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1. Upcoming Meetings/Events

Feb. 22, 2011 SATA Monthly Meeting
Apr. 9, 2011 BINGO 4:45 – 9:30

All SATA monthly meetings are held at 7:30 pm at the St. Albert Community League Hall, 17 Perron Street.

2. Communication No Substitute For Meaningful Consultation

In response to criticisms of its public consultation process, which were leveled at Council and Administration during the 2010 municipal election, the City recently announced plans to introduce new measures aimed at promoting public involvement and communication with residents.

The question, of course, is if the City and its residents are on the same page when it comes to engagement.

The City's plans include using social media and the Internet to communicate with residents, along with providing a monthly newspaper column to inform citizens on what Administration and Council are doing. But is this really what is needed or residents want? These measures do nothing to promote meaningful engagement with residents on important issues.

Councilors should be asking themselves what is gained by implementing the proposed plans, particularly since the *Saint City News* and the *St. Albert Gazette* both already provide factual and objective reporting on City issues. The City

itself regularly publishes information on its programs, services and initiatives in the "Citylights" feature of the *Gazette*. The only proposal that has any merit is webstreaming Council meetings; an idea that was ironically voted down by the majority of Council last December after being introduced by Councilor MacKay as a 2011 budget request.

We believe Council should shelve most of the proposed plans and focus on the real issue surrounding public consultation on major issues. The core issue is changing the City's public consultation policies, procedures and processes to facilitate meaningful consultation which allows residents to influence Council decisions on major issues. Only when Council and Administration implement a policy of engaging residents in dialogue, listening to, and hearing residents' concerns, and factoring those concerns into the decision-making process, will a truly meaningful process be established.

3. Seniors' Plight

Many St. Albert residents are feeling the pinch of high property taxes, but perhaps no one more so than low-income seniors, of whom more than 568 received a \$100/year subsidy on their property taxes from the City in 2010. While this is a welcome initiative, it is a drop in the bucket compared to the needs of many house-poor seniors, who may be forced to move out of the city.

Their plight is underlined by the fact that between 2008 and 2011, St. Albert property taxes and utilities increased 20.95% and 35% respectively, while CPP and OAS benefits increased by 7% and 4.3% respectively. The City assures us that in 2011 taxes and utilities will on average increase a total of \$15.82 per month or \$189.84 per year, leaving seniors with a paltry \$83.40/year, or \$6.94/month out of their 2011 pension increase with which to cover other rising costs.

So what is the solution? A bank line of credit must be paid back on a monthly basis, while a

reverse mortgage entails significant legal and start-up costs, not to mention the usurious rates charged by the banks. We believe there's a better answer - property tax deferral for seniors.

First established in B.C., this policy defers annual property taxes on a home until it is sold by the senior or sold as part of their estate. It combines low interest rates and start-up costs with almost zero risk, making it an excellent investment in our senior citizens and aiding the "aging in place" goals of health care.

Seniors United Now has lobbied for this plan for a number of years, and the City of St. Albert took a resolution to the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association. Both initiatives have been unsuccessful, as our provincial and municipal governments continue fighting over money. As nothing is done, seniors continue to suffer.

One possible solution, however, is for the City of St. Albert to finance the program itself. The City possesses, and continues to build, very large capital reserves that earn very low interest income. The City could implement a property tax deferral program of its own at virtually no risk to municipal taxpayers. Seniors will benefit from the advantages of the program, the City will earn interest, and by filing caveats on the homes of seniors who subscribe to the program, the City will be the first entity paid, even in the event of bankruptcy.

The average tax (excluding school taxes) for a single family home in 2009 in St. Albert (25-30 years old, single-detached, 3 bedroom bungalow of 1200 sq feet, etc) was \$2152. For seniors who choose to participate, implementing a property tax deferral program could put almost \$180 a month into their pockets, potentially making a major difference in their lives.

4. Strategic Plan

At SATA's January meeting, SATA members participated in an exercise to update the Strategic Plan, which outlines our goals and the key directions you want us to head in. We learned a lot about our current plan, and discussed what was important to us, including what we should stop, change or continue to do, as well as what new objectives we should pursue.

What did we learn? We learned that our plan to date has helped us get closer to our Vision of a St. Albert where everyone can afford to live, and tax dollars are spent for the benefit of the majority of taxpayers rather than special interest groups. We want to continue doing much of what is currently in our plan, while making some adjustments. Also, there are new ideas that we should add or put more priority on. These ideas include putting more emphasis on the impact of taxes on the family life style, which is driving seniors and young families alike out of St. Albert, or supporting improvements to the budget process like the implementing of a zero-based budget system or limiting new Council initiatives within 3 months of an election.

There's much more to this revised plan, which we'll be unveiling at our February 22nd meeting. We'll be asking attendees to tell us what they want as priorities this year. You will be able to view the draft plan at www.stalberttaxpayers.org, and your feedback is both encouraged and welcomed.

5. Bingos... HELP

We need VOLUNTEERS! Join our fundraiser!

Our 2011 bingo schedule is shown below. All bingos are held at the Bingo Hall in Grandin Mall. In January we forfeited \$120 in fines due to insufficient volunteers. Please consider joining our bingo group to prevent this happening again.

Weekday	Date	Time
Saturday	April 9, 2011	4:45-9:30
Sunday	May 8, 2011	10:45-3:30
Sunday	October 2, 2011	10:45-3:30
Saturday	December 10, 2011	4:45-9:30

We need 7 volunteers for early bingos and 8 for the evening event. Please let us know which bingos you can attend. Sign up at our meetings or contact George at gvalan@shaw.ca, or by phone at 780-691-1459 or 780-418-5659.