

REGIONAL ROUNDUP Airdrie roars out of Calgary's shadow as a top business and job destination in power corridor

Moving to Airdrie

ALEX FRAZER-HARRISON

WESTERN INVESTOR

A quiet bedroom community no more, the bustling city of Airdrie, Alberta, has managed to keep its identity and maintain a thriving business and residential market, despite being in Calgary's giant shadow.

With a population roaring past 27,000, Airdrie continues to see rapid expansion in its industrial and residential development, and Mayor **Linda Bruce** freely admits that her city has Calgary's explosive growth to thank for it.

"If we were to have this conversation in Cochrane or Okotoks, we could probably tell the same story – it's what's coming out of Calgary," she says. "We're not siloed little communities anymore; we're tied to a regional growth pattern. What Calgary experiences, the rest of the region will experience as well."

Bruce said that while Airdrie has managed to keep that small-town feel, which has been a selling point for homebuyers, the changes since she first moved there in 1990 have been remarkable.

"When I first moved here, there was not a single traffic light ... there were few four-way stop signs," she says. "There was a farm in the middle of town where there are homes now. It was a very small but vibrant little community, with a population less than half what we have now."

Growth woes

With growth comes challenges. Increased crime and labour shortages are issues that the sleepy bedroom community Bruce moved to 16 years ago rarely had to face.

"Many people are trying to find their way in this community and that's where you see that imbalance," said Bruce. "And that happens in Calgary, too. How do you make that connection to a new city?"

Several incidents of teen-related crime over the summer led to calls for the city to institute a curfew, an idea Bruce resists.

"At this point, we're saying we're not pre-



Phillip Hughes, CEO of Fortis Alberta: New Airdrie office will be the size of a football field.

pared to entertain a curfew," she says. "We'd like to look at some other opportunities. It has to be a community solution. It can't be just one tool that will solve this issue. Yes, we've had incidents at 3-4 a.m. but we've also had incidents during the day. A curfew would only affect a small demographic."

Possible solutions might include an anti-loitering bylaw, Bruce said.

Like most of Alberta, Airdrie has also suffers from a lack of labour, particularly in the service industry.

"We have had one of our fast-food dining rooms shut down in the evening and is drive-through only," said Bruce. "And we're seeing businesses that are closing an extra day of the week because they can't get staff to work."

The city also has to face the spectre of Calgary continuing to expand; it's currently negotiating with the Municipal District of Rocky View to expand its boundaries out as far as the hamlet of Balzac, only a couple of miles from Airdrie's southern boundary.

"It's one of those philosophical questions," said Bruce about the possibility of future annexation.

"[Calgary] Mayor **Dave Bronconnier's** phi-

losophy is 'unicity' and that means if he had his way, we could be annexed and rolled into the one big city. There's really no example in Alberta of a major city annexing another city. I don't know if the provincial government has an appetite for that."

Close ties

Airdrie relies on Calgary for water treatment,

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and its Catholic schools are part of the city's separate school system. Bruce said through the Calgary Regional Partnership initiative, Airdrie is able to work closely with Calgary and other nearby communities on issues of common concern, ranging from organic waste management to transportation issues.

FortisAlberta move

Meanwhile, industry continues to be attracted by what Airdrie has to offer.

FortisAlberta Inc., a regulated electrical distribution utility with more than 426,000 customers, is planning to relocate most of its service and office facilities to Airdrie.

"We have two buildings in Calgary, one we own and one we rent in the downtown core, and it made sense to get out of the rental market," said **Jennifer MacGowan**, manager of corporate communications.

"In Airdrie we'll continue to be close to Calgary and the major transportation corridor. The Airdrie office will accommodate about 280 employees, including operations, and we will have a 24-hour customer contact centre and other employees that support that."

Although design work is still underway, current plans call for a two-storey, 81,000-square-foot facility, roughly the size of a football field, with the option to add more floors in the future.

MacGowan said the move is expected to generate substantial economic spin-offs in Airdrie, as employees make use of local services and businesses, and some employees may even choose to move to the city.

"FortisAlberta is very pleased to be investing in the growing community of Airdrie," adds president and CEO **Philip Hughes**. "Building in Airdrie will allow us to be closer to our customers and house a large number of employees under one roof while still maintaining a head office presence in Calgary."

Industrial

FortisAlberta's new facility will be located in the Kingsview Business Centre, a major light industrial park now under development in south Airdrie adjacent to Highway 2.

Covering some 171 acres, the development has already attracted a long queue of interested businesses and industry, said Graeme Melton, assistant development manager, Calgary region, for **Melcor Developments**, which is working on the site alongside **Remington Development Corp.**

"It will be a high-end, light-industrial use area with a focus towards a wide variety of uses," he says. "We're getting a huge cross-section, every-

thing from office uses to automobile sales.

"We also have a major commercial site in the planning stage and we hope to start construction on that next year. We have had a ton of interest from retailers."

Melcor is also developing a nearby residential area called King's Heights, one of a half-dozen new residential communities currently underway in Airdrie.

"The major factor for people moving out there is that they can get the same product, and a desirable location, for less money than in Calgary," said Melton. "We just released our third residential phase in King's Heights – there are going to be apartment-style units, all the way up to big single family homes. In the end, including multi-family, there will be 2,000 units in the community." Other new residential developments include Cooper's Crossing, which sits on a hill overlooking the city's southside commercial area, and Bayside, with homes constructed along a network of manmade canals.

Mega mall

Just south of Airdrie, and just outside Calgary's proposed new city limits, **Ivanhoe Cambridge** is in the early stages of constructing a \$350 million, 1.1 million square foot mega mall project, the first new major indoor shopping centre the Calgary region has seen since the rise of the big box "power centre" in the 1990s.

"We like to describe it as a hybrid, combining the best attributes of an enclosed shopping centre, an outlet centre, a power centre, and an entertainment venue," said vice-president development **John Scott**. "We plan to have 19 anchor tenants ranging from 20,000 to 130,000 square feet, and approximately 180 smaller specialty stores."

The as-yet-unnamed mall, located at the junction of highways 2 and 566, will be next door to a planned horse racing track and entertainment centre built by the **United Horsemen of Alberta**.

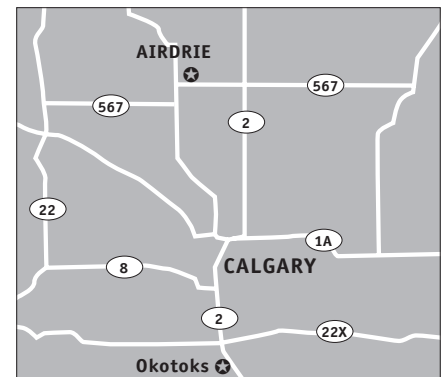
"We're working with them from the point of being neighbours and bringing complimentary developments together in creating a true landmark destination," said Scott, adding that Ivanhoe Cambridge and United Horsemen together control some 673 acres for development.

The mall is expected to open by the fall of 2008, and Scott said it is hoped the development will have a positive economic impact on Airdrie. "It's about creating additional density, and that really helps spur on other development."

Under the radar

With all this development going on, you'd think

Quick facts



Airdrie

Location 32 km from downtown Calgary
Population 27,000
Average family income \$91,362
Municipal tax rate 4.25 per cent
Residential building permit value
 (2005) \$120 million

Airdrie's name would be on everybody's lips. But the city remains one of Alberta's best kept secrets. This was underscored recently when the **Real Estate Investment Network** released its list of the top 10 Alberta investment communities.

Edmonton, Grande Prairie and Calgary took the top spots, but Airdrie failed to make the list, which mystified **Kent Rupert**, Economic Development Team Leader for the City of Airdrie.

"It caused a bit of a concern – our development committee was going, 'What the..?'" said Rupert. "Everyone is trying to figure out why Airdrie missed out. Based on economic indicators we blow away all of them."

Rupert points to a number of statistics. The city's 2005 Annual Economic Report, for example, shows Airdrie with a 32.8 per cent population change from 2001 to 2005, second only to Fort McMurray's 48.2 per cent and outstripping Calgary's 8.8 per cent change during the same period.

"We have \$114.5 million in investment announced or underway, and we had 140 acres of industrial land sell out in 10 months," said Rupert.

"Airdrie is Alberta's best-kept secret ... and our numbers speak for themselves. We have about 1,200 acres (of industrial land) coming on board and we know that will sell over the next 10 years. We're really proud of our community and what we have accomplished." ♦