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1. Upcoming Meetings/Events

Nov. 22, 2011	SATA Monthly Meeting
Dec. 11, 2011	Annual General Meeting (AGM)

SATA's upcoming monthly meeting and the AGM will be held at the St. Albert Community League Hall, 17 Perron Street. The November 22nd meeting will begin at 7:30 pm, while the AGM will start at 2:00 pm.

2. The Budget Grind

As most of you are aware, the proposed 2012 City budget made public in late October would result in an average property tax increase of 2.9%. What some of you may not realize is that combined with the proposed 9.5% increase in utility fees, that's equivalent to a 6.8% property tax hike. In the absence of cost pressures due to rapid growth or high inflation, that's a large increase.

One of the debateable funded projects in the 2012 capital budget is the \$231,000 expenditure on Servus Place Life Cycle Replacement. This is the first instalment in a 10 year plan to spend over \$4.4 million to maintain the 5-year old facility. What is disconcerting is that at the same time, the operating deficit at Servus Place is expected to increase from the current \$837,000 to \$1.23 million in 2014.

Council will also be looking for funds to purchase a new building to accommodate our police department. The new Police Services Building is currently unfunded, and the City needs \$5 million to complete a deal in 2012.

Estimated to cost \$34.8 million, the Transit Park

and Ride Station at Campbell Road and St. Albert Trail, is the single largest item in the 2012 capital budget. With no information on grant availability, and, with insufficient work having been done to lay the groundwork for Council to make an informed decision, Council might be wise to defer this item.

At the other end of the cost spectrum, the City plans to spend \$40,000 to install dog waste collection bag dispensers in city parks. Put forward as a service enhancement, the rub is that the cost of replacing the bags is estimated at \$40,000 per year. Is that really necessary?

And what would the budget be without frivolous requests? One of the councillors put forward a motion that the City add \$350,000 to the 2012 Funded Capital Budget for an LRT functional alignment study. Since the LRT is unlikely to come to the City's southern boundary for at least 30 years, we hope common sense will prevail when Council votes on this motion.

Since many taxpayers may already be feeling strains due to the economic slowdown, SATA hopes that as Council examines the 2012 budget, they will concentrate 2012 spending on essential core services and programs benefitting all taxpayers.

3. Ray Gibbon Drive Uncertainty

As the *St. Albert Gazette* noted in its November 9 edition, residents in North Ridge voiced concerns that the alignment of Ray Gibbon Drive is too close to their homes, and makes no allowance for future widening of the road to a six lane highway. This represents a risk because it's possible that the City may be forced to move Ray Gibbon Drive.

When the province was planning construction of Anthony Henday Drive, the original design was too close to many Akinsdale homes, and the province incurred additional costs moving the roadway to increase the width of the buffer between the homes and the roadway. If Ray Gibbon Drive ends up having to be realigned at some future date, City taxpayers will be on the hook for the costs of realignment.

Another issue that continues to be a source of concern is the province's funding commitment to Ray Gibbon Drive. While Ed Stelmach supported funding the road, we have a new Premier who may not feel bound by Stelmach's promises. And then there's next year's provincial election. If the Wildrose Alliance was to form the next government, would they feel compelled to fulfil the previous government's promises?

The City needs to be very careful before they begin construction of Ray Gibbon Drive, as the project could end up costing St. Albert taxpayers a lot more than we expect!

4. Communication and Engagement

During the election, Council candidates emphasized the need for improvements in communication and engagement with St. Albert citizens on issues that affect them. But a year later what we have seen is only one baby step in the right direction ... the webstreaming of Council meetings. Originally proposed by Cam MacKay and voted down, the project was resurrected and passed in 2011. The Council column such as Cathy Heron's recent contribution to the Gazette is only a political forum and adds no value.

And so, we continue to see more of the same: e.g. open houses that provide Council and administration a chance to TELL us what they are doing, giving the residents limited opportunity for feedback. Examples are the recent open houses on the Recreation and Culture Master Plans. Both of these used poster boards to provide some of the general direction of these plans. Neither presentation identified additional staff that may be required, new public buildings, or new projects or their costs; the side of the equation that allows taxpayers to make an assessment of "is it worth it?"

While survey feedback is solicited, survey questions are usually designed to support what is being proposed. Who wouldn't want "to create a city where people want to live"? The question should be, are you willing to support, through taxes and user fees, the many costly initiatives in the plans, such as \$10-15 million to expand Servus Place, or the unknown cost of a new theatre-performance centre? Where is the debate on what

actually is a public good, and should be subsidized with taxpayer dollars? Or, should the City get involved in initiatives like the exercise facilities or Starbucks at Servus Place, forcing private competitors out of business?

The implementation of the DARP design principles is another example. In this case, now that they know the enormous cost, residents and downtown businesses are not asked whether redesign of downtown be dropped. Instead they are provided with choices on how to implement the selected designs. The new design principles, in addition to increasing administration costs, will increase development costs for entrepreneurs who want to develop or expand their downtown properties.

What we get is more of the same ineffective communication techniques used in the past. Nowhere do we see innovative approaches that would overcome the general sense of "it doesn't matter what we say, no one listens". It's time for Council and Administration to get creative and actually engage the community. Until Council decides they want to hear and investigate "the other side of the story" rather than dismiss it by saying "move if you don't like it", administration will continue to offer ineffective communication and engagement opportunities designed to attract special interest groups who will support them. And only a few will continue to show up, either because they have unbounded optimism that someone might finally listen, it is their ox being gored, or their interests being supported.

5. Culture and Recreation Plan Feedback

Those of us worried about the City's current spending on recreation, arts and heritage projects have something new to worry about. Earlier this month the City held open houses to table their long term Recreation Master Plan and Cultural Master Plan. Both plans contemplate significant future increases in spending in these areas.

If you attended one or both of these events, we would like you to share your impressions of the events, based on the information provided by city staff. Drop us a line by e-mail to flannie@shaw.ca.