

Calgary feeling good, despite the bust

BY JAMIE KOMARNICKI, CALGARY HERALD OCTOBER 6, 2009



The troubled economy and surging unemployment haven't dampened Calgarians' views of their city, according to the Calgary Foundation's latest report card.

Photograph by: Dean Bicknell, Calgary Herald

CALGARY - The troubled economy and surging unemployment haven't dampened Calgarians' views of their city, according to the Calgary Foundation's latest report card.

Its Vital Signs survey, released today, paints a rosier picture of the city than years past, with higher grades in seven of the 12 key categories reported. None of the scores dropped from last year.

In a year when economic woes have dominated headlines, the findings are an interesting reflection of the community, said Kerry Longpre of the Calgary Foundation, which helps identify and address needs in the city.

"Calgarians are optimistic. At the same time, when we look at the comments of what's working, what's not, they have deep concerns in some key areas," she said.

The survey, which collects public opinion on about 50 indicators, saw a series of Bs and Cs, but still no As.

Calgarians singled out a number of areas of particular pride, including the new curbside recycling program, the city's pathway system and the multi-agency 10-year plan to end homelessness.

The lowest grade given -- C -- is better than other years.

In 2007, for example, citizens gave the city a D-in housing. This year, the score was C.

Housing costs, health care and public transportation were top concerns, according to the survey.

Naheed Nenshi, of the Better Calgary Campaign, said the economic swing from boom time to tough times has had a striking effect on "conversation in the city," pushing social issues to the fore. People are taking a more holistic view of prominent social issues, he said.

"It's not that we didn't have these problems before," said Nenshi.

"People are certainly talking more about them now, whether they feel closer to them or at risk personally of falling into those situations.

"Slowly the city is starting to think of itself as a big city, and the economic slowdown has helped move the conversation forward."

According to University of Calgary economics professor Frank Atkins, not all Calgarians are full of goodwill toward the city.

City hall, especially, has come into the crosshairs of citizens anxious over the economy, he said. Fury over city council spending reached a "tipping point" with the \$24.5-million Peace Bridge designed by famed Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava, said Atkins.

"He (Mayor Dave Bronconnier) was spending a lot of money going into a downturn, then we get the bridge. It seemed like the tipping point," Atkins said. "People were starting to get angry."

According to the Vital Signs survey, several issues have gained prominence recently.

In terms of safety, the response jumped from a C-to a B-, indicating that Calgary's low violent crime rate and increased number of police officers patrolling the streets have altered people's perceptions, Longpre said.

However, even though people appear to feel safer on the streets, safety inside the home became a concern. The findings indicate domestic violence is becoming a growing problem as economic stresses put pressure on holding onto jobs and houses.

"In one way we feel safer on the streets, but many people in their homes are victims of violence," said Longpre.

Overall, the city earned four B's, five B-'s, and three C's. The study is based on public consultation and an online and telephone survey by about 1,700 Calgarians. This year, the report added the random phone survey to bolster the online results.

Each year, the number of participants in the study continues to swell, Longpre said.

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