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Business welcomes new mayor

Katz brings better image, better attitude to city

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FOR a long time now, there has been a refrain from the business interests of Winnipeg that the city needs a better image and a better attitude.

And it was as if Sam Katz's up-beat attitude magically washed over the business community following his landslide mayoral victory Tuesday because there was an awful lot of love and goodwill out there yesterday for Winnipeg Goldeyes owner.

Granted, much of the business community had already been riding the Katz bandwagon throughout his election campaign. But perhaps because his campaign was so short and there were so many other veteran politicians in the race who had a credible chance of success, it was hard to be certain the business community was as supportive as it clearly seems to be now.

Katz's friend and colleague, Sandy Shindleman, who is also a partner in the Winnipeg Goldeyes, has long bristled at the unnecessarily challenging process real estate developers like him are forced to endure in order to undertake new projects in Winnipeg.

"In general, I think Sam Katz's victory spells a new era for being open for business," Shindleman said in an interview yesterday. "We think it is a good thing to take the city from regulatory mode to a facilitating mode. It's going to be a signal to regain our place in the hierarchy of cities for Canada."

Probably much more so than Susan Thompson, who was arguably the city's last pro-business mayor, Katz is a well-known character among the powers-that-be in the business community. Whereas Thompson owned a store and was active in the Winnipeg Chamber of Commerce, Katz has done business with and partnered with many business people.

Katz has also probably been one of the most popular speakers on the rubber chicken circuit. And despite his contention that he is not a politician, he is probably better at remembering people's names than most politicians.

Bob Silver, chairman of Destination Winnipeg, (and co-owner of the *Free Press*) was clearly pleased with Katz's win.

"He's a friend of mine," Silver said. "This is going to be very interesting."

In separate conversations, he and Stew Duncan, Destination Winnipeg's CEO, both spoke about how Katz's interests in growing the economy, increasing tourism, and improving the attitude and image of the city mirror the goals of Destination Winnipeg.

"When we hear him say he wants to get Winnipeg open for business, open for growth, supportive of young people, interested in building partnerships, revitalizing downtown and being fiscally responsible and results oriented... it is all right in line with our efforts and actions," Duncan said.

There are some who acknowledge that Katz might need help sweating out the details, but as one business person said, "that's what the bureaucracy is for."

Indeed, while his apparently shallow grasp of the details of the myriad of issues at city hall was a source of some embarrassment early in his campaign, clearly many business people were unconcerned about that.

As one pointed out, "Before the ballpark was built there were a lot of detractors. Now people will say it's the best thing in the city."

While there is more to that change of heart than just excellent marketing, there is no denying Katz possesses those skills.

In a telephone interview from Green Bay, Wis., Arni Thorsteinson, president of Winnipeg-based Shelter Canadian Properties, said, "I was delighted to hear that Sam won. He has a great love and understanding of the city and that is an important thing. He does have great marketing and promotion abilities and that's what being mayor is all about."

In conversation with several business people, some of whom would be considered to hold traditional pro-business political views, there was almost unanimous acknowledgment that Glen Murray was also a good communicator and a good promoter of the city.

Stew Duncan and others also talk about the fact there is a buzz about the city and there is some momentum.

Glen Murray got his picture on the cover of national magazines and helped inculcate an image of Winnipeg as being a smart, creative place that is trying to re-think the way it deals with some of its challenges.

There are many who believe Katz's chutzpah and glass-is-half-full attitude will be a timely shot in the arm to the city that some say is already on a bit of a roll.

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