

Connecting Edmonton

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Edmonton is a hot topic in cyberspace. With more than 58,000 posts by what has now topped 2,000 members in 27 member countries, connect2edmonton.ca has become the city's most popular online water cooler.

Launched just 18 months ago, connect2edmonton.ca (C2E) was conceived and funded by Edmonton Economic Development Corporation. Promotional support has been provided by Pivit Inc., Edmonton Airports, Edmonton Chamber of Commerce, Edmonton Chamber of Voluntary Organizations, the Northern Alberta Institute of Alberta (NAIT) and the City of Edmonton.

"It is an autonomous, non-political, member-led organization," says a blurb on the site. C2E is supported by a roster of pro-Edmonton volunteers and representatives from partner organizations. Head volunteer among them is C2E co-chair Richard Skermer, (a.k.a. "grumpy smurf") an IT manager who helped found the venture after he started a group called Promote Edmonton.

"The original intent was to give a portal to the city that was non-biased, non-city run, grassroots," Skermer says. "A place where you could ask a question and get the non-marketing, non-glossy answer."

In the true spirit of the Internet, it didn't take long for him to discover that others were also interested in connecting people who are proud of Edmonton and sharing their creative and collaborative ideas. "The growth has been remarkable," he says. "There's a real appetite out there to connect, to share ideas and discuss possibilities. The timing was exactly right."

C2E's website-meets-blog-meets-forum format encourages discussion and collaboration on topics that relate to Edmonton. It gives lots of elbow room for everybody to have their say in a strictly-moderated environment. "Say all you want, complain all you want, but no four letter words, no porn, no hate permitted," Skermer explains.

Modelled to some extent after the phenomenally successful skyscraperpage.com, C2E has the same intellectual rigour and opinion-driven sharing of knowledge, but with a keen eye on all things Edmonton. While the members have signed up from 27 different countries, Skermer says they usually have some connection to Edmonton, such as being University of Alberta or NAIT alumni, or expatriate Edmontonians who have moved overseas.

"When we take a look at the site statistics, Edmonton IP addresses are only a third of the hits," he says. "The others are coming from outside, and from search engines like Google. We have more than 20,000 unique IP addresses hit us every month, and the majority from outside Alberta."

Earlier this year, when C2E unveiled the ten priority ideas from its "Great Ideas for Greater Edmonton" contest, media coverage helped push visits and new member join-ups. The contest encouraged C2E members to submit their ideas, big and small, that could help enhance the Greater Edmonton's national profile, quality of life or future development.

The notion, as Skermer explains it, "was to engage Edmonton enthusiasts worldwide in a positive dialogue to develop a new, inspirational regional vision." The hundreds of ideas submitted to the contest keyed on six areas - art and architecture; cleaning up the city; downtown development; river valley development; tourism; and transportation.

The most popular idea was to redevelop the EPCOR power plant in Rosedale into something similar to Vancouver's Granville Island or Winnipeg's The Forks, complete with new amenities and something like a First Nations cultural centre. Second on the list was a comprehensive year-round plan to clean up the city, with measurable public benchmarks for progress.

Other ideas in the top ten include expanding the LRT, and mass transportation in general, to destinations like West Edmonton Mall and the Edmonton International Airport. There was a lot of support for a new arena downtown and more public art. Many participants also expressed a desire to adorn the High Level Bridge with permanent lights. Many others said the city should build its own architectural icon - an Edmonton version of the Eiffel Tower.

Around the site, the treasures abound. There are sections on life in Edmonton, a section for images of the city, another for discussions about buildings and architecture, travel and tourism and the river valley.

There are rants, and raves, there is sports, and arts, and a section for regional issues. Recent threads include discussions on LRT expansion, the 23rd Avenue and Gateway Boulevard interchange, a "bullet train" between Edmonton and Calgary, fighting urban sprawl and the upcoming municipal elections.

Those who visit the site regularly have discovered the beauty of dialoguing online. As our physical communities have cut us off from our neighbours, and as corporate-controlled mainstream media quells alternative viewpoints, such sites are an essential avenue for free speech.

Electronic portals like connect2edmonton.ca provide an opportunity for citizens to engage in a way that spreads knowledge and broadens perspectives. They bring a diversity of opinions from a myriad of backgrounds, adding to public discourse and the healthy functioning of our society.

I can also say, from one who has spent countless hours browsing the threads, that it is one heck of a way to chew through hours of time. Be forewarned: If you've got an interest in Edmonton issues, connect2edmonton.ca is not a site you can visit for just a few minutes.