

Regina's mayor spars with crime, knocks down economic decline

PAT FIACCO HAS A KNACK for stepping into rings and achieving results.

The boxing ring was home for the Regina mayor during his youth—he won Canada's amateur bantam weight crown in 1980. Twenty years later he entered the political ring and defeated the incumbent mayor with a knockout punch at the polls in the election of 2000.

Then age 38, Fiacco assembled a campaign team from his Kinsmen Club and the sporting community, none with any political experience. They canvassed the community and concluded four key issues were on the minds of citizens: property taxes, affordable housing, economic development and crime.

"If those were the four areas of interest to the community, then I wasn't hearing it at city hall. The attitude was almost, 'Things are pretty good the way they are.' Status quo was not an option for me, and it was time for a change," says Fiacco.

Now, with his second term (he won by acclamation in 2003) ending in October, the mayor's leadership and vision have clearly taken hold. Opinion leaders and stakeholder groups seem to be on the same page as the mayor and council governing the city of 200,000 residents. Fiacco was born and raised in Regina and worked as the Director of Strategic Business Development at Direct West before entering politics.

A longtime community volunteer with a range of organizations, he has also had an illustrious career in the sporting world.

A former provincial and Canadian amateur boxing champion, Fiacco has served as a former head official with Boxing Canada.

His love of boxing has also taken Fiacco into the realm of international sports. One of his more memorable achievements was serving as Canada's referee and judge at the 2004 Olympics in Athens.

Fiacco and his wife, Angie, have three children.

Locally, the mayor may be best known as the force behind the successful four-year-old I Love Regina campaign. "We must love our own city before convincing outsiders to feel the same way," says the mayor. "The purpose of I Love Regina is to create a sense of pride in our community to counteract the typical Saskatchewan way—humbly going along doing the great things we do. That's not good anymore. People have to know about Regina if our city wants to compete on the economic development front with the rest of Canada and North America."

The crusade galvanized civic pride from the start. The familiar I Love Regina logo can be seen on lapel pins, licence plates and clothing. I Love Regina will soon be heading to the next level as the campaign is taken outside the city to promote tourism, economic development and trade.

The Mayor's Task Force on Regina's Future promotes community spirit in another way. The task force helps the city strike a pragmatic balance between social and economic development policy. Fiacco brought together about 20 different community organizations, ranging from the Regina Regional Economic Development Authority to the United Way of Regina and many groups in between.

"Essentially, the entire community is part of the task force that meets monthly to focus on our priorities. What's really interesting is that the members from the social development areas provide input on economic development and vice versa," he says. "The whole group truly understands we need both parts to be a sustainable community."

Fiacco proudly points to other positive changes since he became mayor. Building permits for downtown projects totalled



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Mayor Pat Fiacco on one of his many visits to area schools, here with Grade 1 and 2 students at a Regina elementary school.



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nearly \$48 million in 2005, a record 10-year high. Regina achieved the highest economic growth rate in Canada in 2004 and the fifth highest in 2005.

As Chair of the Regina Board of Police Commissioners, Fiacco is pleased about recent significant reductions in total property crimes and some crimes against persons. “The car theft capital of Canada” is a title the city has been happy to surrender.

He has also led efforts to develop constructive relations between city hall and the First Nations community. “We have a large inner city First Nations and Métis population. I decided to visit the reserves in our area to meet with chiefs and discuss issues facing band members living in Regina,” says Fiacco.

“We want to ensure services exist to help them integrate into the community.”

During Fiacco’s tenure, the mayor’s office has become more accessible to the community. Fiacco literally opens his door once a month to anyone wanting to talk with him in person—no appointment is necessary. Fiacco’s blog on the city’s website; his school visits; his SpeakOut Line, a direct voicemail he checks everyday; and the “Mayor for the Day” program for kids are other tools he uses to advance openness.

When it comes to the city’s finances, Fiacco does not subscribe to a single strate-

Mayor Fiacco has parlayed his lifelong love of boxing onto the international stage. Here he is seen in action as Canada’s official referee and judge at the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens, Greece.

gy. “Tax and spend makes no sense. It’s not our money; it belongs to the citizens. In some cases, pay as you go makes sense. But in other cases, borrowing money could be the strategy, based on circumstances,” he says. “If a municipality, for example, needs to invest huge sums in its water plant, it can’t pay as you go. You need a long-term plan that might include borrowing. After all, we are responsible to our citizens — we don’t want to put their health at risk.”

His greatest challenge, shared by his FCM colleagues, is the lack of sustainable funding for municipalities.

“There’s a tremendous fiscal imbalance when it comes to the three orders of government; 92 per cent of Canadian taxes go to provincial and federal governments’ coffers. You cannot rely on property taxes to provide required services. Revenue from property tax just doesn’t grow with the economy.”

Fiacco is able to share those financial concerns with colleagues across the country on a regular basis. He is Chair of FCM’s

Big City Mayors’ Caucus (BMC), made up of Canada’s 22 largest cities. He sees FCM, the provincial/territorial municipal associations and BMC playing key roles in communicating the need to change the fiscal imbalance.

“I’m privileged to be the Chair of the Big City Mayors’ Caucus, but I’m just as privileged, frankly, to be around the table with such talented mayors who are so passionate about their respective communities and about Canada,” he says. “I think we’ve been able to provide focus on the challenges that are facing Canada.”

While he’s looking forward to more municipal challenges in 2006, Fiacco says, on a personal note, that Regina city council members are still dealing with the tragic loss of popular long-time Councillor Mike Badham.

Badham, who died in a highway accident in late January 2006, will be missed for his many contributions to Regina, the Saskatchewan Urban Municipalities Association (SUMA) and FCM, says the mayor.

“Mike and I had a very good relationship both personally and professionally,” says Fiacco. “He took me under his wing when I became mayor and was very willing to educate me and other new council members.”