

Candidate Questionnaire: LES PEARSON

1. What inspired you to put your name forward for consideration in this election?

It's no secret that I love the job! It has been a daily education, a constant challenge, and a source of deep personal satisfaction. It has been a pleasure to be an active member of 17 community and City committees and boards and to be amazed at the energy, vitality, dedication, generosity and compassion that exists in my community.

Two terms in office are a personal and City investment in my knowledge and experience of municipal government. Each new day brings fresh challenges and new learning. But the knowledge gained from past experience is a great assist in making new and different decisions. I don't want to waste the community's investment in me.

2. What qualifications and/or experiences will assist you in being an effective councillor?

I am an enthusiastic and capable communicator: I enjoy listening and learning. Currently I have background knowledge and history for many of the issues and challenges the City Council now faces. I have worked diligently to be informed, to attend meetings, and to be "eyes and ears" in the community. My involvement with 10 Community Boards and Committees, as well as 5 additional Council-assigned Committee memberships, help me to identify City service gaps, frustrations with services, and to hear proposals for enhancements to the City's quality of life. On occasion it is good to hear that Council's decisions have made a positive impact on the life of our community.

3. Please list your top 5 strategic priorities that you will commit to during your four year term.

I am committed to the following strategic priorities:

- (1) Maintain "Financially Fit" and the 30 year Infrastructure Replacement Plan*
- (2) Negotiate an equitable Inter-municipal Collaborative Framework (ICF) Plan*
- (3) Create a "best practice" Bylaw for zoning and licensing marijuana sales*
- (4) Support social development initiatives including "Thrive" and ending poverty in our city while also supporting efforts to build community pride in*

belonging! (Essential to this is building an inclusive community where everyone belongs, enjoys an equitable quality of life and finds meaningful employment.)

(5) Maintain City investment in the Destination Marketing Organization and its Sport and Event Council subcommittee as well as business and industry attraction through contracts with “Invest Medicine Hat” (Rameco) or its successor.

4. What opportunities for growth and development do you see in the future for Medicine Hat? What strategies will you seek to implement in order to achieve this?

City Council’s investment in the Destination Marketing Board—and more recently its subcommittee, the Sport and Event Council—assure me that there is potential growth in the tourism market. Sport tournaments and community cultural events and festivals bring new wealth to our community. Not the least tourism benefit is the prospect of five new hotels in various stages of construction and development. The City ‘s contract with “Invest Medicine Hat” (Rameco) has also yielded new business and industrial prospects: this organization has done a superlative job in marketing our City, its resources, opportunities and quality of life. It is also exciting to see so many entrepreneurial small business ventures emerge from a downturn in the oil and gas industry: witness the plethora of new food trucks in our city and the many new and assorted business licenses. My best hope rests in the City’s development and exploitation of a helium gas field in SW Saskatchewan and SE Alberta: new discoveries may result in the creation of a new city plant and scores of new high-paying jobs. The future for industrial expansion looks especially bright when you also consider the prospects for aerospace technologies that will locate here in Medicine Hat to be near the open skies around Manyberries. It is also encouraging to see new investments at MH Mall and the Southview area in stores that provide logistical support for all of SE Alberta and much of SW Saskatchewan. These businesses, together with seniors facilities, provide the rock solid economic base upon which new and emerging industry and businesses can build. Improved air service, extended customs hours at Wild Horse, industrial plant expansions are all additional targets for municipal government advocacy with senior levels of government. Each has a promise to bring new growth and development.

5. In the past Intermunicipal Collaboration has been entered into on a voluntary basis. The Municipal Government Act review will make the adoption of an Intermunicipal Collaboration Framework a requirement. What aspects of the current Tri-Area Intermunicipal Development Plan would you like to see expanded, eliminated or amended?

The new Inter-municipal Collaborative Framework provides a three-year window for municipalities to agree on matters of common interest before the provincial government will arbitrate differences. I believe a per capita formula should be developed with Redcliff and Cypress County and the City to share a portion of capital costs for new City recreational and cultural facilities—for instance, a new regional community library—and on-going operational costs for City recreation and cultural facilities that their residents use and enjoy along with ours. While our neighbours have made token contributions to construction costs for the Canalta Events Centre, the Esplanade and FLC, the real on-going costs to the City are operational across a broad spectrum of programs and facilities.

Area development plans need to take joint water and sewer services into account especially in those areas at the city's margins. Talks should also include jointly funded economic and tourism opportunities. Finally, there is a need for collaborative thinking on “best practice” shared services for fire and policing. It's time to abandon past rivalries and histories. If we did, who knows? We may even want to discuss a Greater Medicine Hat Municipal Government! Think of the possibilities!

6. Businesses in Medicine Hat pay a non-residential tax rate that is above the provincial ratio average. In your opinion what is a reasonable ratio? What factors should be considered when calculating the non-residential tax rates?

This is an on-going discussion topic for Chamber members and City Council. The current ratio for business and industry—non-residential properties—is 2.34 times the residential rates and subject to an annual review. In a 2015 comparison of tax ratios with sister cities of similar size and composition, Medicine Hat's ratio of 2.25 fell between a lower ratio in Red Deer (2.13) and the higher rate in Lethbridge (2.39). The non-residential tax ratios in our urban cities (Calgary & Edmonton) are closer to three times the residential rates.

My sympathies are with small businesses in our city; their demands on utilities

and infrastructure are not greatly different than those of residences. Heavy industry and larger business enterprises do make heavier demands and, in a “user pays” world, should bear greater tax responsibility. However, provincial tax laws do not permit a differentiation between small and larger businesses.

There is another consideration. In tough fiscal times such as our city has recently experienced—and may still be experiencing—high taxation rates may mean the difference between survival and collapse. Yet the same applies to City services. Without strong tax support recreational, cultural, and maintenance of infrastructure will suffer. In such a state the City will not be attractive to new business or industry.

I favour a tax ratio approximating twice the residential rate as a kind of economic development insurance tax. As our city attracts new business and is able to retain the businesses that exist here, there are jobs that provide wealth that is spent in our business community. Quality of life does not suffer and all residents benefit. Industry can well afford their ratio because of their demands on City services.

7. The City has committed to a Downtown Revitalization Development Plan. What is your personal vision for downtown Medicine Hat? Are there any further opportunities that should be included in the overarching future plans for development in the core of the City?

Council in the last term has continued support for the CCDA, recognized the Monarch Theatre as a Municipal Historic Resource, replaced aging infrastructure, improved downtown lighting, and undertaken measures to beautify sidewalks, crosswalks, and planters. My vision for a re-vitalized downtown includes a privately owned and operated business and condominium complex on the infamous First Street vacant lot. Real vitalization will not come until there are more residents in the downtown core. Associated with the First Street project, I see the emergence of young entrepreneurs who will establish storefront businesses while developing living accommodation on upper floors of those empty buildings on Second and Third Streets. The City has already developed and must continue to provide grants-in-aid for these property improvements. At some future stage of development I believe it may prove necessary to create a closed mall street; sidewalk cafes are the first inkling that there may be receptivity for such a plan. The emergence of additional boutique and niche market stores will be required for this to become a reality. A key to downtown re-development is the renovation and re-

purposing of South Railway buildings including the Assiniboia Inn and other dilapidated storefronts. It may be time for the City to actually invest in ownership of these buildings, complete the renovations, and add them to the realty market in much the way that Moose Jaw SK has done. I see this initiative as even more important than the First Street lot development.

8. Medicine Hat has made major investments into recreation facilities as well as decisions for cutbacks. What vision and direction do you have for the development of our recreational facilities so as to best service the population of Medicine Hat?

The emergence of a Sport and Event subcommittee of the Destination Marketing Board (DMO) is a promising first step in the community's efforts to coordinate tournaments and festivals to fully utilize the wealth of facilities in our community. This organization will work with the Games Society to plan bids for regional, provincial and even national competitions. These events and competitions help fund the operational costs of City facilities and bids need municipal support whenever it is financially feasible. They provide an opportunity for residents to volunteer, to feel civic pride, and to enjoy quality cultural and sporting events. These enrich the lives of many residents.

Increased user fees are necessary to meet increasing facility operational costs. A "user pay" approach only works for those with the resources to pay.

9. Medicine Hat travelers are left with limited options when it comes to air travel. To facilitate a more convenient and efficient travel model for Medicine Hat and area how would you pursue lower fares, increased flight frequency, better connection times and increased load capacity for travelers?

To facilitate better air service for our city I would continue those measures currently employed by Council and Administration: all major airlines—and even a few that are not—have been approached with proposals and requests for improved service. The City has refurbished the terminal and is planning runway drainage and surface improvements. The federal government recognized our unique airport by assigning responsibility for zoning our landing flight path and also funding runway improvements. City officials have lobbied the province and federal government to intervene when air service has been threatened. As a consequence, an additional schedule was added to the Air Canada /Trans Mountain offering. Lobbying efforts should continue to attract both charter service from Medicine Hat to other Canadian cities and

with the federal government to consider a Canadian Customs process to manage international charters coming to our city. Charters from Medicine Hat to American destinations are a goal also worth pursuing with airlines and senior levels of government. Air travel is, after all, a federal responsibility.

10. How do you feel that the council and the City can provide a more efficient business-to-government process to streamline government services for business both online and within City Hall?

Significant steps have already been taken to streamline City services to business and developers in particular. The "one stop shop" for permits and approvals has largely been implemented. The on-line option for submitting proposals and plans should expedite the approval process although any shortage of personnel in planning to review proposals may still cause delays. The revised MGA mandates total transparency in all the City's business transactions and this may enhance opportunities for appeals and additional consultations. Beyond these measures, the City Council and Administration have made concerted efforts to build a trusting and open relationship with both the Chamber and with specialized business interests. This is a vital piece of the streamlining process.

11. As costs for services increase and costs to businesses increase at all levels of Government, how will you evaluate the increases in fees and charges to ensure fee structures are reasonable and that any increases are implemented over a reasonable period of time?

The only ways to ensure that local municipal costs to business and industry are reasonable is first to consult with these enterprises. A second way is to compare proposed costs to those imposed by other municipalities of similar size. It is important for City councillors to understand the unique aspects of enterprise in this community before imposing increases; there may be negative consequences that were not anticipated. It is also important for both the Chamber of Commerce and the City of Medicine Hat to represent the economic interests of our community to all senior levels of government. What impact will provincial and federal tax reforms have on our business and industrial community? When these changes are damaging to our local economy the Mayor and Council, together with the Chamber of Commerce, must be strong advocates protesting changes or suggesting alternate solutions. Consultation then, at all levels and between all parties, is paramount.

12. What are your plans and/or strategies for achieving financial sustainability while balancing service delivery, capital requirements, cost containment and fair taxation levels?

Prayer may not seem like a strategy, but there are days.... In tight economic times such as these, there are essentials for City government. The first priority is public safety: water and sewer, gas and electricity, are all vital for the health of our community. Roads must be maintained. Berms are being built. Old and dilapidated infrastructure must be replaced. Beyond these basics, transit service is also essential for low-paid workers, senior citizens, those with disabilities, and even those who prefer to ride public transport. If someone cannot find an economical and timely way to reach a work site, our City's economy suffers! Employment for all is real economic development. Given this situation and the rising costs that these services engender for the City, I believe the current Council has implemented the following plans and strategies to maintain a sustainable and economic balance between competing needs, cost containment and fair taxation:

- Maintain the 30 year plan to replace aging infrastructure: utility rates will necessarily rise to meet rising construction costs. This is a "user pays" solution. But infrastructure is essential for growth and business/industrial attraction and retention.
- Maintain the "Financially Fit" initiative. Increase taxation only in a staged, equitable, and transparent manner. Do this to ensure that property taxes are still attractive in comparison to sister cities in Alberta and Canada.
- Invest in the future: continue support for DMO and any successor to "Invest Medicine Hat." This is money well spent: returns have been tangible.
- Maintain stakeholder consultations regarding off-site levies and tax rates, while improving the speed of proposal approvals through the "Continuous Improvement Initiative." Ensure that all prospective developers and investors know that our city is "Open for Business."
- Continue the efficiency audits that have yielded returns for oil and gas lease sales, fleet services, and combined City departments.
- "Live within our means" should be the City's watchword. We do not have the luxury of investing in anything other than proven technologies and certain profit makers. When oil, gas, and helium explorations fail to yield profits, curtail and even abandon costly projects. When they produce profits, re-invest!

- The business of the City is public service. Taxes are the great social levelers. They help the City ensure that all residents have an equitable access to recreational, cultural, social and educational opportunities. When “user pay” fees fall short of meeting actual public service costs, then everyone’s tax dollars are necessary to support all the services that permit children to develop into complete and fulfilled citizens, that permit low wage earners to ride a bus to and from work in a timely manner, and for Parks and City facilities to meet their operational costs. This is not “communism” or “socialism.” It’s community development and a social responsibility.