

Andre van Schaik

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Interviewer: Winston Gereluk

Camera: Ron Patterson

AVS: I was born in Cominick, Holland, The Netherlands on December 27, 1948. I was born to Wilhemus van Schaik and Abianche Molinar. I'm the oldest of four. When I was 4-1/2 my father and mother took the chance to come to Canada and start a new life. We landed in Montreal on a boat and went across country to Edmonton, and that's basically where I lived the rest of my life. I went to various schools and graduated grade 12 at O'Leary High School. After that my dad said to me, you go to university or there's the door. I didn't know what I wanted to be yet, and I actually wanted to go out and work for a year so I could find out what I wanted to be in life. But I went to university because that way I could stay at home. I didn't have any money to leave. I went to one year of university, engineering, and spent most of the year playing bridge. That's about the only course I passed. I did write all the final exams just for fun. After that my dad kicked me out of the house. I went to NAIT, civil technology, where I got a diploma, and basically that's my education.

Q: You didn't go directly to work, you stopped to see the world. Talk a bit about that.

AVS: I spent nine months on unemployment in British Columbia. During that time I came up with this bright scheme that I wanted to travel to Australia and see the opal mines. So I saved up about \$2,000 and in 1972 left for Australia. I went on a cruise ship via Hawaii, Fiji, New Zealand, Australia. I stopped off in New Zealand and spent 3 months there, stopped off in Australia and spent 3 months there. About the time I was ready to leave Australia I only had \$440 left, which wasn't enough for a boat or plane. So I took the overland route through Asia and that was a lot cheaper. I ended up in Europe and worked in Germany for a couple of months, met my future wife there. Then I traveled around Europe for about 5 months and ended up coming home. The whole trip was 19 months. It was a changing part of my life. When I came back, that's when I decided I'd better get a real job.

Q: What did you learn on that trip? How did it complete your education?

AVS: First of all it was the various cultures that I encountered along the way, the languages. It's surprising how much a person can communicate with people that you don't even know their language, by using the international language of charades. You could talk to anybody, no matter what language the spoke, using hand signals and describing things with your hands. I was basically able to get along with just about everybody. There were times where people were trying to rob me in some of the poorer countries. We got into big discussions about, yes they needed the money, that I was considered rich, but I needed that money to get to the next location, I needed to get home. It was a very interesting 19 months.

Q: Then you came back to Edmonton and got a real job. What sort of job did you get?

AVS: I actually wanted to go work in Ft. McMurray, because that's where the big money was to be made. But I was a 118-pound weakling and nobody would hire me. I was having trouble getting jobs. I was applying everywhere, I was applying with the City of Edmonton. Somewhere I heard that the general manager of the personnel department, his name was Carl van Schaik. Carl van Schaik isn't part of our family, he's another van Schaik family in the city; there were three at that time. So I picked up the phone and called Carl van Schaik and said, Carl, my name is Andre van Schaik, you don't know me but I need a job. He asked me what my education was and my work experience. I told him. Two days later he called me back and said, Monday morning you start with the surveying area in the engineering department. I worked there for probably five summers, where I'd get laid off in the winter because they don't do much surveying in the winter and they have standard crews in the wintertime. Then I would go to school, NAIT. I investigated other jobs and I was trying to get on full time. Eventually I got on full time with surveying.

Q: Describe what kind of work surveyors do.

AVS: Basically there are three positions in surveying. One is the instrument man, the person you see behind the electronic equipment, the scope, the level, that's the instrument man. He's usually the lead of the crew. Then you have the rod man, that's the person that's walking around with that stick with the numbers on it. Then you have a third person who's basically pounding in stakes and on the other end of the measuring tape, back in those days. Today they have more sophisticated laser equipment so they don't need tape measures anymore, but you've still got to pound stakes in the ground with a hatchet, and you mark where something is going. When I was with the surveying area I laid out brand new roads, such as 137th Avenue between 127th Street and St. Albert Trail. I laid out new subdivisions in Mill Woods. Basically we were staking for curb and gutter, for construction. I've done surveying for asphaltting lanes, replacing sidewalks, I've done a bit in sewers, that kind of thing.

Q: So the survey crew comes out in advance of the people who actually move the dirt and lay the pipe and all that. So why does the surveying have to be done?

AVS: You have to have the alignment of the road according to the plan that the draftsmen have come up with. I remember the case of 137th Avenue. We were told that they wanted the road at a certain degree. I looked through the instrument at that time and realized that about two miles down the road we'd be in a farmer's field. I said, hang on, there's no use putting any more stakes in the ground, because there's something wrong here. So we had to go back in to the office. They checked their numbers and found out they'd made a mistake on the plan and that the angle was off. We had to go back in the field and okay, now it looks good. So first of all it's the alignment. Secondly, it's the up and down. How much cut are you going to need to make in the dirt before you add the gravel and the asphalt, or how much fill are you're going to need to put in. So that's

basically the markings that you'd put on the stakes, that you're going to cut .13 feet or fill .24 feet. The graders would go by that and be able to grade it pretty close to that.

Q: So you got a permanent job surveying.

AVS: That was surveying. I worked my way up from a rod man to an instrument man, and I was an instrument man for two or three years. At the same time I was applying for other positions in the City of Edmonton, trying to advance my career. I ended up getting a job with the transportation department doing traffic lights. That was a very interesting job. I was keeping track of all of the traffic light timings for all of the traffic lights in the city of Edmonton. I would go out into the field and check the timings. We would get reports from people saying, this traffic light was out overnight, and I would go out there with Edmonton Power and check the timings once they got it up and working again, to make sure it was correct according to the schedule that had been produced. Over time I actually got involved in setting up timings for new traffic lights, where you'd actually go out and do a road count. You'd sit in your car with a counter in your hand and you'd count the vehicles in each direction during rush hour traffic. We also did pedestrian crossings, count the number of pedestrians to see if that location warranted a set of pedestrian lights as opposed to other locations, other customers calling in and complaining that some child is going to get killed here. Of course the budget only allowed for a certain number of lights, so we had to set the priorities for which ones went in.

Q: Approximately what years were they, and how busy was it?

AVS: I got that job in the late '70s, probably '76 to '78. The council budgeted for roughly 30 traffic lights in Edmonton, so we had to decide where to put these in, which intersections needed it the most. We'd go by accident reports and whatnot. Most of the work was done during the summer because that's when EPCOR did the construction. The winters were slow. We'd continue to get complaints from the public whether it was summer or winter. Once the 30 traffic lights were done, that was the end of our budget, so we didn't have to do any more planning that year. But there was always book work and accounting type of things to do. But it didn't seem rushed. I really enjoyed the job. I was allowed time to do things properly.

Q: So it wasn't as rushed as it was in 2006 and 2007 when the big expansion was going on in Edmonton.

AVS: I imagine it got a lot worse as the city grew. The other thing I was involved in is when the LRT came into effect. I was asked by my boss to design new sets of traffic lights for 112th Ave. & 86th St., 112th Ave. & 82 St., 82 St. & 115th Ave. That's basically the triangle because that's where the LRT line was coming through. People may not realize it, but before that LRT came through, that was a traffic nightmare in that area. With the LRT coming through, the City was planning on doing an underpass under the LRT, because of the traffic problems and with the crossing of the LRT every six or seven minutes they thought that would really tie it up. My boss asked me if I could design a system with those three lights that would at least handle to the best of our ability the

traffic until such time as that underpass went in. We got a student from the University of Alberta to assist us. He was a pretty brainy guy and he and I worked on various solutions. We came up with this really neat idea that we would make traffic stop at one of those lights but let them go through the next one. While the traffic was stopped, that would be coordinated with the LRT going through. So they'd only be stopped once, they wouldn't be stopped at the light and then the LRT as well. It took us about six months but we came up with this idea. To this day there's no underpass there because we did such a good job.

Q: Talk about what you did next.

AVS: At that point in time I was with an engineer; I reported to an engineer there. The engineer was talking about going into private industry, creating his own company and putting up traffic lights and street signs and highway signs, paint lines, all those things to do with traffic in Alberta. He asked me if I wanted to be a partner in his company and I said, sure let's give it a try. So the two of us left the City, gave our proper notice and left the City and started our own company called Can Traffic Services Ltd. We were very successful. He's still in operation today. We put in traffic lights in Alberta, we did signs in a lot of towns or cities outside of Edmonton. We've done paint markings on new roads in Lloydminster, we did the signage at the Lethbridge airport, all kinds of interesting projects. It was funny when we didn't have any money, because a lot of these provincial governments and cities wouldn't pay you for 90 days after you did the contract, so we had to basically front all the money for the signs and whatnot, and we'd get paid later in 90 days. So for the first six months that we were in business we were in the hole a lot of money. Then after that my partner's wife saw how much money was coming in and decided that because he was an engineer and I was just a civil technologist, he should deserve 75% of the company. That's when I said, hang on here, that's not the way we started this business - you can buy me out. So he did.

Q: Why would a guy leave a job working for the City of Edmonton to work for a businessman in private enterprise? Contrast and compare what it's like working in the public sector as opposed to working in the private sector.

AVS: Working for the City of Edmonton, they have already set up the procedures, the way of doing things. You as an employee coming are pretty much forced to follow those procedures, check with your supervisor. A lot of times you can't sneeze without getting approval. Sometimes the supervisors would go with new ideas if you had a good idea, sometimes they wouldn't, depends on how stuffy the supervisor was. You have to be very careful not to criticize your supervisor, because your job could be in jeopardy. You tried to make recommendations to him but let him take the credit of they were good ideas. You of course didn't get any bonuses or rewards from the City of Edmonton, whether it was a good idea or not or whether you found a new way of doing things or a cheaper way, that didn't matter.

You didn't get any bonuses working for public sector. In the private industry, as soon as I started the job with my partner, now all of a sudden I was the chief cook and bottle washer. We had to do the accounting, we had to do the ordering, we had to do the

phoning, we had to do the sales. It was us that went to all the towns and talked to the managers there and told them about our company and how we offered our services and what we could do, what our background was. Of course we also did the installation. We would pack up the trailer behind the truck and have all our supplies in there and drive it to Lethbridge and put up our signs. So we did the installation, even at midnight we'd be working. Then after that we would do the accounting part of it to try and recoup or money. Of course you were rewarded for doing things quickly, because you made more money that way. In private industry you can make a lot of money in a hurry, but of course you're working a lot of hours. I wasn't too concerned about selling my half of the company to my partner, my friend, because I realized that I was working 11 hours a day 7 days a week. That was just too much, so that's why I wasn't worried about getting out of that and leaving the company.

Q: When you worked for the City, how would you describe the conditions of work by contrast?

AVS: The conditions of work with the City, if you're supposed to be at work at 8 o'clock in the morning and you quit at 4:30, that's exactly when you walk in the door and out the door. You have a half hour lunch or an hour lunch, depending on the circumstances; you know exactly when you're going to get it every day. Things are constant. In private industry you might not get lunch until two hours after you finish putting up those three signs. You might be driving first thing in the morning to get to the job site. You might be coming home at 11 o'clock at night. There was no time schedule other than your own. Of course your family suffers from that.

Q: So you came back to work for the City. Approximately what year was that?

AVS: I had the company from '79 to 1980, for nine months. Then all of a sudden when I sold the company I again applied with the City of Edmonton, as a building inspector. They phoned me up and said, I'm sorry, you don't meet the qualifications for a building inspector, which I already knew. They said, but we have a zoning analyst position that's open and we'd like to interview you for that. I said, well I don't even know what a zoning analyst does. They said, well you've got some very interesting history and qualifications and we'd like to interview you. So I went in and got the position as a zoning analyst I. Back in those days the zoning analyst was basically involved in the development permitting area. As a zoning analyst you were taking in applications at the front counter from customers that want to start a business, they want to build a garage, a house, etc. You were taking in applications and making decisions on minor things such as garages and decks, things of a minor nature. If you were successful you could work your way up to being a zoning analyst II, whereby you could work on more complex projects. The interesting thing about the zoning analyst positions was city council gave a lot of authority and responsibility to these zoning analysts.

Today they're called development control officers. They have given these employees the complete decision making power on an application. There are a lot of other municipalities where customers will go for a permit, and it's a committee that makes the decision. It's a

committee of professionals that would review the application and over time make these decisions, whereas in the city of Edmonton it's a development control officer. It became a development control officer position in the 1990s and our pay almost doubled. The reason that it became a development control officer position was the requirements for the position became a university degree. Any new development control officer that would be hired would have to have a university degree; the existing people were basically grandfathered in due to their long years of experience. Just to give you an idea of the decision power that City Council has afforded the development officer, the typical regulation for a front yard set back for a house to the front property line is 20' 6 meters. The development officer has the authority to relax that to zero. They wouldn't, because the eaves would stick two feet into the public road right of way, but they have the authority to do so. That's how much authority development officers have. Of course, in exercising that discretion to relax the regulation, they would have to send out notices to the adjoining property owners, and they have the right of appeal.

The development officer basically sits on the fence with an application that doesn't meet the requirements of the bylaw, and tries to figure out the impact of exercising discretion on a regulation. In other words, this customer has a peculiar site; it's this circumstance. They want to put the house four feet from the front property line. Is that in keeping with the other houses that are in that block? Is this a lot all by itself? Is it next to a school, is it next to a commercial site? All kinds of things come into it. The development officer could go out and take a look at the site to help him make that decision. Once he makes that decision, he's the one that would get the phone calls from the customers, the neighbors, that would say, have you lost your mind, or do you know what this fellow is doing? You have to very careful on how you make the decision.

The most controversial decision I ever had to make was for a soup kitchen in the Boyle Street McAuley area. This was in the old city driver training building. I went there once to get my city driver license so I know that area fairly well. I knew that this was going to be controversial, a soup kitchen. I handled that very nicely. I asked those people to come in. I had their information requirements in writing but I wanted them to come in. I had a few more questions that weren't quite covered in the submission. So I met with them and asked them, have you consulted with the community league or talked to the people around there? They said, yes , they weren't getting a very good reception from those people. I said, there's no doubt that I will be meeting with these people, because I've already got calls on your application. I haven't made a decision yet but I've already got calls, so I want to hear what their concerns might be and then I'll make my decision. So I met with the community league and the people that were most interested in this project, and I listened to their concerns. Thereafter I did a seven-page summary of my decision and attached it to my approval subject to conditions. I full expected that this would go as complaints to the alderman, so I sent a copy to the alderman for Boyle McAuley, copies of my decision. I never got a call after that decision, not one call, because I had written up a complete decision as to why I did what I did. It, however, was appealed to the development appeal board, and the development appeal board overturned my decision. That's fine with me, I don't take that personally. They have the right to overturn the

development patrol officer's decision. All I know is I made the best decision with the information I had.

Q: What is it about the work of the development patrol officers that's so important?

AVS: Basically City Council enacts bylaws as a reaction to things that are coming, that are actually happening. For instance, let's say there's a single family house and there are 20 people in that house. Obviously that's going to affect the neighbors. The city had to enact a bylaw as to how many people could legally occupy a house or a single family dwelling. They had definitions in there, and of course the development officer was still left with the authority of interpreting those definitions and going there, inspecting the house, and then taking action where action was required, and having those families moved out that didn't qualify to live in that house. Yes, you and your wife and all your children can live in that house. You could have 12 children. That's unusual these days but in the olden days they did. That would be quite normal in a single family house. But, if all of a sudden one of those children were married and had two other kids and they are now living in that house as well, and the mother and father-in-law are living in that house as well, and cousins that came from the old country are now living there, now we've got all kinds of violations. That's in the case of people living in a house. Another case that I can give you, of course you are allowed a shed in your back yard of under 100 sq. ft. and no permit required. However, I know one individual that covered his whole back yard with sheds. So if you were the neighbor you saw nothing but roofs in this person's back yard. This person was a second hand collector, he collected things from second hand stores, the dump, etc., and resold them or whatever he did with them. If you don't have bylaws things like that could continue.

If you don't have bylaws a person could put up a Berlin wall as a fence between themselves and a neighbor they're having a problem with. If you don't have bylaws you could have houses sitting right next to each other being a firetrap. That's why they make these bylaws. You could have high buildings that don't allow much sunlight into your yard. So City Council has enacted these bylaws to provide for orderly development. The development permit basically controls the height of a building, the size of a building, the location of a building, and the use of the building on the property. Once you've obtained a development permit for that building, then you get the building permit and the building permit then controls the construction of the building. Is it going to be constructed safe enough to meet the Alberta building code? That's the distinction between the two.

Q: How did the public view you? Did they understand what you just told me?

AVS: The public has a decent understanding of the zoning bylaw and the need for permits. They have a decent understanding, they don't have an in-depth understanding. But I never really met with the public. When I went out to view a site I wanted no outside influence on my opinion, on my decision. I wanted to go there, even though people would say, what time are you coming? I would say, well I'm not coming there to meet with you, I'm not coming there to meet with your reasons as to why you want this. You've already

given me that in the paperwork you've provided. I'm going there on my own to see what impact this would be.

Q: You were doing that job of development control officer for quite a while, right?

AVS: Correct, I started in 1980 up until 2001. During that time I was lucky enough to become a supervisor where I supervised other development control officers, did training, passed on some of my expertise. While I was there I helped start City Help, and that is the computer information system that is now on the city website. It's basically the most commonly asked questions and answers. At one time it started just in the planning department and then it added on with information from other departments.

Q: Tell us a bit about the union you were a member of.

AVS: When I was surveying and when I was working in the traffic light area and as a development control officer I was with CSU 52. The union during all that time only went on strike once. That was some time in the late '70s they went on strike. I wasn't involved in that strike, I left for B.C. and they could call me when it was over. I always viewed the union as getting in my way. I never had an opportunity to actually use the union for my interests. But as a supervisor I always had the union against me when I was trying to discipline employees or change the way they operated. Even though I paid union dues on a biweekly basis I never felt I got any kind of service from the union.

Q: Do you give that union credit for anything?

AVS: Oh yes, the union was helpful in getting us re-classed from zoning analysts to development control officers. They were helpful in helping us with that. They are good at protecting employees that need protection from tyrant bosses, the old style managers. Yes, the union were good at that.

Q: You were a member of that union for quite a while. Did you see any changes taking place?

AVS: Yes. I remember there was one time where, I don't normally get involved in union business, but there was a union president that wasn't very receptive to criticism or new ideas. Basically he had henchmen at the meeting that would control who got up to speak at the microphone and when they got cut off and when they got thrown out of the building. He ran the union like a Hitler and that's when everybody started uprising against this president and got him ousted. Once the new president got put in, things ran a lot more smoothly, according to the members.

Q: Why did that president act like a tyrant?

AVS: I think a person, when they're in a job for a long time, they get to see themselves as the almighty boss and they think they know better than everybody else. They want things done their way, not any new ways. They don't want to listen to new ideas, so they

protect themselves with individuals to protect their little colony, their little empire. You see that in countries, you see that in organizations.

Q: Was there an appreciation of the union's collective agreement?

AVS: With the City of Edmonton, I think employees take it for granted that they get health coverage and they get sick days and they get short term sick and long term sick at fairly good percentage of wages as compared to private industry. With the City, you can earn up to six weeks vacation a year, which isn't something that's normal in private industry. So yes, there were a lot of benefits, but when you become a City employee you kind of take it for granted that that comes with the job. You don't really recognize or realize that that probably got there due to some unions and hard working people in the past in those unions.

Q: Why did you decide to retire early?

AVS: I retired in 2001. I guess the main reason I retired was I heard there were death rates statistics, that if you retire at the age of 50 there's a good chance you'll live to an average age of 85. If you retire at 65 you're going to live an average 18 months after that. So that kind of spurred me to retire early. I was originally planning on retiring at the age of 40, my wife and I. But we gave up that plan because we still wanted to go on some expensive holidays to Hawaii, to Europe, to Venezuela, that kind of thing. We wanted to have our cake and eat it too. I did want to retire early because I've got health issues in my family and my wife has health issues in her family. We know that we don't have a lot of time to live on this earth, but if we start early at least we can enjoy it now. So that's what we did. I didn't wait until I was 65 and had my full retirement pension. I took a reduced pension, combined it with my CPP and OIS, and I'm not living high on the hog but I'm living comfortably. If you ask me, have I got enough money to live 15 years from now, I'm going to say I'm going to be in trouble 15 years from now, because that's not the way I planned it. If I live that long that would be nice, but I can see that the government's going to be supporting me 15 years from now.

Q: You enjoyed your job, but still you got away from it fairly soon.

AVS: I was a go-go-go person, very active. I didn't realize until later that I had high blood pressure. I don't know if it was the high blood pressure that caused me to go go-go-go or the me go-go-going that caused the high blood pressure. I didn't know whether I could retire. One winter we left for a month to Arizona and enjoyed a month, so the year after that I tried two months and enjoyed that. The year after that I tried three months and I realized I could actually relax and do hobbies and other things I enjoyed. Then I realized that yes, I think I can retire, I don't need work. So that's what I did.

Q: When you're working for the public sector you're open to public pressure. Did you encounter political pressure in your job?

AVS: Yes, there were occasions where my supervisor would come to me and say, I got a call from this customer, have you had a chance to review his application? I think this is approvable. I would say, yes I've looked at it and I'm leaning towards refusal because of this, this, this. The supervisor would say to me, I don't think those are major concerns; approve it. I would say, well if you want it approved, you can sign it. If I sign it I have to be behind the decision. As a development officer you have to go into a court of law and look the judge straight in the eye and say, yes this was my decision, this is my signature that's on this permit, I'm the one that made this decision. You can't go in a court of law and say, my supervisor told me to make this decision; that doesn't work. There have been cases where I've gotten calls from city counselors, aldermen, where they have asked me to approve a project on behalf of their customer, their friend. I've had to say to them, I'm the one that's making this decision. They'd say to me, well you are an employee, you can be fired if you don't make it this way. I'd say, you can try but I know that you've been elected as a counselor and alderman for four years, I have a job here for life and I'm going to make the decision that I feel is the right decision, and of course your customer can appeal that decision. You can appeal that decision if you like and you can appear before the development appeal board. As a matter of fact, aren't you on the development appeal board?

Q: You mentioned a case where the development appeal board overturned your decision for the Boyle McAuley soup kitchen. How did that happen?

AVS: The main argument from the councilors was an increase in traffic in that area. I don't know how homeless can drive. There weren't enough parking spaces on the property. Again, the customers don't drive. The bylaw, because it's considered an eating and drinking establishment, the bylaw required one parking space for every four seats. Of course there was maybe four or five parking spaces behind the building, and that was going to be enough for the staff. But the community got all the representation they could, they filled the development appeal board hearing with all kinds of people, they kept arguing parking and the types of customers that would be going through their neighborhood. The development appeal board made the decision that they felt was right. I'm not going to second guess that. I haven't lost too many at the development appeal board, but you can't have a total winning record.

Q: It seems quite clear you're going to lose when there's a powerful NIMBY factor.

AVS: Correct, you're going to lose those here and there. As a development officer, a lot of times I have to counsel the customer that I could do two things with your application. Number one, I could approve your application and send out notices to the neighbors, and the neighbors would be very upset with my decision and would probably be at the development appeal board in full force against you. Or I could refuse your application, send out notice to the neighbors because you'd be appealing it to the board, and the notice that would go to the neighbors says that the development officer refused your application, and a lot of them may not show up, because if the development officer refused it the development appeal board will probably refuse it. The neighbors probably won't be very organized and you've got a good chance of arguing your case with the suggestions I'm

going to give you. So I suggest you take my refusal. Nine times out of ten I was able to help the customer in getting approval at the board. That was another part of my job.

Q: But it's a better city because we have development control officers and bylaw enforcement officers and all those people, right?

AVS: Yes it is a better city. It would be even better if there was more of them, but budgeting allows for only so many positions every year, and yet the city keeps growing. It's a tradeoff. If you don't have the employees to enforce every bylaw and regulation, then some just don't get the attention they should. But yes, this city could certainly use another 10 officers to enforce the bylaws.

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