

Alberta Association of Municipal Districts and Counties
Convention

Speech by Kevin Taft

Leader of the Alberta Liberal Caucus

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Thanks so much for inviting me to speak to you this morning, bringing the view from the political alternative in Alberta.

I know that a breakfast speech by rights should be fairly light and fun, but I wanted to take this opportunity to share some pretty serious policy ideas with you, ideas we haven't publicly discussed before.

So top up your coffee cups.

Many of you will have heard me speak as the Liberal Opposition Leader about municipal tax issues, the need to protect the jurisdiction of local governments, and so on.

Today I want to talk about a different issue, and the AAMD&C is the perfect place to launch this.

I want to talk about the need for a provincial land use strategy.

In politics, you learn early on that you can take the high road or the low road.

In leading the Alberta Liberal Caucus, I decided that if we're going to make an impact, if we're going to make things better, we're not going to get there by digging up dirt and flinging it at our opponents, that kind of thing.

Even so... I have something I'd like to show you today.

A jar of dirt.

No, this is not for throwing at the government.

For one thing, this... has way too much value.

What I have here is some rich, black Alberta soil – part Ponoka loam, part Peace Hills Sandy Loam...and therefore part of the very thing that brought the original settlers to this part of the world.

It's loaded with nutrients. And even though politicians are often accused of being full of... manure...

in this case, the manure is part of something useful.

The coarse grain of this soil helps channel water and air to the roots of plants. In fact, water doesn't pond on this type of soil.

Its loose, silty porosity also helps it warm to the sun, adding days and sometimes weeks of growing season for farmers in the area, a priceless commodity in our northern climate.

As some of you might have already guessed, this comes from a farm in northeast Edmonton.

This soil's grown an amazing array of vegetables since the middle of the last century.

Carrots, cabbage, corn, you name it.

It's helped Alberta establish a world-wide reputation for seed potatoes.

It's supported generations of Edmonton area farm families.

Put simply, it's some of the best – if not the best – agricultural land in our province.

Yet sadly, as I think you also know, it sits directly in the path of urban development.

This farm, like those around it, is destined to be covered with houses, roads, parking lots and strip malls...as our provincial capital expands ever northward.

And this soil is destined to be stripped from the land... and lost forever.

But not just because this land is close to Edmonton.

No.

There's a bigger threat to every acre of this province... than just the growth of one city.

And that threat is... Alberta's land use strategy.

Or to be more precise...

it's Alberta's lack of a strategy...which threatens our land; threatens us all.

The Alberta Liberal Caucus believes that without a comprehensive land strategy, our future, our children's future, and their children's future will quickly slip through our fingers.

We don't want this to be the only good soil left.

What exactly do I mean by a land strategy?

I mean a strategy... that lets us chart our future, ensure our prosperity, protect our environment and enhance our quality of life.

I mean a strategy... that allows industry room to grow, that gives businesses certainty in their operations, free of endless conflict with residential neighbors and other incompatible uses.

I mean a strategy...that defines future urban growth, with sustainable land use, so our infrastructure costs, already high, don't spiral any further out of control.

I mean a strategy...that addresses long-term transportation needs, for moving within and between communities, and from one part of the province to another.

I mean a strategy... to help resolve competing and conflicting land uses, whether they be from oil and gas, forestry, coal or urban development... to lift the burden from our overloaded courts.

A strategy... that provides greater protection for our natural environment, and protection for our wildlife - and the quality of life - that depend upon it.

Rather than sit back and shake our heads as this province falls victim to a vast array of piecemeal, helter-skelter, one-off developments...it's time we put together a proper land strategy that entrenches the kind of future we want for Alberta.

Because we all know in our hearts how blessed we are here; we know what the millions of visitors - and our friends and families - we know what everyone savours about those parts of our wilderness that still live... wild.

And because we know their value... we know that we can do better; much better.

We have to do better.

Witness the thousands of roads, pipelines and seismic lines that crisscross our forests and put our wildlife under tremendous stress.

Much of this damage could be avoided and millions of construction dollars saved... if our government had a plan to ensure that different sectors share each other's infrastructure.

Witness the thousands of stream crossings in Alberta: some have completely compromised the ability of fish to travel or spawn.

Many of these bridges and culverts didn't need to be built, if only this government had developed a plan to ensure that resource sectors share each other's infrastructure.

The stewardship of our land directly impacts the quality of our water. It's all tied together. As those working hard to protect Alberta's watersheds already know and I'd like to thank those who have taken up the challenge – the way we treat our land dictates the health of our rivers, lakes and streams.

Our province can only make headway on an effective water strategy with a complementary plan for land.

And the same can be said for our efforts to maintain clean air.

This province needs... planning.

This province needs... management.

Think outside the box?

This province needs to think beyond the narrow ribbon of highway that runs between Edmonton and Calgary!

The government has so far refused to take the lead.

So we were left with no choice:

A short time ago the Alberta Liberal Caucus commissioned a discussion paper to take a good, hard look at the development of a comprehensive land strategy for our province.

And I expect to release it early in the new year.

We acknowledge that development of a comprehensive land use plan won't be easy, given the multitude of land owners in our province... and the many agencies and organizations, including your own, which will have to be consulted and involved.

But that's not a reason to sit idle; because something "won't be easy".

Many groups are now pushing for such a strategy, including resource companies, environmental groups and municipal organizations.

(On this point, I would like to thank your executive director, Gerald Rhodes, for offering his time and suggestions to our researcher.)

Would we have to start from absolute zero? No!

Extensive work has already been done by a number of Alberta's neighbors.

For example in 1995, B.C. approved the Growth Strategies Amendment Act as a means to coordinate planning between local governments, the provincial government and various agencies.

And that in turn has spawned a variety of regional growth strategies, designed to protect the environment and resource areas... and to replace urban sprawl with sustainable, well-planned communities.

In Ontario, the government recently passed their Places To Grow Act; a framework for long-term growth planning and infrastructure renewal across that province.

It allows the government to designate geographic growth areas and work with local officials to develop plans that meet specific regional needs.

Across the border, Washington State has worked with local counties and cities to develop an extensive land use strategy.

Local governments manage Washington's growth by identifying and protecting natural resource and environmentally sensitive areas;

designating urban growth districts and implementing comprehensive plans through capital investments and development regulations.

All of these are opportunities for us to learn and use.

We don't have to reinvent the wheel.

We don't have to... make it all up.

The resources are all around us.
And have been for some while.
The Alberta Liberal Caucus recognizes the need for leadership to be shown in land-use policy.
Those examples I just mentioned show how behind the pack Alberta is.
Washington State's Growth Management Act was created in 1990, after a good deal of consultation with state organizations and residents.
15 years later, our government has yet to even begin that dialogue.

And in a province so blessed with resources, that's not just unacceptable; it's downright dangerous.
It's completely unacceptable that we have no long term plan for industrial development, for urban development or for natural area conservation.

We're putting our growth at risk.

It is totally unacceptable that we are sitting here without the proper administrative structures in place to implement a comprehensive land use strategy.

We're putting our land at risk.
A wealth of supportive programs and policies will have to be in place if we hope to have an effective land strategy.

It is shameful that we sit here without any direction on those.
And with no direction... we're putting our future at risk.
In short, it is totally unacceptable for us to enter the 21st Century, a full 30 years after our first major economic boom, with no comprehensive, province-wide plan for how we want to use our land, either now or in the future.

And that is something the Alberta Liberal Caucus wants to change.

Because one way or another, it has to change.

Our caucus knows we need an effective land strategy, if we are ever going to have the kind of province we want for ourselves and future generations.
We know we need a government that is ready to get on with it; a government that is ready to commit the necessary resources to its development and implementation.

We need a government that recognizes what we have at stake here and is ready to take action... before our future, like the land around us, literally slips through our fingers.

The time of making it up as we go along is long since past. And I'll remind you; if your questions aren't getting answered, if your voice is being ignored, you have one more route to being heard in the legislature.

The Alberta Liberal Caucus is the Loyal Opposition,
and our job is to make sure that other voices ARE heard.
Our doors are open.
We're ready to listen.
You have an alternative.
Let's talk.

END OF SPEECH