up. In theory it sounds desirable and it has been tried by many government agencies in the past, particularly in the early 1970’s. In practice, it has effectively been abandoned because the budget process took more time than was available. Its not realistic to expect that spending decisions are made in isolation and without the benefit of past experiences.

When reviewing budgets, I support a zero-base review. Although similar, it requires management to distinguish “core expenses” and “discretionary expenses” and then, defend the requested dollars. A zero-based review allows Council to receive a timely-prepared budget with the benefit knowing what’s been spent in the past, BUT those discretionary costs are highlighted and not buried in with core expenses.

- c) How would you approach future planning and implementation of St. Albert’s capital spending program, and how would you evaluate the relative merits of competing spending proposals?

Answer:

When it comes to spending, I have consistently said that we need to ask ourselves:

- i) Will this additional expense provide a tangible benefit to all residents, and not just to a small special interest group?
- ii) Does this fit into a long-range plan? We don’t want to be committed to capital projects where we cannot afford the ongoing operating costs.

- iii) Is it a strategic expense? Will it generate future revenue, either through new fees or broadening our tax base and attracting new businesses and residents?

We need a “wish list” of unfunded projects. Then, we should prioritize these unfunded projects and study the long-term benefits and costs. Just as important, we should work with other levels of government and businesses to see if they want to somehow share in the capital spending. Historically, St. Albert has consistently gone solo on its capital projects rather than work with other groups who may have helped share the burden, and that metric is clear when compared to other cities in Alberta!

- 5 a) What steps will you take to promote engagement and consultation with residents on issues that affect St. Albert residents?

Answer:

Council is elected by the public to represent them. If elected, I would continue to be approachable at as many community events as possible, encourage town hall type meetings on contentious issues, and designate “coffee” sessions to become as informed as possible. I view this as imperative to gather the information I would need to truly represent St. Albertans at Council. I would also look to electronic media. Such as online polls through my own website and the city’s website.

We have a great deal of knowledge in our community and I intend on seeking it out.

- b) Do you support holding plebiscites on major capital projects, and if so, under what conditions would you consider them appropriate?

Answer:

Plebiscites are a great way to get an indication of public opinion. I would definitely consider holding a plebiscite on major issues such as amalgamation with Edmonton.

What is the definition of a “major capital project”? A dollar amount could be set and any project over that amount would need to have a plebiscite, but considering how many capital projects the city faces each year I would not support holding plebiscites frequently. They are expensive and time consuming. Council is elected by the public to make these decisions.

- 6 a) What will you do to hold Administration accountable when project costs exceed cost estimates and budgets?

Answer:

We need to have more detailed plans before they are approved by Council. If

this is not possible and a project comes in over budget, we need to strongly consider holding over this project to the next budget process or finding other ways to fund.

- b) How will you respond to pressure by other members of Council or Administration to “be part of the team” instead of acting in accordance with what you think is in the best interests of St. Albert?

Answer:

Council must act as a team. For example if three readings of a by-law are to be heard in one council meeting, Council must have unanimous consent before proceeding to third reading. I would be disappointed to see the process slowed down by a council who did not agree and work as a team. Obviously, each council member has their own vote and I would always have done my homework on each issue. Homework will include talking to the public and acting in accordance to what is best for all of St. Albert.

- c) Under what circumstances and for what issues will you support in-camera meetings?

Answer:

Section 197 of the Municipal Government Act clearly outlines what matters should be discussed in camera. I always remember the three L’s. Land, Legal and Labour. Other than sensitive issues such as the 3 L’s the public has a right to be present at all council meetings. The rules are defined and legislated.

- 7 Please indicate whether you support the projects listed below, and indicate what priority level you assign to the completion of each project. Please indicate priority level from 1 – 5 with 1 being very low priority, to 5 being very high priority:

Many of these projects require further study and a business case to clearly set forth the benefits for our residents and dependence on City tax dollars.

Project	Support Yes or No	Priority 1 to 5
Ray Gibbon Drive:		5
Without the provincial funding in place	No	
With the total provincial funding for all 3 phases paid	Yes	
Regardless of payment of the provincial funding	No	
New Civic Administration Building	Undecided	1
New Library	Yes	1
Expansion of Profiles Gallery as proposed by AH&F	Yes	1
Farmers’ Market Building	No	
Seniors and/or Community Center	Yes	5

Servus Place expansion	No	
Riel Park Phase 3 & 4	No	
Grain Elevator Heritage Park	Undecided	1