

Regional plans killing growth: Rigney

Wants MGA changed to prevent "feudal" regional planning

By: Kevin Ma – February 7, 2013

Government planning is a “feudal anachronism” that will kill economic development in Sturgeon County, says the county’s mayor.

Mayor Don Rigney called for the elimination of government planning under the Municipal Government Act during his annual Mayor’s Address Thursday morning. About 100 people gathered at the Morinville Community Cultural Centre to hear him speak.

When Agrium’s fertilizer plant was on the verge of shutting down 10 years ago, Rigney said, the county took steps to diversify by drawing more industry to its borders. “I never realized it would be this long and this difficult.”

Today, Agrium is still going strong, and has been joined by other big names such as Williams Energy, Access Pipeline and North West Upgrading. “The state of Sturgeon right now is very, very promising,” he said, with the North West upgrader set to bring wealth and prosperity to the entire region.

And this was in spite of provincial laws, he argued. “I think we need some significant changes to the MGA,” he said.

The province needs more development like that which is happening in Sturgeon County if it is to get through its current fiscal crunch, Rigney said. “We need more of this type of emphasis (on development) and this type of activity within communities, and I don’t think it’s possible under the MGA.”

The specific problem was regional planning, he explained in an interview, which he argued discourages councils from emphasizing business development.

“Whenever you have central planning or regional planning ... housing prices rise four to 14 per cent a year,” he said, citing research by groups such as the Cato Institute, a libertarian think-tank, compared to one to three without it.

“No wonder our costs have gone through the roof and all these upgraders have decided to go south,” he said. “We can’t bring in the labour or build them competitively.”

Regional planning under the Capital Region Board has brought growth to a standstill, Rigney argued. “We’re going to kill the region with this.”

Public planning is a “feudal anachronism” that should be eliminated from the MGA, Rigney said.

“The best planning in the world is done by competitive forces,” he said, and the province experienced its greatest growth from 1996 to 2003 when it eliminated regional growth plans.

“Amend the MGA so that there’s no planning by the public authority,” he said, “regional or municipal.” He also suggested allowing mayors to also serve as chief administrative officers. “We have to put more power back into council’s hands.” He hoped the province’s current fiscal troubles would push it to make these changes.

Rigney has been making these pro-free-market arguments for 10 years, said St. Albert Mayor Nolan Crouse, and he’s entitled to his opinions. “His ideology is about no planning,” he said, yet the county does extensive planning within its own borders.

“I do not think the Act is going to change to take away planning and make it a free-for-all in Alberta,” he said. Planning gives landowners the certainty they need to make investments, he said, and without it, you get dysfunctional road and sewer systems and shortages of affordable housing.