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Support for social profit sector and commitment to shared space

Councillor Russell Thomas, seeking re-election in the upcoming municipal election, has his eyes set on providing support to the social profit sector by encouraging the creation of a shared-space framework.

“The social profit sector is so important to our region,” said Thomas, a long-time community volunteer, former president of Events Wood Buffalo and a current member of the Social Prosperity Wood Buffalo steering committee. “Think about the things you or your children are involved in, whether it is hockey, Irish dancing or air cadets. Behind those activities or programs are social profit organizations, boards and thousands of volunteers.”

The sector has identified access to affordable, accessible and sustainable space as a growing issue in recent years. With lease costs difficult to manage for the for-profit/business sector, it is even more of an issue for organizations that rely on memberships, annual grants and fundraisers for their survival.

“We would not be starting from scratch. There has been some great work done in the area of shared space with both The Redpoll Centre and the Wood Buffalo Community Village in Gregoire,” said Thomas. “We also have shared space that is included as part of the Shell Place project on MacDonald Island. However, it is not enough, and with the news that tenants in the Village are losing their space, now would be a great time to move from being reactive to proactive.”

Thomas is suggesting that the municipality participate in the development of a shared space model, working with an organization like the Wood Buffalo Community Village, a non-profit whose mandate is centred on managing shared space, and other stakeholders and service providers.

“We have great assets to bring to bear in a conversation about how to develop a shared space framework that will serve the needs of this region for decades to come,” said Thomas. “I am not suggesting that we use tax dollars to solve this problem for the social profit sector. This is about working together to create a shared space plan that will make them stronger, so we can be stronger as a community and region. “

Through the Social Prosperity Wood Buffalo project, Thomas participated in a tour of shared spaces in the Toronto area in 2012.

“I’ll never forget the statement from the director at the Centre for Social Innovation (CSI),” said Thomas. “He said ‘We focus on space so you can focus on mission’. They have developed a model that is successful, fully subscribed and replicable.”

According to Thomas, shared space is not just about providing offices, desks, filing cabinets and storage space. It is more about building a culture of collaboration, innovation and communication.

“Effective shared space models provide all the basics that organizations require, like Internet access, copiers, phones, and a place from which to work,” said Thomas. “But most importantly, they create a sense of community and belonging, an energy that fosters connections and cohesion. In the case of CSI in Toronto, organizations happily make the same investment in lease costs for a quarter of the space, just to be a part of the culture, and benefit from the relationships and collaborative opportunities that exist in a dynamically functioning share space environment.”

The Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo has traditionally played an important supporting role when it comes to the social profit sector, through a series of fee-for-service agreements, grants and gift-in-kind support.

“I’m proud of the work the staff of the RMWB has done in working with this vital sector,” said Thomas. “Participating in the development of a shared space model would go a long way to making our social profits more sustainable and successful.”

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