

Tough love is what Edmonton really needs: Richard Skermer just the guy for the job

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Illustration: Photo: Larry Wong, The Journal / Richard Skermer helped launch the website www.connect2Edmonton.ca.

Civic boosters, with painted-on smiles and practised patter, tell fanciful fibs about fortune and bliss in their hometowns.

I hate boosters. They insult our intelligence. Edmonton isn't a great city. Anyone who really cares for Edmonton knows it. The city has potential. But potential is like romantic love. Absent honest commitment, it fails.

Richard Skermer loves Edmonton. This city runs deep in him. Yet he is no civic booster. He sees the city for what it is and what it might become, if only.

Skermer is a big bear of a man with a high-revving mind and mouth. Such men can intimidate. Not Skermer. A brush with death years ago rubbed away some of the rough edges.

As a 21-year-old, surgeons tore apart and re-engineered his leg with steel. Skermer had the same cancer that killed Terry Fox. Now, 15 years later, Skermer is cancer free, but in dire need of an overhaul.

"I need new bearings," he says, smiling and flexing his leg.

Yet he's in fine form today, except for the crutches.

We've long since finished the interview, but Skermer stays to chat for more than another hour.

He likes to talk. Especially about Edmonton.

His father was a pilot, and as a boy Skermer often travelled along to other destinations. He'd be asked where he was from. When he said Edmonton, the reaction was often one of patronizing bewilderment, or amusement.

Such things stick in the craw, as a personal insult. It's like people were saying: What kind of loser would choose to live in drab Edmonton?

Yet Skermer made that choice.

As a young man, he headed off with his IT expertise to work in big cities all over the U.S. But he eventually came home to live and get involved.

Skermer has a rare interest. An interest in the workings of this city, from its history and transportation planning, to the history of its transportation planning. Rare, because policy wonks tend to be part of government, or the political process.

Skermer works outside it and behind the scenes, mostly. I first met him at a staged public forum where boosters of the City Centre Airport preached to each other about the evils of consolidation at the International Airport.

Skermer eventually stood up to talk. He told the assembled, in so many words, they were out to lunch. The future -- Edmonton's future -- was at the International Airport, not the old Muni, said Skermer. It took guts. This was not an appreciative audience.

Like many of his generation, Skermer spends considerable time on the Internet. What he found there a few years back delighted him -- kinship. There were other people of his generation debating Edmonton's problems and potential.

They chatted online, then decided to meet in person. Out of those meetings a group formed, Promote Edmonton, with a basic belief that Edmonton was being ignored provincially and federally and needed to stand up for itself.

Promote Edmonton has worked quietly on a project that has just now come to fruition -- an online community of ideas called Connect 2 Edmonton. (www.connect2edmonton.ca).

"If you love Edmonton, you've come to the right place," says the C2E introduction page. Boosterism? Nope, says Skermer. The Internet forum is an exchange of ideas and debate. If there's some promotion in there, well, it's about time.

"But there will be lots of critics on the site," he says. "I'm one of them."

Skermer's first contribution to the forum was a rant about the "blight" that is Calgary Trail and Gateway Boulevard. Capital Ex gets dissed on the site. So does the "Berlin Wall" at the top of Hall D, the Shaw Conference Centre's new addition. Yet out of it all

comes the sense that the online community is made up of people who really love this city.

The cancer scare left Skermer with a deep sense of deadline pragmatism. It's time, he says, Edmonton put some issues to bed. Time the region consolidated not just its air service, but itself, into one major city. Time Edmonton built a new southern bridge to downtown.

Disagree? Skermer hopes all manner of folk, locally and long distance, will join in the community and offer their opinions and ideas. He also hopes the message will get out that Edmonton is an active, lively and interesting place to work and live, with great restaurants, post-secondary schools, a vibrant arts scene and a spectacular river valley.

"We hope to spread the word that this is a fantastic city," says Skermer.

So that one day, some kid will get a bit more respect when they say: I'm from Edmonton.

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