



Four years ago, Michael Kazda was the new kid in town, and the caution he received from some quarters wasn't unlike what one might give a child starting at a new school where relationships are already long-established.

MAKING TRACKS

Four years into his role at the helm of EllisDon's Edmonton office, Michael Kazda is embarking on the biggest project of his career

By Ben Freeland

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ADAM GOUDREAU

"I was warned at the start that Edmonton is a hard scene to break into," says the EllisDon vice president and Alberta and Saskatchewan area manager.

To some extent, the advice rang true. Carving out a niche in Edmonton's densely populated construction scene has been a rewarding challenge, he says, but a challenge nonetheless.

"They say you need to know at least 200 people here before you're truly 'in.' But I've been truly fortunate that in this landscape you're always mixing with great people from all corners of the industry, and that you have great organizations like the Edmonton Construction Association that give you opportunities to network and build relationships.

"I've also been fortunate that EllisDon has long had a firm foothold in this region, and while it may not be regarded as a truly 'Edmonton' company because its head office is in Ontario, we're a de facto Edmonton company in terms of our project footprint and our presence in the community. At the end of the day where you have your head office is largely irrelevant. About a third of our total business is done here in Alberta, where we're a major employer, and the money stays here."

EllisDon comes by its Alberta roots honestly. Its co-founder, Don Smith, was born in Provost, Alberta in 1924. Founded in 1951, EllisDon grew rapidly and achieved widespread acclaim in 1989 with the completion of Toronto's iconic Rogers Centre (then known as the SkyDome), the world's first fully retractable. In recent years, the company has made major forays into light rail, starting in 2012 when it was selected as general contractor for Ottawa's Confederation Line, the city's largest ever infrastructure project, scheduled to open in 2018.

This was quickly followed by the awarding of Toronto's massive, \$5.3-billion Eglinton Crosstown LRT project to an EllisDon P3.

Yes, that's a big list of Ontario projects. But EllisDon has long maintained an outsized presence in Alberta's capital city. With Edmonton as its secondary corporate home since the mid-1970s, the company has quietly carved out an impressive niche in the city, with structures like Commonwealth Stadium,

Canada Place, Edmonton International Airport's combined office and control tower, and most recently the new Mill Woods Library.

Now, the company is poised to undertake its biggest local construction project ever as one of the lead players in the Valley Line LRT project.

And Kazda, 55, is thrilled to see EllisDon as a key partner in TransEd.

A native of the greater Ottawa area, he grew up in the construction business thanks to his father's general contracting business. Upon completing his engineering degree at the University of Waterloo, he went to work for PCL Construction in Toronto before joining EllisDon at their Ottawa office in 2003, where he served as project manager for the company's \$128-million Royal Ottawa Hospital project and \$180-million Montfort Hospital Redevelopment project.

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After a four-year sojourn on the west coast as manager of construction for Surrey, B.C.'s Lark Group, he opted to return to EllisDon in 2012 as area manager for the company's Alberta and Saskatchewan operations, based in Edmonton.

Kazda contends that while the company is a relative newcomer to the civil and transportation sector, »



its long track record for successful public-private partnerships makes it uniquely well suited to the Valley Line project.

"We're still generally seen as a 'buildings' contractor, but we have more P3 experience than anybody else out there. This has allowed us to forge into massive civil engineering projects like these and get great results."

Kazda himself has more than a decade of P3 experience under his belt.

"When it comes to the public-private partnership model, we couldn't ask for a better partner on the construction side than Michael," says Scott McGeachy, CEO of TransEd Partners, a consortium consisting of EllisDon, engineering and construction giant (and leading partner) Bechtel, rolling stock provider Bombardier, and equity partner Fengate Capital Management Ltd., to which the city awarded the LRT contract in February.

"He has more P3 experience than just about anybody out there, and his track record for leading projects bodes well for the project and the region."

Phase one of the Valley Line, which will connect downtown Edmonton with Mill Woods, is set to open by the end of 2020.

As project manager for the construction of Edmonton's latest light rail extension, Kazda is acutely aware of the controversy that has surrounded the Metro Line, and is determined

to ensure the mistakes made during that phase of LRT expansion are not repeated.

"The process of marrying different, incompatible systems is extremely difficult, and in the case of the Metro Line you probably had too many proverbial cooks in the kitchen. But construction isn't like manufacturing inasmuch as you're not making the same thing over and over again. Every project is different and poses new challenges, some of which are difficult to foresee. All we can do is try to be smarter and more efficient with every new project we take on and learn from the past."

While the project will take five years to complete, some of the most challenging work, namely the river valley bridge and associated earthworks, will be tackled early on.

"The biggest challenges to working in Edmonton are geographic, most notably the river valley," Kazda explains, and he's also sensitive to Edmontonians' emotional connection to the river valley.

"Nobody wants to see it defaced by too many bridges and other structures. We also have to contend with fish spawning windows, as well as the clay soil in this region that's hard to build on and winters that cut into your construction season. But we're expecting to start work in the river this fall and we're

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confident that we'll meet our targets. Light rail is a tough business to be in, for all we know we could find ourselves at the butt end of some unflattering news stories three years down the road, but we're confident in our ability to get the job done right."

The scale of this project also means major opportunities for Edmonton construction firms, and the Edmonton Construction Association has served as an important connector in this capacity.

"Having Bechtel and Bombardier enter our market in partnership with EllisDon is a tremendous boon to our industry, particularly in a dipping economic climate. We were very pleased to host a TransEd group presentation at the ECA to clarify all of the significant project opportunities for our members," explains ECA Executive Director John McNicoll.

"Our role is to help TransEd create direct contact with our 43,000 registered COOLNet users in Alberta who constantly search for construction opportunities that match their companies. This is exactly the role that construction associations are designed to play, and we're very thankful that TransEd values such services."

McNicoll further adds that the partnership model exemplified by TransEd bodes well both for the success of the Valley LRT Line and the city's construction sector as a whole.

"Large-scale projects like this bring with them the largest risks and the strongest need for solid financial underpinning. TransEd represents a collaboration between three great companies equipped to navigate this high-risk territory and ensure stability. Our industry thrives when there is effective collaboration."

For Kazda, EllisDon's involvement in this megaproject speaks volumes to his company's enduring dedication to a city it considers every bit as much home as its official base of Mississauga.

"I've very much enjoyed all the moving around I've done, but Edmonton is home and I have no desire to leave. There's an edginess to this city that I haven't found anywhere else — you feel it in everything from its entrepreneurial spirit to its artistic streak. And the construction community here is absolutely outstanding. It may have felt like a bit of a closed community at first, but after four years I feel very much at home within it, and I'm not going anywhere."



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