Mayor Colin Basran

City of entrepreneurs

By STEVE MacNAULL
The Daily Courier

The Kelowna advantage has created a city of entrepreneurs. Knowledge, opportunity and lifestyle are driving our economy," Mayor Colin Basran said in his state-of-the-city address Wednesday at a Kelowna Chamber of Commerce lunch. "Such an enviable lifestyle attracts entrepreneurs and we want to build on that momentum.

For the city's part, Basran said rules and regulations are designed to be flexible and efficient in order for entrepreneurs to set up shop in Kelowna, grow, hire and create. "Such an approach has led to back-to-back Open For Business Awards from the B.C. government's Small Business Round Table," he said.

The Kelowna advantage is an educated workforce, an international airport, high-speed fibre-optic Internet, attractive lifestyle and that entrepreneurial spirit. It attracts yet more entrepreneurs who set up businesses in everything from retail and tourism to professional services and high technology.

"It's an outdated myth the only work for young people in Kelowna is seasonal in the service and tourism sectors," said Basran, who was elected the city's youngest-ever mayor in November at the age of 37.

Ten per cent of young workers work in the knowledge economy and the professional, scientific and high-tech sector in the city has grown 138 per cent since 2004. Everyone seems to know about high-tech success stories such as Club Penguini, QRIS Technologies, Catalyst Healthcare and Procera Software.

However, here are many more smaller companies in all sectors, not just high tech, that drive the economy.

While a city needs a strong, diversified economy to grow and prosper, Basran said it must be done in tandem with strong neighbourhoods and a sense of community. That's why Basran touted the quality services the city delivers to its citizens for a well-balanced community.

"It's the city's evolution," he declared. "Such an environment has created the confidence for a myriad of projects, both private and public. Private construction includes the new interior health headquarters downtown, a highrise hotel at the foot of Bernard Avenue, the Grand Illusion beside the library and the Lucaya and Sopa Square highrise condominiums. Public projects include the new police station at the corner of Richter Street and Clement Avenue, parkades downtown, phase two of Stuart Park, fibre-optic infrastructure to serve public institutions and business and the Queensway Transit Station.

Like everyone, the mayor is concerned about how the drop in oil prices and the slowing Alberta economy will ripple into Kelowna. "We haven't felt any impact yet, but there are 5,000 workers who live in the Okanagan and commute to jobs in the oil patch and the slowdown could affect them and Kelowna airport, which they use to get to and from work," he said.

"Albertans also buy real estate here, but, hopefully, the market will sustain with local move-up and first-time buyers." The mayor went on to say Alberta's troubles are a stark reminder of what can happen when an economy is too dependent on one commodity.

"Kelowna has a diversified economy and that will serve us well," he summed up.