

Mayors must look through perimeter

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Go stand at the corner of Portage and Main and look in either direction.

If you were new to Winnipeg and stood at that famous corner, one of the first things you may notice is that the streets are very wide. And when you look down Main Street north you would see buildings dating back to the 1900s. It would suddenly occur to you that urban planners started laying foundations for those buildings and growth when the roads were already the equivalent of eight lanes wide.

Someone in the 1900s was already planning for Winnipeg to be one million people. As the Free Press series [City Beautiful](#) that began last Saturday points out, city planners were looking ahead to what our future would look like in 1914. Today's question is: Who are those infrastructure visionaries who can look at Winnipeg today and develop a map for our future that ensures the city can continue to grow and prosper not alone, but with its neighbours?

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If our urban developer from the past were to cast an eye on Winnipeg today, what advice would be given to our aspiring candidates to the office of mayor or council?

Standing at Portage and Main in 2014, it becomes clear thousands of people who live outside the Perimeter Highway drive to Winnipeg every day. During lunch, the Stonewall and Selkirk homeowners who work in Winnipeg take a break from their jobs to eat in Winnipeg restaurants or work out in Winnipeg yoga studios.

On their way back home at the end of the day, they buy groceries, shop for kitchen appliances or swing into their favourite bookstore before leaving the capital city. When they get home, they may phone back to a Winnipeg hotel to book a night's accommodation for after a Jets game or concert.

Our urban planner can't tell exactly how much those Stonewall and Selkirk homeowners have used the roads or paid back into the local economy because, frankly, no one in this century has done the math.

What is known is that Winnipeg and the 16 municipalities that border it make up only 1.2 per cent of Manitoba's land mass, but two-thirds of the province's population. The 1996 population of the region was 706,000. By the last census in 2011, it was 767,380 representing 63.5 per cent of the province. The area also accounts for 70 per cent of all the goods and services produced in Manitoba. So it's likely our visionary urban planner would look beyond Winnipeg's borders and would be thinking not just how the capital city could prosper, but the entire capital region.

It is encouraging to see some small signs of regional co-operation. For example, CentrePort Canada, which comprises 8,000 hectares straddling northwest Winnipeg and the RM of Rosser, has leveraged a service-sharing agreement between Winnipeg and the RM of Rosser to extend wastewater service and an undertaking by Manitoba to expand water distribution. Each will benefit the economic jewel that CentrePort will be, but will also cost effectively extend these critical and basic infrastructure services to six other municipalities and future businesses and homeowners.

But it's also likely our urban planner would be dismayed to learn there is yet no co-ordinated regional economic growth or transportation investment strategy to help link the region and its communities into an effective economic business development zone benefiting all.

If projections hold true that Winnipeg and the region around it will grow by 28 per cent by 2030, a co-ordinated regional plan -- both economic and transportation -- needs to be put in place that has the kind of big-picture vision our 1900s city planner had when in anticipation that the dirt-rutted Portage and Main would one day need to hold a whole lot more traffic from far and wide.

On Oct. 22, voters in 17 cities, towns and rural municipalities will elect mayors, reeves and councillors to fill offices in the capital region. While many candidates may think they are running to serve their immediate constituents, in fact they are on the cusp of dramatic change in the way we all connect and serve each other.

Hopefully, among them are leaders with the same vision demonstrated by our urban developer from the past.

Hopefully, many of them will recognize careful planning of our regional infrastructure is their collective responsibility.

So, residents in the cities of Winnipeg and Selkirk, the town of Stonewall and the rural municipalities of St. Clements, Macdonald, St. Andrews, Rosser, Rockwood, Taché, West St. Paul, East St. Paul, Springfield, St. François Xavier, Ritchot, Headingley, Brokenhead and Cartier -- that collectively make up the capital region -- should be asking their respective candidates to bring a big picture view to how they will co-ordinate sustainable economic growth and invest in our infrastructure for the benefit of all.

In a global economy, it is no longer individual cities but regions that must compete for investment and plan for sustainable growth. This capital region isn't just where we live, but where we work, plan, develop and compete internationally -- together -- looking through the perimeter.

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