



ISSUES 2000: CHALLENGES ON THE WESTERN URBAN LANDSCAPE

INTRODUCTION

It is hard to deny the growing importance of Canadian cities. A full 62% of Canadians live in one of Canada's 25 largest cities, and most Canadians (78%) live in an area classified as urban.¹ Cities are Canada's social, economic, and cultural hubs, and issues on the urban landscape impact the lives of millions of Canadians.

In addition to the general increase in Canadian urbanization rates, recent downloading from the federal and provincial governments has expanded the list of municipal responsibilities. Cities have clearly become important components of governance in Canada, and as we will see, the issues confronting today's cities are not limited to "traditional" urban concerns such as roads, sewers, and the like.

Given these two large-scale changes – increased urbanization and increased municipal responsibilities – it is important to pull into focus the full range of issues confronting Canada's cities. Building an inventory of these challenges and opportunities not only provides a window on the urban landscape, but also the prospect of a better understanding on how governance in the urban context can be improved and strengthened.

Rather than a national overview, this report focuses on the key issues found in Western cities. There are two reasons for this narrower focus. First, these cities are arguably the most dynamic in the country. The seven largest Western metros have grown by 92% since 1966 (compared to only 65% in the rest of Canada), and while the jury is not yet in, they have experienced some of the most wrenching changes in their provincial environments.² Second, conducting a year-long *issue scan* is no small endeavour, and doing it for all Canadian cities would be very costly and time consuming. As such, we have left the field open for an examination of similar issues in Ontario, Quebec, and Atlantic Canada to complete the Canada-wide discussion.

METHODOLOGY

In order to identify the issues facing Western cities, Canada West Foundation employed three different methodologies:

1) Newspaper Scan: Four different city newspapers (the *Vancouver Sun*, the *Calgary Herald*, the *Regina Leader Post*, and the *Winnipeg Free Press*) were reviewed and analyzed from March 21, 1998 to March 20, 1999. This period was selected since it was the last year for which a complete set of microfilmed newspapers was available. Each paper was comprehensively reviewed for articles pertaining to particular problems facing the city. Given the time-consuming nature of the research, one newspaper in each Western province was selected.

This report was prepared by Casey Vander Ploeg, Canada West Foundation's Director of Governance Projects, along with CWF Research Assistants Glenn Blackett and Michael Bates. Because of the independence given the authors in writing this report, the opinions and recommendations expressed within are those of the authors only, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Canada West Foundation Council, its members, or donors. Permission is hereby given by the copyright owners for any and all reproduction of this report in its entirety for non-profit and educational purposes.

CANADA WEST FOUNDATION

To be included in the scan, each article was required to meet a set of specific criteria:

- 1) *Articles had to deal directly with a clear urban problem requiring a solution, and had to discuss this matter in a substantive way. For example, an article on the exact design of city hall would not be included, but an article on the city's financial ability to build and maintain a modern city hall would be included.*
- 2) *Our primary concern was with long-term trends and broader systemic issues. In other words, anecdotal accounts of problems were not included unless they could be linked to a broader civic issue.*
- 3) *The article had to discuss an issue that local officials could address, or at least impact in some fashion. For example, articles discussing rising interest rates affecting local housing were not selected since the ability of local officials to influence the setting of the bank rate is limited at best.*

Once the articles were clipped, a detailed taxonomy was developed. The articles were then analyzed using this taxonomy, and the top ten issues were extracted based on the number of articles in which that issue was discussed. A total of 473 articles were collected for Vancouver, 542 for Calgary, 421 for Regina, and 405 for Winnipeg.

2) Interviews: A set of qualitative telephone interviews was conducted with elected officials, journalists, and academics from the seven Western metros to validate the news scan and identify key issues in the cities not covered by the news scan. Interviews employed a standard set of open-ended questions with candidates who were selected based on their involvement in and knowledge of local issues. The local politicians interviewed were typically senior councillors with experience in a variety of civic arenas. Interviews with media were conducted among television and print reporters who covered the city news beat. University professors with expertise in local government rounded out the group. Transcripts from the interviews were reviewed, and issues that emerged in multiple interviews were identified. In addition to identifying major issues facing the city, respondents were asked to identify a “sleeper” issue which does not receive the attention it should despite its importance. Respondents were also asked to outline advantages of their particular city. A total of 23 interviews were conducted. Two interviews were conducted in each of Vancouver and Regina, three in Victoria, and four in each of Calgary, Winnipeg, Edmonton, and Saskatoon.

3) Provincial Municipal Affairs: Rounding out the issue scan is an overview of recent annual reports from the four Western provincial departments of Municipal Affairs. These reports highlight the priorities of the four departments, and provide insight into how the various provincial governments perceive the issues facing cities.

SOME IMPORTANT CAVEATS

Before moving to the results of our issue scan, readers should note several caveats related to the study's methods:

- 1) *The issue scan focused on print media, and only one newspaper in each city was analyzed. An expanded analysis of other newspapers and media types would have enhanced the study's findings.*
- 2) *The analysis is an exercise that converts qualitative data into quantitative data. As such, subjective choices had to be made in structuring the issue categories and determining whether an article “substantively” discussed an issue. While efforts were taken to ensure fairness and objectivity, the subjective nature of the exercise is acknowledged.*
- 3) *Some articles discussed more than one issue (eg. poverty, crime, and drug use) and were counted two or three times in more than one category.*
- 4) *The study presents the top ten issues ranked in order from those that were mentioned more frequently to those that were mentioned less frequently. This presentation format demonstrates the relative weight of an issue in a particular city, but not the presence or absence of an issue itself. We realize that the frequency of mention is only one indicator of an issue's importance.*
- 5) *The interviews were conducted among policy “elites”, and therefore do not take into account popular perceptions. It is entirely possible that public opinion polling in each city would yield different results.*
- 6) *All statements found in the newspapers and made in the interviews and government reports were accepted at face value. Readers should note that these are views expressed by the media, the respondents, and the governments, not the authors of the report.*

While the study has limitations, it does tap into the issues in no small way. Obviously, this work cannot serve as the definitive word on the issues facing western cities, but it will open debate.

THE WESTERN URBAN ISSUE AGENDA

Scanning across the newspapers, interviews, and annual reports allows us to build an issue agenda facing Western Canada's large metropolitan centres. The agenda includes the following issues, selected according to their frequency of mention in the news scan, the interviews, and government reports:

1) Finance and Taxes: At least one aspect of municipal finance emerged in each and every city. The concerns centre around numerous points, including reductions in provincial municipal operating grants and transportation funding, the rising cost of city services, depleting cash reserves, increased

debt, higher taxes and user fees, and moving to market value tax assessments. Vancouver has sought to manage the cash-crunch by reducing services, raising property taxes, and digging into the city's cash reserves, while Calgary has seen higher transit fees, increased debt, and a recent two percent tax hike. In Regina, property taxes have also been increased. The urban finance issue was also raised in Winnipeg, a city some claim to be the most reliant on property taxes in Canada. Numerous suggestions have been put forward to address the finance issue in Winnipeg, including increased user fees, reduced services, more privatization and contracting out, and frontage levies for street improvements.

The financing issue is one of critical importance since it has ramifications that ripple throughout a city. Financing touches on virtually every urban issue, whether it is the level of city services or the opening of a new homeless shelter. At the same time, several provinces are now reviewing their fiscal relationship with municipalities and examining new financing arrangements. The process in BC has resulted in a three-year, \$150 million sewer and water grant program that will be combined with the sharing of traffic ticket revenue to replace unconditional grants. A new proposal for restructuring provincial transfers has been developed in Saskatchewan, and Calgary recently negotiated a new revenue-sharing deal with the province on gasoline taxes generated in the city.

2) Transportation & Infrastructure: The issue of roads, sewers, water, and other infrastructure is often seen as a "traditional" urban issue, and it was not surprising that this matter received significant attention. The issue was cited in six of the West's seven cities and was also mentioned in two municipal affairs reports. The concerns are diverse, and range from massive congestion in Vancouver's lower mainland, to reduced transportation grants in Calgary and Regina, and poor air links in Edmonton and Saskatoon. While each city faces a somewhat different manifestation of the problem, it is fair to conclude that each is also spending a significant amount of time and resources looking for ways to alleviate the concerns.

3) Crime: The issue of crime has always provided fodder for the media and it is not surprising that it emerged as a key issue in six of the seven cities. Again, the focus was somewhat different in each city. In Vancouver, the problem of illicit drug use and trafficking received the most attention, while young offenders and prostitution emerged as the prime concern in Calgary. In 1997, Regina was said to have had the second highest rate of reported violent crime in Canada, while Winnipeg had the third highest rate of reported violent crime. Traditionally, policing has been viewed as a municipal concern, but it is also clear that dealing with crime requires action not only at the local level, but the national level as well.

4) Housing: Housing emerged as a key concern in four of the seven Western cities. Since housing is an area impacted by federal, provincial, and municipal policy, it was not surprising to see the matter as a key focus in three municipal affairs reports as well. While the issue remains one of general concern, it does have more impact in Vancouver, Victoria, and Calgary. In Vancouver, the issue centres around the "leaky" condo crisis and, along with Victoria, the cost of simply acquiring a modest home. Many feel that real estate prices in the lower mainland are causing the province's talent to seek opportunities elsewhere. In Calgary, the housing concern manifests itself in a population boom that has seen property values rise. Developers have been left scrambling to keep up with demand, particularly as it relates to multi-unit housing complexes.

5) Economic Development: The economy emerged as a concern in all cities except Calgary and Edmonton. Vancouver and Victoria have seen the shine on the provincial economy dim through the "Asian flu" and an "exodus" of Hong Kong immigrants and money that had fuelled the local economy over the last five to ten years. In Regina, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg, the concerns centre around the ability to attract investment and new businesses given high taxes, lower disposable incomes, and downtown business districts in need of revitalization. Concerns over the economy have led the City of Regina to eliminate its business tax, and the Council of Winnipeg to declare the economy as one of three top priorities over their four-year term.

6) Other Issues: The issue of *poverty* was mentioned in many cities, but arriving at a coherent regional statement is difficult given the multitude of ways the issue manifests itself – from homelessness in Calgary to unemployment and urban aboriginals in Regina. Poverty is demanding attention, but municipalities may be hard-pressed to address it. *Healthcare* clearly emerged as a top issue for cities included in the news scan, but it was ignored in the interviews. This result may reflect the fact that interview respondents did not see health as a uniquely "urban" issue. At the same time, the advent of regional health authorities ensures the issue will remain on the agenda, even though the role of municipalities in health is far from clear. *Regional cooperation* was pinpointed in several interviews and was a focus in three Municipal Affairs reports. Arguably, the issue is most meaningful in Victoria, Vancouver, and Edmonton, which find themselves serving as a hub for surrounding urban areas containing upwards of a dozen other municipal authorities. Concerns centered around service delivery in Victoria, high speed rail in Vancouver, and cost-sharing and service duplication in Edmonton. Finally, *Municipal Act reform* is an ongoing effort in every Western province. Changes being considered in consultation with municipal stakeholders include modernizing and enhancing provincial-municipal relationships, increasing municipal autonomy, streamlining services, and reducing duplication.

PROVINCIAL MUNICIPAL AFFAIRS: BRIEFS FROM RECENT ANNUAL REPORTS

BRITISH COLUMBIA ('98/99)

Municipal Act Reform: Along with the Union of BC Municipalities, the province is involved in a multi-year process to modernize the Municipal Act. Bill 31 was introduced in 1998 to increase municipal autonomy and provide local government with broader powers and increased flexibility. Local government is recognized as "an independent, responsible, and accountable order of government..."

Municipal Financing: Municipal Affairs and the Union of BC Municipalities are reviewing the financing of local government. The review is designed to modernize the financial relationship between the province and the municipalities by changing the system of transfers, identifying new revenue sources, and removing restrictions on existing sources. A three-year \$150 million sewer and water infrastructure grant program and the sharing of traffic ticket revenue will replace unconditional grants as the focus of provincial support to local government.

Housing: Following the Barrett Commission report, the province introduced the Homeowner Protection Act in 1998, which provides for mandatory third-party warranties, builder licensing, and a home reconstruction loan program. Bill 50 was also introduced the same year, ensuring that homes built as affordable housing or with government money for that purpose will continue to be used as affordable housing.

Regionalization: In 1998, the Greater Vancouver Transportation Authority was created to harmonize Greater Vancouver's transportation system and its growth strategy.

Vancouver Charter: Bill 50 changed the Vancouver Charter by allowing the city more power to regulate business hours.

Future Directions: Priorities in the next year include managing fiscal pressures by reducing costs and identifying operational efficiencies. The province will continue to work toward strengthening the relationship between the province and local governments, and phasing in the last amendments to the Municipal Act.

ALBERTA ('98/99)

Municipal Act Reform: In 1999, Bill 14 was passed. It improved the Municipal Act by streamlining legislation, enhancing equity and efficiency, and filling procedural gaps. A review of provincial-municipal roles has also begun.

Municipal Finances: Alberta is reviewing the property assessment system to ensure uniformity, fairness, and accuracy. Growth and increasing property values in some municipalities means some residents are paying a larger share of the education levy. Alberta will continue to review the collection of education taxes.

Housing: In 1998, a symposium was held with 500 stakeholders to identify housing needs and obstacles, and develop solutions. Alberta is working on a new social housing policy, and will continue to promote community-based partnerships with municipalities and private and non-profit groups. New standards for seniors' lodges were set, and 552 lodges were updated. Also, 422 new subsidized housing units were introduced. A new funding formula for federal-provincial cost-shared housing was arranged. Over 7,500 provincially-owned housing units were refinanced, resulting in interest savings that can be used to create more housing units. A provincial-municipal Homelessness Task Force was also created in Edmonton.

Regionalization: 23 municipalities in the capital region joined with the Capital Region Governance Review in 1998. An Intermunicipal Dispute Resolution Initiative was also struck to help municipalities resolve disputes.

Municipal 2000: This program promotes innovation, intermunicipal cooperation, and excellence in local government by funding improvements in municipal governance, administration, services, and intermunicipal cooperation. Over 260 municipalities are participating.

Future Directions: Improving the quality and integrity of the property assessment system will continue to be a priority. A growing and aging population is placing pressure on the supply of housing. One goal is to end duplication among the 8 provincial ministries, the federal government, and municipalities involved in housing.

SASKATCHEWAN ('97/98)

Municipal Act Reform: A Task Force on Municipal Legislative Renewal was struck in 1998 to examine municipal issues, identify improvements to municipal governance, review the province's Municipal Act, and recommend any necessary changes.

Municipal Finances: New proposals for restructuring provincial transfers have been developed. The current property tax policy will also be reviewed, as well as departmental services to municipalities, and provincial support for culture and recreation.

Housing: The activities of the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation (SHC) will be consolidated around the new Housing Agreement signed with Ottawa in 1997. The agreement gives SHC responsibility for off-reserve housing for Aboriginal peoples as well as 10,000 housing units transferred from CMHC. A new housing policy framework was released in 1997 outlining the basic vision, core principles, and objectives for the province's role in social housing. Priorities include revitalizing inner city neighbourhoods, addressing the needs of an aging population, and ensuring access to affordable rental accommodation.

Infrastructure: Infrastructure needs in Northern communities will be studied. The department will also liaise with the federal government to renew infrastructure programs and review the role of federal and provincial governments in local infrastructure development.

Community Development: The department worked with a variety of regional and provincial groups which provide programs to vulnerable children, youth, and families, and coordinated 125 workshops on community development with over 1,600 community representatives.

Future Directions: The review of departmental services will be completed, and efforts to reform and redesign the system of financial transfers will continue. Housing programs and financial support for communities to help finance new affordable rental accommodation will also be reviewed.

MANITOBA ('98/99)

Municipal Act Reform: Bill 36 was passed in June 1998 and makes significant amendments to the City of Winnipeg Act. Changes include new powers for city council, an enhanced role for the Mayor, and allowing the city to implement alternative forms of service delivery and to set penalties for by-law violations. The Board of Commissioners has also been replaced with a Chief Administrative Officer who is responsible for civic administration.

Regionalization: The province, with the approval of the 16 municipalities in the Capital Region, established an independent panel to consult with municipalities, community leaders, elected officials, and citizens on issues in the Capital Region. The specific goals of the panel are to identify and discuss regional issues and identify new approaches to resolving them. The focus is on economic cooperation, integrated land use planning, service delivery, and mediation mechanisms for intermunicipal disputes.

Infrastructure: New initiatives for infrastructure are designed to give Winnipeg greater autonomy in expenditure decisions. A proposal for a new provincial-city community revitalization program is being developed to replace the Community Revitalization Program that ended in March 1997. A third urban capital projects allocation totalling \$96 million to renew and enhance Winnipeg's infrastructure was also announced.

Economic Development: The province continues to manage the tri-partite Winnipeg Development Agreement, a 5-year \$75 million initiative to support long-term economic development in the city.

Public Services: A new program called *Partners in Public Service* was announced in 1997 to provide better services at less cost.

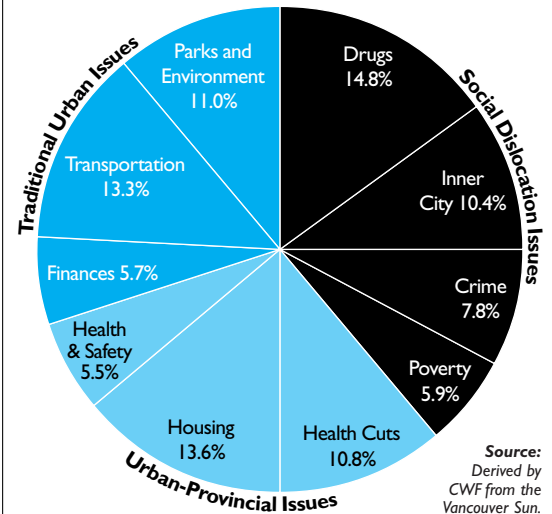
Future Directions: A re-draft of the City of Winnipeg Act is being conducted by the province in partnership with the City. The purpose is to streamline the Act and eliminate the duplication of services. The new act is expected to be introduced in the legislature in 2000.

VANCOUVER NEWS SCAN

The range of issues facing the city of Vancouver does to some degree reflect the larger regional pattern, but there are several important distinctions between it and other Western cities. First, it is apparent that “social dislocation” issues (illicit drug use, poverty, inner city decay in the Eastside, crime) are receiving more attention than in other cities. Indeed, 15% of all the articles scanned mentioned the issue of illicit drug use and its devastating impact, making it the number one issue in Vancouver. This issue did not make the top ten in any other Western city. While drug abuse is of concern for obvious reasons, the frustrations in dealing with it were also evident. Drug use is highly concentrated in Vancouver, yet it is arguably a national concern: the city attracts the problem from across Canada because of its mild climate. Secondly, “traditional” urban issues (transportation, finances, taxes, parks, sewers, infrastructure) comprise a relatively smaller portion of the concerns in Vancouver. The dominance of social dislocation concerns, combined with a focus on issues that touch on federal and provincial governments (health cuts, “leaky” condos, and expensive housing) shows Vancouver is facing a range of problems not traditionally viewed as “local” in nature.

THE NEWS SCAN: Vancouver's Top Ten

(% of all News Articles Mentioning a Specific Issue)



THE ISSUE

MANAGING THE ISSUE

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Illicit Drugs (14.8%) The use and social implications of illegal drugs received much attention in our media scan. The city has an estimated 6,000 to 10,000 drug addicts, and 40% of them are estimated to be HIV positive. Many also suffer from Hepatitis C. In 1997, the rate of HIV infection for addicts was 18% – the highest in the developed world. It is estimated that 80% of all Eastside residents have criminal records. Cultivation of marijuana for export to the U.S. is also a concern.

The city government has been criticized for a lack of action on the issue. Needle exchanges have been established, but there has been little progress in providing treatment. In areas with treatment facilities, there have been complaints about drug dealing, unqualified staff, and overcrowding. Other options include counselling, secure and safe housing, and mandatory treatment. One proposal called for supplying free heroin in monitored clinics.

The greatest obstacle is a lack of knowledge about how to best deal with the issue. Many argue that needle exchange programs may actually cause higher rates of addiction. There is a great deal of obstinacy from local residents and businesses owners who say their neighbourhoods are being adversely affected by the presence of highly visible needle exchange vehicles. Many feel that efforts should be directed towards treatment – mandatory if necessary.

Housing (13.6%): First, about 5,000 Vancouver area condominiums are leaking and rotting. The *Condominium Homeowners Association of BC* has estimated that homeowners will have to pay over \$1 billion towards the repair of the units. Second, housing in Vancouver is very expensive. Some feel that high housing prices are driving skilled workers out of the province to protect their standard of living, and also make it difficult to attract new skilled talent.

On the leaky condo issue, the province has vowed to lead a class action suit and struck the *Barrett Commission* which cited poor workmanship, bad design, and inappropriate materials as a cause. The *Homeowner Protection Act* was also passed, providing for the regulation and licensing of all contractors, low interest loans for repairs, and improved home warranties. Ottawa has been lobbied to make repairs GST exempt, and to change the National Building Code.

Regulation and licensing of contractors is seen by some as a ploy to unionize the construction industry. Securing taxpayer support for helping with the repairs conflicts with a general attitude of “buyer beware.” With regards to high home prices, some have said Vancouver homes need to be more effectively marketed. Others have said that in the end, marketing will only delay the inevitable exit from the province as people realize house prices are diminishing living standards.

Transportation (13.3%): The city has problems with chronic traffic congestion and poor air quality from high automobile use and the popularity of less fuel efficient vehicles like sport utility vehicles. Cooperation between the province, the city, and other communities in the Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD) is needed, but the issue generates conflict as expanded transit routes must ultimately pass through someone’s backyard.

Most efforts have been dedicated to reducing the use of private vehicles by increasing subsidies for public transit, extending sky train service, delaying new license applications for 90 days, and creating a rapid bus link between Vancouver and surrounding centres. The city designated “multi-occupant” commuter lanes and has focused on better bridge links along congested corridors. The city considered, then abandoned, a gas “guzzler” tax.

Sky Train extension is costly and requires reorganization of public transit. More generally, conflict between the province and the various municipalities in the GVRD has inhibited arriving at a mutually agreeable solution. Transit alternatives that facilitate commuting between Vancouver and surrounding communities are often described as visible and audible blights to the communities through which they pass.

Parks & Environment (11.0%): Vancouver is situated in an ecosystem important to fish, migratory birds, and other wildlife. As the city grows, its green-spaces are the object of dispute between developers and environmental groups. The city is also seeing park deterioration through overuse and abuse. Other concerns include air quality, polluted water systems, deteriorating sewer systems, and the amounts going into landfills.

To reduce the levels of waste going to landfills, the city has initiated recycling programs, subsidized the purchase of compost bins, and imposed restrictions on the volume of garbage allowed per city resident. Some municipalities have also implemented programs aimed at preserving water quality by mapping and enforcing development bylaws affecting area streams, and by opposing the logging of trees in the city’s watershed.

To protect natural habitats the city must contend with interests wishing to develop valuable land. Stopping park abuse is difficult as enforcement is expensive and time consuming. Park staff have few resources to deal with bylaw offenders. Air quality issues are also difficult given the expense of expanding and then maintaining public transportation through tax dollars and subsidized ticket fares.

THE ISSUE

Health Cuts (10.8%): City hospitals are under stress due to health cuts. Health practitioners are upset about wages and work loads, and city hospitals are experiencing emergency room congestion and long delays for elective surgery. Health professionals anticipate a worsening of the problem as the existing nurse shortage becomes more acute, the population ages, and treatments become more expensive.

Residential Inner City (10.4%): The Eastside is Vancouver's inner city and is known as one of the most troubled urban areas in North America. The area is plagued with homelessness, prostitution, crime, drug abuse, and concomitant health problems like AIDS and Hepatitis C. Neighborhood streets and parks are littered with used needles, condoms, and broken bottles. The area accounts for only 3% of Vancouver's population, but contains almost 30% of the city's bars and over 20% of the city's instantaneous deaths.

Crime (7.8%): Like all big cities, Vancouver has a number of different problems related to crime, but the focus remains on the production, trafficking, and criminal activity related to illicit street drugs. It is estimated that the production, sale, and export of illegal drugs in BC is worth \$3 billion per year. Sophisticated drug rings are able to exploit Canada's refugee policy by bringing in drug dealers from other countries. Much of the drug production takes place in the Fraser Delta area.

Poverty (5.9%): The Lower Mainland seems to act as a funnel for young people running away from homes in BC and throughout Canada. These youngsters are vulnerable to being lured into the drug or sex trades. Housing prices compound the situation. Private investors do not find it profitable to build low rent housing, and the city's existing stock of less expensive hotels are being renovated to attract budget tourists. A greater number of the city's poor are finding themselves on the street.

Finance & Taxes (5.7%): Municipalities in the GVRD are struggling with the delivery of services in the face of provincial cuts to municipal grants. In response to the cuts, cities have reduced and streamlined services, dug into cash reserves, and raised property taxes. The transportation system is strained, West Vancouver firefighters say budget cuts are making firefighting more difficult, and the Vancouver library system says it will have to close branches and reduce services.

Health & Safety (5.5%): News articles relating to specific health and safety issues were quite prevalent. The most frequently discussed issue was that the city's schools are structurally unprepared for an earthquake of the magnitude that some seismologists predict Vancouver will soon experience. Other issues included under-funding of child protection services, violence against prostitutes, and youth prostitution.

MANAGING THE ISSUE

BC has regionalized decision-making to regional health boards and is concentrating services within each region. The province is attempting to deal with increased health costs by establishing a fixed medical budget from which Vancouver doctors are paid. Hospitals in the city are shortening recovery times after surgery and moving palliative care patients out of expensive acute care beds and into the community or hospices.

Drug-treatment centres and needle exchange programs have been implemented, and new street lights and low-income housing have been constructed. Police presence has been increased, and there are attempts to clean streets and parks, and remove the area's graffiti. There have also been suggestions to establish area-wide video surveillance, create a clean and safe corridor between the tourist areas of Gastown and Chinatown, and even prescribe heroin to addicts as a means of controlling HIV infection rates.

City Hall, community groups, and police are cooperating. The police department has been restructured to put more officers on the street, community education workshops have been held, and community patrol groups have been established. Suggestions have emerged for a police helicopter and better programs to occupy the city's youth. Some groups are also arguing for a greater emphasis on the victims of crime rather than the procedural rights of criminal suspects.

Charitable organizations have responded by starting homeless shelters, and schools are donating blankets and winter jackets. A safety house was also established in an attempt to intervene before runaway youths could become addicted to drugs or involved in prostitution. Social advocacy groups are encouraging the protection of low-income housing on the Eastside. Some municipalities have begun to limit the areas where panhandling is allowed.

Cities in the GVRD have reacted to budget shortfalls by raising taxes and levying higher user fees on city services such as transit. To deal with transit problems the city has raised transit fares and also levied a tax on parking meters. The Library Board suggested a special levy on Vancouver households to maintain and enhance existing services. Tax rates were also raised 1% in Vancouver to put an additional 40 police officers in the problem area of the downtown Eastside.

Schools have been placed on a priority list of buildings for seismic upgrading, non-structural earthquake risks have been removed, and regular drills are now conducted. In response to youth prostitution, city police have launched crack-downs and are trying new methods of control such as sending "Dear John" letters to the homes of prostitution patrons. Teenage safe-houses have also been established to intercept young runaways.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Some argue that the city's health board was selected without due regard to professional expertise, and that they are under-qualified. There is concern over the "balkanization" of health care, as each district's funding is tied to its population, thereby building in a disincentive to treat non-area residents. A focus on greater community health care has taken place without establishing a sufficient community health care network.

A better understanding between business owners, middle class residents, poor residents, and social activists needs to be established. Often, one group perceives another's program initiative as a threat to their own standard of living or quality of life. For example, community clean-up projects are often seen by the area's poor as gentrification attempts, and drug treatment projects are seen by businesses and middle class residents as encouraging even more drug abuse.

There is a conflict between those arguing for a "beefing up" of traditional models of crime prevention (more police, more convictions, and longer sentences) and those arguing that these efforts do little to treat the underlying causes of criminal behavior. A large part of the difficulty also lies in dealing with other associated factors of crime, particularly illicit drug use, which are not easily addressed or resolved.

Protecting low-income housing is not always welcomed by residents who would rather see local property values rise. The rift between property interests and social advocacy groups has even been described as a "class war." There is a lack of funding for social services, particularly those institutions that deal with the addicted or mentally ill. These individuals are being released or turned away, only to end up on the street.

Tax increases and expanded user fees are never popular measures. Such is the case in Vancouver, where recent increases were criticized by some who felt taxes were too high already. In addition, Vancouver authorities have been resistant to the idea of a new library levy as they feared such a levy would soon be requested by the city's other primary service providers, namely parks, fire, and police services.

A number of structures throughout the Lower Mainland have an equal need for seismic upgrading (hospitals, offices, wharfs, bridges, warehouses, roads). It is difficult to increase funding for child protection services as there is little support for a tax increase. City police have said that cases of violence against prostitutes are difficult to solve because they are "stranger-to-stranger" crimes.

THE TOP ISSUES

Illicit Drugs: Drug abuse in the city's Eastside is a key concern. While always an issue in the past, the problem is growing. The issue receives significant media attention, but it remains a challenge that is talked about with little effective action being taken.

Leaky Condos: The provincially commissioned *Barrett Report* indicated systemic failure at every level – architectural, engineering, and construction. The impacts have been felt in the real estate market, where prices are depressed and the home warranty program was driven to “bankruptcy.” The provincial government has not been successful in pressuring Ottawa to subsidize some of the costs for the necessary repairs.

Transportation: The current situation was described as one in which buses fight their way through heavy traffic. In Vancouver, the term “rapid transit” needs to be revisited. To address the transit needs of the city and surrounding communities, the provincial government established the *Greater Vancouver Transportation Authority*, now called *Trans Link*. Possible solutions to the transit problem might include the use of existing, dormant freight lines and Light Rail Transit expansion.

Economic Downturn: After enjoying a decade-long economic boom, the city's economy has turned flat. Respondents mentioned the Asian “flu” and provincial government policies as causes of the slump. Although BC is moving away from a resource-based economy, the reduced demand for natural resources has had a dramatic impact on Northern and coastal communities which are more dependent upon resource exports.

Political Representation: The Non Partisan Association (NPA) currently controls council, the school board, and the park board. Such dominance has led to concerns that segments of the population are not being represented. A ward system or some type of proportional representation system was suggested.

Other Issues: Growing urban density, the downloading of legislative responsibilities to municipalities, political accountability, making the city more “bike and pedestrian friendly”, and inland migration from the Prairies and Eastern Canada were also mentioned.

SLEEPER ISSUES

WATERFRONT CAPACITY: There seems to be a lack of attention to the capacity for incoming and outgoing shipping on the harbour front – arguably part of the city's economic life blood. Vancouver has only 18 gantry cranes to load and unload ships at the docks, and may lack the capacity to compete with other harbour cities like Seattle which employ over 40 cranes.

PUBLIC CONFIDENCE:

A lack of confidence in public officials and the political system was cited as an emerging issue. Political office used to be considered honourable, but today it is subject to heavy criticism. While some of that criticism may be valid, cynicism has also crept into the public's perception of political leadership.

THE VANCOUVER UPSIDE

Progress in developing new land and efforts to revitalize some of the older communities in the city were singled out as unique upsides of living in Vancouver. Of course, a moderate climate and numerous green spaces were also seen as part of Vancouver's “traditional” advantage.

VANCOUVER: IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“We are not dealing with [drug abuse] in an effective way. We seem to be losing ground in that particular direction.”

“Someone has described [leaky condos] as the largest man-made disaster in the history of North America.”

“We need a rapid transit system north-south pretty ... soon because the population south of us, and Richmond, is getting to the point where we are going to have to do something. Otherwise, we are going to get choked with cars.”

“Vancouver has a rather serious representational problem. It's basically been a one party state in municipal terms.”

“We need to be able to turn them [ships on the waterfront] around without them hanging their hooks in English Bay for a week or a month.”

GO FIGURE

Environmental concerns and the state of Vancouver's parks were quite prominent in the news scan but not the interviews. The criticism against migration from Alberta and other provinces was also unexpected.

THE TOP ISSUES

Regional Cooperation: The defining issue in Victoria is intermunicipal cooperation. Victoria, with some 80,000 people, is only one municipal authority among twelve that make up the larger *Capital Regional District (CRD)*. Through the CRD, the 12 municipalities share responsibility for building permits, police and fire, waterworks, and waste management. All respondents alluded to tensions or “turf wars” that exist between municipal representatives on the CRD Board and stressed the need for greater cooperation. There was no consensus on whether more formal amalgamation was needed.

Housing: Housing was mentioned several times as a key challenge facing Victoria. There is little land for expansion and housing prices have remained high for 20 years. Victoria has adopted the “Charette” process where particular areas are studied to determine how best to meet particular housing needs. Ideally, this process leads to changes in land use and development. Lax enforcement of zoning laws has allowed for a thriving market of illegal basement suites, especially in the university area.

Economic Development: Respondents noted that the province and the city have not come out of the last recession well, and aside from Atlantic Canada, BC is the worst performing province in the country. All respondents touched on the economic challenges facing Victoria, citing a wide range of factors including the effects of moving from a resource-based economy to a service and high-tech economy, declining immigration from Hong Kong, a lack of new investment, low consumer spending, an unpredictable regulatory system, and provincial government policies. Some felt that Victoria can do little in light of these factors. Attracting business from the mainland is a priority, as well as applying for funding under the federal *Smart Cities Initiative* in the hopes of establishing more high-tech industry.

Other Issues: Other issues include the CRD’s *Regional Growth Strategy Plan*, infrastructure funding, and the harbour authority. Negotiations are underway on the divestiture of federal authority over the harbour area. With negotiations incomplete, the approval process for development along the shore and the Gorge waterway has become a jurisdictional quagmire. The need for more regulation in eco-tourism was also mentioned.

SLEEPER ISSUES

REGIONAL GROWTH STRATEGY:

There is a lack of attention to the Regional Growth Strategy being adopted by the CRD. Some feel the plan is flawed.

VICTORIA AS THE PROVINCIAL CAPITAL:

Victoria is the provincial capital, and frustration was expressed that the city no longer receives provincial funding for providing police, fire, and other civic services to government sites.

INFRASTRUCTURE GRANTS:

The reduction in federal infrastructure grants to cities has significantly impacted Victoria, according to one respondent. Although Ottawa agreed to many of the city’s applications, the province was able to delay or withhold funding. The feeling was that the municipality is a victim of federal-provincial conflict.

THE VICTORIA UPSIDE

Notwithstanding 1999’s rainy summer and the generally dull, gray winters, respondents commented on the pleasant weather of Victoria. Short commutes, a walkable downtown, and a very attractive harbour front were proudly mentioned. The high quality of life in Victoria was linked with a strong sense of community, and outstanding educational opportunities and recreational activities.

VICTORIA: IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“You notice I didn’t use the ‘A’ word. The ‘A’ word is amalgamation. That’s a no no.”

“The solution is a provincial government that is more predictable.”

“We have lost our Hong Kong immigrants who were bringing in a lot of money...and our resource industries are down and we are not getting new investments...we have very high unemployment...”

“There has to be a model out there that has the four or five core municipalities coming together as one, the western communities coming together as another municipality, and the Saanich Peninsula leading out to the ferries as a third.”

“There is clearly a lot of tension in a whole bunch of areas based on lack of communication between the different levels of government.”

GO FIGURE

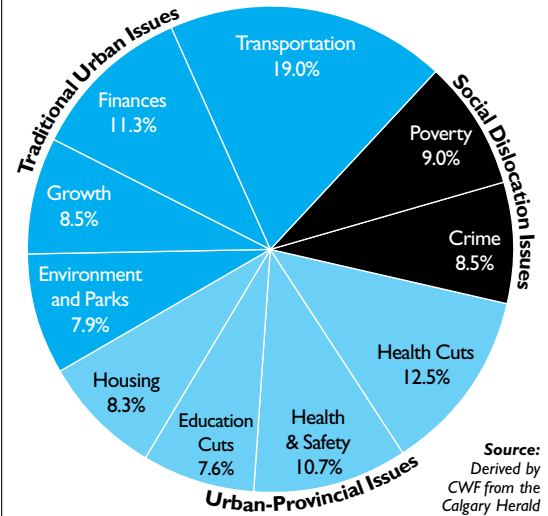
No mention was made of issues affecting seniors despite a large retirement population. Victoria was also one of the few cities where crime did not emerge as a key concern.

CALGARY NEWS SCAN

Unlike Vancouver, “social dislocation” issues were less of a focus in Calgary. Rather, the issue agenda in Calgary reflects the dramatic and rapid population expansion experienced during the last half of the 1990s. Transportation tops the agenda, with almost one in every five articles scanned mentioning some aspect of this particular issue. Closely related to the transportation concern is that of managing urban growth, maintaining and increasing the stock of available and affordable housing, and city finances. The influx of new residents is straining city infrastructure at a time when provincial grants have also been declining. The obvious result is significant pressure on the municipal budget. The impact of continued expansion has also led to concerns about the environment, particularly the ecology of the Bow and Elbow Rivers, and Nose Creek. Recent attempts at restructuring health and education in the province are also reflected in Calgary. Cuts to health care funding emerged as the number two issue in the city, in part fuelled by the province’s decision to demolish Calgary’s General Hospital in the fall of 1998. Education cuts and other health and safety issues also registered quite prominently.

THE NEWS SCAN: Calgary’s Top Ten

(% of all News Articles Mentioning a Specific Issue)



THE ISSUE

MANAGING THE ISSUE

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Transportation (19.0%): In the early 1990s, per capita transportation grants were cut while the city’s population continued to grow. Some argue that this has led to a transportation crisis. The city estimates \$670 million for transportation is required by 2005, yet it can allocate only \$220 million in its current capital budget. Traffic congestion has clearly increased, and emergency vehicles report delays during peak traffic hours.

The city implemented a 2% tax hike, took on \$78 million in debt, and has asked the province for more funding. (Recently, a revenue-sharing deal with the province was struck on the gasoline taxes generated in the city.) Other options include improving transit, increasing urban density, creating more mixed residential-business communities, and encouraging industrial growth in outlying communities to limit one-way traffic into Calgary.

Unless Calgary can secure additional funding to address its infrastructure needs, the city may be unable to control traffic congestion, much less reduce it. Simply, Calgary’s booming population means its transportation requirements are extremely costly. At the same time, the city is able to raise only a modest portion of the huge financial resources it needs to meet both current and future transportation requirements.

Health Cuts (12.5%): Calgary hospitals are seeing congested emergency wards, stressful work loads for health professionals, waiting lists for elective surgery, and difficulty meeting the needs of the mentally ill. The *Calgary Regional Health Authority (CRHA)* planned to run a \$52 million deficit for the year. Compounding the problem is the growth of the city’s population. Health care further deteriorated as unions engaged in activities designed to pressure the province to increase wages.

A 24 hour health care advice line was proposed to cut unnecessary visits to emergency wards. Establishing more low cost long-term beds to reduce the number of critical care beds currently used by the elderly was identified as a cost saving. The province has said it will consider expanding funding for areas where “bottlenecks” seem to develop. To address a lack of psychiatrists in hospitals, there were suggestions to concentrate psychiatric care in a single location.

Attempts to restructure and reform the health care system came under intense public scrutiny despite reports that a majority of Calgarians were satisfied with their health care experience. Both the proposal to concentrate psychiatric care in a single location and the 24 hour health care hotline were criticized as means of reducing service. Within the health care sector there is general agreement that more money is needed.

Finance & Taxes (11.3%): Besides transportation funding, other finance issues emerged as a key concern. Some say the education tax (paid directly to the province) is being used to subsidize boards outside the city despite higher education costs in Calgary. The province also mandated a Market Value Assessment formula for property tax. While a majority saw their assessments go down, a minority saw a substantial increase. Some businesses say their tax bills have gone up 40%.

Higher transit fees, charging for parking at transit locations, a vehicle registration surcharge, and taxes on parking have been considered. School boards have also gone to court to collect their own taxes. The province defends education funding by noting it pays supplementary grants to Calgary Boards. To offset the assessment change, the city has allowed payment in installments and reduced the increase for those whose bill grew by more than 10% and those with lower income levels.

Some have criticized borrowing to pay for infrastructure, saying the city should wait until its tax-supported debt decreases and then redirect interest to finance improvements and programs. The city’s plan to raise taxes for infrastructure has also been criticized. Some say aldermen did not run on a platform of raising taxes. Instead, the city should work harder to capture a greater share of the tax dollars already paid by city residents.

Health & Safety (10.7%): Numerous articles dealt with issues affecting the health and safety of Calgarians. Issues included traffic safety (traffic violations and accidents, impaired driving, high volumes slowing emergency response), elderly health (lack of long-term care, under-funding of care units, elderly abuse), children’s health (teen prostitution, smoking), and the establishment of a sour gas well near the city.

Police are cracking-down on running red-lights and want cameras if funding can be found. A *Collision Prevention Week* has begun. The province has stiffened penalties for drunk driving, and is being encouraged to increase funding for elderly care centres. Expansion of the *Kerby Centre* (to assist abused seniors) has begun. A task force is dealing with teen prostitution. Police are working beats to identify pimps, prostitutes, and johns.

Traffic fatalities continue to be a problem, in part because police say they do not have the financial resources in place to implement newer and possibly more effective technologies for both prevention and enforcement. Funding increases for elderly care centres are also difficult to provide because the CRHA had already stretched itself beyond the bounds of its annual budget.

THE ISSUE

MANAGING THE ISSUE

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Poverty (9.0%): Poverty and homelessness are a growing concern in Calgary. In 1997-98, one estimate pegged the number of homeless at 3,800. Of Calgary's homeless, 45% are employed, 18% are women, and 61% are between the ages of 25 and 45. A commonly identified cause of homelessness in Calgary is the severe shortage of affordable housing and low-rent accommodation.

Responses include providing transitional living space and increasing the stock of affordable housing. Community groups sponsor programs such as *Inn from the Cold* (family housing project) and *Salvation Army House* (temporary housing.) The city allocated \$1.4 million to increase the number of subsidized apartments in city-owned buildings (eg. York Hotel, CFB Calgary) and is partnering with developers for new low-income housing.

A key barrier is the lack of low-cost housing. In 1997, the vacancy rate approached 0%. Since low-cost housing remains a low-profit investment, the stock of such housing will not increase without charitable efforts. In 1997, an Alberta Health study identified several causes of homelessness including job loss, a low minimum wage, and a lack of necessary resources to secure employment such as a telephone or transportation.

Crime (8.5%): Young offenders and prostitution were the two dominant crime issues. Biker gangs, arson, graffiti, domestic violence, and homicide were also listed. Crimes committed by teenage girls were highly publicized. The arrival of the Hell's Angels in the summer of 1997 has not seemed to usher in a wave of organized crime as originally feared. Rather, the focus has been on legal battles between the gang and police over whether the gang has been harassed.

Officials hope changes to the Young Offenders Act will curb youth crime. The *Mayor's Task Force on Community & Family Violence* is also revisiting its recommendations of five years ago to assess progress. Responses to prostitution included a pilot project using security guards and dogs to patrol the street, and a task force which has met with some success. Police have struck the *Identify Sex Trade At The Street* initiative (one component of a four-part plan) to combat the sex trade.

Criticism has been leveled against the media for increasing fear in the community and distorting the actual crime picture. Where statistics reveal increases in crime, the actual cause may be increased awareness in the community or an increase in law enforcement. Several positive trends have also appeared. For example, there has been a 13% decrease in house break-ins, indicating that crime may in fact be decreasing or at least is under control.

Growth & Density (8.5%): Calgary's economy continues to fuel growth. From 1994-97, the city's population grew by 52,000. In 1998, 8,000 new homes were built. The city's growth requires major infrastructure investment. There is high demand for housing, and emergency services are unable to respond quickly to peripheral communities or through rush-hour traffic. Protecting the city's natural environment is a concern, and there is a perception that the city may lose its atmosphere and community spirit.

The city formulated the *Calgary Municipal Plan* in 1998 – a blueprint for development into the 21st century. The plan outlines a number of proposals including increased housing density in new developments, encouraging the use of public transit, and requiring developers to build a minimum of low-cost homes and multi-family dwellings. There were suggestions by the city and other groups to foster the growth of business outside the city centre (including satellite communities) to reduce centre-bound traffic.

The city's policy of orderly annexation faces two difficulties. First, EMS is having problems reaching far-flung subdivisions and continued expansion threatens EMS efficiency. Second, some outlying centres resist the idea of annexation fearing it will change their communities. Developers are also concerned with the city's emphasis on increased density. New design requirements for suburbs may cost more and increase the price of homes. Higher density will also result in less popular "cookie-cutter" subdivisions.

Housing (8.3%): Builders in Calgary are pressed to keep up with demand, especially for multi-unit rental accommodation. Property owners are also converting rental units into condominiums. As a result, Calgary had Canada's lowest vacancy rate for two years. Shelters are at capacity with more people waiting to be admitted. Low vacancy and high rent are a problem for students who may be discouraged from studying in the city. Growth has also caused the problem of urban sprawl.

There is no interest in rent control. The city's low-income housing agency and a developers' charity are restoring two buildings for transitional housing. The city struck a deal with Ottawa to convert some CFB Calgary barracks into low-income housing. The city has challenged developers to build low-income housing and is providing incentives, and urban sprawl is being addressed through "orderly annexation" – maintaining a 30 year supply of land at the boundaries to control fringe development.

As noted, Calgary developers and builders are concerned with attempts by city hall to control the look or make-up of new residential areas, fearing that they will be restricted to building homes that are not in demand. If restrictions do go ahead, some developers argue that families who are unable to find the homes they want in Calgary will simply move outside of the city's limits to satellite communities.

Parks & Environment (7.9%): Issues include pollution of the Bow River due to sewer run-off and fertilizer use, air pollution, growth of "Purple Loosetrife" threatening wetlands habitat, and an increase in hazardous materials problems. Wildlife (bears, deer, moose) have also come into the city limits. City parks face the threat posed by Dutch Elm disease to some 20,000 mature elm trees (worth \$44 million) and destruction of mature trees by a growing beaver population.

Plans call for a system of linked wetland ponds with native vegetation to filter pollutants. Downstream towns of Chestermere and Strathmore jointly sued the city over polluted water. The city has discussed reducing pollutants in the Nose Creek tributary with the City of Airdrie and Rocky View MD. The city has teamed with the Calgary Motor Dealers Association to reduce the number of older cars on city streets. Designating specific lanes for car-pooling has also been suggested.

Continued growth will pressure the surrounding environment. Wildlife incursions will continue as natural habitat is encroached upon. Policies like suppressing forest fires may increase the problem as low-lying brush (a food source growing in burn clearings) is eliminated and wildlife move to forage in the city. Controlling noxious weeds has been seen as unnecessary interference. Calgary also has one of the highest per capita vehicle ownership rates in North America.

Education Cuts (7.6%): In 1993, funding to the Calgary Board was cut by \$200 million. It has been a struggle to balance educational quality, demands for wage increases, and the need to balance the budget. The board ran a \$34 million deficit in 1998, partly because of a wage settlement. The board has been forced to cut maintenance costs, yet estimates that city schools need \$322 million for maintenance and repairs.

The board is looking to save labour costs through early teacher retirement and recruitment of new graduates. Closing under-utilized inner-city schools and re-directing the savings to growing suburbs was also considered. There is a push to overhaul the funding structure (based on a per student basis) as it ignores the higher costs of the Calgary Board. A program selling ads on school computer screen savers was started.

Many schools have outdated electrical, heating, and plumbing systems, and leaking roofs. The policy of early retirement has presented the board with the challenge of integrating significant "new blood" into the system without disruption. Closure of inner-city schools is difficult because of parental protest and the fact that at least one inner city school (Elbow Park) slated for closure in the 1980s is now operating at 130% capacity.

THE TOP ISSUES

Transportation and Managing Growth: Rapid growth and its impact on the city was a common thread linking all Calgary respondents. Transportation issues were clearly recognized as a negative by-product of the city’s rapid population boom. At the same time, some respondents added that the issue may also be one of perception. Transportation infrastructure is under stress, but compared to cities like Vancouver, Calgary’s traffic woes seem relatively minor. The strain on city finances was noted as particularly harsh given the sharp reduction in provincial transportation grants that has coincided with a period of rapid expansion. The related problem of urban sprawl and the more general issue of increasing urban density were also mentioned.

Social Issues: A variety of social problems that are either caused or exacerbated by growth were touched on including health care, homelessness, substance abuse, the mentally ill, and poverty. Of all social concerns raised during the interviews, only housing was raised by all respondents. The lack of housing and rental units and the need for low-income housing were clearly key concerns.

Quality of Life: Quality of life was specifically mentioned as a key consideration. When asked to define this term, one respondent emphasized schools, libraries, transportation, proper land use, and a strong civic spirit. For another, quality of life was associated with a concern over the loss of a larger sense of community related to the annual challenge of integrating 20,000 to 30,000 new arrivals into the fabric of the city. Respondents commented on a creeping “NIMBY” (not in my back yard) attitude threatening Calgary’s strong sense of “community.” However, respondents added that Calgary still reflects a strong community spirit.

Other Issues: General concerns were also raised in the interviews about the state of education and the local school system, recent increases in municipal user fees, the condition of other city infrastructure (aside from transportation concerns) and the related threat of increased gasoline taxes and toll roads.

SLEEPER ISSUES

CULTURAL DIVERSITY

For one respondent, Calgary’s cultural diversity does not receive the attention it deserves. A dramatic demographic shift is occurring in the city, and it will become increasingly more pronounced and important.

ELECTRICAL DEREGULATION

There has been a lack of debate regarding the deregulation of the electrical industry, despite its impact on the general public.

REPRESENTATION

There was a concern that provincial and federal electoral boundaries may have failed to keep pace with Calgary’s recent growth. The consequences of any imbalance are significant as the lack of provincial and federal attention received by the city impacts on a range of urban issues.



Calgary’s proximity to the Rocky Mountains and Banff National Park were held up as positives. The city has a friendly atmosphere. Calgarians show a strong volunteer spirit and enjoy an active lifestyle. Unlike other cities, Calgary has a world class airport that is easily accessible.

CALGARY: IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“Calgary does drive the province. We are the biggest city, biggest base, most people come here, but we still have to fight for every dollar from the province.”

“There is no such thing as rush hour in Calgary. There’s heavy traffic all the time.”

“I would like to see more people jumping on the train and using public transit. That would be wonderful.”

“If the history of the city is any predictor of the future, we know that the prosperity cycle we are in now will [come to an] end. Probably a relatively abrupt one.”

“I think private industry, which is making a lot of money in Calgary, also has a responsibility to help the community but they haven’t been doing that.”

GO FIGURE

While crime was mentioned in passing as a general concern, no specific mention was made of biker gangs, youth crime, arson or prostitution even though these issues did appear quite often in the print media.

THE TOP ISSUES

Finance and Taxes: All respondents expressed concern over Edmonton's financial challenges with recent cuts in provincial grants, high social costs, and an immediate need for upgrades to city infrastructure. When the province started reducing grants in 1993, Edmonton was left with two problems. First, it did not have the resources to meet local needs, and second, it lacked the capacity to raise the missing revenue. Attempts for a hotel room tax or a gasoline tax were refused by the province, leaving the city with no choice but to raise property taxes. Controlling the municipal tax rate may be the single biggest challenge facing Edmonton. While local politicians are reluctant to raise taxes, there may be few options left.

Regional Government: Costs and jurisdictional issues associated with communities around the city are a major concern, and include infrastructure, cost sharing, duplication, annexation, and flight from the downtown. It was suggested that those moving to outlying communities are more affluent, leaving the inner city with a variety of economic and social problems. The net result is that Edmonton effectively subsidizes the surrounding centres which do not contribute any taxes to Edmonton. The solution may be found in annexation, but the province does not want to act unilaterally, and the surrounding communities likely want no part of it. Some kind of cost-sharing arrangement may be the answer. The hope is that the province will support this option in the ongoing *Capital Region Governance Review*.

Social Issues: The flight from Edmonton's residential inner city to the suburbs and outlying communities has left that area with a host of social problems. Exacerbating the situation is the fact that Edmonton is Canada's most northern city, and it serves as a destination for northern migrants seeking work. Without the means to support themselves, they often end up placing demands upon social services. Other social issues cited include prostitution, drug abuse, homelessness, a high murder rate, gangs, and gang-related violence.

Other Issues: Poor air service, deregulation of utilities, cold weather, the building of a ring road, and user fees were also touched upon. The closure of the Municipal Airport has not resulted in more direct commercial flights, and some believe that business people are choosing Calgary or Vancouver over Edmonton because of easier travel connections.

SLEEPER ISSUES

ORGANIZED CRIME:

Organized crime and gangs are clearly emerging as a concern. While most gang crime is directed at other gangs, concern in the general public is rising. A recent RCMP investigation regarding allegations that members of the force are assisting the biker gangs has served to focus more attention on the issue.

INCOME DISPARITY:

Increasing disparity between rich and poor in Edmonton may also be an emerging issue. With governments less capable of providing basic services, those with lower incomes are slipping through the cracks of the social safety net, often into poverty. The consequence is a rebound effect where social problems and crime become more acute.

THE EDMONTON UPSIDE

While acknowledging Edmonton's long and cold winters, respondents spoke highly of Edmonton's quality of life. Light traffic, beautiful parks and river valleys, a politically and ethnically diverse culture, excellent leisure and recreation services, low housing costs, and a clean environment were cited as advantages of living in Edmonton.

EDMONTON: IN THEIR OWN WORDS

"The feds cut grants to the province, and the province then cut grants to the cities [but] the homeless who are here in the city, you have to help them."

"People feel this problem [organized crime and gangs] is growing and we are being told not to worry about it. And yet, we are worrying about it".

"We are seeing more and more restaurants hit, more and more drive-by shootings. More recently we had...two or three drive-by shootings in a particular week."

"We have tried to work with surrounding municipalities [that] we are bumping into now. All around us, Sherwood Park on the east, Ft. Saskatchewan on the northeast, St. Albert right on our doorstep on the northwest, Spruce Grove and Stoney Plain out to the west, [and] Leduc to the south. [Regionalization] is a significant issue..."

GO FIGURE

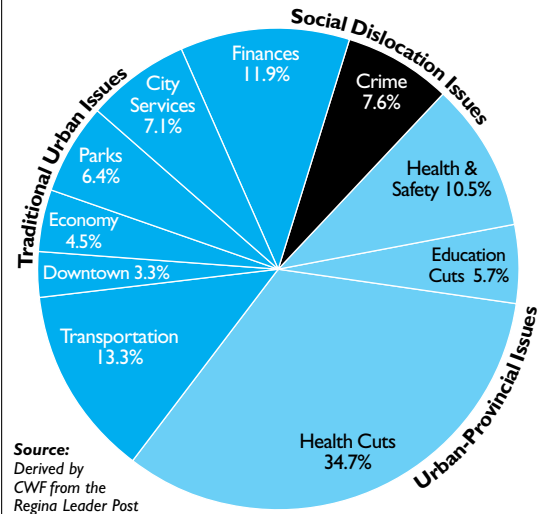
Crime featured more prominently in Edmonton than in Calgary. Unlike some capital cities, hosting the provincial government was not mentioned as a specific issue in Edmonton.

REGINA NEWS SCAN

When looking at the top ten issues in Regina, a different picture once again emerges. What is striking is the degree to which health care funding dominated the news coverage. Of all the articles selected for analysis, over one-third were found to discuss and debate the issue of health care funding. To be sure, some of this emphasis relates to the time period in which the scan was conducted. Like Calgary, the health care issue was brought into sharp focus by the province's decision to close a city hospital, and the issue was fuelled by a legal battle that followed to keep the facility open. Traditional urban issues also seem to be more prominent in Regina, particularly as they relate to the economic situation in the city. The issues of finances, taxes, the provision of city services, the state of the downtown business core, and the economy in general emerged as key concerns. Finally, unlike Vancouver and Calgary, the issue of housing did not register in the top ten for Regina, and social dislocation issues were limited to articles on crime. In Regina, the issues seem to be quite evenly split between "traditional" urban issues, and those that cut across federal, provincial, and municipal jurisdictional boundaries.

THE NEWS SCAN: Regina's Top Ten

(% of all News Articles Mentioning a Specific Issue)



THE ISSUE

MANAGING THE ISSUE

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Health Cuts (34.7%): Health cuts and their impact were the number one concern in Regina. Cutbacks resulted in the closure of the *Plains Health Centre Hospital*, lengthy waiting lists, bed shortages, and labour problems. The hospital closure sparked an intense debate about how the health system should be restructured. Legal action was taken to keep the hospital open. The *Regina District Health Board* predicted a deficit of \$6 million in 1998-99 on a budget of \$303 million.

Most critics of the cuts would simply like to see the province inject more funds into the system. Extra funds were made available during the year for the hiring of 200 nurses to help meet immediate needs. Renovations and additional beds for Regina's *General* and *Pasqua* hospitals were planned, and fundraising efforts were undertaken for the purchase of new equipment. However, those opposed to the *Plains Hospital* closure still wanted to see that decision reversed.

The cuts to Regina's health care system reflect significant reductions in expenditure at the provincial and national levels, and are typical of the other major western centres. An aging population combined with expensive new pharmaceuticals and medical techniques exacerbates the effects of the cutbacks. Some critics did suggest that there was in fact no crisis, while others said it was the provincial government's mismanagement that was to blame.

Transportation (13.3%): Two factors contribute to deteriorating traffic conditions. First, urban sprawl and flight from the downtown have increased the costs of maintaining infrastructure. Second, the province has also cut transfers. The intersection at Pasqua Street and Victoria Avenue, and the twinning of the #1 highway near Regina are of particular concern. The issue of using cameras to monitor red lights has also generated controversy.

There is little agreement on how to solve the traffic woes. A controversial intersection was approved at Victoria Avenue, providing better access to a growing retail area. Pasqua Street is being widened to four lanes. Provincial-municipal cost sharing is urged by the *Saskatchewan Urban Municipal Association* as a long-term solution. Small buses are proposed to reduce noise. Cameras at busy intersections could be a source of new funds.

Many see the lack of sufficient financial resources as a significant barrier to resolving Regina's current and future transportation needs. At the same time, raising additional funds from within the city will be difficult as business and property taxes are widely perceived as being too high already. In addition, road expansions and upgrades have been quite divisive, often pitting residents against business owners.

Finance & Taxes (11.9%): Despite reduced revenues and rising costs, the city phased out the business tax in 1998-99, arguing that to do so was essential for economic growth. The school board, partially funded by the tax, opposed the policy. In 1999, property taxes were increased to compensate for the elimination of the business tax. Cuts to the Library Board budget were also contentious. The city has also sought new ideas to revitalize the downtown business core.

To meet its financial challenges, the city is exploring and implementing a number of changes to its tax structure. First, the city is implementing "market value" assessment for property taxes, arguing that this makes the property tax system more fair. Second, it is also hoped that the elimination of the business tax will attract new business and tax revenue to the city. Third, to help renew and revitalize the downtown core, the city is allowing tax breaks for downtown developers.

Clearly, the elimination of the business tax will have the effect of reducing Regina's tax revenue in the short run. As such, the policy is very much an investment in the longer-term financial health of the city. At the same time, it is clear that some citizens do not view the matter in this way. Provincial cut backs in transfer payments, from an expected \$13 million to \$6.5 million, have also served to tighten budgets throughout the city's departments.

Health & Safety (10.5%): A number of health and safety issues make up this catch-all category. A proposed tough anti-smoking bylaw pit restaurant and hotel owners against various anti-smoking groups. The *Community Services Committee* at city hall asked the *Regina Health District* to conduct a public consultation on the issue. Other miscellaneous issues included helmet laws, food banks, school safety, and welfare fraud.

Two separate thrusts were identified in addressing some of the issues surrounding community health and safety. First, the local food bank has begun securing the assistance of corporations to sponsor their work. Second, city police have decided to invest another \$60,000 to boost their efforts at investigating and reducing the amount of welfare fraud in Regina.

Regina's experience with anti-smoking by-laws is not unique as this policy area often generates conflict. In dealing with other health and safety issues, the greatest obstacle identified by most groups promoting one particular cause or another has been a series of funding cutbacks affecting the provision of social services. These cuts have come from both the provincial government and the City of Regina.

THE ISSUE

MANAGING THE ISSUE

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Crime (7.6%): While other issues have captured more headlines, crime remains a concern. Statistics Canada reported that in 1997, Regina had Canada's second highest violent reported crime rate and the highest reported property crime rate. Regina had 40% more homicides than its sister city Saskatoon. One group of car thieves has been dubbed the "Oldsmobile Gang" in reference to the model of car they prefer. Prostitution and youth crime also emerged as a concern.

Suggestions have emerged for increased patrolling and enforcement in high crime areas. Changes to the Young Offenders Act (since passed) were also urged. A program called *Neighborhood Watch*, in partnership with city police, set up volunteer citizen foot patrols to help monitor local neighborhoods. Other proposed solutions for controlling crime included establishing a red light district and better lighting in back alleys.

City police argue that they do not have the manpower or resources to comprehensively patrol all areas of the city. The Young Offenders Act has also become a target, and was cited as an impediment to addressing or reducing youth crime in Regina. The Chief of Police has urged residents to consider that crime statistics are based on reported incidents only, and as such, they may indicate higher rates of reporting and better enforcement as much as an increase in crime.

City Services (7.1%): The closure of downtown libraries topped the list of a range of concerns about city services. Supporters of the libraries blamed the elimination of the city's business tax for causing a \$600,000 shortfall in the library budget. (Unlike many other cities, Regina's library board actually sets a mill rate of taxation for library services.) Other concerns included the availability of downtown parking, the lack of airport taxi service, and concerns over the maintenance of Taylor Field.

In order to avoid the closing of library branches, the Regina Public Library Board decided to shelve plans for constructing a new library building. A number of other solutions have been proposed for the Library Board's woes. One suggestion was to secure increased support from city businesses and corporations for library services. With regards to the issue of parking availability in the downtown core, the city has considered the creation of an "arms length" parking authority.

Not surprisingly, the primary obstacle preventing an increase in the number or the quality of services in the city is funding, and libraries, roads, parks, and recreation facilities are having to compete vigorously for a reduced pool of capital. The city is facing a short-term decrease in revenue from the elimination of the business tax, but Mayor Doug Archer has consistently defended the action as an investment in the longer term economic potential of the city.

Parks & Environment (6.4%): The current landfill site is nearing capacity and oil at the site is believed to be leaching into the city's aquifer. There are also calls for the dredging and deepening of Regina's Wascana Lake to return it to a more pristine condition. A growing concern is Cankerworm infestation, which defoliates trees and can kill them if allowed to attack the same trees each year.

New locations for a city landfill are being proposed as the oil problem at the old landfill site is being cleaned up. Plans are also in the works to dredge Wascana Lake as part of a provincial Centennial celebration planned for 2005. With regards to the Cankerworm problem, the city has called for new strategies in light of the failure of "banding" (sticky rings placed on trees to prevent the advance of insects and parasites).

The state of Regina's finances will likely serve to restrict both the ability and the speed with which the city can respond to concerns over parks and the surrounding environment. Obviously, the implementation of significant improvements will cost money. As such, any movement on this issue will directly compete with other demands that may have a larger and more vocal constituency.

Education Cuts (5.7%): The City's plan to eliminate the business tax was a big concern for the Public School Board. As a result of this policy, the board lost approximately \$3.1 million. The board went on record as formally opposing the policy. Though cooperating in the construction of a new school, the Catholic Separate School Board and the Public Board were also in disagreement over the way tax monies are shared between the two divisions.

During the time covered by our news scan, the Public School Board was clearly at risk of running a budget deficit. A shortfall was avoided after the provincial government decided to directly intervene by giving the board an increased education grant. Efforts to save dollars by restructuring the educational system in the city are ongoing, but have also yielded concerns about the closing of several inner city schools.

Once again, it is the elimination of Regina's business tax that is the key point of contention between the city and the Public School Board. But the issue is not just a municipal concern. Compounding the problem is a perceived lack of funding coming forth from the provincial government to support education in the city. This lack of financial resources is viewed by some as straining the city's educational system.

Economy (4.5%): Our media scan reveals a growing concern over the future of the city's economy. In particular, discussions centered around the ability of Regina to effectively compete with other major centres in the West and across Canada. This concern was especially focused on the city's ability to attract new businesses and new commercial ventures.

To address the concern, a number of new initiatives are being undertaken to promote business and economic development in Regina. As noted, the business tax has already been eliminated. Second, tourism is being aggressively promoted. Third, the *Regina Economic Development Authority* is working on a plan they hope will add 13,000 new jobs over the next five years for the city.

A number of barriers are seen as a hindrance to Regina's ability to advance economically. High taxes is one of the chief concerns. It is also recognized that the level of crime and the harsh weather makes the city less attractive to business. The high property taxes (and the business tax before it was eliminated) were considered among the most problematic barriers to economic growth.

Downtown Business Core (3.3%): Like other North American cities, Regina is experiencing the onset of urban decay as witnessed through difficulties with maintaining a strong and vibrant central business district surrounded by a quality residential area. The downtown is being undermined by a flight of residents to the outlying suburbs. This problem has been compounded by a reluctance of business to settle in the downtown core.

Two programs are designed to revitalize the downtown and preserve heritage buildings. The programs provide tax relief for potential developers and business owners looking to the downtown area. Both have met with some success. To address crime, police have added bike patrols and increased their presence in the downtown. City council and the *Regina Market Square* organization are installing cameras at various high traffic locations to increase security.

A higher level of crime and a lack of adequate parking are two concerns (among other problems) that citizens say will continue to impede the development of the downtown area. The city has responded with expanded police patrols and new surveillance cameras for increased security, but these are also a strain on an already tight city budget. Revenues from parking tickets and parking meters are not substantial enough to offset these new costs.

THE TOP ISSUES

Downtown Business Core: The state of the downtown business core was a primary concern. Regina has been undergoing a flight to the suburbs that has left the downtown area “people poor” and “retail rich”, according to one respondent. Lower property taxes in outlying communities such as Emerald Park and White City have drawn residents away from the city centre. A study commissioned by the city emphasized the need to make Regina a “24 hour city” with more attractions and residential areas in the downtown.

Infrastructure: The need for provincial infrastructure development as a means to secure the economic well-being of the city was mentioned. Twinning the Trans-Canada highway to assist local tourism and manufacturing was deemed essential. Economic development in the Moose Jaw-Regina “corridor” was also highlighted.

Urban Aboriginal Peoples: Concern over high unemployment and poverty in the Aboriginal community, especially those in older residential inner city areas off the downtown emerged as another issue of concern. Some progress was being made, albeit slowly, in addressing problems faced by the Aboriginal community. Aboriginal real estate purchases and business investment in the city were cited as positive developments.

Crime: Break and enters and property crimes were specifically mentioned as an issue in need of attention. Statistics were cited showing Regina with the highest per capita crime rate of major cities in Canada. While Regina’s police authorities have reported that the crime rate is in fact dropping, the fact remains that Regina’s reported rate of crime is still higher than other Canadian centres.

Other Issues: It was mentioned that Regina offers a much lower cost of living than that found in other cities, and while this was seen as a significant advantage offered by Regina, its ability as a drawing card is offset by relatively high provincial and municipal taxes. The city’s inability to attract big name entertainers or a professional hockey team was also mentioned as problematic.

SLEEPER ISSUES

WASCANA LAKE:

A large and expensive dredging of Wascana Lake may be long overdue in the view of one respondent. The Lake is the “heart” of Wascana Park, and the park itself is the “heart” of the city. As such, the lake needs to be protected.

PROVINCIAL OUTLOOK:

Being the capital city of Saskatchewan was generally seen as a positive, but one respondent did feel that citizens and the media focused too much on provincial issues at the expense of local ones. The city’s reputation as unattractive with cold winters could be countered by more civic boosterism from citizens and community leaders, which has been lost because of the provincial focus.

THE REGINA UPSIDE

Wascana Park is one of Canada’s largest urban parks, and was cited as a unique Regina feature. Short commute times and affordable housing are some of the things that contribute to the high quality of life in Regina. A well-educated, highly skilled labour force and an efficient building and planning department were hailed as important business advantages that Regina offers.

REGINA: IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“Quick transport is one of the hallmarks of our community.”

“They have got to have good roads to get to and from your particular attraction for (business) to work.”

“Twenty three hundred acres of lake and green space is a huge advantage and a tremendous legacy, and something that you definitely want to protect well into the future.”

“I think it is particularly noticeable in the evening – just not a lot of people downtown.”

“You’re looking at paying four, five, six thousand dollars of taxes in Regina. Whereas in [neighbouring] Emerald Park, it’s a couple of thousand.”

“There is a fairly large native population in Regina, and a lot of reserves in the surrounding areas...many of them (have) social and economic problems.”

GO FIGURE

Economic development was seen in terms of agricultural (livestock for export) and industrial development around the city. In contrast, Saskatoon respondents cited the advancement of high-tech industries.

THE TOP ISSUES

Social and Economic Disparity: Concern was expressed about social and economic disparity in the city. There is an east-west cleavage in Saskatoon, with the west side home to a disproportionate share of the city's social and economic problems. This disparity cuts across racial lines, with both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities being affected.

Urban Aboriginal Peoples: If current demographic trends continue, Aboriginal issues will become more important as the city's Aboriginal population grows from 8% to 40% over the next 50 years. To address this challenge, more low-income housing, better employment opportunities, and greater participation in the local economy will be needed. The Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations and the Saskatoon Tribal Council have tried to focus attention on Aboriginal issues, but they remain peripheral for most residents.

Transportation: Poor land and air connections to other major centres were frequently mentioned. This impacts on Saskatoon's ability to access major markets. The highways that do exist are not completely twinned, and north-south links to the United States are inadequate. While poor air connections were also mentioned, some felt this issue might be overstated.

Economic Diversification: Saskatoon's economy is driven by agricultural and resource industries, but progress is being made on economic diversification. Attracting high-tech industry and building the "intellectual economy" is the main challenge. The Canadian Light Source Synchrotron project at the University was cited as an example of the type of high-tech industries the city needs. For some, poor transportation infrastructure was cited as a barrier in competing with other major centres. At the same time, respondents added that Saskatoon does offer certain economic advantages such as a high quality of life, low cost of living, a respected university, and all the amenities of larger centres.

Other Issues: The importance of the University to the life of the city, the perception of the city as a backwater, poverty, and city finances were also cited. Crime – specifically home break-ins – was mentioned as a problem, although it was not seen as a major issue. Jurisdictional issues with surrounding municipalities and the downloading of responsibilities from other levels of government round out the concerns.

SLEEPER ISSUES

BIO-ENGINEERING:

The emerging technology of gene manipulation in the production of seed crops could carry important implications for Saskatoon and the province. Farmers may become dependent on a small group of companies for seed, herbicide, and pesticide.

CULTURAL DIVERSITY:

A recent debate over prayer in the public schools is a sign that Saskatoon is becoming a more diverse city and must address the challenge of becoming a multi-cultural centre.

LIMITS TO GROWTH:

Concern was expressed over the city's recent boom. Growth and infrastructure issues have been given much attention, but little debate has taken place on the appropriate limits of growth.

THE SASKATOON UPSIDE

When asked about the advantages of living in Saskatoon, respondents frequently mentioned the nice size of the city and short commute times. According to one respondent, the city is the perfect size for both transportation and addressing social issues quickly and effectively. The low cost of living, a strong sense of community, cultural diversity, attractive parks, and the river pathway system were also mentioned.

SASKATOON: IN THEIR OWN WORDS

"By and large [Aboriginals] still haven't been accepted into mainstream society for whatever reason...until they are, there are going to be continuing and growing problems of poverty."

"We haven't been able to strongly...focus on the new economy, the intellectual economy."

"[Because of crime] if you do end up on 20th Street on a Friday night and you breakdown, your heart beats a little faster."

"Right now the housing market is the hottest...in Canada. Houses you could buy five years ago for \$80,000 are now selling for \$140,000."

"It's sort of quiet...we don't have overt and highly manifested racial incidents or problems. What we've got is a kind of polite racism..."

GO FIGURE

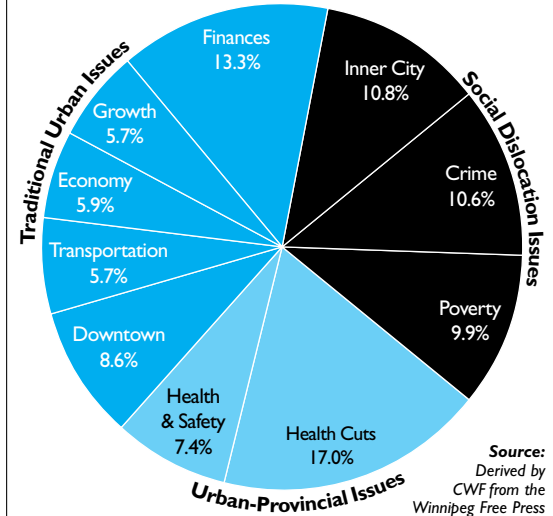
Perhaps reflecting Saskatoon's effort to diversify its economic base, only one respondent acknowledged the impact of depressed prices for agricultural products on the city.

WINNIPEG NEWS SCAN

Arguably, Winnipeg emerges as the Western city with the most diverse issue agenda – the top ten concerns are almost evenly split between traditional urban issues, problems related to social dislocation, and issues that span the local, provincial, and federal divide. As such, Winnipeg shares numerous similarities with other cities in the West. Like Regina, the state of health care emerged as the top issue, and the city's finances took second place. To no small degree, this reflects a deep concern with the levels of taxation in the city and the potential of a declining tax base as people move to bedroom communities. This concern with taxes and finances merges with concerns over the state of the downtown business core and the economy in general to demonstrate significant concern with Winnipeg's future economic opportunities. Like Vancouver, social dislocation issues also registered prominently, particularly conditions in the residential inner city and the level of poverty in that area. As in Calgary, transportation emerged in Winnipeg's top ten, as did urban growth. In Winnipeg's case, however, the growth issue is not related to managing a rapidly growing population, but stemming urban sprawl and flight from the city.

THE NEWS SCAN: Winnipeg's Top Ten

(% of all News Articles Mentioning a Specific Issue)



THE ISSUE

MANAGING THE ISSUE

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Health Cuts (17.0%): Provincial health care cuts have caused major problems for hospitals in Winnipeg, including packed emergency rooms, long waiting lists for health services, over-worked staff, labour disruptions, loss of experienced staff, bed shortages, and loss of patient privacy. In a media poll taken, health care emerged as the number one concern in Winnipeg.

A number of solutions have been proposed, some more successful than others. Like many other provinces, hospital management has been centralized under one regional health board, and some services have also been centralized to reduce duplication. The city's palliative care capacity has been increased both institutionally and in the community to free-up needed chronic care beds.

Residents of Winnipeg are not alone in their concerns over health care. Resolving issues in the health system has been made more difficult by an aging population, increasing costs, a continued lack of funding (with no consensus that the situation requires tax increases), poor management of transition from high-cost to low cost health care, and hospitals which are resistant to eliminating some departments.

Taxes & Finances (13.3%): Property taxes in Winnipeg are high. The city is also the most reliant on property taxes of all cities in Canada. A recent poll revealed that tax-cuts should be the city's number one priority. High property tax rates are being blamed for the flight from Winnipeg to bedroom communities, as well as advancing deterioration of the downtown business core. Higher property taxes also have the effect of discouraging entrepreneurial activities.

Several solutions have been proposed and implemented including more user fees, contracting-out services, repairing streets through frontage levies, privatization and reduction of city services, increased educational funding from the province to reduce a special education levy, controlling the city's debt (the city spends 20% of tax dollars on debt maintenance), collecting tax arrears owed to the city (\$34 million), and a reduction in infrastructure spending.

High taxes may well be their own worst enemy. When high taxes push people out of the city to the suburbs, the tax base shrinks, requiring an even higher tax load on remaining residents. Education funding from the province then falls because of lower enrollment, and schools must raise the educational levy. Property tax hikes, in turn, lead to greater urban sprawl. The education levy is also being pressured upwards because of recent demands for wage increases.

Residential Inner City (10.8%): The inner city is plagued by high crime, drug use, social decay, and numerous derelict, empty, and burnt-out buildings. These conditions erode the quality of life for residents. Many are afraid to walk in their neighborhoods as a result of gangs. This isolates individuals, erodes the sense of community, and invites a host of other problems, from child neglect to the health problems of poor single mothers.

Community patrols are trying to reduce crime and restore a sense of community. Dilapidated homes are being restored to encourage permanent residency and to provide temporary employment. Other efforts include tax incentives, fines for negligent property owners, and community sponsored home construction. Youth programs focus on a pursuit of constructive activities like sports and safety from troubled home lives.

Urban sprawl and downtown deterioration are now recognized as mutually reinforcing conditions, and officials are ending the subsidization of suburban construction by imposing taxes that reflect the cost of infrastructure development. City hall has made rejuvenation of the city centre a priority, and efforts are succeeding. There were no murders in 1997 in the area once known as "Hell's Half Acre." Only time will tell if the trend is sustainable.

Crime (10.6%): Winnipeg had the third highest reported violent crime rate in Canada in 1997 and the highest murder rate among large metros (500,000 plus) in 1996. The crimes mentioned in the media are (in descending frequency) youth crime and gangs (which have saturated the city centre and begun spreading to the suburbs), arson, murder, prostitution, and theft. Some say criminal activity has helped trigger urban depopulation by encouraging flight to the suburbs.

Patrol groups have been created to keep a public presence on the streets. Community groups have also helped install lights. The city is attempting to control youth crime (Manitoba has the second highest rate of youth prosecution in Canada) by starting athletic clubs and finding ways to provide jobs and opportunities for poor youths. Financial damages from auto thieves are being pursued, and the city has requested intervenor status in the gun control reference case.

Crime is linked with a recurring theme in the media – Winnipeg's downtown and the residential inner city. Crime is geographically concentrated in this area, which has 13% of the city's population but 30% of the crime. In many respects, this is not surprising since crime is often linked with poverty and general social decay – characteristics of the inner city. Winnipeg may well continue to struggle with crime until these associated risk factors are addressed.

THE ISSUE

Poverty (9.9%): Winnipeg's residential inner city is characterized by wide-spread poverty. The two inner city areas delineated by the postal codes R3A and R3B emerge as the fourth and fifth poorest neighbourhoods in Canada. This poverty is associated with numerous social problems such as drug abuse, family violence, widespread crime, vagrancy, and homelessness. Each arguably affects the quality of life for all Winnipeg residents.

Downtown Business Core (8.6%): Winnipeg's business core is economically stagnant because of the under-utilization of both the area and its amenities. In addition, there is no central authority with both the staff and resources capable of coordinating various projects to turn the situation around. The downtown's main problem may well be the fact that there are so few residents living in the area. Only 120 people live in the area known as the Exchange District.

Health & Safety (7.4%): Winnipeg Child and Family Services (CFS) has seen the number of abandoned and threatened children double in recent years. About 60% of the children in CFS's care are Aboriginal, and many live in the depressed inner city area. Problems with elderly long-term care was also a focus. Many of the city's elderly are waiting in their homes or in short-term hospital beds for access to home care programs. Winnipeg was also found to have a high rate of fire fatalities.

Economy (5.9%): In 1998, Manitoba enjoyed the lowest unemployment rate in Canada, but Winnipeg's economy still emerged as a key issue. There were concerns about the departure of skilled workers, a stagnant downtown core, high taxes, and low disposable incomes. Mayor Glen Murray and the city council have agreed that the city's economy needs to be one of the three top priorities over their four-year term.

Transportation (5.7%): The city's \$14 billion in infrastructure is so poorly maintained that it is threatened with collapse. The condition of the city's streets are a major issue in Winnipeg. This is evident in that streets were a primary focus of the recent civic election and in that city council has put street maintenance at the top of its four year agenda, ahead of both public safety and preservation of the city's crumbling centre.

Density and Growth (5.7%): City planners see 750,000 residents as a threshold for self-sufficiency and economic growth, but this could take 55 years to achieve based on current growth rates (6% growth since 1986). With Winnipeg's slower population growth, the entire province has come to suffer from a shortage of skilled labour. Urban sprawl is also a concern, as people move to bedroom communities, shrinking Winnipeg's tax base and abandoning the city's already depopulated core.

MANAGING THE ISSUE

Community groups and non-profits are attempting to address poverty. There are numerous soup kitchens and drop-in centres operating in the city. There is also a trend towards focusing energy on stabilizing the lives of impoverished youth (particularly Aboriginal youth) to pre-empt involvement in criminal and gang activity, and prostitution. Efforts include youth drop-in centres, health services for low-income mothers, and a project establishing a "native campus" in the area.

Increased residency is needed to draw business and tourists to the area. Ideas include tax credits for renovating buildings and creating a registry of those interested in living in the area. Projects include widening sidewalks, installing lighting and benches, eliminating traffic lanes, and more meter parking. Programs are now dealing with crime and homelessness. Installation of a traditional electric streetcar has been considered to enhance the area's image.

CFS is focusing on early intervention by working with community groups to improve the social conditions that lead to abuse and neglect. Safe houses will be used instead of hotel stays, and a program has been started providing inner-city mothers with a place to meet. The province has begun construction on a number of long-term care facilities. In response to fire fatalities, the city has considered proposals such as mandatory hard-wired fire alarms in all residences.

The city's location means Winnipeg should be a natural trade hub. *Winnport* and the *North American Trade Corridor Partnership* (facilitating trade to China, the US, and Mexico) are two major projects which may drive an economic rebirth. *Winnport* may bring 5,000 jobs with a \$600 million payroll. Lower taxes, streamlined government, better infrastructure, and a revitalized downtown are key to luring skilled labour.

A number of options have been considered to save the city's transportation infrastructure, including user fees and renewal levies. In an attempt to deal with the problem, the city has opted to transfer money away from other services. Specifically, the city has cut its entire capital expenditure budget in half to increase the amount of money available for the necessary road repairs.

Larger lots, a rural lifestyle, and lower taxes are cited as reasons for leaving the city. As such, many see lower taxes as key to luring residents back. Tax breaks for inner city home development and renovation have been implemented. Increased provincial educational funding would allow the municipal education levy to be reduced. More aggressive immigration policies have also been suggested, and builders argue that costly development guidelines could be relaxed, making it more affordable to build homes on larger lots.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

About one-half of Canada's Aboriginal peoples live in urban areas, but federal government aboriginal programs often focus on reserves. (Winnipeg's population is 7% aboriginal.) There has been some movement away from this trend, with Ottawa recently announcing a major project targeting young urban Aboriginals. There was a suggestion in the Winnipeg media that poverty was a "taboo" subject during the recent civic elections.

There is no coordinating body for various revival efforts. Until more people are living in the city centre it is difficult to link the dispersed corners of the area into a community. The downtown must compete with retail outlets on the city's periphery. Either the population of the area will have to increase so residents will find it convenient to spend their dollars in the area, or the city will have to restrict development of retail outlets on the city's periphery.

Many commented that increases in the amount spent on child protection would not necessarily improve the situation without addressing other issues. In particular, there seems to be a greater focus on broader social conditions, but these conditions are complex and poorly understood. The city's proposal for mandatory hard-wired alarms was rejected by landlords as "short-sighted" since many owners would be financially hard-pressed or unable to comply.

Lowering taxes to attract people, improving infrastructure, and revitalizing downtown is a difficult balance to achieve. The Exchange District, with more than 100 buildings built before 1918, needs large investments for restoration. Until the city can attract more people, it will be difficult to link and improve the different areas of the core. Decay of the core is also worsened by school closures, making it an even less desirable place to live.

The city's high rate of property taxation makes it very difficult to increase funding for any specific project. The key, then, is to prioritize spending by increasing it in some areas and reducing it in others. The city's commitment to decrease the level of property taxation means that even maintaining spending at current levels will likely require cuts in other expenditure areas.

Increasing Winnipeg's population through more pro-active immigration policies has had critics. Some have also said the city's tax credit system for improving city housing did not work as well as originally thought – some of the money was used by suburban homeowners rather than those in the inner city. The province has also been criticized for giving large grants to outlying bedroom communities for infrastructure development, which effectively serves to subsidize urban sprawl.

THE TOP ISSUES

Urban Aboriginal Peoples: Poverty, unemployment, a lack of affordable housing, and crime are some of the economic and social challenges facing urban Aboriginal peoples. It was mentioned that the federal government has financially “cut off” a number of Northern reserves, resulting in the migration of Aboriginal peoples to the city in search of employment and social services. Some solutions mentioned include more Aboriginal candidates in political campaigns, better programs for youth employment, and greater participation in the business community through investment and ownership.

Downtown Business Core: Years of suburban flight, haphazard development, and a number of run-down buildings has left the downtown in a state of decay. However, a renewal appears to be underway. A number of buildings have been renovated, and the Forks, a trendy retail, bar and restaurant area, is thriving. The challenge remains to re-populate the downtown through residential and business development. Criticism was levelled against some of the renovations now underway; some of the vacant buildings are being converted into high-end condos rather than badly needed affordable housing. An umbrella initiative called *Centre Venture* has joined several downtown groups together to work out a 20 year plan for renewing the downtown.

Economic Diversification: While Winnipeg does have a broader industrial base than many other Western centres, concern was still expressed about Winnipeg’s ability to attract more high-tech firms. There is a need to develop industries appropriate for the community – including the Aboriginal community – and there was frustration over the lack of tourism in the city. The failure to tap the potential of the Red River Valley was mentioned in particular.

Other Issues: High education and property taxes also emerged as a key concern. Unlike other Western cities, Winnipeg directly subsidizes the provincial welfare funds. The City of Winnipeg Act extracts four percent (over \$18 million) from city property taxes, according to one respondent. Crime, the state of health care, and child poverty were also cited.

SLEEPER ISSUES

ABORIGINAL YOUTH:

Like Regina and Saskatoon, Winnipeg has a sizeable Aboriginal community. Concerns were expressed by one respondent about the opportunities and challenges facing Winnipeg’s Aboriginal peoples, particularly the future of Aboriginal youth.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING:

The city’s lack of affordable housing is an issue that has been neglected, according to one respondent. “Deluxe housing in heritage buildings” has not begun to address the need for affordably priced mixed residential housing in the core.

THE WINNIPEG UPSIDE

Though the cold winters are a drawback, respondents felt the city enjoys a very high quality of life. From rock concerts and fringe festivals to world class ballet, respondents mentioned the rich culture in the city. Green parks, outstanding restaurants, and a quality education system were other positives that emerged.

WINNIPEG: IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“We have 67% of the population of Manitoba. Our share (of provincial revenues) is not even one third.”

“We almost lost downtown. It’s still on life support, but I think there is still a chance that downtown can become a community.”

“You can buy all kinds of bricks and sticks but the only way you really revitalize downtown is... to get people down there...get them living there.”

“People are beginning to board themselves up in houses like they do in jail. They put bars in the windows because of crime.”

“No, we haven’t made anything [on the Pan-Am Games]. We’ve taken a big loss.”

“I think the sleeper issue is...so many kids having kids... I think that is the ticking clock that could potentially blow up in the face of Winnipeg.”

GO FIGURE

Despite Winnipeg’s traditional role as an economic hub connecting Western and Eastern Canada, surprisingly little mention was given to issues of export trade.

- 1) **The range of concerns on today's urban landscape has clearly expanded, reflecting an issue agenda no longer restricted to "traditional" urban problems:** Across the West, it is clear that the urban issue agenda is both rich and diverse. "Traditional" urban concerns such as land-use planning, development permits, city parks, roads, water, and sewers do not at all reflect the totality of issues in today's modern urban environment. Rather, many of the issues affecting quality of life in a modern city encompass a wide variety of concerns related to social dislocation and other areas that cut across the federal, provincial, and municipal jurisdictional divide. Issues such as poverty, crime, drug use, inner city decay, and local health services now top the list of urban concerns.
- 2) **A brief scan of the top issues facing the seven major Western metros indicates that there is a regional urban issue agenda:** At least one aspect of municipal finances and taxes emerged as a key concern in each metro across Western Canada. Cities are struggling to keep tax rates low, but are also being confronted with a lack of capital and human resources to effectively address the full range of concerns in their communities. The regional urban issue agenda also includes concerns over transportation and other municipal infrastructure, crime, housing availability and affordability, economic development, urban poverty, health services, and regionalized decision-making.
- 3) **At the same time, there is a wide diversity within the regional urban issue agenda:** While there are numerous similarities on the broader issues, key differences do emerge when considering the specific details. For example, transportation emerged as a key concern in most cities, yet the nuances of Vancouver's concerns are much different from those of Calgary or Saskatoon. In Vancouver, the issue clearly revolves around co-operating with surrounding municipal authorities for developing new high-speed transit routes into the city, while Calgary's concerns are closely related to the issue of provincial funding. In Edmonton and Saskatoon, the transportation issue also touches on the creation of effective air links.
- 4) **An expanded and diverse issue agenda which transcends "traditional" urban concerns points us toward considering new roles for local authorities and new models of municipal governance:** Considering the issues facing today's modern cities, new governance structures may be needed for local decision-makers to effectively address the concerns in their communities. This is especially important with regards to municipal financing and social dislocation issues such as crime and poverty. For example, is it realistic to expect Vancouver City Hall, with the current range of policy tools at its disposal, to make a dent in illicit drug use? Is it realistic to expect Winnipeg City Council to meaningfully address the challenges facing its urban Aboriginal community?
- 5) **The current policy environment appears to be open for a serious discussion over enhancing local government:** Each western province is currently in the process of reforming their Municipal Act and reviewing provincial-municipal financing arrangements. This recent emphasis on identifying new municipal roles and responsibilities is a positive trend. Although it is not yet clear whether these efforts will result in significantly expanded autonomy for municipalities or improved access to fiscal and human resources, the opportunity is certainly presenting itself.
- 6) **The days of focusing on provincial and federal affairs at the expense of municipal governance is over:** Cities are clearly becoming an increasingly important focus of governance in Canada. The great majority of Canadians now live in urban areas, and almost two-thirds reside in one of the country's 25 largest cities. The range of issues confronting today's cities is immense, and how those issues are ultimately dealt with can no longer be ignored by scholars, academics, business people, and others interested in building better urban communities that are vibrant, dynamic, and well governed.

ENDNOTES

1. *Cities@2000: Canada's Urban Landscape*, Canada West Foundation, Calgary, Alberta; 1999. Page 32.
 2. *Ibid.* Pages 38-39.
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ALSO AVAILABLE FROM
THE CANADA WEST FOUNDATION:



Cities @ 2000

In November 1999, Canada West released CITIES@2000. This study provides a comprehensive overview of urbanization trends in Canada within a national, regional, and provincial context, and a detailed profile of Canada's 25 largest cities based on key demographic, social, and economic indicators. CITIES@2000 concludes with a future research agenda to address the issues facing municipal governments. Copies of CITIES@2000 are available for \$20 by contacting the Canada West Foundation at 403-264-9535 or cwf@cwf.ca.