

### INSIDE THIS ISSUE

1. Upcoming Meetings/Events
2. Riel Costs Skyrocket
3. AHF Review
4. DARP Implementation Strategy
5. New Provincial Search Fees

#### 1. Upcoming Meetings/Events

June 28, 2011     SATA Monthly Meeting

The guest speaker at the meeting will be Paul Moulton, Executive Director of Arts & Heritage St. Albert.

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

#### 2. Riel Costs Skyrocket

Riel Park project cost estimates raised their ugly head again at City Hall's Finance Committee meeting on June 13<sup>th</sup>. The cost of this project, originally estimated in 2006 at \$8.4 million, has now ballooned to close to \$36 million. In June 2006 the consultant proposed the remediation and refurbishment of Riel Park as "a cost effective way to incorporate former landfill site, expansion of the City's park system, and maintenance of important recreation and sports facilities for the whole community".

The last 4 years have shown that the consultant's plan was anything but cost effective!

During the last budget process, when Council was presented with another increased estimate of the cost of this project, the Mayor asked for assurance that this was the last cost "surprise". Council was given that assurance by Administration. At that time, the cost for phases 3 and 4 was \$5.2 million. But in the April Council report the cost escalated to \$8 million, and barely 2 months later, it had risen to \$9 million. This is a 77% increase in cost over less than a year. Mr.

Guy Boston said the latest increase was because of some "... interesting inflations..." but provided no explanation for the additional costs. Regardless, Council voted to fund Phases 3 and 4 of this project ... the capping, grading and replacement of the rugby and soccer fields.

Was Administration held accountable for this by Council? Sadly, no. So \$4.5 million of Provincial infrastructure funding will be diverted from other needed projects to fund this one. In addition, every taxpayer will pay over \$14.00 a year for the next 15 years on their utilities bill to cover the latest cost increase.

Will this Administration ever be held accountable or will they continue to spend scarce taxpayer dollars like water?

#### 3. AHF Review

During the May 30<sup>th</sup> Council meeting, Mayor Crouse set the wheels in motion to review the City's long standing stewardship agreement with the Arts and Heritage Foundation (AHF). The purpose of the review is to determine the most efficient, effective and economical approach to provide arts and heritage services in the City. This will be the first review since 2007. The existing agreement will expire in June 2012.

Under the existing agreement, the AHF delivers arts and heritage programs to the residents on behalf of the City. The City provides AHF with operating grants to fund the programs.

Based on information tabled during the 2011 Budget, the City's operating grants represent roughly 69% of the Foundation's current year \$1.83 million budget. AHF's single largest expense is for wages, benefits and contract services which, at \$1.27 million represent almost 70% of total annual expenses. The 2011 budget for programs and exhibitions stands at less than 7%, or \$121,345.

Do you think St. Albert residents get good value for services provided by AHF? Should AHF's mandate be taken over by the City, or should AHF

be more efficient in delivering its services?

You will get a chance to learn more about the AHF, and ask questions when you attend our June monthly meeting which will feature, as guest speaker, Mr. Paul Moulton, Executive Director of Arts & Heritage St. Albert.

#### **4. DARP Implementation Strategy**

Recently residents have witnessed renewed talk about some high-profile projects. After a short hiatus, the City is now planning to resume work on Phase 3 of Ray Gibbon Drive, and the boondoggle called Riel Park redevelopment will see another \$9 million spent to complete Phases 3 and 4. Recently Council also received from the Administration the Downtown Area Redevelopment Plan (DARP) Implementation Strategy which prioritizes DARP identified projects, provides preliminary cost estimates, and sets out proposed completion timelines for the project.

Council experienced some sticker shock when the strategy plans revealed the preliminary estimated cost of the project is \$136 million. This does not include the cost of the proposed new administration City Hall annex, nor the library. A scaled down, "Priority Capital" version of DARP focusing on studies and short term projects is estimated to cost \$42 million. The estimates are reportedly accurate to plus or minus 50%. Given Administration's dismal record when it comes to estimating project costs, DARP could end up costing residents twice the estimated amounts!

Some of the ideas proposed in DARP would drastically change the character of St. Albert downtown. DARP calls for narrowing Perron Street, which will slow down traffic and make the area nearly impassable in winter. The free parking in front of City Hall will be replaced with a multilevel parkade where citizens will have to pay to be able to park their vehicles. Professional businesses such as doctors, lawyers and accountants will be restricted to offices on the upper floor, which will make it harder for some types of businesses to establish themselves downtown, and will also make it more difficult for handicapped clients to get to their services. Several new public buildings, that is, buildings

that will be used by the City and not by taxpaying businesses, are planned for construction, on some of the 14 acres of vacant City owned land. With only 4 acres of the vacant land held privately, it's hard to see how any new construction will turn the downtown into the much touted hub of economic activity.

Although DARP strategy document outlines several ways to pay for implementing these changes, most of them aren't very feasible and most of the costs will be paid by you, the taxpayer. Furthermore, nothing has been said about the ongoing future maintenance costs of the new facilities.

Never mind that there doesn't seem to be any pressing need to change a downtown that most citizens seem quite satisfied with. Is there really a need to spend so much money on something that will probably harm downtown in the long run? We don't think so.

#### **5. New Provincial Search Fees**

As many St. Albert Taxpayers are no doubt aware, recently the Province announced that it would be introducing a \$15 charge for accessing motor vehicle information by enforcement personnel. Municipalities conduct searches of vehicle registries before issuing tickets for photo radar and other traffic violations.

In late April, as St. Albert Council finalized the 2011 Budget, it amended the operating budget by including, among other changes, \$385,000 to cover the cost of new provincial registry search fees. Next year, the new fees are estimated to cost the City \$510,000.

Following an outcry from many municipalities in the Province, provincial officials decided to suspend the proposed search fee until September. That means that St. Albert will likely spend only half the \$385,000 included in this year's budget.

We hope that the Mayor and Council will remember to refund the difference to St. Albert taxpayers when they set next year's property tax rates.