

GREAT ENERGY AT AUMA AND IN EDMONTON

Gord Hume...October 2016

The energy and excitement generated by the opening night at the magnificent new Rogers Place in Edmonton Wednesday night is also buzzing through the people and the city of Edmonton. One senses a real belief by local residents that the new sports and entertainment facility will be a major rejuvenating catalyst for the city, and for the downtown neighbourhood in which it is located.

I was invited to Edmonton as a guest speaker at the annual AUMA conference last week. I gave two presentations: one on Leadership and the other on Building better Council/Staff relationships. There were big crowds at both sessions, and an extremely engaged audience with great questions. A thousand delegates attended the event, and despite some difficult economic times facing some Alberta cities, the resiliency and the determination of the municipal mayors and councillors was evident.

It was a well-organized conference with substantial content for the delegates. I've always thought that was a key for municipal events. I am bemused by conferences—and I am invited to speak at many municipal and government events—by those that spend money on showy marching bands and comedians at the wind-up banquet, as opposed to providing pertinent and useful content.

One of the many questions I was asked during my presentations concerned just that point—how do you attract council members to such conferences to help broaden their knowledge and maybe even inspire them? It was a great question, and I am always stunned by the number of elected officials who never go to a conference, seminar or municipal event. In fact, some of them proudly point out how little they spend each year, rather than understanding the lost opportunities by not learning about new ideas and opportunities for their municipality.

I remember distinctly doing a book-signing at a conference in Ontario a few years ago. A couple of older gentlemen came along, peered down at me and asked what I was doing. I explained my latest book on local government in Canada was now available. One guy sort of sniffed and snickered, and then told me—and I have never forgotten these words—“I already got elected. I don't have to learn anymore.”

To say my jaw hit the floor would be an understatement as I watched them waddle down the corridor at the trade show, quite satisfied with themselves.

The attitude at the AUMA conference was just the opposite. I was tremendously impressed with the determination of delegates to learn, to hear about new opportunities, to be inspired by speakers like General Rick Hillier, to talk with Alberta provincial government representatives, and to meet colleagues from across the province and talk about common problems.

While speaking with Mayors Don Iveson and Naheed Nenshi during the conference, I was again impressed with the determination of municipal leaders in Alberta to overcome their economic challenges and move forward. The poster-child for that, of course, is Fort McMurray and the Wood Buffalo region where the community and the elected and staff officials did such a magnificent job during the terrible forest fire in the spring.

Despite the financial problems facing parts of the province, Alberta municipal leaders are determined to keep their communities strong, healthy and progressive.

It was exciting to be at their conference. Municipal leadership at its best was on display from the delegates from communities large and small. Well done.