

COVER Red Deer poised to vote on an audacious plan to create the first inner-city canal system in Western Canada

Wow factor

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For almost two years, two certainties have remained constant with **Ken Mandrusiak**.

The first is that it's Red Deer's time to compete with the big boys in Calgary and Edmonton for a slice of Alberta's growing tourism industry pie.

The second is that the city of nearly 87,000 needs a "Big Wow," a magnet for provincial, national and international tourists every bit as enticing as the Calgary Stampede and the West Edmonton Mall.

"It has to have that 'wow' factor, and Red Deer has a golden opportunity that may never come again to do just that," said Mandrusiak, a longtime respected businessman and hotel owner in the city that is about halfway between Calgary and Edmonton.

In late 2006, Mandrusiak was tasked to chair a **Red Deer Chamber of Commerce** tourism committee to look at what Red Deer needed to do to become a significant player in Alberta's \$5 billion tourism industry, the fourth largest in the country. Although Red Deer tourism officials say exact economic figures for their region are not available, they estimate the region currently generates "hundreds of millions" of dollars from tourism.

Strong economy

The economic climate in Red Deer has been one of the best in Canada for several years, and the business community feels it is an opportune time to think big and outside the box.

Even with today's uncertainties with the entire North American economy, the Central Alberta city appears almost insulated against the recent financial tumult in the United States and the accompanying slowdown in many other parts of Canada.

In 2006, the unemployment rate in Red Deer was officially recorded at 3.8 per cent, well below the national level of 6.3 per cent.

While residential construction tailed off for the first eight months of 2008 following unprecedented booms in 2006 and 2007, the market began to rebound in September. And while residential construction may have been



ABOVE RIGHT: Plan for Red Deer's "Big Wow" in the city's Riverland's district along the Red Deer River. If approved, the area will feature canals, waterfront real estate, and a spectacular public centre. **LEFT:** Visionary businessman Ken Mandrusiak: "Red Deer has a golden opportunity that may never come again."

down earlier this year, the commercial sector through the end of September was almost 25 per cent ahead of the pace recorded in 2007.

The real estate market had banner years in 2006 and 2007, and despite slowdowns in both Calgary and Edmonton in 2008, Red Deer continued its brisk pace this year.

There were 1,217 single-family homes sold in Red Deer from January 1, 2007, to the end of September. For the same period in 2008, there were 1,197 single-family homes sold.

Meanwhile, renters are now finding Red Deer more desirable than it was a year ago. The vacancy rate in September was 2.9 per cent, which offers tenants reasonable choices for short- to mid-term rental accommodation.

No one can predict how the economy will go as 2009 draws closer, but key players in Red Deer say the city is ready to take a great leap of faith that could bring in once unimaginable tourism prosperity.

With help from a consulting group, Mandrusiak's tourism committee looked at several options, including amusement park concepts, a museum based on the province's vaunted tarsands industry and even a "bubble-city concept" that would offer tourists perfect climate 365 days a year.

And while the committee entertained all ideas, there was one that refused to leave the table.

Committee member **Jack Donald**, president and CEO of **Parkland Properties Ltd.**, and chairman emeritus of the board of directors of **Parkland Industries Ltd.**, noted the city was about to free up 27 acres of land alongside the Red Deer River in the Riverlands district near the downtown core.

He also knew the city had envisioned development of the Riverlands since the release of the 2000 Greater Downtown Action Plan.

Inspiration

While driving along Taylor Drive in the city's south end, Donald gazed at Waskasoo Creek,



which flows near the Riverlands district and into the Red Deer River.

A moment of inspiration came: Why not use water as a theme for the Big Wow? Donald then thought of other cities that had done the same, notably San Antonio, Texas, with its world-famous River Walk. It was then the idea of having a Big Wow tourist attraction that featured a canal system in a traditionally dry western Canadian Prairie city was born.

The committee seized upon Donald's idea and launched the concept to the public 14 months ago.

At first, there was a smattering of snickers, along with strong opposition from the environmental community that did not want any water drawn from the Red Deer River nor risky intrusions on Waskasoo Creek's fragile ecosystem. There was also significant public anxiety about how much Donald's utopian idea was going to cost. On city council there was loud opposition to the grand plan from some members who argued the city had more pressing priorities.

But Mandrusiak and Donald, both longtime influential players in the community, were convinced the plan had the potential to put Red Deer on the national stage when it came

to tourism. They put their feet to the pavement and went to every community group in the city to sell their vision.

Mayor onsite

Red Deer Mayor **Morris Flewwelling**, who stated after his 2007 civic election victory that redevelopment of the Riverlands was his number 1 priority, convinced council members to invest \$100,000 to study the canal concept.

The city also reconvened its Greater Downtown Action Plan committee to update plans for the entire downtown area, including the Riverlands.


Last June, the city hosted Greater Downtown Planning Week, a four-day public open house event that featured world-renowned urban planner **Michael von Hausen** and his team of Surrey, B.C., associates. On the last day of the week-long event, von Hausen unveiled a bold plan for the entire downtown core, including the Riverlands.

Astonished citizens saw a vision that not only incorporated a waterway or canal system, but one featuring a waterfront promenade, bridge crossings over the Red Deer River, public market spaces, commercial and residential development, ideas for five-star hotels and a convention centre, and a spectacular four-season centrepiece facility called the Ark, a 60,000-square-foot glass structure beside a 65-metre observation tower that is envisioned as a focal public meeting place.

Von Hausen also introduced a plan that appeased environmental concerns – no water would be drawn from the Red Deer River. Instead, the water used for the canals would come from a novel storm water collection system.

There was a dramatic change in public opinion. Suddenly everyone was on board. Even once cynical senior city hall officials were singing the praises for the Big Wow, and further promising the big price tag for the project would be mitigated by the sale of lots from the city-owned 27 acres of Riverlands property.

Quick facts



Red Deer, AB

Population 86,600

Average house price \$346,400,

Residential vacancy rate 2.3 per cent

Unemployment rate 3.8 per cent

Major employers Construction, government, oil and gas industry, agriculture

Vote coming

The city hosted another public house in October, and the proposed Big Wow plan is scheduled to go before city council next month for ratification.

If passed, construction on Red Deer's Big Wow could begin in 2010.

Mandrusiak admits he is "pumped" about the project's promising future. However, there is one thing he and the rest of the supporters vow to not let happen – any attempt to remove the "wow" factor.

"We just have to keep this thing at a level where it doesn't get watered down. We have to remain part of the process," said Mandrusiak, who wants to see an independent governance board model created to manage the revitalized district. "The city is going to drive this process now, but our concern is that they don't take what we came up with and water it down to the point where it is just going to be like another redevelopment in another downtown in some city in Canada." ♦

