

IMAGINE CALGARY: A Strategic Lens to View the Future

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As regular viewers of *The West Wing* (or keen students of political theory) can attest, democracy isn't easy; you have to want it bad. Put another way, the bedrock of democracy is citizen participation in the functioning, planning and decision-making of society. I've been reminded of this over the past several months as Imagine Calgary has been debated in these pages (see for example, the June 15 editorial, *Imagine a city unlike any other*).

It's easy to see why some might arch an eyebrow at the very idea of something like Imagine Calgary. It is, after all, popularly (if improperly) viewed as little more than "another" planning exercise and what most people really want is action. Others might note that the majority of plans and strategies fail, or fail to have the impact they might because they can't be effectively implemented. Still others will carp that it is about sustainability, that most vexing of terms, and any effort to make Calgary sustainable will inevitably stifle the entrepreneurial verve that distinguishes this place.

While it is right to note that the proof of any planning effort lies in the extent to which vision and idea are translated into on-the-ground change, it is equally right to note that not all approaches to planning are the same. And it is here that Imagine Calgary boldly stakes out new ground.

Most strategic planning efforts lack an effective process to involve the front-line people ultimately responsible for implementation. Imagine Calgary breaks from this mould in at least four ways:

It is engaging up to 100,000 members of the public in conversations about the future of the city over a 100-year time period;

It has created a round table and series of working groups, comprising community leaders and organizations with a mandate to implement change, to backstop the broad community engagement effort;

It has forged productive working relationships with a variety of experts and other interested people from Calgary and elsewhere to provide periodic "reality checks" on the process; and most crucially

It has created a mayor's panel comprising community leaders who can ensure the good ideas are translated into actions that resonate with and motivate members of the public – the panel is a tangible demonstration that there is a will to make the vision happen.

The challenge facing virtually every city today, especially one growing as fast as Calgary, is the tendency to focus on individual symptoms of non-sustainability rather than a systems-based view of the whole. Imagine Calgary holds considerable promise as a framework to guide planning and decision-making – it really is most properly viewed as a strategic lens through which economic, social and environmental challenges are viewed as interdependent parts of the same system. Such a framework also makes for more thoughtful consideration of tradeoffs.

Think of it this way: the decisions Calgary makes today about buildings and infrastructure will define the environmental impact and cost profiles for energy, water, waste, air quality, health, and many other issues within the city for the next 100 years. Infrastructure pipes, roads and subdivision layouts are typically sized and built for 100-year timelines and pay little attention to sustainability. This must change. If we learned anything from watching the devastation of New Orleans by hurricane Katrina, it was the need to ask questions about the resilience of municipal infrastructure.

Marcel Proust observed that the real act of discovery is not in finding new lands, but seeing with new eyes. Imagine Calgary represents a rare opportunity for the people of Calgary to do just this – to see their city as they perhaps haven't seen it before, to draw a picture of what they want.

Can Calgary maintain or enhance environmental quality while remaining an economic engine, and if so, how? Can it provide meaningful work for the people who live here? Can it be a place that incubates and supports new ideas in business, the arts, health and wellness, and citizen engagement? These and other questions lie at the heart of any meaningful conversation about what might make Calgary more vibrant and livable now and in the future. Imagine Calgary provides a seat at the table of that conversation for every Calgarian. Better still, it provides an opportunity for individuals and groups to shape the conversation, own a piece of the action, and see themselves as profound culture-shifting agents. Now, that is anything but the same old planning.