

Here's my wish list for a better Calgary

BY PAULA ARAB, CALGARY HERALD JANUARY 5, 2012



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A recent cross-country trip provided new perspective with which to better appreciate Calgary, this year's cultural capital of Canada.

But economic prosperity, more sunshine-hours-per day and Nenshi-envy aside, Cowtown still has ample room for improvement.

Here are my top wishes for a better Calgary in 2012.

1. Synchronized traffic lights. Calgary rush-hour traffic is nothing, and personally adds just 10 minutes onto my daily commute.

What's frustrating is the starting and stopping needlessly at lights that are poorly timed. Driving from one red to the next is bad for the peace of mind and the environment. It wastes time, money and gas. In June of 2010, then-traffic manager Troy McLeod promised me that all 915 traffic signals in the city would be reviewed and retimed within the next two years. Tick-tock. Traffic engineers have five months left to get the job done and improve traffic flow. They better get moving, so that the rest of us can do the same.

2. Shorter red lights. If this is the best we can do to optimize traffic signal plans, then please shorten the sequence. Waiting one minute for the light to turn back to green is crazy making, yet about average for major intersections. The busiest intersections take a full four minutes or longer, before they cycle back to green. The inevitable result is that people start daydreaming while waiting at a red light, lowering their response time when it finally turns green, and increasing their chances of getting on their cellphones and breaking the distracted driving law. Hmm.

3. Get rid of the photo radar van surreptitiously stationed on the Trans-Canada Highway headed to Banff. The speed limit seems to be kept artificially low here, posted at 80 km/h westbound and 90 km/h eastbound. Police are almost always waiting hungrily, trapping speeders ahead of where the speed limit turns to 110 km/h a few feet away. It's a cash grab. It needs to go.

4. Warn tourists. Alternatively, in 2012, Alberta Tourism, travel websites, car rental agencies and any other business in the hospitality industry that relies on tourist dollars, should boldly warn visitors of the speed trap to Banff. Postcards from the Rockies are one thing, but a speeding ticket waiting in the mail is hardly the type of souvenir most visitors want to bring home with them.

5. Speaking of hospitality, may 2012 be the year I find a favourite neighbourhood haunt. Calgary has an abundance of great restaurants that fall into the fine-dining category, but for everyday fare that doesn't break the bank, I want a Ma-and-Pa kitchen bistro that offers simple but fresh food at friendly prices and an inviting atmosphere for hanging out.

6. Food Trucks: That in 2012, street food is invited to do business in my Kensington-Hillhurst neighbourhood, and other obvious, pedestrian-friendly areas, where they would do well.

7. Taxi, please. That all citizens get a taxi when they want it, where they want it. Heck, I'd be happy if cab companies simply hired enough dispatchers to answer their phones to take customers' orders. I've never understood how a so-called shortage of taxi licences or vehicles on the streets explained the constant busy signals one encounters when calling for a cab.

8. An end to animal cruelty. It's right up there with natural disasters, domestic abuse and serial killers, in terms of the response such stories attract from readers. Sometimes, I wonder if the public has more tolerance for horrors that befall humans, than they do those that hit cute little Fluffy or Buster. May this be the year that fewer animals suffer at the hands of humans who need to feel big about themselves, by harming helpless creatures.

9. Pesticide ban. Perhaps 2012 will see Calgary start protecting its citizens from toxic lawn chemicals considered non-essential pesticides, and long banned in most cities. More than 170 Canadian municipalities have a pesticide bylaw. It's really time for Calgary to catch up. We are the largest municipality in Canada without a bylaw, 21 years after the first pesticide bylaw was passed in North America.

10. Recycling and composting. My wish is that the city will finally get serious about its waste diversion strategy, by introducing mandatory composting and curbside recycling to all Calgary homes. The city's

158,000 apartments, townhouses, condos and other units in multi-family residential buildings are still excluded from the curbside recycling service. Including them doesn't even seem to be on the agenda. If waste management officials could only hear how foolish they sound, when they talk seriously about meeting their goal of diverting 80 per cent of waste from the landfill by 2020, but fail to mention these too-glaring omissions in the strategy. It's about as achievable as Kyoto.

We can always hope, which is what a new year is all about. May 2012 be the year dreams come true.

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