



A RESPONSE TO THE CITY OF EDMONTON'S REIMAGINE SERVICES REPORT

JUNE 21, 2021

Dear Edmonton City Council,

I would like to begin by thanking you for engaging with me over the last few weeks. I have met with a number of you to discuss the future of City services and the right approach to continue providing those services given the challenges posed by the economic downturn and COVID-19.

Through this letter, I hope to provide my perspective on the Reimagine Services Report and the contracting out of bus cleaning jobs and offer my thoughts for the Council to consider as you weigh the options outlined in the report. I offer these thoughts both in my capacity as a candidate for Mayor, and as someone who has sat in your position and been faced with difficult decisions. My views are also informed by my lived experience delivering public services under a contracted out environment.

The challenges the City of Edmonton is facing are significant, and I appreciate the need to review business practices, establish sound fiscal footing, and ensure that resources are allocated effectively. Edmontonians want to see value for their tax contributions, and they expect to see that value manifested in fair treatment of employees as well as quality and consistent services.

It is critical we offer services to Edmontonians in a way that reflects our collective values, and the vision of the city we want to live in. I strongly believe that some of the recommendations within the Reimagine Services and the contracting out of ETS bus cleaning jobs fail to meet this mark, and therefore should be rejected.

First, the decisions in front of you today are inconsistent with the goal of a broad-based economic recovery following the COVID-19 pandemic. As a government, our fiscal decisions in this recovery must support employment where workers can provide for themselves and their families, live with dignity, and contribute back into our local economy.

The projected savings achieved by contracting out City services would be realized by converting good public-sector jobs into lower paying private sector jobs with no benefits, and/or by reducing and compromising quality of services Edmontonians expect. This amounts to balancing the budget on the backs of individuals and communities who are already marginalized, and creating a new group of contract employees who will experience financial uncertainty and compromised working conditions while serving our city's residents.

I have direct experience with working in such an environment. When I started at DATS, the service was run by the private sector, and we had no union representation. We were required to work 12-hour days, six days a week with poor pay, without overtime pay and with no benefits like sick leave. My colleagues and I were committed to providing quality public services and experiences to our passengers, but we often struggled to do that because we found it difficult to live and work with dignity and a sense of belonging in those conditions. My colleagues and I organized to advocate for ourselves, and we are proud that those roles with DATS now provide workers with benefits and pay that reflect the value they are providing to Edmontonians.

My point in raising this story from my past is to illustrate that hollowing out our workforce is not the right way to address financial shortfalls, as it will only compromise other parts of the economy and hinder our collective ability to rebuild. We should be aiming to build a fair economy, with more decent jobs for people with all backgrounds and levels of education, rather than destabilizing and marginalizing those who perform essential services for our city.

I urge that your decisions are viewed through this lens of equity and fairness. Council must consider who occupies the jobs that will be affected by these proposals. The staff targeted are often our most marginalized workers - persons of colour, newcomers, women, people with disabilities and members of other equity-seeking groups. This Council has made it clear that you value building an equitable City where we work to mitigate the disadvantages faced by equity-seeking groups. The actions outlined in the Reimagine Services report and contracting out of ETS's bus cleaning jobs do not meet this mark, but will instead deepen existing inequities.

The third and final point I will raise is around affordability and quality of services. Given the challenges Edmontonians have faced, I know affordable access to quality public services and amenities is a high priority to our residents. After the past 15 months of the pandemic, Edmontonians are eager to get back to the amenities that provide them with a sense of renewal and fulfillment: our parks, our libraries, public transit and our recreation centres.

I recognize the value in considering user fees and revenues as mechanisms to rebalance our budget, but we must prioritize affordability and quality for those who are most reliant on our services. Equitable and affordable access to City services is essential to the quality of life for residents in our city. As a free amenity, parks play an essential role in providing access to recreation, nature and social opportunities for all Edmontonians. This access to parks should never be income dependent.

Building a fair economy, supporting marginalized workers, and affordable access to City services; these are the three lenses I encourage City Council to apply to decisions around the Reimagine Services report and contracting out of ETS bus cleaning jobs. There is no question City Council is facing difficult decisions in rebalancing the budget, but our commitment to values of fairness and equity should not be abandoned in the face of difficult decisions. If we believe in building a fair, equitable and accessible city, we must uphold these values in each decision we take as leaders.

It is clear that several of the recommendations in the Reimagine Services report, and other similar items under consideration by the city, do not meet this values test. Specifically, the proposed privatization of the cleaner positions under ATU 569 and the contracting out of recreational services are of deep concern, as these proposals will ultimately create more economic vulnerability in our city.

I am also opposed to the proposed implementation of parking fees for free City amenities, namely parks. While parking fees may be appropriate for some amenities, parks should remain open spaces for families and individuals who rely on access to those spaces for their wellbeing. I relied on these spaces as a young immigrant, and I would not have been able to access them had parking fees been in place at the time.

I strongly encourage City Council to consider not just the immediate need to rebalance the budget in these decisions, but also the longer term view of the type of city and economy we want to rebuild in the aftermath of the pandemic. I have spent many months talking to Edmontonians about their values and vision for the future, and I've heard clearly that they want to rebuild through investment in services and infrastructure that will inject money into our economy, rather than further destabilize it by limiting access to services and undermining employment.

I thank each of you for considering this input, and for your thoughtful engagement with Edmontonians on this difficult topic. I look forward to continued dialogue with members of Council over the coming months.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "A Sohi". The letters are cursive and somewhat stylized.

Amarjeet Sohi