

Speaking notes for Mayor Ireland
Jasper Park Chamber of Commerce meeting, May 8, 2018



State of the Municipality 2018

Thank you to the Jasper Park Chamber of Commerce for this opportunity to present the seventh annual State of the Municipality address.

I struggled to find a single theme for this evening; instead I have settled on three words to guide my remarks and focus your thoughts: equity, perspective, awareness.

I assure you that I am treating everyone with absolute equity.

No one, not Municipal management or staff, not Patti, nor the Chamber Executive, not the press, not even council, have any notice of the nature of my remarks.

Total equity. No collusion.

Well, I did warn council that I may reveal some secrets. So most of them are present.

It is, I think, interesting to note, that council presently includes two past presidents, a past general manager and at least one former director of the Jasper Park Chamber of Commerce.

Make of that what you will, but I suggest it is worth some reflection.

Having recently experienced a municipal election that, too, presents an appropriate opportunity for reflection.

During the election, candidates addressed, in a general sense, what they perceived as the State of the Municipality; it was reflected in the issues on which they chose to focus: governance, fiscal, social, housing issues – whatever the case.

One observation which can be made, is that where each of them stood on any issue, depended upon their personal perspective.

You are likely all familiar with Mile's Law, although possibly not by that name. Rufus Miles, a Truman era bureaucrat coined the phrase: "Where you stand, depends on where you sit."

Where so many of us so often sit, of course, is in echo chambers. Those chambers shape and colour our perspective; influence and guide our perceptions.

It is through those self-selected lenses, people form their perspective of the State of the Municipality.

It is that issue of perspective and perception, not the perspectives and perceptions themselves, that I hope you will keep in mind.

The State of the Municipality is, of course, a matter of perspective.

How you source your information, the trust you repose in those sources, is of primary importance.

However 'objectively' council or the Municipality may attempt to measure our status, in the final analysis, it is the perception and the perspective of residents which is paramount.

This evening, I am one such source. I leave it to you to judge what weight to attribute to my remarks.

It is, I believe, a positive sign of the State of the Municipality that 16 individuals put their names forward as candidates last fall; a sign of a healthy, engaged community.

The fact that the Mayor was acclaimed I leave open to debate: good or not so good depending upon your perspective.

Candidates ran, in part no doubt, based on their perception of the state of the Municipality.

Now, a new council serves.

It's interesting – again, in my view – to speculate how councillor's perceptions may have changed since the campaign and the election.

I can say with certainty, however, that since the election, council has been fully immersed in the ongoing work of governance.

It has been an intense six or seven months.

Budget – reflecting the fiscal State of the Municipality – took precedence. Council unanimously approved our 2018 operating budget.

What is the fiscal state of the Municipality? It depends on your perspective; where you sit.

My perspective, sitting as I do, on council, is that financially the Municipality is on solid ground.

On April 17 we received our Auditor's report. I find it intriguing, that although taxes have increased, as a proportion of our overall budget revenue, taxes have in fact decreased: they accounted for only 40 per cent of municipal revenue in 2017 compared to 44 per cent the previous year.

To offset that reduction, we are now slightly more reliant on sales and user fees, up two per cent from 33 to 35 per cent of revenue, and we received a moderate increase in transfers from other levels of government. That is, I think, a good sign – particularly for taxpayers. I am not yet sure, though, whether it is a trend.

There is, however, a clear trend: our five-year Debt to Tangible Capital Asset summary is clearly trending in the right direction.

Our reserves are in good shape.

These are, again, positive reflections of the State of the Municipality.

But we are aware: we are aware that taxpayers can absorb only so much; we are aware that we must remain vigilant; we are aware that we must be prudent.

We are also very much aware of the state of much of our infrastructure.

Significant re-investment is required.

You are aware of the issue we faced this winter with concerns regarding both asbestos and ammonia in the arena. Our staff is to be commended for the efforts they took to keep our facility open and operating. Other communities were not so fortunate.

Our activity centre is a critical component of our community's winter offer. Members of the Chamber of Commerce will appreciate the economic benefit generated throughout the community by visitors who come to use municipal facilities. But we must reinvest. Not just for asbestos and ammonia mitigation, but for the facilities, for the future, and for financial prudence.

In respect to all of our capital assets, current council is committed to continuing the implementation of the asset management plan adopted by previous council.

Our asset management plan has been described quite simply by our Director of Operations, Bruce Thompson: doing the right thing, to the right asset, at the right time.

But as simple as that sounds, properly managing assets is not so easy: it takes considerable effort to formulate a plan and even more effort to stick to the plan.

Likely consistent with your own experience, much of the municipal day is consumed dealing with emergencies.

Things break, or freeze, or fail and they must be addressed. It's hard to plan for that, and it's even harder to stay on plan when you must respond to emergencies.

But we are committed to best practices in maintaining all of our facilities and infrastructure. In the long run, it will unquestionably produce savings.

I was asked to address our field use policy. As with other municipal facilities, it is recognized that sport and event fields have a broad economic impact in the community.

Beyond that, you are all residents, you may use the fields for your own purposes, you may have children in sports who use the fields and it is a community issue.

Council very recently approved a field use policy. The policy reflects our commitment to the asset management plan I described.

The intentional emphasis of the policy is on use and enjoyment: council wants those fields available and accessible, to be used and enjoyed by the public. But they must also be safe, for some purposes they must meet standards, and in all cases they must be maintained using best practices.

The administrative procedures required to implement the policy direction set by council are still being developed. We have invested a considerable amount of taxpayers' money on our fields; they must be used, we want them used, but not to the point of abuse leading to premature replacement or to the creation of unsafe conditions or conditions which make the fields unusable.

Perspective is critical. As a user, one may have one perspective, but as a taxpayer the same individual may have another perspective. We are aware of differing perspectives; we are aware of the need for balance.

I was asked, also, to address generally, the housing issue – and more specifically, the status of the Jasper Community Housing Corporation charrettes in which many of you participated in February. I can tell you this evening that that initiative continues and is approaching a milestone.

Next week, May 15 at 1:30 pm, Council will receive a report from our consultant, ParioPlan. That report will be available later this week when our agenda is published on Friday. Presentation of the report will mark a significant step in the efforts of the Housing Corporation to address some of our perennial housing shortage.

At the same meeting, we will also receive a report from Parks Canada concerning the status of the release of parcel GB, an opportunity to allow the private sector to contribute to addressing our housing needs.

Both of these initiatives are important, both are part of a multi-faceted approach by the housing corporation to ease the crunch.

Patti asked on your behalf that I also address business licensing.

Over the past couple of years, based on an analysis conducted by MNP, we have worked with Parks Canada to better align all of our practices in that regard. The business licence application process should now be much more user-friendly; more intuitive, effective and efficient. A new one-page business licence process brochure is available on our website. Working with Parks, working with the Chamber, we believe we have made significant improvements. If issues remain, we encourage you to bring them to our attention to be considered and addressed.

Paid parking is another topic I was asked to address.

It is an option which has been presented previously, more than once, and has arisen again, in part in the context of the Transportation Master Plan, recommendations of which were presented to Council this morning and presented this afternoon to our Traffic Advisory Committee.

Paid parking can be seen both as a component of an overall, integrated community transportation plan, and as a component of the continuing pursuit of alternative revenue sources.

Again, perspective matters. Both the private and public sectors – at least elsewhere – have no hesitation charging for parking.

But there is always the spectra of unintended consequences; chasing parking from the commercial sector to adjacent residential streets, for example.

Those issues are identified in the presentation we received, but the recommendation is that we undertake a parking management study to determine whether there is a need, a place or a desire for paid parking and, if so, how that would be configured. No decision is imminent. We know there will be differing perspectives. Your perspective will be important.

I invite you to review the draft plan – it's on our website on today's agenda – and to provide us with your comments, your perspective.

On that point of perspective, I want to return to council.

From my perspective, it is, as I mentioned, a very positive sign that last October, 16 individuals put forward their candidacy for council. It confirms a broad interest and genuine desire, spread throughout the community, to serve in elected office; a sign that, democratically, the Municipality is in a state of health.

Elections are perhaps not quite as easy as may appear from the perspective of those who are not candidates. So I use this opportunity to thank all those who put their names forward and to those who were elected.

The learning curve has been steep, but the community chose well and the response of those elected, particularly those elected for the first time, has been remarkable. They deserve your appreciation.

Like you, each has their own perspective, reflecting, I trust, the diversity of community perspectives.

But I am also comfortable saying that we share much in common.

Council is currently engaged in developing strategic priorities. Although not yet confirmed, it is evident that council shares a commitment to promoting equity throughout the community: jurisdictional equity; fiscal equity; social equity; community equity and, of course, community and public safety.

What, you may ask, does that really mean?

It means that council will continue to pursue our community vision and those initiatives which will lead us toward the desired future the community has envisioned.

The existing vision, last updated in the Jasper Community Sustainability Plan, continues to call for locally elected residents administering a form of municipal government designed and accepted by the community and Parks Canada.

Council will continue efforts to refine and adjust that design. Those efforts will include continuing discussions focused on the transfer to the Municipality of some degree of jurisdiction over land use planning and development.

But we recognize, too, that we will continue to share governance of the community with Parks Canada and that Parks Canada has and will continue to be an ally and a partner.

We have witnessed that in their contribution to our own fire smart efforts, contributing cash and policy adjustments to make our efforts more affordable.

We saw it again this morning as we continue discussions regarding our – shall I say, joint approach – to the legalization of recreational marijuana.

Respecting that relationship, council recently re-signed our formal Relationship Agreement with Parks Canada. We will continue to find ways to co-govern the community effectively, while respectfully advocating for systemic changes to better reflect the community vision.

In terms of social equity and community equity, the availability and affordability of housing will continue to be among the highest of priorities for council.

Fiscal equity, equity in both assessment and in taxation, will continue to garner council's focus.

Our community vision foresees that municipal costs will be equitably distributed among visitors, Parks Canada and the community. We are not there yet. What is an equitable distribution remains to be determined: it is a matter of perspective.

The Municipality continues to devote funds to maintain infrastructure to service the needs of our visitors; over eight per cent of the municipal taxes we now collect continue to be transferred directly to the federal government for land rent and planning; yet there is no sharing of any revenue contributed by visitors, though, for example, gate fees.

Council will continue to challenge the equity of the current distribution of municipal costs.

But council's focus will not be restricted to external issues. We recognize that there may be inequities, or perceived inequities, within the community. Assessments, for example, must be seen to achieve equity both within and between property classifications.

Amendments in the Modernized Municipal Government Act now make it possible for council to designate sub-classes of property within the non-residential sector. Whether we can achieve greater equity by doing so, remains to be seen.

Other changes to the MMGA now limit the tax rate split which can be approved by council. On incorporation, Jasper started with a 7.1:1 commercial-to-residential tax rate split. That rate reflected the existing proportionality between commercial and residential land rents.

The intent was to maintain those existing proportions. Over time, that split has been reduced: first to about 6:1 and now to 5.1:1. Interestingly, as Jasper gradually reduced its split tax rate, other communities throughout Alberta were increasing theirs. In some cases to as much as 17 or 18:1

The province has now capped the tax rate split at 5:1; essentially exactly where Jasper has been. Whether council will chose to further reduce that apportionment remains to be seen.

Again, perception matters; where you stand depends on where you sit.

But where we all sit, is in the middle of a forest.

A forest which has been devastated by pine beetle.

We are aware of the risk. Our mission recently, has been to ensure that all our residents are equally aware of the risk, but more importantly, are aware of their role in the event of wildfire.

Be Wildfire Ready. Yesterday we held an open house; great attendance. Residents were provided an opportunity to be made aware. They were provided with information about what they should do in the event of a wildfire.

Know the risk. Have a plan. Have a kit.

I am confident that a large number of residents were comforted by knowledge of the fact that there is a plan, and that those who must implement that plan, who must execute the plan, know the plan.

The plan is both flexible, and evolving. It is capable of adjusting to circumstances as they may develop; and it will always be a work in progress; adapting to changes in conditions, capabilities and resources.

On May 1st, for example, council authorized the expenditure of \$150,000 for a second Structural Protection Unit, a mobile trailer with pumps, hoses, etc. which will allow our volunteer fire brigade to better protect structures within the community. Those additional resources may well influence adjustments to the plan. That is for the experts to consider.

But we have capable people. Knowledgeable people. People committed to success and committed to the community. All of that is evident in the material presented yesterday. Material of high quality; as will be the response.

We have a plan, including an evacuation plan, if necessary. But again, the plan will depend on the nature and location of the emergency and on any number of contributing factors.

The information made available to the public yesterday is of critical importance.

We believe that our message is getting out.

But you also have a role to play, as residents and as business owners. Be aware and encourage your staff to be aware, particularly staff who may still be arriving for the summer season. Make it your mission to ensure that all of your staff is aware: knows the risk, has a plan, has a kit.

Firesmart your own property.

For those with vehicles, keep the tank topped up.

All of the information is available in the guide. Get it. Follow it. Keep it.

The State of the Municipality is a state of awareness. And a state of preparedness.

We know the risk. We have a plan. We have a kit.

Our goal is that every resident is able to say the same.

Jasper remains the most incredible of communities; let's all play our roles to keep it that way.

Thank you.