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## Saskatoon more than university town

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SASKATOON -- In the divvying up of political and intellectual entities, Regina was granted the provincial capital while Saskatoon became home to the University of Saskatchewan. At least that's the simplified version of history.

In turn, each city has been defined by these properties. While the dome of the Legislative Building is symbolic of the Queen City, the heart of Saskatoon is believed by many to be the University of Saskatchewan.

As someone who was born and raised in the Bridge City, I once wholeheartedly agreed that the lifeblood of Saskatoon flowed from the campus. Situated on the banks of the South Saskatchewan River, the university is an island of thoughtful calm and architectural beauty amidst the hustle and bustle of the city.

But I've been away for five years, living way down that boring stretch of Highway 11 in Regina.

When I return to Saskatoon, it is no longer the city it used to be. Of course, it still contains those postcard-perfect views of the downtown riverbank and the vigour of Broadway Avenue. But now Saskatoon also has energy, a tangible feeling that it is thriving. Growth can be seen in the swelling population, ever-increasing traffic and construction on Circle Drive, and surging real estate prices -- all indicators residents may argue as positive or negative.

But while the boom may seem sudden, the city started to really take off about five years ago.

"It takes a while for people to recognize when things are going well," said Alan Migneault, chief executive officer of Saskatoon Regional Economic Development Authority Inc. (SREDA). "We've had approximately four-per-cent growth in GDP every year since 2002-2003. So for that five-year period, we've been racking up some pretty decent growth numbers in Saskatoon, ahead of Canadian averages for sure.

"It has probably been the last 12 to 18 months when people have really started talking about it. This is something that is really happening. Perhaps it takes a couple of years for it to sink in."

It is not like Saskatoon had been hurting. Saskatchewan is the largest potash producer in the world and because Saskatoon is centrally located in the province, it's the ideal home for the head offices and manufacturers that feed the industry.

Cameco, the world's largest uranium producer, makes its home in the city, which is the gateway to the rich mining resources in the north, including gold and diamonds.

Outsiders have been taking notice of Saskatoon's growth and potential. The Conference Board of Canada is forecasting that Saskatoon will be No.1 in GDP growth in Canada, after being in the top three for the past five years. The board has also recognized

Saskatoon as one of the most diversified cities in the country, said Migneault, proving the city has seen growth across nearly all sectors and industries.

"There is a perception element to growth. When people are feeling like things are good, they are perhaps more willing to do more growth activities as well," said Migneault. "If you have a less-than-optimistic outlook of what is going to happen next year, you're not as likely to try and grow your business in a risky way or in a way that you would not otherwise have tried to do in the past.

"That perception does help and the attitude change that comes with success is a very strong motivator."

But all the success has come with a few bumps in the road. The vacancy rate for rental properties has dwindled and numerous apartment buildings have been bought up for condo conversions, leaving some renters scrambling for housing and concern growing for those homeless in the city.

Over the summer, the crunch in the Bridge City became a crisis as thousands of university students prepared to return to school. Unprecedented measures were taken when the city's mayor and the leaders of three of Saskatoon's post-secondary institutions called on local residents to take students in as boarders.

City councillor Bob Pringle, a former NDP cabinet minister who recently stepped down as CEO of the Saskatoon Food Bank and Learning Centre, said over the last two years, there has been a 30-per-cent increase in the number of students using the food bank. The majority are out-of-town students who are having difficulty affording tuition, rent, books and living expenses.

It is not just students feeling the pinch, though. There has been a more than 100-per-cent increase in the number of senior citizen users of the food bank, jumping from 248 seniors to 512.

"All of us want the economy to be doing well . . . but I think when it accelerates so quickly, as it has, there is the other side of the coin -- a lot of people don't keep up," said Pringle.

There wasn't always sympathy for those in need. With the economy doing well and "Help Wanted" signs prominently featured around the city, Pringle admitted some people looked down on those who were still in need. In his mind, what turned the indifference into compassion and action were the personal stories of residents trying to find affordable housing that started to grab headlines prior to the start of the academic year. Since then, residents, local businesses and industry associations alike have responded.

"A lot of people are working together who never worked together before. That's what this type of crisis does, it creates change," said Pringle.

Along with the upswing in the city's economic fortunes has come a change of command and shift in focus for the Saskatoon Police Service (SPS). Clive Weighill took over as chief of the beleaguered police force in September 2006, after spending 31 years with the Regina Police Service. It wasn't long before the department saw a change in direction, which Weighill said was collectively identified through meetings with some of the service's members.

In June of this year, the force shifted to a different style of policing, resulting in a redeployment of officers that placed more on the street and shifted the focus to getting more in touch with the community.

According to the new approach, Saskatoon has been broken up into three divisions with

an inspector put in charge of each division. Resources have been divvied up according to presence of crime in the areas, with the east side and west side divisions each receiving 30 per cent of SPS resources, while the remaining 40 per cent is poured into the smaller inner-city division. The new model calls for daily and monthly examinations of what crimes are taking place and where, resulting in a quicker, more focused approach to reducing it.

"Number one, it forces the command staff to be thinking about crime reduction. Number two, we start solving some of those smaller crimes that historically police weren't solving," said Weighill.

While the early indicators look positive, the real effect of the new model won't be measured until the end of 2008. But the new plan may have some of the service's members and city residents believing the force is moving in the right direction.

"They see that the initiatives we've all worked on -- not just management -- but that we've all worked on in the last year are starting to show positive results on the morale and on the perception of confidence within the police service in Saskatoon," Weighill explained.

With all of this growth in Saskatoon, the perception of the U of- being the focal point of the city may be shifting, with the flourishing university as just one important piece of the city's makeup.

Without a doubt, the institution is a significant contributor to Saskatoon's economy as the city's largest employer with more than 7,000 employees. The campus itself is a major purchaser of services, requiring a utility draw similar to a city the size of North Battleford.

According to U of- president Peter MacKinnon, the university's impact is estimated to make up 20 per cent of Saskatoon's economy. At the height of a weekday during the academic year, there are 30,000 people between campus and Innovation Place -- a sizable pull in a city of over 200,000. (Saskatoon's census metropolitan area is about 233,000.)

"In numbers alone, that's a huge impact but it does not begin to measure the extent of the presence. A very, very large number of alumni, when you think about it, most of the professional people in the city and in the province have been educated at the University of Saskatchewan. That's a very significant impact," said MacKinnon.

The U of- has also seen its changes in recent years, arguably the biggest of which was the opening of the Canadian Light Source, the country's only synchrotron research facility. But the institution's profile is also being raised through the growing prominence of the Vaccine and Infectious Disease Organization (VIDO) and the still-being-constructed International Vaccine Centre (InterVac), numerous capital expansions and renovations, increasing research dollars, and the creation of new schools for public health, public policy and environment and sustainability.

Through its 100-year history, MacKinnon said the university has remained true to the vision set by its first president Walter Murray: A public university must serve the many-sided life of the community. While the university's thriving research and innovation endeavours are benefitting the global community, the U of- has remained steady in its contributions to the cultural, intellectual, athletic and economic life of Saskatoon.

"Inevitably there are changes, there are incremental changes in the relationship between the university and the city but I think the underlying theme has always been the same," MacKinnon said.

Migneault agreed the U of- is an extremely important part of the city's history, current

growth and future progress.

"Any significant metropolitan area in the world has significant university, academic structures that are embedded within it and around it," he said. "I really see the university as being a place where future economic development, future academic development, future research will continue to change and help the city grow."

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