

Fort McMurray Chamber of Commerce
September 25, 2012, Fort McMurray, Alberta
Honourable Dave Hancock

Thank you for that introduction.

When I hear the number of cabinet portfolios I have held, I can't help but think that maybe people wonder if I can keep a job. (Pause)

Sometime I suspect that giving me different cabinet roles is just a plot to get me to retire because I have been the Minister of Everything. (Pause)

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to talk with you.

I always enjoy coming to Wood Buffalo and visiting the "hamlet" of Fort McMurray.

I have to say that you've got quite the "hamlet" here.

I am a fan of communities with big spirit, big ideas and big plans.

I chose to come here to speak because I believe Fort McMurray is a microcosm of the challenges we face in the province as a whole.

I also believe that many of the things you are doing here can act as a model for all of Alberta.

One thing that I know you understand very well is the role an engaged and strong community will play in your future success.

I commend you for the partnership role business has played in meeting the needs of your community through initiatives such as *Up Skill Athabasca* and *Social Prosperity Wood Buffalo*.

Several years ago I was talking with some business people about the challenges they faced in attracting the best talent to their city and what made the difference as to whether the people they attracted stayed there.

They told me that their success in recruiting had little to do with low taxes or even salary levels.

What really worked was when potential employees actually wanted to live in a community.

It was far easier to attract people when people perceived a community as being safe, having a good education system, a healthy environment and a great quality of life.

As one of them said to me, “We need to be a place where the CEO’s spouse wants to live.”

So what makes a community the kind of place we want our children and grandchildren to live in?

What is it that people look for in a community?

One thing I know for sure is that people want to live in a place that has the services they or their families need.

Those services go beyond the most obvious ones related to health, education and transportation.

So let’s look at how community-based and community-drive social services affect worker retention.

Imagine that you have just moved to Fort McMurray and are settling into your new job.

An examination by your one-year-old’s doctor appears to indicate that your little one may be developmentally delayed and could be autistic.

As you may know, one in 88 children is diagnosed with autism.

Statistically, that means 13 of the 1,198 babies born in Fort McMurray last year could be autistic.

What will you do if you find out that the services your child is likely to need to even have a chance at success in life aren’t available in Fort McMurray?

Will you stay here and hope everything works out for the best?

Or will you start looking for a job in a place where you can access the services your child needs?

That's just one way community-based social services can affect your business.

So what other kinds of things would make someone want to move to Wood Buffalo and stay here?

Before that question can be answered, we must look at what we mean by community.

Communities are much more than a collection of businesses and homes in a defined area.

Communities exist because people recognize that a community can do collectively what no one group or individual can do alone.

Communities are about people with shared values.

Our education system is a good example of what I mean.

It is important for your child to receive a good education because we see education as a key to future success.

However, we recognize that it is important that every child to receive a good education.

If your child becomes a doctor, he or she will have to rely on the education, skills and experience of others to help him or her succeed.

That's true for all of us.

And that's why we have a social policy that mandates universal education.

A modern society cannot survive and thrive when only some people have access to education.

As business people, you expect your employees to come to work with the essential skills you need them to have and that is why we have the kind of education system we do.

And that is why Human Services is a partner in the *Upskill Athabasca* initiative. I believe all of us want to live in a community that is safe, with a good education system, a place with clean air and water.

That is why sustainability in all its forms is part of Fort McMurray's vision for the future.

But let's look a little closer at how we can make our communities safe.

The Dave Rutherford approach is to maintain if we jail all the bad guys we will have safer communities.

As a former Minister of Justice, I can tell you that would not be the case.

Though I think bad guys should go to jail, I don't think that people with social problems for which there is a community solution should go to jail.

Incarceration of those with social issues cannot become one of Alberta's growth industries.

Let me give you an example of why the *lock-em-all-up* approach doesn't work.

If there is an aggressive panhandler outside your business who is accosting people, he is likely to drive away your customers.

The standard approach would be to call the police and have him removed and perhaps put in a cell. What would that achieve?

The panhandler is likely there for a number of reasons – he may have psychological problems - he may be homeless – he may have developmental problems – he may have addiction issues, he may be one of results of untreated Fetal Alcohol Syndrome.

Incarceration is an expensive process and does nothing to address the underlying issues that put a pan handler at your door in the first place.

As a result, that person is likely to be back at your front door a few days later and the process will begin again. This is borne out by recent comments by Edmonton's Police Chief, Rod Knecht

He states that police can deal with the kind of person I just described as many as 150 times in a single year and each occurrence can involve close to two hours an officer's time.

That amount to 260 hours dealing with one person with social issues.

Those are 260 hours that the police are not dealing with the real bad guys we really want protection from.

Until we effectively address the underlying issues, we will be trapped in an endless and expensive loop.

Growing up in a small community taught me that if there is something the community needs, its citizens have an obligation to help meet that need.

Communities are safe when engaged citizens work together to make it safe.

Government can be a partner in that process.

It cannot and should not be the driver.

So if we all want safe healthy communities, what are the barriers to achieving that goal?

When people do not feel a part of the community - who do not have a stake in its future - it can create an environment that can foster bad behaviour.

I know that you clearly recognize that available, affordable housing is key to strengthening community.

Without that in place, people who would consider living here will continue to see McMurray as their workplace and not their home and remain unconnected to community.

Those kinds of stressors in the community affect your bottom line.

Many of the people who come here do not have any family support network.

That means that challenges that would normally be handled within a family setting are often unaddressed.

The heavy equipment operator who cannot find needed social services is not going to be fully productive and may be distracted to such a point that she is a danger to herself and others.

The single parent who cannot find day care is not going to be focussed on his work.

The newcomer who has language and cultural challenges will need to have those addressed if he or she is to be a fully productive member of the workforce.

As it states in Wood Buffalo's Strategic Plan, your challenge is to deliver inclusive programs, services and opportunities throughout the region that connect with your diverse and multicultural population.

Alberta Human Services is responsible for enabling communities to provide a wide range of supports and services.

These include everything from worker safety and employment standards - support and services for children – supports and services for those facing physical and intellectual challenges - and help for those who are trying to escape domestic violence. (Pause)

Our goal in Wood Buffalo is to help you achieve your vision of “a balanced future and opportunity for all.”

Right now, many Albertans are involved in creating a new Social Policy Framework for Alberta.

This framework is meant to be owned by Alberta's communities.

It will enable them to see the services that are available and where they fit into meeting the needs of community members.

The end result of this exercise will be to enable communities to determine if they are providing the right services at the right time and in the right place.

It will also enable communities to determine if the supports and services they provide are producing the outcomes they need and want.

For example, do job training services actually result in more people being able to find jobs?

The Social Policy Framework initiative is part of Premier Redford's commitment to results-based budgeting.

It signals a change from a focus on inputs to a focus on outcomes.

It has been 30 years since we as a province asked ourselves what our responsibilities to each other are.

Alberta has changed a great deal during those three decades and it is important that what we do today in the area of social services accurately reflects today's realities.

We need to get beyond the way we have done things in the past and determine who is best able to do what.

And we need to be able to demonstrate to Albertans that social services aren't a cost, but an investment in Albertans that pays real and measurable dividends.

Fifteen years ago, I entered public life with the belief that I could make a real difference to the quality of life for all Albertans.

I now find myself in a ministry which through collaboration with communities has the ability to do just that.

But to achieve that goal, we need you as business people and community leaders to be on board.

We need you to be engaged in the process.

We need your expertise and experience.

This is especially true in the areas of job training, work readiness, and the employment of individuals who are all too often excluded from the workforce.

We need you to help us ensure all Albertans have the opportunity to become productive and engaged citizens to the best of their abilities.

For the past few months we have been consulting with Albertans about the future of social services in the province. We have had a number of community discussions here in Fort McMurray.

Unfortunately, business has not been as engaged in the process as it could - and must be - if we are to succeed in providing the services needed in the most cost effective manner.

Phase II of the development of a Social Policy will begin soon and I want you at the table.

Your community's social services are your business.

Your ability to be successful and productive and to live in a community of choice depends on those services.

We have been circulating a sheet that asks for your email addresses and your phone number.

Those of you who are willing to commit to helping create a better future for Alberta will be receiving an email asking your business for input into the Social Policy Framework.

Your input is vital to the success of this process.

Let's work together on it.

It will be good for business.

Thank you.