

Calgary's next decade: dust will still fly over skyline

By Jason Markusoff, Calgary Herald

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CALGARY - A zoologist scanning Calgary's last decade would have observed that its dominant bird was the downtown crane, the animal king was a fat-wheeled, shovel-nosed Bobcat, and the common plumage was construction-hat yellow.

The recession may have spooked these mechanized creatures that moved earth and steel during Calgary's construction spree, but don't expect them to scurry away.

Some projects have been cancelled or stalled during the post-boom hangover -- a Beltline condo tower here, a tenant-less office skyscraper there. And the race to get projects approved has halted as developers focus on completing things like The Bow skyscraper, hope the vacancy rates don't swell further because of them, and wait for the economy to regain steam.

The bygone decade didn't just prove a lot can change in Calgary in 10 years, but in a year or two. Oil and natural gas prices soar, dive and soar again.

If the downtown office vacancy rate can go from nearly zero to 13 per cent in about 2 1/2 years, who's to say things should take so long to boomerang back, says veteran development watcher Calvin Buss.

Buss's real-estate consultancy Buss Marketing has illustrated how the city's skyline would look in 2015, with additions like the 58-storey Bow, to an angular First Canadian Centre 2 rumoured at 7th Avenue and 3rd Street S.W. He also publishes a map of 100 projects in the city's core in various stages of development (or limbo).

"When you look at what kind of city this is and where we're going in the next 10 years, I firmly believe it will all get built," Buss said.

"Maybe 25 per cent will disappear because they can't hold land, but sell it and someone else will build something the same or very similar."

He's especially bullish on what could become the darling of the city's 2010s: East Village, the city hall-supported renewal bid that's expected to be the stylish, pedestrian-friendly home to 11,500 people by 2020.

An increasing slab of Calgary's population growth will happen within the city, rather than its outskirts, with two more communities planned on the former Currie military base, one on a former southeast gravel pit, and some highrise developments around LRT stations. City hall has spent the past several years promoting such developments, through its long-range Plan It blueprint and other policies designed to slow the city's outward sprawl.

"The ship, in some ways, is launched for the next decade and there's some pretty significant things that are going to happen that will change how the city looks and feels in the next 10 years," said David Watson, the city's general manager of planning, development and assessment.

But that suburban footprint will also keep growing, with dozens of new communities still unfinished or ready to be started.

"That's the mindset of Calgarians. That's what they want: a piece of grass and a garage," said Mike Flynn of the Urban Development Communities.

But the look and feel of suburbs is changing, too. The newer the outskirts community, the denser it will be, with more condos and townhouses amid the stand-alone houses. Some in the deep south and north of Calgary are even proposing highrises or mid-rises built around future LRT extensions.

"The catchphrase is complete communities," Flynn said. "Every community is a kind of city unto itself."

The difficulty in getting around the 2019 city of a projected 1.25 million may depend on how you get around and where you're going. The west LRT will be complete by 2012, and Watson said the first phase of the southeast leg is possible by decade's end -- as is a downtown train tunnel.

The southeast quarter of the ring road is another early-decade certainty, but few are willing to wager on what happens to the southwest portion that's in search of a clear route.

This decade, Alberta also gets a new Ralph Klein Park, a year-round retail district on the Stampede grounds, new ice rinks at Canada Olympic Park, a revitalized Bow River pathway from Fort Calgary possibly to Crowchild Trail, the new Telus World of Science, and a penguin exhibit at the zoo.

Dave Bronconnier became mayor near last decade's start,

12 Weaselhead — Once a former artillery range, now beloved parkland, possible new site for bridge or tunnel as part of southwest ring road.

5 Westbrook Station: A dense "urban village" — like future Brentwood Station — slated overtop of city's first active underground train station, along west LRT line.

3 East Calgary Greenway: Parks Foundation Calgary will open east-end regional pathway from 17th Avenue S.E. to McKnight Boulevard next year, the start of a cycling trail that will eventually wrap around the entire city.

7 East Village — much-anticipated renewal project hoped to bring vibrancy, 11,500 residents to former no man's land.

6 Currie Barracks and Garrison Green — rest of former military base becomes new-generation inner-city suburb, a la Garrison Woods.

11 South Calgary Hospital — 15 years after the province demolished Calgary General, first new full-service hospital opens to serve southeast quadrant. Major urban development planned around it.

1 Brentwood Station: Mid-rises and highrises, offices, condos and pedestrian-friendly shopping to replace traditional strip mall and parking lots near LRT station, part of city's push toward transit-oriented development that will include other stations.

2 Airport runway: Massive new landing and takeoff strip projected to open in 2015. Will force closure of the Barlow Trail access in mid-2011, and potentially feature underground Airport Trail link underneath it.

4 West LRT: Largest system extension since 1980s opens in 2012, linking downtown to 69th Street and 17th Avenue S.W.

8 Stampede Trail: Three blocks of retail and restaurants to lure visitors to Stampede grounds year-round, even during Flames' away games.

9 Quarry Park: Former gravel-pit site already hosts office buildings and retail plaza. About 2,000 homes are planned as well, and possibly by late decade the first phase terminus of the southeast LRT.

10 Southeast Ring Road: Stoney Trail complete to Deerfoot by 2013; completion date for the rest still up in air, as is the route.

Photos: graphic, Calgary Herald

promising to build up Calgary, and will ask voters this fall for three more years. He's now pondering ways to ease the boom-bust cycle that has left lanes blocked off on every corner and a few uncertain holes in the ground.

"How do you stop that? Well, you never do, because there's always

speculation in real estate and it's always been there as long as you have freehold interest," he said.

"At the end of the day, it's how do you make sure you've got a marketplace that's still healthy, so you don't have that cycle all the time. If I had that answer, boy ..."