

GUIDEBOOK FOR PREPARING A MUNICIPAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN

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Alberta 

Guidebook for Preparing a Municipal Development Plan

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**WEST CENTRAL
PLANNING
AGENCY**



OLDMAN RIVER REGIONAL SERVICES COMMISSION



Guidebook For Preparing A Municipal Development Plan

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Introduction

As of 2017, approximately 125 of Alberta's smaller municipalities who have never had a comprehensive community plan or municipal development plan (MDP) will be preparing one for the first time.

Regardless of population size, Council is responsible for managing the community's land base. A future plan that is supported by the community benefits all. This guidebook has been written for municipalities who will be preparing their first municipal development plan. It is meant to aid the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) and Council in ensuring that the municipality meets the obligations of provincial legislation and creates a plan that benefits the community.

This guidebook reflects advice from Registered Professional Planners (RPP) from across Alberta. These individuals have many years of experience advising and working with municipalities of many sizes to meet their planning responsibilities and needs. This guidebook is meant to:

- Create understanding and appreciation of the value that a well prepared MDP brings to a community;
- Communicate the role and purpose of an MDP;
- Provide guidance on the content and information needed to prepare a plan;
- Provide advice on the process to prepare an MDP.

To this end, the guidebook consists of three main components. These are:

- An overview of an MDP in terms of topics such as its benefits, contents, information needs, and process to prepare;
- A series of sample MDPs (contained in Appendix A) for municipalities of different types with smaller populations; and
- A set of topic papers spanning a range of issues commonly addressed in an MDP, and potential linkages with capital planning and municipal asset management (contained in Appendix B).

This guidebook does not promote a "one size fits all" approach to community planning. The Alberta planning system has long recognized the unique settings and aspirations of individual communities. While municipalities can and do learn from each other's experiences, adopted land use planning policies need to reflect their individual needs and circumstances.

What is a Municipal Development Plan?

A municipal development plan (MDP) is a key policy plan that communicates the long term desired land use for your community. It is a high-level blueprint that shows how your community is expected to change over time and the shape it will take in the future. It is often described as the “view from 30,000 feet” to reflect the conceptual, big picture role of the plan.

Much like a blueprint that guides the construction of a house, an MDP helps many decision makers collectively build their shared and desired physical setting. The resource that is being managed is the land base that is occupied by all members of the municipality. This land base is typically limited and is expected to accommodate many activities and functions. This means that choices have to be made. Creating an MDP involves a process to help make these decisions, and serves as a record of the choices that have been made for the community’s benefit.

The assignment of uses or activities to specific lands influences the use of other resources and the daily lives of community members. It has an effect on:

- **Economic** considerations such as the opportunity for commercial services to set up at locations where they can succeed, and space for local industries and businesses to provide employment opportunities;
- **Social** considerations such as the ability of community members to interact on a regular basis, to access services, and the ability to meet the variety of needs within the community;
- **Environmental** considerations such as the preservation of valued natural features and the impact of human activities on the natural environment (e.g. contamination of lands), and preparedness for extreme weather related events;
- **Cultural** considerations such as setting aside space for recreational, artistic, and community gathering or assembly activities; and
- **Governance** considerations such as locations for critical services like fire and emergency response, water treatment and wastewater treatment plants, and the process for making decisions about the future use of land.

The MDP serves as a guiding policy document for future decisions regarding the use of publicly owned and privately owned land, and the infrastructure and services that are needed to support the intended uses. It is a statutory document, meaning it is adopted by bylaw and the direction it sets should be followed.

Key attributes of a well thought out and prepared MDP include:

- A long term, strategic focus on what the community wants to be like 20 or 30 years into the future; for example a desire to have a healthier commercial land base;
- Clear communication of the desired physical layout of activities and features that will be accommodated within the community’s land base; for example, Confined Feeding

Operations (CFOs), residential areas, and open space areas;

- Guidance on how to achieve the desired long term vision and the decisions that will need to be made to implement the direction contained in the MDP, such as land use bylaw designations and subdivision decisions;
- Consideration of the draw on community resources to support the land use activities and form of

development that the plan allows; and

- Decisions and directions that reflect a high degree of community consensus that balances the interests of individuals and groups with the needs of the community at large. For example, finding space for affordable housing.

What are the Benefits of a Municipal Development Plan?

The formal, legislated land use planning system has been in place in Alberta since the early part of the 20th century. Rail expansion, and later, the creation of extensive highway systems in response to increased rates of economic expansion, fueled the need to address haphazard land development and speculation throughout the Province.

Generally we plan:

- To make the most efficient use of limited resources with the primary resource being our land base;
- To minimize conflict between differing types of land uses and associated users;
- To ensure that growth and development occurs in the most efficient and effective manner;
- To preserve those features in a community which may have important environmental, social, or cultural significance;
- To acknowledge not only physical and economic factors, but social needs within a community;
- To create certainty between neighbouring municipalities and community members about what will develop and where growth will occur; and
- To become more resilient and able to respond to changing circumstances and emerging challenges.

We also plan so our future generations will have the same opportunities that we enjoy now. This is commonly referred to as promoting sustainable development

and settlement patterns that meet the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It includes such things as:

- Creating and maintaining aesthetically appealing, orderly and comfortable communities containing the amenities desired by the public;
- Considering ecological and environmental impacts of proposals in an effort to maintain a clean and healthy environment;
- Protecting and promoting the health, safety, and welfare of the public at large through the provision of key facilities and services and avoiding hazardous situations and undue risk;
- Considering development impacts on culture and heritage resources valued by the community;
- Building an inclusive community able to accommodate and respond to the needs of individuals and a variety of household types; and
- Creating confidence for private investors in knowing what the community is prepared to accept and where to confidently invest.

Finally, an MDP can benefit the community by clarifying and communicating how it approaches planning issues and what the community may see in the future. This means:

- Maintaining fair planning decision making processes in which good development can flourish and all parties can participate;

- Promoting the public interest when managing growth and development, including efficiency in the development, delivery and use of infrastructure;
- Respecting the landowner's right to the use and enjoyment of their land and restricting those rights only to the extent necessary for the greater public good and public health;
- Managing change in the community's landscape through appropriate allocation of resources for the maintenance, upgrading and replacement of infrastructure; and
- Proactively identifying areas for investment opportunities that may economically and socially benefit the entire community.

What Topics are Covered by the Municipal Development Plan?

The topics or subject matter contained in a municipal development plan are determined by the minimum legislative requirements and direction provided by your community.

Under Section 632 of the *Municipal Government Act*, a municipal development plan **must address**:

- (a) the future land use within the municipality;
- (b) the manner of, and the proposals for, future development in the municipality;
- (c) the co-ordination of land use, future growth patterns, and other infrastructure with adjacent municipalities, if not addressed in an intermunicipal development plan;
- (d) the provision of the required transportation systems, either generally or specifically, within the municipality, and in relation to adjacent municipalities; and
- (e) the provision of municipal services and facilities either generally or specifically

as well as the following provisions:

- (f) policies compatible with the Subdivision and Development Regulation to provide guidance on the type and location of land uses adjacent to sour gas facilities;
- (g) policies respecting the provision of municipal, school, or municipal and school reserves, including but not limited to, the need for, amount of, and allocation of those reserves and the identification of

school requirements in consultation with affected school authorities;

- (h) policies respecting the creation of joint use agreements;
- (i) policies respecting the protection of agricultural operations.

Section 632 also provides that a municipal development plan **may address**:

- (a) proposals for the financing and programming of municipal infrastructure;
- (b) the co-ordination of municipal programs relating to the physical, social and economic development of the municipality;
- (c) environmental matters within the municipality;
- (d) the financial resources of the municipality;
- (e) the economic development of the municipality; and
- (f) any other matter relating to the physical, social or economic development of the municipality.

Finally, Section 632 also states a municipal development plan **may contain** statements regarding the municipality's development constraints (e.g. steep slopes), including the results of any development studies and impact analysis, as well as goals, objectives, targets, planning policies and corporate strategies.

While there is a basic minimum of topics that must be covered, a municipality has a fair degree of latitude on what to include. Most land use decisions affect people in a limited, local area, so it makes sense that land use planning regulations should be created at the local level.

In practice the list of typical topics **may** include:

- *Future Land Use Patterns* - addressing the major land use or activity assigned to an area when development occurs, such as new residential neighbourhoods and new commercial development or industrial districts;
- *Growth Management* - addressing overall available land supply and amount of serviced lands available for short term growth; addressing the expected phasing of growth; addressing monitoring of development activity, and expectations about funding new development;
- *Urban Form and Design* - addressing the overall appearance of the community and its buildings and spaces;
- *Economic Development and Tourism* - addressing efforts to develop commercial and industrial activities, employment related activities, and prosperity for residents;
- *Heritage Preservation* - addressing the identification of buildings and sites related to the history of the community, and efforts to preserve and celebrate these as new development occurs;
- *Environmental Management and Community Resilience* - addressing natural areas to be preserved, use of conservation reserve, avoiding development on hazardous lands such as floodplains, and managing the impact of human activities on the environment;
- *Housing and Neighbourhood Design* - addressing the types of residential development needed for the current and future population, and the look and layout of new residential areas;
- *Commercial Development* - addressing the location and type of commercial development desired and policies to create new commercial areas. You may also address the needs of the downtown area;
- *Industrial Development* - addressing the location and type of industrial activities to be accommodated, and means to ensure these activities can avoid negative impacts on other uses;
- *Parks, Recreation and Culture* - addressing the locations and types of open space to be provided, and sites for community facilities like schools and indoor recreation venues;
- *Community and Protective Services* - addresses the provision of health and safety services for residents, as well as disaster response planning for unforeseen events;
- *Transportation* - addressing major road and transportation corridors for a variety of forms of transportation needs (vehicular, pedestrian and cycling) to ensure land is available for these functions;
- *Utilities* - addressing issues of capacity for water, waste water and landfills; and
- *Intermunicipal Planning and Regional Cooperation* - addressing matters of shared service delivery and ensuring consistency with the intermunicipal development plan.

Meeting the legislated minimums for topics does not necessarily result in a good plan. The topics to be addressed in your plan should reflect the needs of your community. This may result in different topics than those presented.

Who Uses the Municipal Development Plan?

As the main blueprint for the development and growth of the community, the municipal development plan should be targeted to many users, not just land use planners. Some users of the plan are mandated through legislation. An example is the decisions made on the subdivision of land which must comply with the direction of the MDP. Other users may not be required to follow the MDP by legislation but may benefit from being able to align their efforts with the community's long term desired future. For example, an affordable housing provider or funding agency may seek to work with the community on achieving their housing goals.

The following users of the MDP should be considered:

Community Members

Residents, property owners, and business owners should be able to consult the MDP and determine what could be happening around them and their property in the long term.

Development Community

Those wishing to subdivide and develop property should be able to determine if their plans match up with the desires of the community in terms of the types of land use activities and the intensity of development.

Council

Decisions on more detailed plans such as area structure plans, area redevelopment plans and non-statutory concept plans should be gauged against the direction of the MDP. Land use bylaw designations should reflect the long term intended use based on the MDP. The desire to make changes in the

MDP should be a discussion point during annual operating and capital budgeting. Council may also use the MDP as a corporate strategy for the planning of other municipal activities (e.g. how solid waste services will be provided).

Subdivision/Development Authority

Decisions on development permits or on subdivision approval should conform to the policy direction contained in the MDP.

Subdivision and Development Appeal Board

On appeal of a development permit or subdivision decision, the appeal board must consider the policy direction contained in the MDP. The MDP is the guiding document which provides the context for determining the appropriate course of action in reviewing the appeal.

Municipal Government Board

On appeal of a subdivision decision involving a provincial interest, the Municipal Government Board (MGB), should consult the policies contained in the MDP. Like the local Subdivision and Development Appeal Board, this group can set aside the policies if they feel it is warranted. The MGB will also consult the MDP on determining the appropriateness of proposed annexation of land and expansion of municipal boundaries. The MDP can be a key document in communicating a well thought out pattern of human settlement for your community.

Engineers and Development Professionals

The starting point for all plans involving municipal infrastructure (roads, water, wastewater, parks and recreation

facilities, etc.) is the expected nature, intensity, and location of land use activities. The MDP should provide this context for assessments of existing capacity and master plans for future upgrades and expansions.

Neighbouring Municipalities

Abutting and nearby municipalities may refer to the MDP to understand how your community's plans will interact with theirs. The MDP may also form the basis for what lands to set aside for future expansion and the land use patterns identified in an intermunicipal development plan, relative to transportation and the extension of municipal services.

Provincial Government Departments

The information included within an MDP may be of value to provincial authorities and departments that deliver or fund services to the community. In some cases the MDP may assist with obtaining provincial financial support in the implementation of the plan. For example, a regional housing authority may use the plan to build a case for funding or to select a suitable location for a housing project.

Municipal Administration

The MDP is for the entire municipal corporation; it is not just for the planning department. Implementation is a corporate wide endeavour. It can be used in a variety of functions such as recreation facility planning, subdivision approval, economic development, and planning for the delivery of municipal services (e.g. location of a new fire hall). The MDP does not replace service delivery plans or more targeted short term operational plans; rather, it informs these plans about what the future may hold.

How is a Municipal Development Plan Structured?

As a publication that will be used by many different audiences, it is important that your municipal development plan is well structured. The following sections represent the minimum topics to cover the mandatory requirements of the *Municipal Government Act* and good planning practice.

Introductory Section

This section provides a brief overview of the function of the MDP. This includes noting which parts of the document are intended to be applied as policy and which parts are intended as information or for background context.

Background and Context Section

A high level overview of the major issues and trends facing the community and providing context for the policies of the MDP should be included. This may include the physical setting of the community and key demographic information such as current and projected population. A summary of factors influencing the proposed development patterns, (e.g. a large river forming a barrier to west, sour gas facilities nearby, or a waterbody shared with another municipality), should be included.

Significant Features Map

This map highlights the main features, natural and man-made, within and surrounding the community. It helps provide further context to the choices made in terms of future land use patterns and directions of growth. It should be noted that these features can be either opportunities or constraints.

Vision and Principles

A vision is an overarching statement to guide growth and development within a municipality. It states what the community wishes to be like in 20 to 30 years. Determining your community's vision will help focus where you are and where you want to be in the future. It provides a reference point for the choices in policies and future land use patterns.

Land Use Concept Map

The future land use concept map is the most frequently referenced drawing in the document. It communicates the desired location of future residential, commercial, institutional, industrial and open space areas. Major roadways and transportation features are included, as are sites for key public facilities. The map is often supported by a written explanation of the major land use categories and what each entails.

Topic and Policy Sections

A series of sections are used to address the various topics the community wishes to cover in their MDP. Each section tends to start with one or more goal statements connecting the specific topic to the vision and principles. A goal statement provides more insight on the desired outcome. A series of objectives are usually added to give more focused direction to the goal(s). These are then followed by specific policy statements on individual considerations linked to the overall topic. Policies are typically structured as “shall”, “should” or “may” statements.

Implementation Section

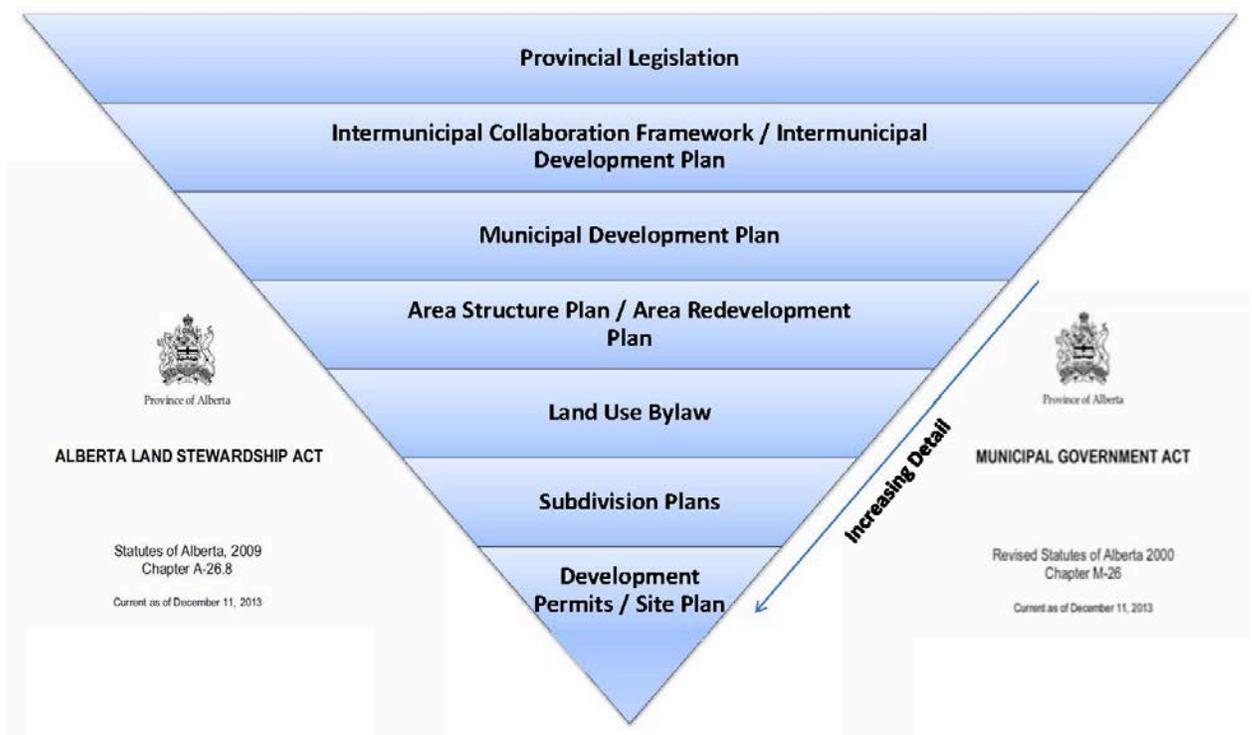
This section addresses processes and mechanisms that will be used to make the vision contained in the MDP become a reality. It may include requiring more

detailed planning prior to development, such as an area structure plan or area redevelopment plan or shared service through the intermunicipal collaboration framework. It may also set out minimum expectations around public engagement efforts on key planning decisions and the funding/budgeting implications for your municipality's 3 year financial planning cycle. The timing for periodic review/update/status check of the MDP is also addressed.

Where Does the Municipal Development Plan Fit In?

A community's municipal development plan is not an isolated, one off document. It forms part of the planning system that applies across the Province. This means the MDP must be written to properly fit within this larger system which is referred to as the "planning hierarchy".

There are several layers of plans that serve to articulate policy from the provincial government down to the local, municipal authorities. Each plan must "fit in" with the vision and direction outlined in the higher level document(s) above it. Generally, the level of detail presented in any plan increases as you move down the chart or inverted pyramid.



Provincial Legislation (Land Use Framework or 1996 Land Use Policy)

The highest level provincial document, the Land Use Framework, will create regional plans for the 7 different watersheds in the Province. In the absence of a regional plan under the Alberta Land Stewardship Act, the 1996 Land Use Policies will apply. Regional plans are managed and prepared by the Land Use Secretariat.

Intermunicipal Collaboration Framework

An intermunicipal collaboration framework (ICF) is a formal regional planning initiative which requires municipalities to work together regarding growth management, delivery of municipal services and cost sharing. The goal of an ICF is to limit duplication of services and increase cost efficiencies.

Intermunicipal Development Plan

An intermunicipal development plan, (IDP), is a plan adopted by two or more councils. An IDP acknowledges that land use decisions can often have significant impacts outside of one municipality's legal boundary. An IDP is a tool which will help identify the positives of joint planning and address the potential challenges associated with growth and development.

Municipal Development Plan

Under updated Provincial legislation, all municipalities are required to adopt a municipal development plan. An MDP is a long range, statutory document that is required to be adopted by bylaw by every municipality, no matter how large or small the population.

Area Structure Plans and Area Redevelopment Plans

Area Structure Plans and Area Redevelopment Plans are considered intermediate or secondary plans which will identify in detail: land use, servicing requirements, and infrastructure needs within a portion of the community. Plans of this level also need to provide information regarding the proposed sequence and density of development within a given area.

Land Use Bylaw

A Land Use Bylaw (LUB) is the primary tool that is used to make "every day" decisions regarding applications such as redistricting and development permits. Although approved by bylaw, it is not a statutory document. A change in land

use or redistricting a piece of property should conform to the vision contained in the MDP, or other higher level documents, if the long term vision is to be achieved. For example, if a piece of property is currently designated (zoned) as agricultural or urban reserve and the MDP identifies the future use as industrial, the local Council should not redistrict the property to residential.

Subdivision

The subdivision of land is accommodated by compliance with the Subdivision and Development Regulation, which is a specific implementation tool under the *Municipal Government Act*. The Subdivision and Development Regulation, amongst other things, identifies setback requirements for proposed development from landfill operations, sewage lagoons and oil and gas facilities. The Regulation also outlines when input is required by other authorities such as School Boards, Alberta Transportation for highway proximity/access, and the Natural Resources Conservation Board (NRCB) for potential development/expansion of a confined feeding operation.

Development Permits/Site Plans

The submission of a development permit/site plan is the most detailed level of information generally approved by a Development Authority, whether the Authority is a Development Officer, Municipal Planning Commission, or Council. The information contained in a Development Permit application or drawn on a site plan is used to assess conformity with the Land Use Bylaw.

Creating a Municipal Development Plan

The process used to create the municipal development plan is as important as the content and policy direction of the final adopted plan. The MDP aims to build consensus around how the community chooses to change. The opportunity to discuss various points of view and gain appreciation for different opinions should be a goal of a good, well-structured planning process. Participants should be able to recognize their contributions and acknowledge that they were listened to and that their perspective was taken into account.

Good, participatory process help build the consensus the community needs on the major topics covered by the MDP. A comprehensive appreciation of the perspectives of the community ensures that Council can create a plan that will stand the test of time.

Legislated Process Requirements

The *Municipal Government Act* provides limited guidance on the overall process to prepare an MDP. Section 632(1) requires that an MDP be adopted by bylaw. Section 636 outlines the basic expectations around the process to create and adopt an MDP. This includes:

- Providing an opportunity and means for any person who may be affected by the plan to make suggestions and representations to those preparing the plan;
- Notifying the public about the planning process and their opportunities to make suggestions and representations;
- Notifying school authorities that serve the area and providing them with opportunities to provide input;

- Notifying adjacent municipalities, being those with a shared boundary with the municipality preparing the MDP, about the plan process and opportunities for their input and review; and
- Notifying the Indian band of any adjacent Indian reserve, or any adjacent Metis settlement.

Section 692 sets out requirements for the process to pass a bylaw that adopts an MDP. Before second reading is given to the bylaw, Council must hold a public hearing. The public hearing is held as part of a regular or special meeting of Council. During the public hearing Council:

- Must hear any person or group who claims to be affected and has followed the procedures for a participant that may be set out by Council (e.g. any resident or property owner in the municipality); and
- May hear from any other person or group who wishes to speak and Council agrees to hear (e.g. a national environmental organization like the Sierra Club of Canada).

It is equally important that the proposed MDP be presented, typically in a summarized fashion, at the public hearing. Council is expected to make their decision on the bylaw or any amendments to the bylaw based on the information that they have presented to them as part of the hearing process.

Context: The General Planning Process

The preparation of a municipal development plan needs to be viewed in the context of a broader planning system. As a community evolves its plans need to adapt and be kept up to date to address changing circumstances. The plan should serve as a living guide that is periodically revisited and updated.

The process starts at **Stage 1** with a “challenge” (e.g. upgrading municipal water line) to be solved or “opportunity” (e.g. new industrial business) to be explored.

In **Stage 2** information is collected and the current situation is assessed. At this point the process moves into setting a vision and supporting goals.

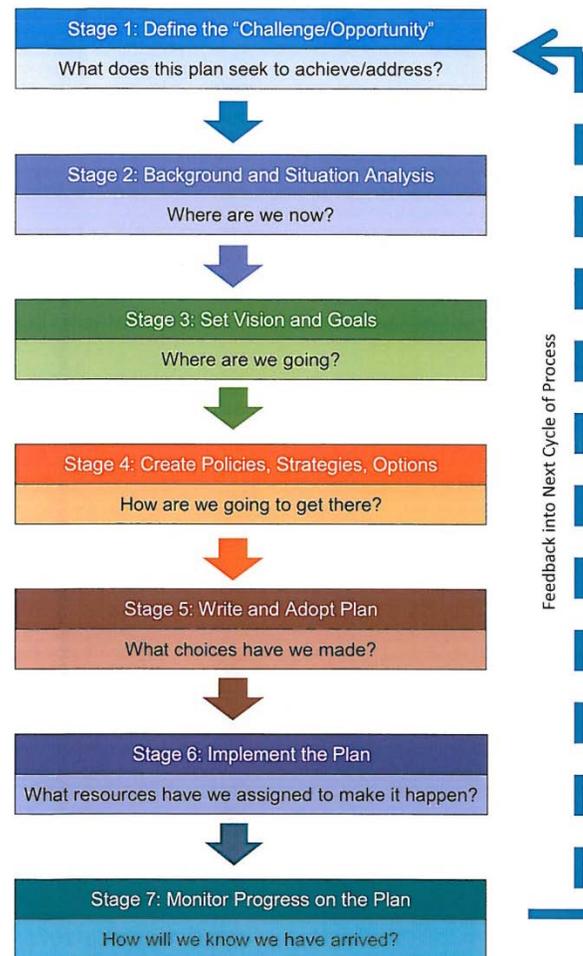
Stage 3 seeks to answer “where we are going/wish to go?”

Stage 4 involves building policies and strategies that will move the vision towards reality. These are typically actions and responses to a variety of items that may be encountered over the life of the plan. It addresses the “how are we going to get there” type questions.

Stage 5 is the formalization of the plan in a written document. The main intent is to communicate the choices that have been made and the desired directions.

Stage 6 is where resources are committed to making the plan’s directions take place. If the plan calls for public acquisition of a park, the implementation stage consists of activities to secure a site.

Finally, in **Stage 7**, the plan is monitored for effectiveness. The experience with the plan’s successes and shortcomings is used to inform the definition of the “challenge or opportunity” going into the



next planning cycle, typically over a period of five to ten years.

There may be many activities occurring within each of the stages described above. There are also many stakeholders to be considered throughout each stage of the process. It is important to consider how best to ensure participation opportunities for all.

A plan should not be an end product. Planning is an on-going feedback process, which requires constant re-evaluation, relative to how the community is moving forward in a positive manner; or a realistic evaluation of what challenges have arisen that prevent reaching a goal. A plan is only effective if

initiatives are created and acted upon which are necessary to achieve the desired outcome.

Stakeholders in the Municipal Development Plan Preparation Process

The roles of various stakeholders in the planning process should be defined and reflected in the selection of activities. This includes consideration of the citizens/public, Council, municipal staff, and consultants brought in to assist with the process. The list of stakeholders may be longer based on the size of your community or the number and type of organizations that are present.

Steering Committee

The Steering Committee is the group tasked with overseeing the planning process, providing input and feedback, reviewing drafts of the plan, and making a recommendation to the Council on the plan to adopt. The membership of the committee can be all or several members of Council and can include members of the community at-large.

Committee members are often called upon to directly assist with hosting public participation events and communicating to the community about the plan and planning process. This means the Steering Committee is a critical component of the process.

Council

While some or all members of Council may form the Steering Committee, the final adoption of the plan is a decision rendered by all of Council. Starting with first reading of the bylaw to adopt the proposed MDP, Council assumes their role as decision maker for the benefit of the entire community.

Municipal Administration

Municipal staff can provide background information about the community and about possible challenges and

opportunities. The CAO is typically a participant in Steering Committee meetings to provide the administrative perspective. This includes process advice and input on proposed plan directions and policies. Municipal staff also support the plan preparation process by providing communication support and helping with public participation efforts.

Municipal Planner or Planning Consultant

A planner, planning consultant, or planning team, can assist with the majority of the activities needed to successfully prepare the plan. This includes:

- Helping to structure the plan process and guide the Steering Committee through the various stages;
- Preparing research and background materials for review by other participants;
- Identifying and providing an evaluation of alternative courses of action such as land use pattern scenarios;
- Drafting plan policies and directions and writing the plan; and
- Facilitating public review and input on draft and proposed materials.

Agencies and Other Local Authorities

This group includes various Provincial Government departments and agencies that have a direct or indirect role in community planning. Examples are Alberta Transportation and Alberta Environment and Parks. The group also

includes local school authorities and housing authorities that serve the community and various private and public utility providers.

Referral agencies and other local authorities can provide useful background information related to their areas of expertise and interests regarding future development of your community. Some, such as school authorities, have specific interest in planning areas of land for their future needs and use as the community grows.

Adjacent Municipalities and Indigenous Communities

Neighbouring municipalities and adjacent or close by indigenous communities should be consulted. This ensures opportunity for the coordination of land use patterns and major infrastructure systems such as connecting roadways. It also allows sharing of perspectives on the nature of the economic, social, and cultural issues that the plan should take into account. For example, changing demographic trends in the nearby communities may have an impact on your community.

Interest and Stakeholder Groups

Organized groups may offer information and perspective about particular topics that are covered in the MDP. For example, conservation groups may be interested in the environmentally related policies. Developers and other groups may be interested in the planned future for a specific property. Economic development agencies may have information regarding future possibilities.

Members of the Public

The citizens of the community are interested in the outcome of the plan process and should be afforded ample opportunity to participate. Some may have ideas about the future of their own lands; others may have concerns about the environment being created for future residents. Citizen support for the direction coming out of the plan will be a crucial element in the successful implementation of the plan – it is their community.

Public Engagement in the Process

The process to create a municipal development plan must include opportunity to provide input as the plan is prepared, not simply react to a draft plan. This can take the form of notifying the general public, stakeholders, and referral agencies about the intent to prepare the plan, the process to be undertaken, and the ways they can participate.

The *Municipal Government Act* sets out the minimum legal requirements for the amount of public engagement to be used in a preparing an MDP as:

- Opportunity for initial input while the plan is being prepared; and
- Participation in the public hearing to consider adoption of the plan.

Most communities will likely find these minimum levels insufficient to achieve the desired degree of consensus. The minimal level of engagement may also result in a plan and a process that may not be able to withstand criticism.

The amount of public engagement to be built into a process can vary. There are many techniques that can be employed to provide opportunities for participation. The challenge is finding and using the ones that will prove useful in your community. Your community's public participation bylaw should give a starting point for the desired approach.

One of the common frustrations in this process is measuring the degree of actual participation by the public and citizens. The tendency is to score success or failure by the number of participants, rather than the significance and thoughtfulness of the collected input. It is important to remember that the municipality is required to provide meaningful, accessible opportunities for community participation and to communicate these opportunities to

community members. It then falls on the individual community members to choose whether or not to make time in their schedules to participate and engage in the process. Anticipating low levels of participation is not a justification for not putting forward the effort. Different techniques may have to be tried.

Consultation is not only about informing individuals or groups where a meeting will be held. Be creative in terms of how you go about gathering ideas and input. Why not meet in a senior's facility so that those individuals who may have challenges attending a meeting have the opportunity to share their wisdom? Why not set up a booth/table in the entrance to the local grocery store on a Saturday morning to hand out surveys and answer any questions? Could you meet a local class of school children to ask their opinion of what they see as desirable or necessary for the community? Remember, that it is likely that these children will be living with the benefits or consequences of the policy direction contained in the document as they grow up – their insights may prove invaluable.

Share the information provided and collected throughout the process; seek out opportunities for feedback or to "confirm what you heard". More meaningful and creative opportunities for participation result in a better end product.

There are several toolkits available through the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities on public engagement tips and techniques. This section describes some of the most common approaches used in preparing a MDP.

Survey and Opinion Poll

Survey questionnaires can be useful in getting input on key issues and perspectives about the desired future of the community. In a small community with a population of less than 10,000 these surveys are rarely statistically accurate or reliable. For a limited number of straightforward questions (e.g. yes-no, circle preference) a properly structured survey can provide some general sense of the public view. Delivery of a survey can be through mail out, website, or hand out.

Website and Social Media

A project website or page can be used to keep your community up to date on the project and can be a means of gathering input. This can include:

- Interactive chat pages;
- Commenting through email; and
- Commenting through other social media methods such as Twitter or Facebook.

Open House

An open house is an informal event that allows for information using text, drawings, and visual aids, to be presented and for individual dialogue between a project team and members of the public. Static display boards summarizing key points of information are typically used. Open houses are run over a set period of time to allow participants to fit in attendance with their personal schedules.

Public Meeting

Public meetings are often used for two way information exchange between presenters and a large number of participants. A presentation is usually made at the beginning of the meeting. This is followed by a facilitated question or discussion period where all participants can hear answers to all questions and hear from their fellow

community members, as well as the presenters.

Public Hearing

A public hearing and an open house/public meeting are not the same thing. A public hearing is a regulatory requirement and comes with a higher degree of formality. Presenters speak to Council, about their concerns about all or part of a proposed course of action. While a presentation about the plan or proposal is usually made, two way information exchange and discussion is limited. The process should follow your public hearing procedures bylaw.

Focus Group Session

A focus group session is a conversation with a small, invited group of participants. Participants are usually selected to achieve a cross section of the community members or based on their expertise in a particular area. Exchange of information through text, drawings and discussion, feedback on proposals and suggestions are collected through a facilitated conversation.

Workshop

A workshop is meant to solicit suggestions and ideas from participants to help craft the plan. It involves two way dialogues through general discussion, usually with a facilitator who directs small group and large group assignments. Workshops are commonly used to help create a vision statement and key planning principles.

Design Charrette

Similar to a workshop, a design charrette involves active participation and contribution by participants. The main difference is the emphasis on drawing as the technique to communicate ideas and suggestions such as options for future land use patterns.

Key Person Interview

This is a one to one conversation between a participant and a member of the project team. It can be based on the expertise and knowledge of the individual or a series of interviews can be conducted to obtain a cross section of community members. Interviews are typically scheduled around the needs and availability of the interviewee.

Sample Process to Create the Municipal Development Plan

This section outlines a sample process used to prepare a municipal development plan. The exact nature of the activities in each phase of the process should be based on the circumstances of the community being planned. For example, your community may favour open houses over public meetings. You may prefer a citizen led steering committee to guide the process, or you may utilize organized interest groups.

The basic linear phases presented below can be adjusted to reflect the process desired by your community. It assumes that you are starting with few existing studies, limited information, and little previous broad public discussion about the future of the community.

Phase 1: Project Start Up

Once resources such as a steering committee and planner/consultant have been arranged, the overall process to prepare the plan should be reviewed at an initial meeting. This ensures that both the steering committee leading the plan and the team working on the plan are familiar with the nature of the work and likely timing of events. It should involve a review of the terms of reference and discussion of logistical issues such as the availability of steering committee members for future meetings and venues for public participation events.

Phase 2: Notice and Referrals

Early in the process, the intent to prepare an MDP and the opportunities for participation should be broadly publicized. This can take the form of a public notice in a local paper and notice on a website. The intent is to alert the community about the planning process, the role and significance of the MDP, and their opportunities to participate. It should also invite sharing of any information that

may be of interest relative to deciding the future of the community.

Written contact with referral agencies, other local authorities, and organized groups should also occur during this phase. A specific request for any relevant background materials should be included.

Phase 3: Research and Analysis

This is the review of available background information about the community, its surroundings and trends. This information is supported by field investigation and survey to establish an understanding of the existing physical setting and influences on future land use patterns.

Key aspects are summarized in a background report. This report may also contain the input and background materials received through Phase 2. This is then available to create a common base of understanding and discussion for the steering committee and other participants. A steering committee meeting to review the background report and identify, confirm and organize for the next steps in the process should be held.

Phase 4: Information Sharing and Vision Setting

Publication of the background information and sharing through an open house is undertaken to enable interested participants to become familiar with the issues that may influence the plan. This can be combined with a workshop where participants join the steering committee in setting out a future vision for the community. The workshop may also address goals for major topics such as housing, open space, etc. The key element at this stage is to determine

what the community wishes to become based on an understanding of where they are currently.

Following the visioning workshop, a draft vision and set of principles and goals is written. A steering committee meeting should be held to review the draft materials and discuss the input received through the open house and workshop. This material guides the preparation of more detailed directions and policies in the draft plan.

Phase 5: Plan Directions and Options

Several potential plan outlines describing proposed policy directions and a set of land use concepts should be prepared for review and discussion with the steering committee. An evaluation of the options should be created to assist the committee.

An optional step at this phase is the hosting of an open house to solicit public input on the plan directions and available land use concept options. If held, a summary of the input should be reviewed by the Steering Committee to identify the preferred directions and land use pattern.

Phase 6: Writing the Draft Plan

The full plan document is prepared containing the vision, principles, goals, policies and land use concept. A steering committee meeting is held to review the draft and discuss desired revisions.

Phase 7: Public Review of Draft Plan

Notice that the draft plan is available for review by the public, referral agencies, local authorities, and all other interested participants is sent out. This may involve posting on the website, emailing copies,

and having hardcopies available. An open house and/or public meeting are hosted to answer questions about the draft plan and receive input. All input is summarized and reviewed with the Steering Committee. Desired revisions are identified and the revised plan becomes the recommended or proposed plan to be forwarded to Council.

Phase 8: Formal Consideration for Adoption

An adopting bylaw for the MDP is prepared and placed before Council for first reading. The bylaw and the public hearing are advertised per the *Municipal Government Act* requirements (same as a Land Use Bylaw amendment). Formal referrals are sent to the adjacent municipality, government departments and other local authorities. Council hosts a public hearing on the bylaw and the proposed MDP prior to considering second and third readings and any amendments.

Given the significance of the MDP, a presentation at the public hearing should be made on behalf of the steering committee. This should outline the process used to create the plan and the major directions of the plan (e.g. future land use patterns). It should also outline any input from the final referral of the proposed plan.

If amendments are desired, the matters requiring more discussion should form the topic of a subsequent Council meeting. This allows for more considered thought about the nature and implications of possible revisions.

Following adoption, the approved document must be published on the municipality's website.

Linking Process Steps to Public Engagement Approaches

Flow Chart of Sample Process		Public Engagement Approaches to Consider Using								
		Website and Social Media	Survey and Opinion Poll	Key Person Interview	Open House	Public Meeting	Focus Group Session	Workshop	Design Charrette	Public Hearing
Phase 1:	Project Start Up									
Phase 2:	Notice and Referrals	●								
Phase 3:	Research and Analysis	●	●	●			●			
Phase 4:	Information Sharing and Vision Setting	●	●		●	●	●	●	●	
Phase 5:	Plan Directions and Options	●	●			●	●			
Phase 6:	Writing Draft Plan									
Phase 7:	Public Review of Draft Plan	●	●		●	●	●			
Phase 8:	Formal Adoption	●								●

The table above provides suggestions about where the various public engagement approaches can be used during the sample plan process. Many of the approaches can be adapted for information gathering and for two way dialogue on proposed direction to be taken in the new plan.

How Long Does Creating a Municipal Development Plan Take?

When setting a target timeline for creating the municipal development plan it is important to bear in mind other activities are underway at the same time. This means recognizing that participants and steering committee members have other commitments and demands on their time. The amount of time needed to prepare a good MDP for the first time typically spans 14 to 18 months.

Critical considerations in scheduling the process and target completion date should include:

- The community's schedule. For example, regular or annual community events such as a farmers market, trade fairs or rodeos may provide key consultation opportunities;
- The community's seasonal commitments and availability. For example, in rural farming communities, the demands of seeding and harvest may limit some communities and/or committee members' ability to engage with the MDP process at particular times of the year;
- The impacts of holiday seasons. For example, during the Christmas season it may be difficult to schedule committee meetings and/or public events;
- The impact of vacation schedules. For example, scheduled Council meetings are often reduced over summer months, and 'snowbird' residents may leave the community for extended periods of time;
- The availability of background material, the length of time to collect information from other organizations and persons, and the time to summarize information collected;
- Sufficient time for participants to review materials, attend participation events, and provide their input. For example, allowing referral agencies, other local authorities, and community organizations 30 days to review and respond to materials;
- Sufficient time for steering committee members to review background and draft materials and have meaningful conversations about the possible implications for the community's future (i.e. additional meetings may be needed); and
- Time for adequate notice and advertisement of public input and participation opportunities. For example, at least two weeks lead up time for an advertisement on an event. Participants should be given at least one additional week to provide written comments.

Information Needed for a Municipal Development Plan

In order to create a municipal development plan that meets the requirements of the *Municipal Government Act*, and that is also relevant to your community, it is important you take the time to gather the required information. Information may be obtained from several sources. So where do you start? This section describes useful tools, sources of information, methods of gathering information, and data interpretation hints to assist you in the process.

Why Does Background Information Matter?

While an MDP does not always have to identify minute technical details, (e.g. the size of a wastewater line), it does need to examine broad level information to determine what logical growth areas are available. For example, planning to grow in a direction that is not the most readily serviceable or that faces a major constraint like a sour gas well setback needs to be avoided. The background information should help to identify factors that may limit or alter the form or direction that growth can take.

Existing Population Statistics

An important step is gathering, reviewing, and interpreting current and historic population, employment, and housing statistics. Much of this information is available through Statistics Canada and Municipal Census records. This information will help identify and track population changes. You will be able to see or verify changes, which can help your municipality focus on how you would like to move forward into the future.

The review of trends should be based on long term information spanning the past 10 years. Key variables typically include

total population, age ranges, household make up, gender, income, and sources of employment. The idea is to build snapshots of the population that reside in the community to then understand what their future needs may be or what future opportunities may develop.

Existing Studies and Background Documents

A review of past studies and reports from municipal records and referral agencies may provide useful information about how the community evolved to where it is today and what others thought of its future prospects and challenges. This may involve any materials pertaining to:

- Previous General Municipal Plans;
- Existing land uses and activities such as aggregate extraction, airport operations, soil and topographic conditions, etc.;
- The history of the community and its development;
- Changes in growth patterns (e.g. type and number of dwellings, pace of industrial land development);
- Changes in employment and similar economic indicators;
- Changes in population;
- Trends in property assessment base changes;
- The number of business licenses issued yearly;
- The number of development permits issued and types of development
- Infrastructure studies, as-built records and master plans; and
- Changes in school enrolment.

Field Survey

A field survey to understand the physical surroundings and setting of the community is a critical step. It gives you an understanding of the land base that is available to accommodate future uses. It

also confirms the presence and nature of any features or activities that may pose a constraint (e.g. sour gas well) or create an opportunity (e.g. permanent open space area) for the future evolution of the community. The field survey should be supported by aerial photographs and site photos. Much of the information collected should be communicated on the significant features map(s).

Key Person Interviews

There may be information the municipality is unable to find in document form. Information may be found through human sources such as long term staff and council members. In addition, local residents and business owners may be able to provide missing information through personal knowledge. Accessing this knowledge may be achieved through interviews and/or a public survey. Other sources include the five year capital plan and municipal asset management records.

SWOT Analysis

Undertaking a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats (SWOT) analysis may assist your community in determining areas of potential growth or decline as well as confirming successes. The process of undertaking a SWOT analysis is as varied as the municipality and can include a public and/or Council strategic planning session and/or a public survey/questionnaire through various media and/or engagement methods. Key planning areas to review in undertaking a SWOT analysis include land uses, community facilities, utilities, streets and transportation, recreation and parks, as well as industrial development issues.

Community Scan and Community Mapping

Similar to the field survey, a community scan of the existing development and activity can provide useful information. This can include such things as existing

land use patterns, sites of historical interest and the location of community facilities and services. An offshoot of this is a community mapping exercise where members of the community are invited to mark areas of interest, value or concern directly on a map.

Population Projections

A useful tool to help municipalities plan for future growth is through producing population projections. Many communities project population growth through three scenarios (low, moderate, high) growth. This data aids in setting residential densities and the mix of housing types the municipality would like to encourage, (such as single detached, semi-detached, row housing, duplexes, or apartments), including both owner occupied and rental units. Reviewing historic population trends may assist in targeting the most likely growth scenario. In reality, many smaller communities are experiencing population decline. In this instance, the municipality may focus on the low growth scenario or promote economic diversification and/or enhance liveability for existing residents.

Economic Status or Base Analysis

By reviewing changes, (growth or declining trends), along with other community/economic indicators such as the strength of the economy, changes in industry, residential vacancy, and development activity, a snapshot picture can be formed. Once the municipality has a better understanding of what they are doing, policies can be developed to encourage growth or mitigate change. Developing policies is one component of addressing these challenges.

More detailed follow up studies can be recommended to obtain a better understanding of how to promote a community and encourage growth.

Data Interpretation

After compiling the background information, the next step is interpreting the data. Reviewing how your community has grown or shrunk, what industries have come and gone or continue to thrive, or identifying recreation and cultural activities that have come and gone. To determine how healthy your community may be, review your financial health by examining what amenities you may have including physical infrastructure such as a library and an arena. These are positive indicators of a healthy community. For example, is your municipality shrinking? Do you need to promote residential diversification to retain the existing population? Undertake succession planning to retain existing businesses? Encourage commercial or industrial diversification to attract investment? Are policies needed to continue to enjoy a high “quality of life” or limit further decline?

What if You Do Not Have Detailed Studies?

Ideally, the process to create an MDP starts with a series of comprehensive and detailed studies involving existing land use statistics and a general land inventory within the municipality. This is not always going to be the case. Additionally, conducting primary data collection, in a way that creates meaningful results, can be time consuming and expensive. This means the MDP may have to move ahead with the best information available at the time. Future studies, like a new infrastructure master plan, may simultaneously rely on the MDP to understand the community’s desired future and confirm the challenges in getting there.

Using Terms of Reference

In the case of preparing a municipal development plan for the first time, the “challenge/opportunity” in Stage 1 of the general planning process can be described as the need to envision a plan for the desired future of the community.

The MDP is the product of the process, and the goals of the project are often used to state the “challenge.” For example, a goal for the plan may be to describe the desired land use patterns within the community at a point 20–30 years into the future. Over the course of the 20-30 year period the MDP may be written, amended, and updated several times.

A “terms of reference” is a written outline that guides a community through a project or a process. It identifies the main goals of the project and the activities that will be undertaken to reach these goals. It helps participants understand what is expected as a final outcome, the order of activities to get to the outcome, and the likely timing. It also helps make decisions about the resources needed to complete the process.

Creating the “terms of reference” is where the process to prepare a municipal development plan is crafted. In defining the “challenge/opportunity”, it identifies the matters that must be addressed and the nature of the desired process. It can be a valuable resource before and during the process.

Key questions that should be addressed include:

- What are the major aims of the planning process? What do we hope to get out of it?

- Who will lead the process? Will Council form the Steering Committee or will a group of at-large volunteers lead?
- What is the nature and level of desired public participation? Are there approaches that have been successful in the past? Are new approaches needed?
- What information is available to inform the process? What is our starting point in terms of existing studies and background information?
- What resources are available to help us go through the process? What is our desired or likely timeline?

The CAO, municipal planner and/or planning consultant should take a lead role in the initial crafting of the terms of reference. This can then be used to obtain Council support for the proposed process and the identification of the needed resources to undertake the project.

Three things that you should look for in a consultant are:

- Knowledge about the Alberta planning system and public engagement techniques;
- Previous experience in completing MDPs or similar plans in Alberta; and
- Project management skills and ability to guide the process from start to finish.

Other resources for building a process to create a MDP may be available from:

- Alberta Municipal Affairs – Planning Advisors;
- Regional planning service agencies; and
- Alberta Professional Planners Institute (APPI).

How to Implement the Municipal Development Plan

A common concern is that having an approved plan will bind and commit future Councils to a course of action. The Council who is creating the municipal development plan for the first time is responsible for a very significant “project”, being the development of a community which has been underway for decades. While it is their turn at the helm, it falls to the Council of the day to guide the community in a responsible direction using their best judgement.

Concerns about implementation and level of commitment to the plan can result in a desire to “water down” the policies, which in turn weakens the plan. This section discusses some key aspects pertaining to implementing your MDP that may make the commitment to a well thought out plan easier to bear and work with over time. It is up to you and community members to make the plan work the best it can for your community.

Conceptual Plan

The MDP is a statutory document that contains a land use concept. This means many of its directions and policies may afford a degree of latitude in how they are applied. It also means that the level of detail in the MDP may have to defer to more current and more accurate information that may be provided through a specific site plan, subdivision design, or area structure plan.

In terms of financial commitment, the *Municipal Government Act* expressly states that a municipality is not obligated to undertake a project described in the MDP. This acknowledges that priority for the use of limited resources, especially available funding, needs to be flexible. Effectively, Council makes the decisions regarding investments to advance the vision or goals identified in the MDP on shorter, 3-5 year time spans. This

consideration is made in light of the other priorities facing the community.

Make the MDP a Living Document

The success of your MDP is ultimately a measure of the efforts made to implement the policies and directions. You can wait for someone else to initiate a change and then have a framework to respond with, (which is how private land development occurs and how development control works). You can also undertake initiatives as a municipality or in partnership with others, (like a park redevelopment proposal or joint community marketing efforts). It is very likely your MDP will contain both approaches.

Periodically, look at the MDP and identify follow up actions for each year. This includes your annual capital projects and annual operating budget. An MDP is not considered a static document, but a living, statutory document and should be referenced in current land use planning decision making, such as reviewing development applications. Like your other plans, the MDP should be available for public reference (e.g. website and hard copy at the office counter).

Review and Update

An MDP should be revised and updated to keep it relevant. The process for keeping an MDP current is through either a bylaw amendment or the review and rewriting or the entire document, (which must also be done by bylaw). It is recommended that a municipality review and/or update the MDP approximately every 5 - 10 years to keep it current with emerging trends, land use changes affecting the municipality, or changes in Provincial legislation. Amendments can be made but remember to keep all of

your adopted plans consistent with one another.

It's About Managing Change

Amendments outside of a scheduled review can be made but should be done in a thoughtful manner. The MDP gives the framework to understand the implications of changes to land use patterns and policies. Just like the original preparation, the right questions have to be asked when processing amendments to ensure the MDP continues to achieve the vision desired by the community.

Long Term Focus

An MDP is about the long term. The MDP horizon of 20 - 30 years seems like a long time for an individual but not in terms of the life of the community that is likely already more than 100 years old. It is important to remember that achieving your 20 - 30 year vision/goals does not have to happen overnight. Start with a few steps and when successfully completed, move on to others.

About the Authors

Parkland Community Planning Services (PCPS), Oldman River Regional Services Commission (ORRSC), West Central Planning Agency (WCPA), Mackenzie Municipal Services Agency (MMSA) and Palliser Regional Municipal Services (PRMS) are regional planning service providers in Alberta.

The agencies evolved from the regional planning commissions originally created by the Province of Alberta. In 1995, when regional planning commissions ceased operations, a number of municipalities created their own shared planning departments. The five agencies are all owned and operated by their member municipalities