

East Victoria looks to a fresh direction

Historic Beltline area has eye on future

By Murdoch Macleod

Business Edge

Has Calgary's Beltline been studied to death? Some people think so, and the viewpoint was even noted on one of the information displays at a public planning workshop and open house in late June.

The workshop was to let residents and other stakeholders learn about, discuss and give advice on the future direction of East Victoria.

It was part of a joint city-community study of the future of the area.

As well as a future, East Victoria has a history. It's the part of the Beltline that wraps around the north and west of Stampede Park. More than a century-and-a-quarter after the birth of Cowtown, Victoria and the Beltline not only border the site where Calgary displays its heritage, but is arguably the area where Calgary's modern, urban heart beats most strongly.

East Victoria is bounded by the Elbow River on the south and east, the CPR on the north and 1st Street S.E. on the west.



File photo by Larry MacDougal, Business Edge

In many cities, the areas surrounding a fairground are an eyesore. East Victoria in Calgary hopes to avoid that fate.

One of the biggest issues in the area is transportation, says Eileen Stan, executive director of the Victoria Crossing Business Revitalization Zone.

Access into and out of the area is important for regular traffic and for major events. Stampede Park is a 365-day-a-year operation, she notes.

The road corridors of 10th, 11th and 12th Avenues move traffic in and out of the area, but East Victoria transportation should also be user-friendly for pedestrians because millions of people a year come to the area.

A great benefit, Stan adds, would be a pedestrian crossing over the tracks at 4th Street S.E., leading to the East Village.

City planner Don Schultz says one reason the area has languished was uncertainty over Stampede expansion. The Stampede's boundary at 12th Avenue S.E. creates certainty for the development industry and the study will follow that up, he says.

City, industry and community can now start planning for the urban, mixed-use community that is just waiting to break out. East Victoria is a community of deep roots. If the planning and study process works, it could create a model of

how an area surrounding a fairground can best be used. In many cities, the arena or fairground is surrounded by blight, he says.

As the area redevelops, it still probably won't evolve into a family community. There are few children in the Beltline, and proximity to the Stampede makes it a better opportunity for an urban residential lifestyle.

Ground-level retail and townhouses with apartments above are matched better to smaller units and smaller households.

Rob Taylor, Connaught community president, sees the urban lifestyle growing. "It's not about attracting a corporation or attracting a sector, but attracting the people who will make a difference," he says.

If you attract educated people to an area, then they decide what industry they're going into or business they'll start, and it grows from there.

Planner Schultz says city council has instructed staff to negotiate with the CPR and report by December.

Whether it be a tunnel, overpass or level crossing, a link across the railway would help with event traffic at Stampede Park, and make Olympic Way the main entrance to the Stampede.

From where I sit in the suburbs, it still looks like a good idea. Connecting East Village to Victoria would benefit the Beltline as well as downtown.

Vibrant inner-city neighbourhoods are a city necessity. If someone from out of town were to ask about the real Calgary, I would not point them to my leafy quasi-suburb. I wouldn't direct them to the concrete and glass towers of the central business district, vital though those are. I would direct an out- of-towner to inner-city neighbourhoods such as Kensington, or Connaught, Bridgeland or Victoria.

The Victoria Crossing BRZ's theme is the Soul of Calgary, and it's right on the mark.