

Ward 6

UPDATE

February 2010

Alan Dunn Councillor, Ward 6

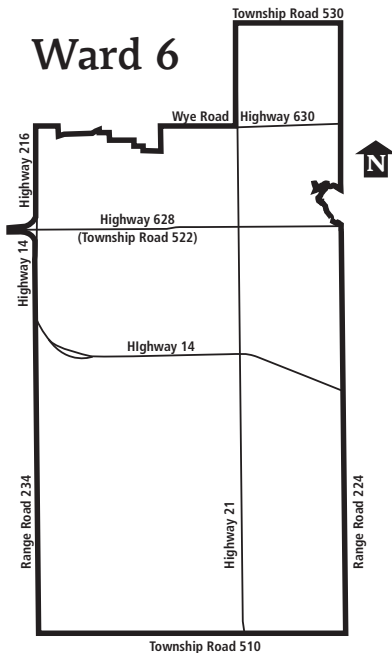
Office Phone: 780-464-8206
Fax: 780-464-8114
Email: dunn@strathcona.ab.ca



Strathcona
County

www.strathcona.ab.ca

Ward 6



Distribution of this newsletter

This newsletter is intended for residents of Ward 6, as shown on the map above. To economize, it is being distributed according to delivery zones established by Canada Post, which do not coincide with ward boundaries.

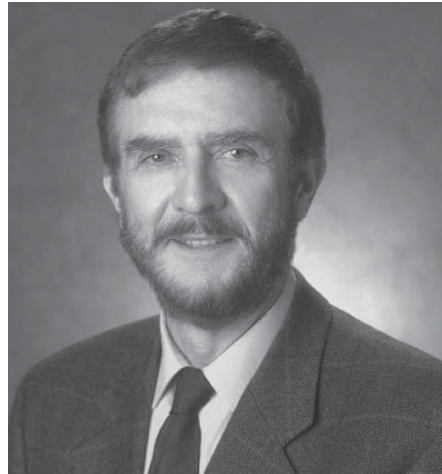
A limited number of households in Wards 5 and 7 may receive a copy as a result. If so, please enjoy the information and make note of the councillor for your area.

Ward 5, Councillor Jacquie Fenske, 780-464-8147
Ward 7, Councillor Glen Lawrence, 780-464-8003

 This newsletter is also available at www.strathcona.ab.ca.

FSC logo

from your councillor



Councillor Alan Dunn

Sustainability: what does it really mean?

A popular yet misunderstood word in the modern politically correct lexicon is “sustainability.” It seems impossible to produce a report, make a speech or even have a discussion without somehow working this overused word in somewhere.

It has become the new *imprimatur*, particularly for government documents. If something is described as “sustainable,” we are all to breathe a collective sigh of relief knowing that somehow our interests are being looked after.

There are many definitions of this slippery word out there and I'll not waste column inches quoting others' purple prose. My definition is: “An activity is sustainable if you can keep on doing it without either making things worse or running out of something that cannot be replaced.”

If we accept that rough and ready definition, then we must throw out quite a few human endeavours and habits as not sustainable. Mining and petroleum production, for instance,

are not sustainable. No matter how efficiently and carefully we use these resources, once we have dug them all up, there will be no more. Which is not to say we shouldn't do it, as long as we understand the consequences and have some practical alternative plans when the end comes, which it will sooner or later.

While there are many other examples, one of the more outrageous is the notion of “sustainable growth,” a logical impossibility that only seems to make sense because it is repeated so often. Nothing grows forever, whether bacteria in a Petri dish or a megalopolis. When there is no more space or food, then the population stabilizes or, more likely, declines.

Why this is more than a tiresome academic discussion is that we, the residents of Strathcona County, enjoy a lifestyle that is based upon the quicksand of “sustainable growth.” Our superior roads, recreation facilities and services are mostly bankrolled by our strong commercial and industrial base. These produce their maximum tax benefit when first commissioned. This benefit declines yearly with depreciation. It follows that we must continue to attract and construct more and more taxable industry to stay ahead of the curve and that, is not “sustainable.”

At present, residential taxpayers fund only one-third of municipal revenue and the share is declining. Residents are therefore becoming increasingly irrelevant to the decision-making process and that should be a sobering thought to anyone.

Of course, the “sustainable growth” illusion appears to work if the time scale is sufficiently short and we have notoriously short planning horizons—the continued on page 2

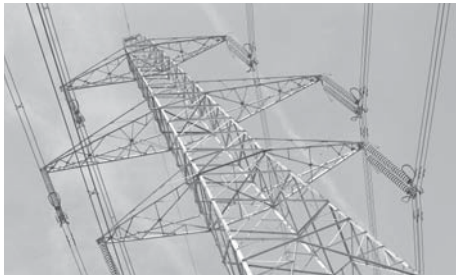
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next election, the kids' graduations or retirement to the coast.

Nevertheless, unchecked, the myth of sustainable growth will gradually erode our future leaving our community permanently poorer than we found it, and that will be a shabby legacy for future generations.



500 kV powerline proposal: far from over

Epcor/AltaLink have at last announced their preferred route for the new 500 kV powerline that has been causing us so much heartburn over the last few years.

Surprise, surprise, the route chosen is within the Transportation Utility Corridor (TUC) just east of Highway 216 and exactly where we have told the power companies and the province that we don't want it.

This might be a good time to point out that the *T* in TUC stands for *Transportation*, not *Transmission*, but I digress. Many of us believed this has been the preferred route for years and that all of the open houses, public meetings and invitations for feedback have been mere window dressing to make us think our opinion is important.

One new wrinkle has been added to the debate, however. The power companies are patting themselves on the back for having chosen a route impacting the fewest residences, a claim

based on a clearance of 150 metres from the centre line of the towers.

All this proves is that one can pass any test if the bar is set low enough—150 metres is a far cry from the 800 metres presented at various open house meetings as a minimum clearance. And, this is measured from the centre line, not the edge of the tower structure. This means that if the span of the conductor-carrying arm is 45 metres, the actual horizontal distance is less than 130 metres.

To actually claim, on the basis of this disingenuous arithmetic that the number of affected residences has been minimized, is an example of the breathtaking *chutzpah* of which the power companies are capable. Or, perhaps no one noticed that Fountain Creek, Balmoral, Woodbridge Farms and other communities are just across the fence.

There is, however, some good news in the announcement: burying the lines is not off the table yet. The power companies have committed to presenting a buried line option in their application to the Alberta Utilities Commission.

If this option is accepted, it will go a long way toward alleviating our concerns. The Facilities Application will likely be submitted in the summer, with the hearing sometime after that.

Strathcona will intervene in this hearing and continue to press for buried lines wherever they pass through the County. This is far from over.

Highway 21 twinning

At last this project is complete. Sort of. The road surface in the new section is pretty bad. There are no trustworthy painted lines yet and the access roads have not been paved yet.

All this is to be taken care of this spring. As least the long-drawn-out construction has been completed and

I for one am happy we finally have a working, twinned highway on this busy section of road.

Update on electronic Ward 6 newsletter

In my last newsletter, I asked whether you would prefer electronic distribution of this newsletter. Feedback was negligible, (though mostly in favour). That, together with the fact that it is taking much longer than hoped to provide high speed Internet in Ward 6, has caused me to drop this idea. I'll have to continue using snail mail for the present.

As much as many of us hate receiving unaddressed mail, this still seems the cheapest and most efficient method of getting the information out.

Taxes

Council approved a budget for 2010 that will maintain municipal services without increasing taxes. Here is a quote from the official news release:

"Holding the line on taxes in this coming year will give our residents and businesses some certainty during a time of widespread uncertainty. We know the economy is affecting many people in our community. Doing this has required us to make some adjustments, but we're confident they are well-founded."

In order to achieve a zero-per-cent tax increase, the County has had to reduce the contribution to reserves for future vehicle replacements, and proposes to use anticipated surplus funds from 2009 for some one-time capital projects.

I voted for this budget, which passed unanimously, but only with reservations. We were fortunate during 2009 to have made some unexpected economies. Fuel prices, for instance, turned out to be much less than budgeted.

To apply these economies to a lower or zero tax creates the illusion that we shall always be able to find the money to avoid tax increases in the future. This is simply not realistic and will no doubt come back to haunt us in subsequent years. That we are

doing this in an election year might also attract the attention of the cynics among us.

I would have preferred to have spent whatever windfall surpluses we gained in 2009 to top up reserves and to pay down the ballooning debt, letting taxes follow their normal inflationary rise. Such an approach would have had, in my view, a better long-term outcome through lower interest costs and would have avoided creating the expectation that we, as a society, can continue to have whatever we want without paying for it.

Still, except for this one philosophical snag, this is an excellent budget worthy of our support.

Priority funding

As Priority Funding has had a bit of attention lately within County Council, perhaps it is time to explain what it is all about.

A Priority Fund, once referred to by the less politically correct term *discretionary fund*, is an allowance allocated to each member of Council through the annual budget process.

For the 2010 budget year, this amount is \$31,250. Any unspent balance carries forward to the following year. The idea is that Council members have the discretion financially to support community projects and needs, on an *ad hoc* basis. This in turn makes it unnecessary for support of such projects to be gained through the annual budget, a time consuming, cumbersome process that is often a mystery to those not directly involved.

The Priority Fund system does present several drawbacks:

In principle, these expenditures require a motion in a public Council meeting, debate and subsequent vote. In practice, there is rarely any debate and the funds are approved almost automatically. This gives the impression this money is under the sole control of the councillor without much actual vetting by Council as whole. Often councillors seem to act as if this is in fact the case.

Equally often, residents assume, incorrectly, that funding provided in this way comes from a councillor's private account. In either case, there is

the real or apparent risk that Priority Funds could be therefore used for political purposes, to buy residents' votes with their own money.

Perhaps concern could be alleviated with clear guidelines or better yet rules around how Priority Funds are allocated. So far there are none, though some councillors, including me, set informal guidelines for themselves.

In general, I support only modest requests for projects where the money is to be spent within the County by local volunteer groups. I expect that these groups would have already done significant fund-raising on their own before applying for Priority Funding.

I do not support the use of Priority Funds for travel outside the immediate area by teams or clubs, nor do I support projects proceeding from other levels of government or private businesses. These should be dealt with through the annual budget process.

Because of these restrictions or perhaps because of my uneasiness about dishing out money that doesn't belong to me, I have tended to spend relatively little from my own funds. Others have spent more lavishly, creating an impression of unfairness.

Until the recent 2010 budget discussions, I hadn't realized what a hot button item this was. At that time I moved that for one year only, no additional money be added to Priority Funds. This would have resulted in a savings of over \$250,000 during a tight budget year, without causing much hardship.

The result was more emotional and hostile than I could have imagined. My motion was soundly defeated with much fire and brimstone as was a similar motion by another councillor simply proposing to reduce the amount by half. Until then I had not realized to what degree some of my colleagues feel ownership of this money. That attitude makes me even more determined to press for a review of Priority Funding, a basically good idea that seems to have gotten out of hand.



Protecting County lands for everyone

The vast majority of Strathcona County residents respect one another's property boundaries. Encroachments and unauthorized uses of County property unfortunately do occur.

Examples of such encroachments are where individuals:

- build fences, decks, fire pits and storage sheds on parks, reserves or road rights-of-way
- construct docks on stormwater management facilities
- plant trees or shrubs and create pathways on County property without permission
- dump leaves, grass clippings, debris or fill on County land
- cut down trees and vegetation from County property

Unauthorized use like this can create safety hazards, limit public use and access to public property, prevent necessary maintenance, and damage the natural environment.

Update on development in our area

Wye Road Crossing

Work is almost complete on the Wye Road Crossing commercial development east of Wal-Mart. Many of the businesses are now open. Rona is expected to open this spring.

Planning for Phase II, the area east of Wye Road Crossing, is well underway. The proposed urban village will include a mix of commercial uses and a diversity of housing types from low density semi-detached homes to high density apartment towers and everything in between.

Salisbury Village East

Preliminary planning has begun on the eastern portion of the Village, adjacent to Range Road 232. The developer is proposing a business campus environment including office buildings, hotel, residential and significant green space around an existing wetland that is currently not visible from Range Road 232 or Wye Road.

Trail improvements in Ward 6

To improve walkability, initial work began in late fall 2009 for proposed improvements for J & R Trail, including surveying the main trail and several of the larger connector trails. Trail surface conditions and foot bridges were also assessed.

This project focuses on enhancing the existing trail running south from Baseline Road to Wye Road, including constructing a new link to connect to Boag Lake. Foot bridges will be refurbished and a couple of new ones built to cross the wetlands. Low- or no-maintenance materials such as mulch or wood chips will be selectively applied along the trail and at entrance points. A trail map, and directional and interpretive signage will also be added at key locations.

Construction will begin in late spring 2010, depending on weather and ground conditions. These improvements are located on County road rights-of-way, public utility lots and municipal reserve lands.

These improvements are part of the County's approved Open Space and Recreation Facility Strategy. Part of the strategy is aimed at creating parks, natural areas and trails that contribute to walkable communities and inviting gathering places.

Further information

Engineering and Environmental
Planning
780-464-8279
www.strathcona.ab.ca/revitalize

Snowmobiling in Strathcona County



With plenty of snow this winter, here are some timely reminders from the RCMP.

- Snowmobile riding is allowed on your own property or other private property if you have the owner's permission. Snowmobiling is also permitted on publicly owned lakes.
- In Alberta, snowmobiles cannot be operated on any portion of a highway including the ditch. In this case, highway refers to all types of roadways.
- If snowmobilers cross a highway, they must stop and yield to all traffic, have passengers get off, and cross by the most direct, shortest and safest route.
- Snowmobilers require registration and insurance, and must be able to produce these when requested by a peace officer.
- Registration for snowmobiles may be obtained from any location where motor vehicle licences are sold.
- The Insurance Act requires snowmobilers to carry minimum insurance coverage of \$200,000 in public liability and property damage. Coverage of \$1,000,000 is common.
- Riders must be at least 14 years of age to operate a snowmobile on their own. A person under 14 must be accompanied by an adult or supervised closely while receiving instruction.

Strathcona County RCMP strongly encourages the use of helmets for anyone utilizing off-highway vehicles, whether snowmobiles or all-terrain vehicles.

Further information

780-467-7741

Snow clearing...a valued service



In Strathcona County, Transportation and Agriculture Services' operators work 24/7 to get the job done. This year, more snow removal and sanding are being done at night than ever before. With over 2,000 kilometres of roads and trails in rural and urban Strathcona, crews have a large area to cover.

Costs for this service are significant. For instance, in 2009, the County spent over \$3.5 million on winter road maintenance. This figure does not include residential street snow clearing in Sherwood Park (P4), which can be a point of concern for urban residents.

In rural areas, the most common

complaint is "plugged" driveways. When a grader goes through a subdivision at a slower speed it leaves a ridge, or windrow, at the end of driveways. We apologize for any inconvenience that may be caused, and request residents' help in clearing these.

Further information

780-417-7100
www.strathcona.ab.ca

Please report any road conditions that need attention. Remember, the Government of Alberta contractor – Carillion Canada, 1-800-390-2242 – maintains all highways.