

COMMERCIAL DEVELOPMENT



POLICY OPTIONS PAPER | 2 OF 6

INTRODUCTION

Commercial development supports a complete community by ensuring residents have places to shop close to where they live. It also supports economic development by keeping local dollars in the community and contributes to the County's tax base. A variety of commercial uses are located within the urban and rural service areas of Strathcona County, providing services for County residents, the traveling public and surrounding areas.

Recent trends in commercial development have resulted in vehicle-oriented development, with commercial uses located at the periphery of communities. There has also been a substantial increase in the amount of big box and large retail chain stores. Current projections indicate a "return to the past" as demographics change, the cost of living and fuel increases and communities continue to grow, and there will be a return to smaller-scale, accessible, commercial uses in the heart of the community.

WHAT DOES THE 2007 MDP SAY?

The policies relating to commercial development are found in Chapter 6 of the current Municipal Development Plan. The current MDP identifies 7 types of commercial developments distinguishable by their geographic location, scale and market area. The key objectives in the current MDP include:

1. Establish a strong, diversified commercial base, to provide employment and a high level of service to residents and visitors;
2. Encourage commercial developments which contribute to a more sustainable community;
3. Encourage the development of adequate, efficient and economical infrastructure to meet current and future commercial needs; and
4. Use commercial developments to aid in establishing a central focal point for communities.

ISSUES RAISED DURING THE MDP ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

Many participants expressed the need for a greater variety of shopping and local services close to where they live. Urban residents suggested increasing density with "European village-style" neighbourhoods that are designed first and foremost for pedestrians rather than just cars. Rural residents also suggested adding more density in hamlets (but acknowledged that infrastructure is a significant challenge) as well as small local amenities such as coffee shops, and corner stores where residents could walk to meet their day-to-day needs and socialize with their neighbours. Residents in both urban and rural communities noted they would like to see more small, locally-owned shops that fit with the character of the area rather than "big box" retailers or strip malls.

POTENTIAL POLICY OPTIONS

This section introduces some potential new policy options and expands on others already included in the MDP. These policy options can help the Municipality (and partners) to deliver a variety of commercial development. These options are intended to promote discussion about the best options for Strathcona County and may eventually guide new or refined MDP policy and land use bylaw changes.

1. Place Greater Emphasis on Mixed-Use Development in Commercial Areas

With the exception of the “Urban Villages” commercial designation, the existing commercial designations in the MDP are exclusively “commercial” and do not emphasize complementary uses such as residential. This results in areas that are mostly single use and less attractive and less walkable than they could be.

Policy Options

The policy options with respect to mixed-use development in commercial areas may involve:

- Amending the intent and definition of appropriate commercial designations to allow and encourage mixed-use development that mixes commercial development with other uses such as residential, office, or institutional either above or beside the commercial uses.
- Introducing more explicit policies to encourage existing commercial areas to redevelop as mixed-use neighbourhoods.
- Allowing complementary uses to share parking with commercial uses to reduce overall parking needs and use land more efficiently.
- Requiring new residential developments (in urban and hamlet areas) to incorporate local-serving commercial development.
- Considering allowing residential uses as a temporary use until such time as the neighbourhood has developed to a sufficient extent that there is a market for the commercial uses.
- Reducing parking requirements for mixed-use areas/buildings because people living in these areas are likely to drive less and own fewer vehicles.

2. Clarify Scale and Type of Rural Commercial

The current MDP provides little guidance as to the type and scale of commercial development suitable for different rural areas within the County. This can result in commercial developments that are a poor “fit” with their context and surroundings.

Policy Options

The policy options with respect to rural commercial development may involve:

- Creating new policy for each of the major rural policy areas that specifies the appropriate scale and type of commercial development for that area. For example, appropriate types of commercial development in the Beaver Hills Policy Area could include agriculture- and recreation/tourism-related commercial development with a scale and design that fits with the natural environment of this area.

3. Create a Set of Planning Standards and Design Guidelines for Commercial and Mixed-Use Development

Besides some simple diagrams showing the location of parking and desire for “street fronting” buildings in commercial areas, Strathcona County does not have design guidelines that can help developers understand the County’s vision for commercial development and help approving officers review commercial proposals.

Policy Options

The policy options with respect to planning and design guidelines may involve:

- Introducing a new MDP policy to create and apply a set of detailed, illustrated planning and design guidelines for commercial and mixed-use development that describes desired building forms, mix of uses, building orientation, public (and semi-private) realm design, parking lot design and green development standards.