

Ward 6

UPDATE

August 2009

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Councillor, Ward 6

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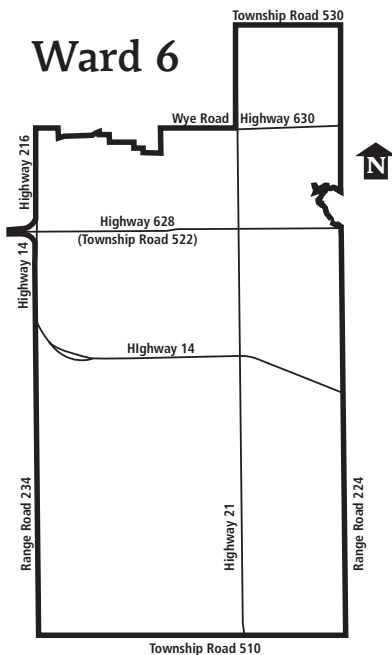
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Strathcona
County

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

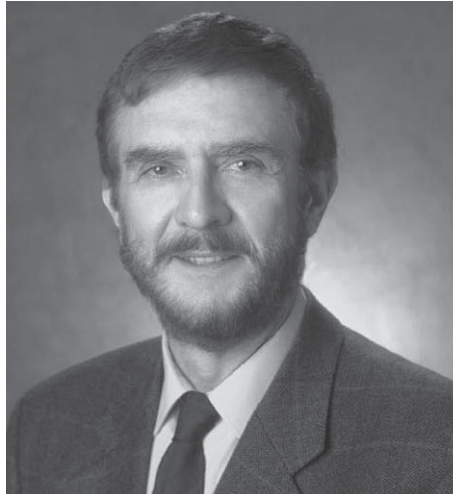
Ward 7, Councillor Glen Lawrence, 780-464-8003



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

FSC logo

from your councillor



Councillor Alan Dunn

With the cold spring, last-minute Council issues and now the long awaited rain, my touring of Ward 6 is off to a slow start. Still, a few trends and concerns are beginning to emerge, which I hope to address in this and subsequent newsletters. Here is the list in no particular order:

- Taxes: "Too high for what we get."
- Green Routine: "Why can we not have weekly organics pickup?"
- Speeding: "Not enough enforcement in subdivisions."
- High Voltage Transmission Lines: "Are they coming here?"

Property taxes

By now, most folks have paid their 2009 taxes, but judging by the number of calls I receive, there is still resentment.

As one of my colleagues has pointed out in a recent column, the Municipal Government Act (MGA) puts severe restrictions on the ways municipalities can raise money. There are four: government grants, fees for

services, developer levies and property taxes.

In the USA, municipalities often have more freedom to collect money through fuel taxes, payroll taxes, bond issues and other methods. In Canada, these are available only to provincial and federal governments.

Alberta's Municipal Government Act stipulates that residential property taxes must be based upon the market value of the home, so if you do renovations, expect your assessment to go up.

We understand perfectly how unfair this is, yet the MGA allows absolutely no leeway to do this differently. Nor is there consideration for variations in services received by the taxpayer; that is deemed to be accounted for by the free market.

Whether or not a residence has street lights, sidewalks or access to facilities would influence the value of the residence and therefore the assessment.

The current economic downturn has drastically affected the housing market. The retail value of homes has dropped by about 20 per cent since last year, yet in most cases taxes have increased. Folks are understandably puzzled by this apparent contradiction.

The quick answer is that tax rates are based upon the relative values of homes not the absolute values. If your home is worth twice as much as your neighbour's, then your taxes will be twice as high. If both homes fall in value by 20 per cent, the ratio of the values will be maintained and therefore your taxes will still be twice as high.

To determine the actual tax bill,

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Ward 6

UPDATE

...from your Councillor continued

Strathcona County calculates how much total revenue is required from residential taxation, then proportions out the contribution according to relative value of each home. If the County needs more money than last year, then all taxes will rise accordingly.

The final unpleasantness in the 2009 tax situation was the curve thrown at us by the Province through the education tax.

This was increased by a whopping 15.4 per cent this year for a variety of reasons. We were quite proud to have held the municipal tax increase to 5.9 per cent this year; unfortunately, coupled with a 15.4 per cent education tax increase, the overall result is about 8.9 per cent for an average home.

Strathcona County has no jurisdiction over education. We are simply directed by the Province how much to collect and remit. Many folks do not read the fine print and assume that the entire amount paid to the municipality is spent by the municipality. In fact, only about 60 per cent of what residents pay goes towards roads, fire protection, police, recreation and other services that we expect. Concerns about education tax should be addressed to your MLA.

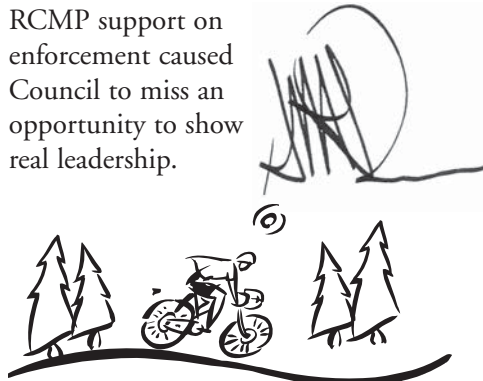
Cellphone use: restriction on hand-held starts September 1

Last session, Council finally passed a bylaw restricting the use of hand-held electronic communication devices while operating a motor vehicle. The bylaw comes into effect on September 1 of this year.

Judging from what I see while driving, many folks are either unaware of the new rules, or have decided to continue this unsafe practice until the last possible moment.

Though not legally required, the County will have an information campaign including new signage advising motorists of the bylaw.

I do regret that we “chickened out” and did not include hands-free units as studies indicate they are as hazardous as hand-held units. Lack of RCMP support on enforcement caused Council to miss an opportunity to show real leadership.



Rural Crime Watch

One of the best ways to improve community safety is to have an active and informed group of citizens.

In our community, the Rural Crime Watch Association helps to provide that critical link.

Rural Crime Watch volunteers work in partnership with the RCMP to provide call-outs with timely information.

A lifetime membership in Rural Crime Watch is just \$15. It's a worthwhile way to build a safer community.

Applications for membership or more information about Rural Crime Watch can be obtained from the RCMP detachment, 911 Bison Way in Sherwood Park. Call 780-467-7741.

500 kV powerline

On June 17, the local organization Responsible Electrical Transmission for Albertans (RETA) held a community meeting that was attended by about 1,500 people.

The highlight of the evening was information from Eurocable, a trade organization based in Brussels. These folks made a series of very credible presentations illustrating that burying high-voltage powerlines is not only possible, but often desirable for a number of reasons.

This approach is common in Europe and in other parts of the world. While making no wild promises without all of the facts, they made it clear that the opening position of the transmission companies about the impossibility of burying powerlines was simply nonsense.

Preparing for hearings

On the home front, the commitment of Strathcona County to oppose these lines is stronger than ever. We have set aside funds to prepare for Alberta Utility Commission hearings in the fall; we have engaged specialised consultants and legal counsel to assist us and we have appointed a senior utilities manager to spearhead our efforts.

We have no answers yet — whether the line will be built, or which of the two proposed routes will be selected if it is.

We'll not have a final answer until after the hearings and therefore we ask that everyone be patient but maintain their commitment. If we stick together in our determination to stop this project, we can prevail.



Pesticide reduction—where we stand

As most know, I have been a persistent advocate to reduce or eliminate the use of pesticides as much as possible.

Pesticides are poisons, and there are no truly selective poisons. What is fatal to one species is also harmful to a greater or lesser extent to any other species. We know that pesticides are responsible for a variety of health problems including cancers, Parkinson's, asthma, etc.

We live in an agricultural area where pesticide use has become to some extent an unfortunate economic necessity. While undesirable, agricultural pesticides are less of a problem as farmers, ever mindful of costs, are unlikely to use any more than the minimum requirement.

A more serious issue is the frivolous and indiscriminate use of pesticides, especially herbicides, by careless and untrained homeowners in residential areas for purely cosmetic reasons. These toxins eventually find their way into the soil and water system where they persist indefinitely.

Bans put in place

Other jurisdictions have recognized this as a serious health problem. Both Ontario and Québec have banned the use of herbicides to kill aesthetic/cosmetic weeds.

As of this year, there are over 150 municipalities with partial or full bans. Closer to home, the Province of Alberta will ban the use of combination herbicide/fertiliser products ("weed and feed") at the end of this year. The City of Calgary is considering a pesticide ban and will look at alternatives by October.

Strathcona County is looking at these initiatives with interest. While noxious weeds are defined by statute, cosmetic weeds are a little trickier to identify. That is why I am somewhat reluctant to support an outright ban on pesticides, particularly herbicides.

I am leaning to a requirement that all pesticides be applied by licensed, commercial applicators only. The County is already working with interested associations such as the Landscape Alberta Nursery Trades Association to ensure that whatever rules we introduce make sense.

The County is required by law to control noxious weeds and additionally uses herbicides along road rights of way for safety reasons. In the past five years, our use of herbicides has been reduced to about a third, without any noticeable degradation of service, demonstrating that useful improvements can be made with a little thought and care.

Plan for future of the Capital Region comes together

Over the last year, Strathcona County has worked with our neighbouring municipalities to develop a plan for the future of the Capital Region. While some work is yet to be done, we have made significant progress.

Ray Danyluk, Minister of Municipal Affairs, attended the June 11, 2009 Capital Region Board Meeting to respond on behalf of the Province to the Capital Region Growth Plan submitted to the province on April 2, 2009.

"The work of the Capital Region Board to date represents substantial progress and commitment in meeting the objectives of an integrated and strategic approach to planning for the

future in the Capital Region Board," said Mr. Danyluk.

The province has asked for additional work on the Land Use, Transit, Housing and Geographic Information Services Plans to be completed by December 31, 2009. With the completion of the additional tasks, the Capital Region Growth Plan will be an effective tool that will coordinate decisions, sustain economic growth and ensure strong communities and a healthy environment.

More information is available on the Alberta Municipal Affairs website: www.municipalaffairs.gov.ab.ca/1203.cfm.

Community Futures supports small rural businesses

Are you an entrepreneur with ideas and ambition? Community Futures, an independent agency supporting small business, may be able to help.

Entrepreneurs can access a wide range of services at their local Community Futures office. These include business loans, one-on-one business planning, and support to explore and implement various economic diversification strategies.

Rural development is the key to a stronger provincial economy. Flexible, affordable Community Futures loans are specifically designed to help start, expand, relocate or buy a business in a rural community. Solutions are tailored to meet the needs of individual businesses and decisions are made locally and quickly.

Check out our seven new loans products, designed to help you meet the road ahead, at www.roadahead.biz or call 1-877-851-9996 to find out more. Additional information is available at www.cfelkisland.com.

Habitat for Humanity's first build in Strathcona County



With Mayor Olesen at the start of construction of a duplex, the first Habitat for Humanity project in Strathcona County. The project is one of a number of initiatives to bring affordable housing to our community.

Traffic safety – options for reducing speeds

Recently, one of our Council colleagues moved to begin studying a reduction in speed limits in subdivisions to 40 km per hour from 50 km per hour.

To the surprise of many, I did not support this idea. As much as I like the idea of reducing average speeds for environmental and safety reasons, more studies are not going to help. This issue has already been studied to death by Strathcona County as well as many other jurisdictions. The findings are pretty consistent:

- Drivers tend to select a speed that “feels” right based on conditions no matter what the legal speed happens to be.
- Arbitrarily reducing limits has little or no impact on actual speed unless accompanied by consistent enforcement.
- Perception is not always reality. Often complaints are not supported

by evidence of minor accidents or even near misses.

- Enforcement “sting” operations usually net a very high percentage of local drivers, the same folks who complain about others’ speeding.

So, if putting up costly signs that most folks ignore is not a solution to the problem, what then is?

The first step is to determine whether there is in fact a problem. It is a fact that one of the safest places to drive is in a subdivision. The real danger areas are rural roads and controlled intersections.

There are really only two effective methods available to us to reduce actual speeds: enforcement and passive traffic calming, both of which are effective, expensive and generally unpopular.

I am still an enthusiast for roundabouts. These devices reduce maximum speed without reducing

average speeds significantly; they keep traffic moving. Kerb extensions work by narrowing the road, but introduce their own safety and maintenance issues by jutting unexpectedly into the right-of-way.

Reducing the apparent road width by painting bike paths or cross-hatching is surprisingly effective at relatively low cost. This only works, however, when the roads are clear of snow.

My least preferred device is what the Germans refer to as “sleeping policemen”: speed bumps. These things, while annoying everyone, only slow down those prudent drivers who care about their vehicle suspension.

The yahoos, who we would really like to control, either ignore them or register their displeasure by doing a noisy burnout once across.

Whatever method we pick will be expensive so we need to be really sure that this is an actual problem and not political opportunism.

Green Routine – weekly organics collection



Get with the **GREEN ROUTINE!**

It’s hard to believe that it’s been one year since the Green Routine was introduced! Although a significant change was required, residents accepted the challenge and the program has been a success. After one year Strathcona County residents have diverted 16,930 tonnes of waste from the landfill. In comparison, a year of the previous services only saw 7,319 tonnes of waste being diverted. It is clear that your efforts are making a difference!

I have received a number of inquiries about weekly organics collection not being provided to country residential properties in Ward 6. In the fall of 2008, Council approved weekly organics collection for all hamlets in Strathcona County based on resident feedback and results from a telephone and online survey conducted in fall 2008.

One-third of the residents who had been polled in the survey reside in rural Strathcona County. The majority of rural residents were satisfied with the frequency of waste and organics pickup.

When specifically asked whether they were in favour of weekly organics collection at an increased cost, only 40 per cent of rural residents wanted an increase in organics collection during the peak summer season. The majority of rural residents indicated they did not want to pay for this extra collection. Many indicated they already grasscycle (or mulch) or compost, and don’t need the extra space in their green cart.

Because there was not strong support for weekly organics collection and the increased costs to customers, Council did not approve additional organics collection for the rural area. It is important to note that customers in the hamlets pay additional fees for this service. Rural customers are not contributing to the hamlets’ fees for the extra collection.

For rural residents who have additional organic waste, the following are options to manage the materials:

- if you have a small green cart (35 gallon), you can upgrade to a larger green cart (65 gallon) for an additional \$1 per month
- if you already have a larger green cart and still require additional capacity, you can request another green cart for an additional \$7 per month
- additional organic materials can be taken to the brush and yard waste station at 420 Streambank Avenue, which is open 24 hours a day.
- grasscycle or start a compost pile to manage your organic materials on your property – your lawn and garden will thank you!

For further information on these options, please contact the Green Line: 780-449-5514
www.strathcona.ab.ca/utilities.