

Northern Canada and emerging prosperity

Whitehorse, Yukon's mayor Bev Buckway is a smart and passionate proponent of her city and of northern Canada.

When I interviewed her at the recent FCM conference in Saskatoon, she spoke confidently about the opportunities, the misconceptions most Canadians have about life in the north, and the enjoyment the 300,000 visitors a year—most of whom arrive through Whitehorse—find upon arrival.

Whitehorse is a thriving city of 27,000 that offers all the modern amenities and conveniences, as well as the pristine wilderness that attracts many. The city has been the transportation hub of the Yukon since gold was discovered in 1896, and that continues today with an international airport and the Alaska Highway.

Mayor Buckway has done extensive work in developing a strong relationship with native groups and local government. "In Yukon we have four orders of government," she told me. "First Nations have a number of settled land claims. The four orders of government will get together for ceremonial events, but we never get together to talk issues and business." Part of the problem is the varied election cycles for the various orders and the learning curve after. It is frustrating for local officials.

The territorial government in Yukon treats its municipalities in a unique way by taking on responsibility for policing, providing a comprehensive municipal grant (which provides significant funding for municipalities), servicing of land for new subdivisions, libraries and social services.

Land planning, recreation services, services to property, water and sewer, fire, finance, human resources, IT and other departments are amongst the primary responsibilities of municipalities in the Yukon.

"After many years of whining and crying about all the things that weren't working for our municipalities, we've come up with "Our Towns, Our Future" which is a document that defines the relationship with the territory and its municipalities," Mayor Buckway told me. This includes looking at the current funding agreement and studies are on-going at this moment.

Federal funding comes through the Gas Tax, as well as occasional capital or infrastructure projects and funds. The mayor makes the point that very small communities simply don't have the capacity or funding base, and the short construction season in the north means a competitive environment for construction projects.

“The biggest challenge is getting people to understand our sustainability plan,” she replied to my question about issues facing Whitehorse. The city is on the leading edge of many initiatives and offers a contemporary composting system, demands higher insulation levels for homes, and other leading steps. There is a concern about the supply of electricity as the city expands rapidly.

Concerns about increasing density for housing is provoking local debate, as are building connector roads and the construction of high-rise buildings. Housing construction is another issue and the city is doing some innovative planning to encourage denser development.

Tourism is a major industry and spire of the local economy, along with mining (gold, lead, zinc and copper) is on the upswing again. There are a substantial number of employees to handle the four orders of government. There are a growing number of people involved in the CRINK Economy (Creative, Innovative, Knowledge-based). People are attracted by the beauty of the area, the lifestyle, the sense of community and the opportunity. There is an effort to upgrade the local college to become Canada’s first northern university.

Whitehorse offers an urban environment, friendly people, interesting local culture and lots of great local food ranging from salmon to arctic char to game meat. When I questioned Bev about food costs, she surprised me by indicating that prices were comparable to other centres, and the city gets fresh food deliveries throughout the winter.

There are lots of benefits for local residents. There are no health care premiums. Students graduating from high school get substantial grants to encourage them to attend university. There are wonderful recreational facilities, and an expanding cultural base and opportunities.

More people are choosing to retire in Whitehorse. “The life style is good,” the mayor states firmly, “people love the opportunity and the community spirit.”

Canadians living in the regions closer to the 49th parallel sometimes tend to forget that northern communities in Canada offer a vibrant, exciting and active life for their residents. Mayor Bev Buckway is an articulate and passionate promoter of her city and the northern lifestyle, and of the economic, social and cultural opportunities that are emerging.