



## Go Long!

May 10, 2012

*The following column is written by Gord Hume, President of Hume Communications Inc., former Councillor of the City of London, ON, and author of “Cultural Planning for Creative Communities” and “Taking Back Our Cities”*

When Casey Vander Ploeg and the team at the Canada West Foundation and Communities of Tomorrow approached me about writing a column for the Let'sTOC series, I instantly agreed. The dialogue that both organizations are encouraging is another important step in building stronger cities and changing the way municipalities operate and are funded. That's a critical theme I explore in my latest book, [Taking Back Our Cities](#).

This is the first of what will be a series of regular columns on [www.letstoc.ca](http://www.letstoc.ca). My columns will look at issues ranging from the infrastructure crisis in Canada and how municipalities function, to how we can improve the structure and relationships between the six levels of government in Canada.

My reputation as a blunt-spoken veteran of 13 years in public office, and four decades of interest in municipal government and national politics through my career in the media, provide a unique perspective. I will provide a clear-eyed look at key issues and opportunities. You may not always agree, and that's just fine. But, we do need to change the conversation and encourage dialogue in this country about how we can build stronger communities.

In my speeches and media interviews, which in the past month alone have literally stretched from Nanaimo, BC to Gander, NL, there is a consistent theme coming back to me—the current system isn't working and we need to change if our cities are to compete more effectively in the global economy.

With 80% of Canadians now living in an urban setting, how we build, rejuvenate, create, and grow our towns and cities is critical to our national prosperity. What goes on in our communities combines with natural resource extraction and the aqua and agricultural industries to generate most of Canada's wealth.

One of the hardest decisions for politicians of any government is to invest significant amounts of money for the future, knowing that they won't be getting any credit.

I was a very young man when I began my media career in the late 1960s as the city hall reporter for a radio station in Saskatoon, my home town. The Mayor of Saskatoon at that time was Sid Buckwold, a brilliant man who would go on to a distinguished career as a Senator. Mayor Buckwold and the Council of the day were smart enough to understand the benefits of land-banking (acquiring property for future growth and expansion) and the importance of long-range planning. They were doing future planning for transportation systems, including new bridges across the South Saskatchewan river—such as the one being completed now—that will provide better access for Pacific Rim markets.

It was a lesson that impressed me. When I return to Saskatoon and see the subdivisions and the Circle Drive route and remember those courageous decisions decades ago, it confirms the value of long-range planning. Perhaps these are some of the reasons why Saskatoon is one of the fastest growing cities in Canada, with a booming economy and a very high quality of life.

A real problem today is that more and more, politicians from all orders of government are just too focused on the short-term. It takes real political courage to invest in a ten or twenty year strategy to upgrade sewer pipes, for example, and to pass a long-term bylaw setting water and sewer rates that will provide sustainable financing. The reality is that homeowners—taxpayers and voters—just don't think about their sewer pipes. That is, of course, until the day comes when they can't flush.

There is a natural reluctance by home owners to resist paying for things they can't see, and pipes buried deep in the ground are hardly a good opening gambit for cocktail party conversation at the neighbourhood barbeque.

This is where local politicians need to show leadership and show courage. It's very easy to slice the underground repair budget in a tight fiscal year, or delay replacing and improving water and sewer lines. But, the value and importance of such infrastructure cannot be underestimated.

Municipalities are responsible for more than half the infrastructure across Canada, and the gap in funding that deficit is growing every day. It's a national crisis that is being ignored by too many politicians.

We need to have this national debate, and we need to push our political leaders to better understand the need and value of long-range planning, investments, and infrastructure commitments. The value of this strategic thinking and planning will pay off in better, stronger, and more prosperous towns and cities.

Leadership takes courage. We need to expect and demand more from those seeking public office, and we should reward long-term thinking instead of the knee-jerk, short-term shouting about the issues of the day.

That's what the Council in Saskatoon showed in the 1960s. And, the people of that city are benefiting today from those investments and their foresight and commitment.

I got to know Sid Buckwold very well. We became great friends. The early lessons he taught me about municipal government and the value of public service have helped to guide my own career in public office. Today, there is a major bridge in downtown Saskatoon that was re-named to honour Senator Buckwold following his death in 2001.

It's a fitting tribute to a man who showed the kind of political courage, foresight, and strength that Canada's communities desperately need today.

Email Gord at [gord@gordhume.com](mailto:gord@gordhume.com), or visit [www.gordhume.ca](http://www.gordhume.ca).

*Casey G. Vander Ploeg Says:*

[May 10th, 2012 at 11:42 am](#)

I've often thought about how politicians and public decision-makers often prefer the "short-term" over the long-term." I'm sure it's not the case on each issue they face or every decision they make, but oftentimes that certainly seems to be the case. Why is this? Well, a focus on the "short-term" better helps re-election prospects. But, it does nothing for the legacy of a leader. When I review lists of the most "famous" or "the best" leaders (according to historians and even public opinion polls) the list is always dominated by those with a long-term vision. Construction of the CPR cemented John A. MacDonald's legacy, and the opening of the West did the same for Wilfrid Laurier. These PMs were nation-builders. Leaders like Allen Blakeney and Peter Lougheed were province-builders. They too have legacies. This type of politician is just very rare these days. We need more of them.