

YYC Mayoral Showdown 2025

Luncheon Fireside Chat Series

May 15, 2025, Luncheon with Brian Thiessen: Summary of Discussion

Brian Thiessen's Opening Remarks.

Calgary is facing a full spectrum housing supply crisis, and that includes the rental market. Rents are rising, inventory is tight, and the process to bring new units to market, whether purpose built or secondary, is frustratingly slow. Landlords and developers face red tape delays and inconsistent policies. Renters are struggling to find stable and affordable options. But this isn't about buildings. It's really about people. Calgarians are being priced out and pushed out, and that's why we introduced last week a whole new housing strategy, and we're saying very clearly, housing and rentals must be Calgary's first priority.

The Calgary Party believes in market solutions. We don't need more red tape or symbolism, we need systems that work and policies that unlock development. Renters are struggling to find stable and affordable options. But it isn't about buildings or policies. It's about people. It's about Calgarians being priced out of rentals and housing. So our vision for Calgary is rental housing that is valued as equally as home ownership, not just in policy, but in perception and investment. We need an opportunity to breathe new life into Calgary's mature neighborhoods, areas where population decline has left schools under enrolled, small businesses struggling, and communities losing their vitality. These neighborhoods are ideal for respectful density and secondary suites, town homes, and backyard units that increase rental supply while preserving the character of the community.

We also envision a strategic density in key areas of the city along transit corridors like McLeod Trail, University District, the Rivers and Crossroads market, these areas can become vibrant, mixed use, high density rental hubs, much like the success we've seen in East Village. At the same time, Calgary's new suburbs are already evolving. We're seeing more townhomes, laneway homes, and low rise apartments, many of which are ideal for rentals. This shows that Calgarians are embracing diverse housing options. The market is moving in the right direction, and now it's up to us to clear the way so these projects can happen faster and with fewer barriers for everyone, from small landlords to large scale developers.

So how do we get there? How do we unlock more rental housing faster? Well, last week, the Calgary Party introduced our 3331 permitting framework designed to bring speed and predictability to Calgary's development process. It is three days for home renovations, including rental suite upgrades and accessibility improvements. Today, those take between 10 to 12 weeks. Next, three weeks for new single family homes and townhouses that meet zoning requirements. This currently takes about three months. Three months for midrise, for multifamily housing projects with zoning in place, and that's currently about four months. And one year for high rise or community scale developments that require land use changes. Right now that takes between 14 to 24 months. These are the kinds of reforms that rental providers like you have been asking for. Faster approvals mean better affordability. Predictability attracts more investment and fewer delays mean more units coming online sooner.

But that's not all. We are also committed to clear zoning rules for rental folks, focused developments support for small landlords, many of whom are struggling to keep pace with the rising costs and regulatory complexity and the development of walkable transit connected Rental Communities from the outset, ensuring that renters have access to the amenities and infrastructure they need. Our permitting approach will be digitally enabled, business paced, and builder informed, no more bureaucracy that holds up urgently needed rental supply. We believe in market driven solutions. We don't need more red tape. We need systems that work and policies that unlock development. The Blueprint is here. The urgency is real and the time to act is now. Together, we can build rental communities, make Calgary more affordable and create housing options that fit every stage of life. This is about more than just solving a housing crisis. It's about building a city where renters, landlords and developers all thrive, a city where every Calgarian has a place to call home. Thank you for the work that you all do every day to support Calgary's rental housing market. I look forward to working with you to make this vision a reality. Let's get to work. Thank you.

Q1: Why are you running for Mayor of Calgary? And why should we vote for you?

So why don't we start with the fact I'm more experienced - 30 year career in managing everything from Fortune 500 companies to managing a law firm that I took you know, increased its profitability by 40%; took it from sixty lawyers to one hundred lawyers over a four year period. So I've successfully run businesses. The single biggest line item on city council budget is the Police Commission's budget, which I chaired and was named Citizen of the Year for my work at the Police Commission. That's a hundreds of millions dollar budget where I had to walk through and present budget to city council every year. Got intimately knowledgeable with the budget process at City Hall and how City Hall works. Then we attracted candidates. We've got three or four of them that actually work within city hall right now, so understand the mechanics of City Hall. Our housing

policy is drafted with the assistance of sitting city councilors that have spent 15 years in urban design. So I would say, you know, I'm pretty experienced, far more experienced than many of these councilors were when they took on those jobs in the real world of working with real businesses and building profitable businesses. I'd put my resume up against any of theirs any day. So I'm pretty comfortable on those and guiding large organizations and in organizational change.

I worked on the Suncor/PetroCanada merger, I worked on the CNOOC acquisition of NEXIN, so 1000s of employees in two organizations where you put them together and you try to figure out how to bring culture change to an organization. Again, I did that at City police when I was brought in in 2016 and we changed the culture from trying to emulate the U.S. use of force model, to community policing model, right? And so first of all, we brought in, we issued the direction that we wanted to see CPS proceeding. We had to change out senior leadership within the organization, and that's what I was talking about with, the characteristic approach. I have a lot of experience in guiding organizations. And you know, I hear people talk about city admins not working. You should go in and fire them all. That's not my experience with organizational change. My experience with working with large organizations is you set a clear directive from the board on how you expect them to proceed. That is what city council is supposed to be. They are supposed to be the board that is issuing direction to city admin, who accomplishes the mission and is measured quarterly on how they progress. Right now, city admin manages city councilors. So I'd set a clear direction, set a strategy I expect them to implement. We reward the people who produce creative solutions for how to improve the process. And if they don't implement, then we use the stick approach. Some people will have to go and you have to, you have to replace them with people that understand that the mission is public service, moving at the speed of business and actually getting stuff built. And I can tell you that I have achieved that type of work. I get brought in in crisis mode with large organizations like Hockey Canada when they're in a crisis mode. And I advise, you know, I brought in, you know, brand new CEO, replaced the entire board of directors, and set a new culture for that organization. That's my day job. So I think it's more arrogant for people to run that have run for council or sitting on the current Council, to have taken those jobs with no real world experience, then for me to come in with my real world experience and think I can run this organization.

Q2: If you had been on Council at the time, how would you have voted regarding Blanket Rezoning (RCG) across Calgary and why?

So the short answer to that is I was in favor of trying blanket rezoning. And the reason I spoke out in favor of trying it as a private citizen, because I wasn't on this council, was because we have a housing supply crisis. And so in a housing supply crisis, if you're in a

flood, you don't argue about the esthetics of the neighborhood that are ruined by sandbags. We have a desperate need for more housing . And I thought it was worthwhile trying Blanket rezoning, and it is worthwhile, because it spreads development across the city and neighborhoods across the city. I will tell you that this council completely dropped the ball on the rollout. On the one hand, you had the mayor that was promoting it as the solution to housing development, which is not. It really results in about two thousand more units throughout the city, and on the other hand, you had Community First councilor Sharp and Clayton saying that it was pouring gasoline on the fire. And it's not that either. At the end of the day, there were ninety-eight recommendations for increasing housing supply that were brought forward by admin in that report, Blanket zoning was one of those tools. And what we've said since then is, let's try it. There's a housing committee at city council. Let's refer to them if people are upset about it if it's not working. Let's refer those comments to the housing committee and give them 18 months to see where it's at. And if we can fix it, let's fix it. If we can't fix it, let's repeal it and move on to the other ideas that help with zoning. I'm a practical person. I focus on what's working to help us build housing supply, and so I think that this Council's been very distracted by the zoning debate and isn't focused on actually building housing supply, and that should be all of our priorities.

Q3: You talked about community input. There were a record number of citizens at city hall voicing their concerns about blanket rezoning. How do you plan to engage the community and how can that be done effectively so that their voices can in fact be heard?

Yes. I mean, that really comes down to how Council mismanaged the discussion on open zoning. It's happened in every city in North America. Every city in North America has adopted some version of open zoning. But what they did is the cart went before the horse. They planned to roll it out. They pretended to consult with the public, and then they rolled out brochures approving it before the public actually had input on it. So now people are rightly a little bit concerned, right? Because city council had made up their minds, and I can tell you, on both sides, like Sonia sharp and Dan McLean, who were against open zoning, they were very dismissive of people who were pro zoning at council, the mayor and the pro open zoning people were very dismissive of those who raised ballot concerns.

That's why we are saying we can address it. We can listen to people's concerns. We can have a housing committee at city council that can address concerns on density and infrastructure support. So we'll listen. The short answer is, we'll listen to Calgarians. We'll feed it into our process, and we'll see how we can improve it. People do need to remember, though, like you know, we've rejected projects like Glenmore Landing, right? So the Glenmore Landing Project met all the city's key points. It was on a high transit bus

line, rapid transit bus line, mixed use, density, affordable units, commercial units on Glenmore Landing. And you know, the Haysboro community showed up, and you know, ten people opposed it, and city council killed that project, right? So, you know, Councilor Sharp invited RioCan to come back after that. Well, RioCan builds housing across Canada, they're not coming back. When you reject building projects that meet all of the criteria of city council, and you get rejected on zoning grounds because a couple of people in the neighborhood are upset, that investment doesn't come back. And when you're talking about neighborhoods like Haysboro, it's at about 30% of its peak density. What I mean by that is one hundred by fifty foot lots with two people living in the home, it's actually declined significantly in population from when there were families attending schools in those neighborhoods. So when we talk about increasing density in those neighborhoods, you're really talking about returning them to the type of density they had 20 - 30 years ago, when they were at their peak population. They are massively underpopulated at this time. So there is not a lot going on there that isn't palatable to this group as a rental Association that's looking to build more properties, increase the taxpayer base for the neighborhood, and bring a lot of amenities to the neighborhood. But it has been communicated very poorly, and now we're going to have to clean up that mess, right? We're going to have to step back, we're going to have to get people's feedback, which should have been done in the first place, and see how we can fix it.

Q4: Calgary's housing strategy was developed and approved back in September of 2023. And one of the recommendations proposes that the city investigate rent control used in other jurisdictions and provide a summary to the Alberta government. So my question is pretty straightforward. Do you support investigating and/or implementing rent controls in Calgary?

You know, I'm not a rent control advocate, and the reason for that is that, I mean, I'm a free market capitalist. We build the supply that is required for the market. I think rent control doesn't succeed in achieving what we need. There needs to be a balance. You know, BC has had some pretty extreme examples, and I think a lack of success with rent controls in the BC market. And you have to keep in mind, you know, the province has land title under the land titles Act, there are remedies under the provincial legislation for removing, for example, bad tenants on the eviction side, so there are some tools that exist for landlords in the structure, but on the rent control side, I think you build more supply.

Q5: The City of Calgary offers programs like the Housing Incentive Program, providing funding to non-profit affordable housing providers. Discussions are ongoing about extending similar incentives, such as tax rebates or grants, to private developers to encourage the construction of purpose-built rental housing. Do you support extending financial incentives to private developers for rental housing projects?

I'm more a favor of, again, market capitalism. I'm more in favor of creating an environment, an environment that incentivizes building, commercial and residential development across the board by reducing the cost of everyone engaging in construction, as opposed to municipal incentives. There are some on the affordability side, I would say, like actual social housing or affordable units, as opposed to affordable across the spectrum, there has been some success with property tax exemptions for some affordable units. I'm not against exploring that, but the solution is found in creating an environment that allows everyone to build faster and more cost effectively than providing incentives for purpose built rental properties.

Q6: Calgary's property tax rates are determined annually, with recent budgets proposing increases to fund city services and infrastructure. Balancing the need for revenue with the goal of maintaining affordability for homeowners and renters is a key concern. How do you plan to manage property tax rates to ensure affordability for both homeowners and renters, while maintaining essential city services?

Yeah, I mean, it's a tricky environment, and that's why, you know, the Calgary Party actually started with an online budget exercise. So we actually broke down the City's budget, which, by the way, is more complex if you try to understand it than understanding the provincial budget. So we actually broke it into seventeen categories. We put it out online in November, and we put it to Calgarians the seventeen categories of costs that you could expend on property tax. What would you prioritize? And it was a really useful exercise because everyone starts at the same point I do, and that is, I would like zero property tax increase, right? Like we're, we're all the same. In fact, some of the candidates for mayor, are just like, "I'll never raise property taxes" but here's why that doesn't work. Calgarians actually came back and said, "These are our priorities. If it's fire or safety, we're willing to accept a certain property tax increase if it's a choice between those. If you have a 0% property tax increase pledge, like one of my opponents, and you have a critical water infrastructure break then and a \$250 million replacement project, you have no room in your budget to plan for emergencies. So I always think, I know I'm a fiscally conservative type. You balance your books first. We have to, City Hall has to be accountable for every dollar they spend, and they need to manage it wisely, but then we need to spend it on the priorities of Calgarians.

When we talk about property tax, I have to say, I find it amazing in Alberta, where you can walk down the street and people will talk about transfer payments to Quebec, and how our tax dollars fund daycares in Quebec, and nobody talks about the fact that 1/3 of Calgarians' property tax dollars every year go to the province in Edmonton, and we never get it back, and that's despite the fact that the province has a multi-billion dollar surplus. They have income tax, they have royalties, they have all kinds of sources of income. So to get to the full answer your question, we could do all of the things we are promising in our platform and not raise property tax if the province just let Calgarians' property tax dollars be spent in Calgary by the Calgary municipal government.

Q7: What role do you see the City playing in expanding supportive housing initiatives?

Yeah, I mean, the number one thing that the City absolutely has a role in, as does the federal government and the provincial government, is expanding supportive housing initiatives. I was asked this weekend in an interview to talk about some of the federal policies on affordable housing, and some of them are actually pretty good: they're talking about using federal lands, I think the number one opportunity for affordable housing is federal, provincial and municipal lands being put forward in the city to build affordable housing projects. That's a great idea. The one I get a little leery about is when the federal government talks about getting into the affordable housing building business. I think that we can do a better job of, you know, if we provide the lands, we provide faster approvals and let the private sector build affordable housing. I think there's lots of room for that supply to be built if we create good process for affordable housing. And then, you know, there are some ideas I'm going to explore, like property tax exemptions for affordable units in places, but yes, affordable housing is a significant priority for the city, the province, and the feds. And I heard someone at the back asking whether the property tax piece is constitutional. Did I hear that right? Well, it's not so. The weird thing in the Canadian Constitution, sorry I put on my lawyer hat, is that there are only two orders of power in the federal constitution. There's the federal and the provincial. And so the province constantly reverts back to municipalities. Municipalities weren't the significant order of government that they are today. But the property tax piece is a negotiated part of the charter agreement between the municipalities in Alberta and the province, and it can be renegotiated at any time. And in fact, it has been renegotiated, so we can negotiate our share of the property tax piece with the province at any time. And I would propose that the next provincial election in two years is a great time to negotiate that when the UCP and the NDP are in Calgary looking for your vote again. Calgary will decide the next provincial election. I think as Mayor of Calgary with my council, that's a great time to negotiate with the province on our share of the property tax for Calgarians.

Q8: Is there anything else that you would like to bring up that hasn't been discussed yet, or that you would like to elaborate on before we get to the actual Q and A session?

There's a lot of talk right now about us, tariffs and supply chain logistics, and there are some real, concrete things that the city can do, one of which is, we have building suppliers like ATCO that are investing heavily in prefabricated buildings. ATCO can build a fourplex, prefabricated fourplex in three months right now, and they've tried to do it. And I'll tell you, when I met with ATCO and talked to them about it, we can build these in three months. The problem is they get hung up at City Hall for 18 to 24 months to get the approvals for us to build the same unit in multiple places. And so we have, you know, it's back to the streamlining point. But you know, companies like Echo, that are in Calgary, companies that are building prefabricated housing that help us dramatically on things like tariffs. They say, listen, we're going to build one thousand units in the next couple of years. We'll either build them in Medicine Hat or in Calgary, but we're going to build them in the jurisdiction that actually gets that they have real responsibility to streamline the process and is actually serious about building housing. And that kind of reinforces my point about how important streamline process is and it also are some of the tools that we can use. We also, nobody talks about the feds, the province, the City of Calgary. All talk about we're going to put all this money in, we're going to dedicate all this land, and nobody's talking about the labor supply. I'm sorry, I'm a Labor Employment lawyer. We have a massive shortage of skilled workers that we need to invest in. So that's everything from state to immigration policy. But we, you know, when you talk to people who actually build the houses, they will say, where are all these workers going to come from? So that gets to a provincial issue you know. If one good thing comes out of what's happening south of the border, it will be if we can get the provincial governments to remove inter provincial trade barriers. The Fed Conservatives and Liberals agreed on that point. There is a real opportunity right now for us to remove those barriers and allow skilled workers from other provinces to work here seamlessly, and also to reform our immigration policy to bring in skilled workers so we can build the housing supply we actually need.