

City council's 2001 rookies get top marks

Critics rate mayor and five aldermen

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CALGARY HERALD

When five rookie aldermen and new Mayor Dave Bronconnier took their places in council chambers in 2001, it punctuated one of the biggest shake-ups Calgary city hall had seen in more than a decade.

And it hasn't settled down. In the past three years, the newbies have contended with three consecutive tax hikes, project overruns, a development scandal and the firing of the city's chief executive, Dale Stanway.

Yet, observers believe the group has emerged unscathed in the tumultuous term — and even scored their share of political points. Now, they'll have to prove their value at the polls as they make their first re-election bid.

"I think they performed admirably," said Keith Brownsey, a political scientist at Mount Royal College. "There wasn't always consensus on council, but that's what politics is about. It's not about consensus on every issue. It's about getting problems solved."

And in the past three years, all 15 aldermen have had their share of problems to solve.

Indeed, to say the aldermanic Class of 2001 — Gord Lowe, Craig Burrows, Druh Farrell, Madeleine King and Ric McIver — have been on a steep learning curve is an understatement.



CIVIC VOTE 2004 CITY HALL

They've been to the school of hard knocks.

They began their term in the throes of the debate over whether to sell Enmax, then rallied together to battle the province for a share of the fuel tax and helped prepare the city for the G-8 Summit.

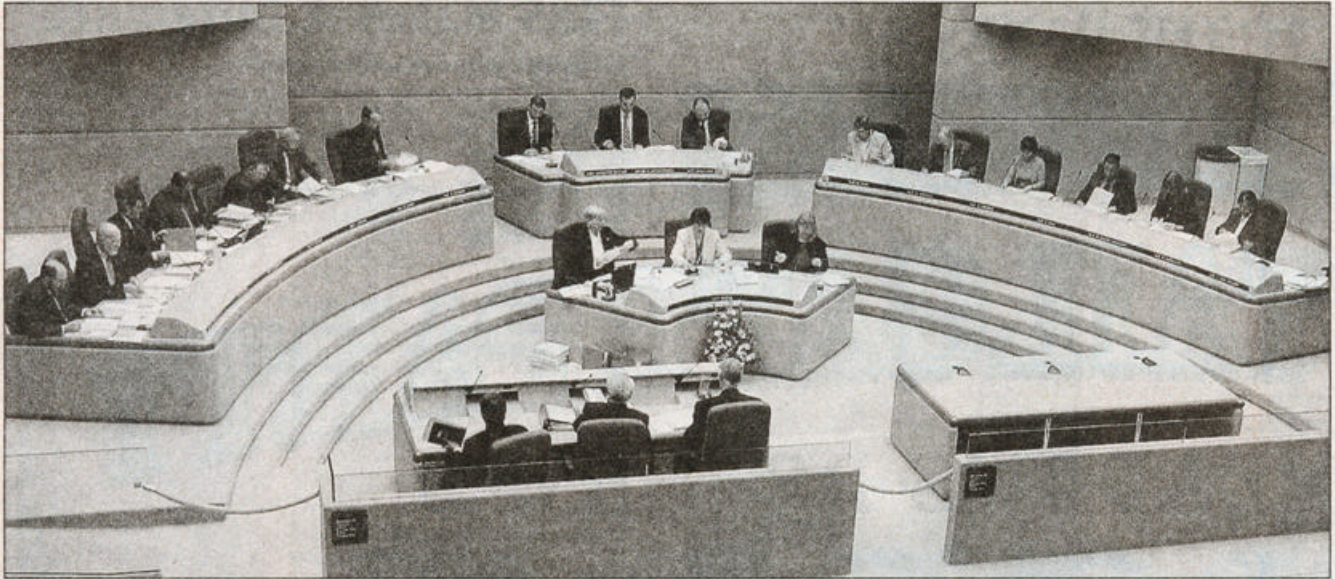
But the aldermen then faced an unpredictably big development headache in the downtown's East Village — with one of the new civic politicians playing a significant role in the outcome.

For years an area blighted by urban decay, the city partnered with developers to turn the area around. The trouble began, however, with a fight over plans to build closer to riverbanks than city rules allow.

The issue led to bigger questions about the deal the city had made with developers. Scrutiny of the fine details exposed a litany of problems, including questions over the integrity of the bidding process.

Farrell, the alderman for the area, led the charge, despite the skepticism of some of her peers. Bronconnier and the city's chief executive later ordered an audit that saw the municipality part ways with four officials.

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City council's rookies had to deal with an assortment of controversial issues, including the East Village scandal.

FROM BI ROOKIES: Controversy dogged city council

In the end, most of council agreed to scrap the original East Village plan. A new initiative is now moving forward.

"I was new and they didn't know me so it was difficult perhaps to be heard initially, but I think after all the information came to light, it was pretty hard to ignore," Farrell said.

"I don't think I have any enemies from the East Village. I think it was a learning experience that we were able to turn into something very positive for the city of Calgary."

The fiasco ultimately cost taxpayers \$2.8 million for the city to get out of the deal.

Midway through the term, a new issue emerged: the eight-seven vote.

The splits weren't always the same. Some of the aldermen's votes were predictable on fiscal and social issues, but others leaped back and forth across the fence to tip the split one way or the other.

Philosophical divides, political ideology and even the seating plan were blamed. Some aldermen said it was a case of the newbies versus oldies. But McIver believes the splits were more about philosophy than experience.

"And I think that's more healthy than if everybody agrees every time," said McIver, who's become council's most vocal anti-tax advocate. "Council chamber should be a chamber of debate. If there is no debate, we might as well all stay home."

Early in 2003, Bronconnier had had enough with what he saw as a reluctance to deal with big issues.

In a scathing public speech, the mayor voiced his frustration with

accountability between the executive office and elected officials by restructuring that relationship.

He then went a step further by singling out for praise six aldermen who supported his initiatives.

Of the rookie politicians, Lowe, Burrows and McIver were given a pat on the back. The others were not.

The move upset members of council and remains a sore point for some, but King insists they've moved on.

"It was definitely a challenging time, but we are stronger and better for it," said King, best known for her work for heritage and the arts. "Since then, he has worked well with us and we have worked well with him."

But one of the most divisive issues to confront the new council — and the rookie aldermen — came just last year with the dismissal of Stanway. The Harvard graduate was hired by the previous council and, as the city's top bureaucrat, was charged with bringing a more business-like focus to the administration.

However, under Bronconnier's pledge to bring greater accountability to city hall, the role of the administration was put under a microscope. In the mayor's eyes, elected officials should direct policy, not the bureaucrats.

The tension between council and staff built up for months until it finally came to a head last November.

Soon after aldermen were surprised by a bad-news report on city pensions, Stanway was dismissed because of an unsolvable "mismatch" with city council. Two-thirds of council voted for the move, but the tension was high as sev-

ings about Stanway and his work.

"I think the city manager was a tough one for council because it kind of pit alderman against alderman," said Burrows, recently named to Calgary Inc.'s Top 40 Under 40. "That's probably the most divisive (issue) in council, but I think we've worked through that."

Lowe, who had to rally the support of his colleagues in spearheading efforts to revamp the budget process, said one of the biggest challenges for new aldermen is also learning the intricacies of city hall.

"There are no political parties, so essentially what you have are 15 independent members sitting around a table and it's interesting to watch allegiances and alliances form and reform as a matter is discussed," he said.

"You have to learn to pick up on that, particularly if you're advancing something."

Brownsey agrees, and expects a smoother-running next term if everyone wins back their seat. However, he believes it would be unfair to hang all the controversies of this last term on the current council.

"There had been a number of issues that had simply been ignored and let simmer . . . and as a result this new council, these five rookies, . . . they had to deal with these problems," he said.

"They came to a head when these counsellors and Bronconnier were elected."



Rookie aldermen, from left, Gord Lowe, Craig Burrows, Ric McIver, Druh Farrell, and Madeleine King are seeking re-election. Jenelle Schneider, Calgary Herald