

Thode at Lake Blackstrap

A Community for Families, A Community for the Future



A Blackstrap Community



A Message for Thode

..July 25th, 2024

Some Reflections from the Mayor and Pondering about Tomorrow

THE THODE DYNAMIC – MAKING PLANS WORK

...with great teams we can make great things happen,

..*from Alan Thomarat – A Note to the Community – Sharing Memories, Ideas and Thoughts on our Future*

I sincerely hope that this letter finds you and yours well as we live through the heat and smoke that's now covering a lot of our region. While we are careful in the smoky conditions, we all enjoy the outdoors in summer because we know winter will be back, and far too soon. We hope too that everyone is getting a chance to reconnect with family, friends and neighbours this summer as we enjoy one of the Provinces best kept secrets, *the beauty of Lake Blackstrap and enviable lifestyle we have here in Thode* . Summer is here, the lake looks amazing and our community is vibrant. We appreciate what we have and I always look forward to working together to care for this community, making it better for generations to come.

Working as a Team, caring for our community builds a team that unites our community and helps our community grow stronger. Dividing and criticizing only takes time and holds us all back.

I may be a little reflective as I recall how much we have been able to accomplish in the last fifteen years and even how much we changed this place from what it was 23 years ago when we moved here. Some of you have been here longer while others have just moved here. To all of you, I offer this reminder; - in our Region, we are the smallest of all the communities but no matter how it's measured, we over-perform, we over achieve and we punch way above our weight, over and over and over. I will say too that it was never a high priority for me to worry about popularity, I worried about Thode.

What was always more important to me than being popular was to Put Thode First and Do What was Best for Thode. Because ...THODE MATTERS

2004 to 2009 - As I approach the end of over 23 years helping this community, I want to take some of your precious time to offer some context and perspective. Working 15 years as your mayor and for a term before that as one of your councillors gave me an often changing perspective as this community grew and continually faced new challenges. As this province grows and as time goes on, we do know that all we can be sure of is that, change will happen. Whether or not we are willing and prepared to adapt to change will impact each of us. Whether the community we build together will stand still or grow to its' real potential depends on each of us. *If we do nothing, nothing happens.*

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Potable Water and Waste Water Systems - As I began my time on council in late 2003 and 2004, I recall the centrepiece of our efforts was to build a potable water system for the benefit of the urban communities, the rural subdivisions and agricultural sector too. I was honoured to serve at that time as your board delegate and treasurer on the Dundurn Rural Water Utility (DRWU) and by the fall of 2006 all residents of Thode were joining our neighbours in Shields and throughout the RM of Dundurn as we could all now enjoy safe potable drinking water. Thode, Shields and the RM of Dundurn were joined by the RM of Blucher in a partnership with the Province and Canada to financially support this life changing but basic essential infrastructure investment. DRWU is now the largest Rural Water Utility in Saskatchewan.

Time for Changes - In the summer of 2009, when I assumed the role as Mayor, we were already immersed into discussions and plans for another partnership, one that would invest in new Waste Water infrastructure. This was another multi-million dollar investment (over \$12MM) in essential infrastructure supported by Saskatchewan and Canada bringing new sewer lines, force mains, lift stations, a truck dump and a new lagoon west of Highway 11 and south of the Thode Road grid into our region. To support both the water and waste-water infrastructure investments, Local Improvement Levies were approved by the council and community and these levies cost each property slightly less than \$3,000 each for water and then \$6,000 each for waste water per home. Shrewd investments for an area with a relatively sparse population base proved that we were clearly planning for future growth. After the official commissioning of the Waste Water Utility, Thode was able to liquidate its' own septic service vehicle, turning that task of pump outs over to the private sector for those that still had septic tanks. Thode then was able to use that cash to begin to invest in other public services and especially our own roads.

In Thode itself, we continued to improve services as our community was transforming from a retirement community with mostly seasonal properties. We were becoming a four season bedroom community with more and more young families. We upgraded what we called the Camp Kitchen to convert it to become our Village Centre, then we invested over \$150,000 in stabilization and product and we resurfaced our gravel road with a dust free product saving tens of thousands of dollars annually in maintenance costs. We demolished the old public washrooms and built the new four season washrooms that you see today, we installed stairs and wheel chair and baby stroller accessible ramps to the park. At the Village Centre, we built a new wrap-around deck, installed natural gas heaters and we made improvements to the beach and playground and rejuvenated the building interior.

Leasing Land to Secure our Future - In 2014, through our good relations and collaboration with the Government of Saskatchewan, we secured a 33 year lease on roughly 95 acres of Crown Land to the south of Thode and to the west behind the properties on Summerfeldt. This lease will be up for renewal in 2047 and in exchange for our stewardship as tenants we have opportunities to increase amenities that Thode

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residents can use, providing more space for quads, ATVs, dirt bikes and other vehicles while also sharing this land with those residents that wanted to walk in the natural grasslands around the residences.

Taxes are for Basic Services - We still envision future plans for walking trails and other recreational facilities on the leased land, but as with the Sport Court this is not something we want to do on the backs of taxpayers. We need our community to donate again through our Community Building Fund to help raise the money that we can use for matching grants to improve the vehicle trails and build new walking trails and rest areas. It is also important that we also consider essential and emergency services and, for that reason, plans are in place to build proper roads for fire trucks and emergency vehicles and to build an egress road for the evacuation of our community in an emergency. We shouldn't forget though this isn't part of Thode's Municipal Reserve holdings. We are tenants and the land is owned by the Crown (Government of Saskatchewan).

Demographics Brought Changes, Fresh Thinking and Expectations – Our community and the region was undergoing changes. More and more we were no longer a seasonal community. We had become a four season commuter community and we witnessed many good friends leave while young families moved here. Better services, utilities and roads brought capital costs but also we now became responsible for maintenance and legislated total quality management of the utility systems. It was no longer possible to provide these services with volunteers or contract staff. We needed to change course.

In the fall of 2015, with help from then Deputy Mayor Larry Cook, Thode committed to hiring a full time professional Operations Manager that we would train and support to gain the needed certifications for our legislated utilities maintenance requirements. That Manager, Fred Fehr is still with us today and we made an agreement with Shields to share Fred's expertise and time. However, we still needed more full time staff in both Thode and Shields so we tasked Fred to build a team that could manage all the maintenance and utilities management duties in both villages. This is a strong partnership that is now nearly 10 years strong.

Community Development Funds at Work - With out using taxes we raised over \$250,000 to build the new Sport Court that everyone sees south of the NEW Community Centre. We did all this without new taxes and with no cash calls, (no local improvement levy).

While we worked hard to continue with local improvements and maintenance and build stronger relations in the region, we continued to face challenges. We worked hard to address concerns with our regional utilities and to establish and support better fire and rescue services. The Town at about 2016 demanded that the Waste Water utility be dismantled and for more than three years we struggled through that process.

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Planning for Growth - From 2017 to 2019, we continued plans to adopt an Official Community Plan in Thode. We needed to simultaneously update our Zoning Bylaw and set the table for growth and new opportunities. We wholly own the land from the new office and maintenance centre that was build in 2020 to 2021, all the way to the causeway and because of that we have great opportunities before us. We always remain aware that we have critical needs to provide for, including building another passable and safe road 365 days a year and we needed new alternatives for entry to and exit from Thode.

We still maintained and improved our services, loaned \$65,000 to help buy a \$500,000 No 1 Fire Engine and yet didn't increase our base tax or mill rate for three years from 2017 to 2019.

Reacting to Issues Outside of our Control - By fall of 2019, a pandemic started sweeping across the globe and in Canada and Saskatchewan economies were in rapid reverse. Frankly, most resource based economies struggled since 2015 and the attack by the federal government on producing provinces and their resource driven projects had it's dampening effects across the west. Compounding all of the economic and market factors was the emergence of a pandemic across the globe. As COVID-19 took hold in Saskatchewan, businesses were being shuttered, travel was banned, and the world experienced a circumstance that was unlike anything that any of us had ever seen before in our lifetimes.

Business and Families in Thode were Hurting - I recommended that our Council reach out to help our residents who were bearing the brunt of government shutdowns. We reduced the base tax by 50%, lowered the mill rate, suspended all interest charges and held the line on utility rate increases and late fees. This saved most home-owners \$1,500 to \$2,500 in 2020. We relied on over \$100,000 of our cash asset reserves to help our community, our residents and their families.

Remembering though that we still had to deal with ongoing responsibilities, infrastructure issues and safe roads, we embarked on a multi-faceted approach to continuous improvement of our public services.

1. We continued the effort with colleagues in Ontario and support from Ottawa to bring fibre optic internet access to Thode. This amenity brought more than \$450,000 in value to the community with no cash call or contribution whatsoever from residents. This saved each home over \$4,000 in capital costs, a cost that nearly all other communities getting the same service, had to collect from each of their residents.
2. We built partnerships with Highways, the South Saskatchewan River Watershed Stewards and other agencies and ministries to further our agenda and make progress towards new safe roads, a growing community and a cleaner lake.
3. We designed and built a new 21st century, modern Administration and Maintenance Centre with only a mere 10 percent provincial infrastructure contribution but again, no new taxes and we did not impose a local improvement levy. We were creative and we managed our resources well.

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4. In 2022, we added a generator and 3 phase power for over \$50,000 at the Admin and Maintenance Centre to alleviate the frequent Precautionary Drinking Water Advisories. This also gave us back up power to support a Muster Point for residents in the event of a necessary evacuation or community emergency. All of Council supported this investment, without exception as no one person can make anything happen by themselves. Government doesn't work that way.
5. We then, in 2021 applied for access to more federal and provincial funding programs (ICIP – the Investment in Communities Infrastructure Program) to build a new and modern Community Centre valued at over \$725,000 with our community required to contribute 27% of the costs. Again, despite that we needed to contribute nearly \$200,000, we made every effort to avoid a cash call or a Local Improvement Levy.

A New Office and Shop but No Office Staff - For years our community in Thode was spoiled and we needed to move on from the steady hand of the same part time administrator, Jessie Williams that we had for over 37 years. Competence and commitment were the hallmarks of the office management of the Blackstrap Villages for decades. Thode had to increase its commitment to office management services, but this hasn't occurred without growing pains and disappointments. We knew that Council and the mayor needed to actively participate in the transition from a shared administrator with Shields in the home of the former administrator to a new office arrangement. To do this we set aside a special budget to support the extra work of councillors and the mayor that needed to be active in training and supervision while getting a new office built. We have had to train three candidates through this transition but yet, we move on and we are proud to have a skilled mentor in Pamela Wintringham, CAO and our Administrator, Krystal is quickly gaining her credentials to take over as our full time administrator in 2025.

A Strained Relationship - In 2020, despite the prevalence of COVID-19 all around the world, all municipalities proceeded with their elections. Only Thode returned a majority of councillors to office that had previous experience. Your mayor having the most and more than our neighbour municipalities combined. Our neighbours and our partners elected entirely new councils, except for a couple of councillors in the RM, that were not yet up for re-election.

Thode, in my view has been the envy of other communities but it certainly is the smallest of all and the only one that is living beside a huge intensive livestock operation. Our community has had to take stands on the operations of the ILO, of both of the utilities and the newly formed fire department, that until 2019 was a committee of the RM of Dundurn. Some of this learning curve at the other Councils has come at a cost to real people in our own community, as the new uninformed councillors from other communities criticized the way it is, rejected governance, promoted non-compliance and sought to change legally binding agreements. Many were upset with contracts that protected the interests of Thode. Yes it is true there are agreements that serve and protect Thode, but every clause serving Thode also serves every other partner in the same manner. Other communities watched and wondered how such a small community had

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such a clear vision, had a future plan and had a strong unequivocal voice with a deliberate direction for the future. The Mayor and Council of Thode works with many partners but we always work in the best interests of Thode because,

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Many hands Do make light lifting.

It Takes a Community to build a Better Community - For years, I would show up at meeting after meeting after meeting on many boards and councils, always vigilant and seeking opportunities for Thode. Recently three of us took the fight to the RM Council and last year as in many years we firmly stood up to a corporate church seeking to bully us. Two of us, a couple Saturday's ago, pushed ahead organizing and working to support and defend our community. Many of you attended an RM public hearing and Council meeting in opposition to the changes that were an attack launched to weaken Thode. If you couldn't make it, some will say "where were you?" I don't, we shouldn't say that and we shouldn't be so quick to judge. I understand. Don't worry, we were there, others from Thode were also there for everyone in Thode, because we all care. Everyone should go to the meetings they can go to, so we remain relevant and respected, but sometimes we need the help of others and that's how a team should work.

Together Everyone Accomplishes More = **TEAM**

The 211 Connector - We will continue to fight since 1991, to BUILD THAT ROAD and as a unified community, we will BUILD THAT ROAD. We were given that clear direction from our community when we received everyone in the Community Centre on more than a few occasions. We qualified for a \$185,000 Rural Integrated Roads for Growth grant and will qualify for another \$50,000 change in scope adjustment and we will press the RM of Dundurn Council to honour their commitment to acquire the land for the Thode connector.

The RM Plans Don't Work - the current Zoning Bylaw in the RM serves all communities in the region and protects economic, social and environmental interests for all communities for generations to come. Support everyone and help each other. That's how I feel about this community. I was criticized for lowering taxes, I am criticized now for my current and ongoing efforts mentioned previously. Sadly, our Deputy Mayor has been criticized for his responsibility of carrying the voice of the Mayor and Council to the broader community when the message has been unpopular. I have learned in my own engagement with many residents there is a true sense of community and appreciation when people know the facts and understand all the information for what has been done and continues to be done. Many have approached us to thank us and I am pleased to see that some have done likewise for our Deputy Mayor as he has been treated poorly and unfairly by some for his good work for Thode. We both know being on council is not a popularity contest, it is about doing what is right and what is best for our community and because ...

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CLOSING THOUGHTS AND WE WONDER

➤ ***So how may communities do you think can grow without growing the tax base***

We are fortunate here in Thode in that we have much undeveloped opportunity on some of the most valuable land in the CMA around Saskatoon. The values won't go down and the demand for people wanting to be here will continue to increase. We've been strategic and we put the infrastructure here first and we can build more amenities as we grow. There is room to grow so that taxes don't become a burden.

➤ ***If the tax base doesn't grow how do you keep from raising taxes***

The truth is you don't. We've been creative and we have been resourceful. As a result of the dispute over the ILO and road we stopped paying the RM a maintenance fee for Thode Road. We have sold small parcels of land with no value to our public services to residents and we have reviewed our asset reserve contributions to help bring relief to the tax obligations. That isn't a sustainable strategy, the school taxes always go up and we don't control that, our cost always go up and we don't control that.

Growth will bring new neighbours, new opportunities, more taxpayers and not more taxes

➤ ***Do you know many communities that built a new Community Centre without a local improvement levy?***

Thode did it because we have good relationships with senior governments and we continue to work on those relationships. Thode did it while investing in new staff, paying for staff training, paying our share for utility services and the Fire Department and incurring increasing costs for all our services as inflation, carbon tax hits our office too just like it affects all of you.

➤ ***Do you know many communities that built a new Maintenance Centre without a tax increase and a new Administration Centre without a tax increase.***

Thode Did That!

➤ ***Do you know many communities that brought high-speed fibre-optic internet service to their residents without a capital cost charge of nearly \$4,000 to each property owner.***

Thode Did That!

➤ ***Do you know how many communities built a Sport Court raising hundreds of thousands in donations and grants and build new modern four season public washrooms and didn't raise taxes to do it?***

Thode Did That!

➤ ***Do you know how many communities cut their base tax in half and reduced all other charges to residents during COVID-19 without asking for the money back like the federal government is doing?***

Thode Did That!

Don't ever let anyone tell you that you don't live in a great community that doesn't do much.

The truth and facts definitely tell a different story.

With Sincere Best Wishes To Everyone in Thode - Alan Thomarat

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Building for Growth and a Sustainable Community¹

... we worked hard to bring value to a little community with a small tax base.

For a place that some say hasn't done much in ten years there sure has been a lot going on!

➤ Community Centre Grants -	\$ 515,000
➤ Community Centre Municipal Funds ² -	\$ 178,500
➤ Water Pump-house/Muster Centre Generator	\$ 50,000
➤ Flex Network Fibre Optic Backbone to Last Mile -	\$ 402,500
➤ New Boat Launch and Dock	\$ 50,000
➤ Integrated Roads to Growth -	\$ 183,000 ³
➤ Maintenance/Administration Centre Grant-	\$ 30,000
➤ Dakota Dunes Development Grant -	\$ 5,000
➤ Asset Liquidation Initiatives -	\$ 400,000
➤ Sport Court Investment -	\$ 250,000
➤ Other Cost Prevention Activities ⁴ -	<u>\$ 560,000</u>
Total savings	\$2,624,000
Property Count in Thode	<u> /115</u>
Real Savings per house	<u>\$ 22,815</u>

¹ Not a comprehensive review of all savings - excludes water, wastewater systems commitments and contributions to DFD, accessibility enhancements and other amenities

² Sale of 141 Summerfeldt Drive

³ Doesn't include upgrade for extension of the jug handle

⁴ DFD proposed acquisition of Water Truck rejected by mayor, deputy mayor and council