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Wanted: municipal consensus

By **NEIL WAUGH**

Premier Ed Stelmach pulled another sticky note off the legislature fridge door last week in his scramble to complete his to-do list before the expected March election.

At the same time, he laid out his plan to bring "integrated growth management" to the Edmonton capital region's squabbling mayors and reeves.

The most pugilistic of all is Mayor Stephen Mandel who turned the recent civic election into a Campaign of Blame. He claimed Edmonton is getting short-changed by the provincial government and he cast an envious eye at the growing industrial tax base on Refinery Row and Upgrader Alley.

Stelmach and the Alberta Tories have been walking a fine political line, trying to keep Mandel happy (next to impossible, it appears) but not alienate the PCs' key support in the bedroom communities.

And the Tories are trying desperately to plan for as much as \$87 billion in development coming to the capital region over the next 15 years.

That number may be a little far-fetched. Nonetheless, the days of 25 individual municipal governments doing their own thing must come to an end.

It appears that the people are way ahead of the politicians on this obvious issue.

A recent Innovative Research Group poll shows an overwhelming 82% of Edmonton region residents back the creation of a regional council by the provincial government.

Of course, a council is easy. What it does is the hard part, especially when it comes to the touchy subject of taxes.

In the poll, the response was positive when people were asked how they felt about "having the cost of major regional infrastructure shared across all municipalities."

In Edmonton, a solid 81% of those surveyed agreed with the idea, while 73% of regional respondents agreed.

Before Mandel and his socialist city council get too excited, this is not the industrial tax grab they appear to be seeking.

If a draft of the plan is anything to go by, Edmonton taxpayers may at times end up paying for projects outside the city's boundaries.

The cost-sharing mechanism is "not an unconditional transfer of revenue between jurisdictions," says the report.

The governing board will be a provincial authority with a non-voting government rep riding herd on municipal politicians.

The decision-making process is more complex. Consensus, of course, is the first choice. But that's going to be hard to achieve.

So a complicated "double majority" process where 17 municipalities with 75% of the population agree is apparently the process of choice.

"All we are saying is let's put our heads together," Stelmach pleaded.

If that doesn't happen, it appears the premier is prepared to crack the recalcitrant mayors' and reeves' heads together. Which wouldn't be a bad thing.