MODUS
planning design engagement

JULY 2015

PHASE 2 ENGAGEMENT SUMMARY

MUNICIPAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN UPDATE
SHAPING OUR FUTURE

STRATHCONA
COUNTY

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INTRODUCTION

Strathcona County is updating its Municipal Development Plan (MDP) which is the County's plan for the future. It sets out a clear vision for how Strathcona will grow and develop over the next 20 years or more, and guides decisions on key issues like conservation of the natural environment and investment in infrastructure and services.

Since the MDP was last updated in 2007, the County has added over 10,000 new residents. This growth means we need to ensure that development of urban and rural communities is sustainable and maintains a high quality of life for current and future residents. The updated MDP will also reflect recent studies, as well as key trends and best practices.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

Over a 10 month period, we are asking residents, business owners, and community stakeholder groups to share what they value most about Strathcona County and to weigh in on how the County can build on our strengths while planning for the future.

This report summarizes what we did, what we asked, and what we heard in Phase 2.

PHASE 1	PHASE 2	PHASE 3	PHASE 4
Foundations	Setting Direction	Options & Trade-offs	Draft Plan
APR - JUNE 2015	JUNE - AUG 2015	SEPT - DEC 2015	JAN - MAR 2016

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Participants emphasized the importance of creating more sustainable, walkable communities in both urban and rural areas. They challenged the idea that "bigger/newer is always better" and suggested the County focus on promoting and improving the great assets we already have.

Residents noted they would like to see growth concentrated in key "nodes" with existing infrastructure (such as urban areas and hamlets) to prevent sprawl and preserve prime farmlands and natural areas. Participants stressed the importance of agriculture and natural areas to the County's history and identity as well as the local economy and health and well-being of current and future generations. Some residents stressed the need to maintain and protect important ecosystems for current and future generations; however, others identified challenges associated with farming and environmental protection. For example, some landowners whose lands have been designated as "environmentally sensitive" felt that they should be compensated for the loss in property value while other participants felt there should be greater flexibility to allow for innovative and sustainable development projects in these areas.

Urban residents suggested increasing density with "European village-style" neighbourhoods that are designed for pedestrians rather than 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, corner stores, and churches 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 rather than "big box" retailers or strip malls.

Affordable housing was a key topic; both urban and rural residents emphasized the need for more affordable housing, particularly for seniors who wanted to remain in their communities close to friends and neighbours, but also for youth to remain in the community and for younger families looking for starter homes. However, high land costs and municipal requirements and levies for developers were identified as key challenges and participants noted that creative and innovative solutions would be needed to address the affordable housing gap, in both urban and rural areas.

Ideas for tourism focused on building on the amazing assets the County already has and promoting them to visitors, but also to local residents. Participants emphasized the need for education and promotion to re-connect people (especially youth) with nature and local food. Residents stressed that any new tourism development should be small-scale and carefully designed so it does not detract from the area's natural beauty.

ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

SUMMARY

In Phase 1 we engaged participants on their core values as well as a range of topics including agriculture, industry, environment, affordable housing, nature based and agri-tourism, sustainability, and urban design.

In Phase 2, we dove deeper into some of these key topics to better understand why these topics are important to the future of the County, which topics align or clash with each other, and what other topics may be important for the MDP to address. The County hosted interactive workshops in 3 locations to hear from a range of urban and rural residents:

- June 22 (5 – 8 p.m.) - Ardrossan Recreation Centre
- June 24 (5 – 8 p.m.) - South Cooking Lake Community Hall
- June 25 (5 – 8 p.m.) - Sherwood Park Community Centre Agora

Participants reviewed background information on key topics and took part in small group discussions to hear from each other as well as planning staff and consultants. A total of 43 people attended with several others stopping to collect or review information about the project. An online questionnaire was also available from June 10 – 30th for those who were unable to attend the in-person events.

The input we received will help us as we start to draft policy options, which will be reviewed and discussed through public engagement events in the fall.

PROMOTION

To raise awareness about the project and Phase 2 workshops, the County promoted the events via:

- Project website and Engagement Hub announcements
- MDP Project newsletters
- Postcards, newsletters and backgrounders at key locations throughout the County
- County digital displays at key locations throughout the County
- Newspaper ads in Sherwood Park News on June 12th and 19th
- Newspaper coverage in Sherwood Park News
- Press release issued June 15th
- County newsletters
- Materials distributed to rural areas via the Bookmobile
- Social Media including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram
- Bus ads
- Road signs at the entrances to South Cooking Lake and Ardrossan, and along Sherwood Drive next to the Community Centre in Sherwood Park.
- Information booths at Rural Living Days (June 6th) and the Farmers Market (June 17th)

WHAT WE HEARD: SUMMARY OF FEEDBACK

The following section provides an overview of community input from the in-person workshops as well as the online questionnaire.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Creating more **sustainable, walkable and connected communities** was a popular theme among participants. Residents expressed concern about urban and rural sprawl and the impact of a 'bigger is better' approach to growth and development for future generations. Piecemeal development and expansion into farmlands and natural areas were identified as key issues and residents stressed the need for greater transparency and openness to ensure development is guided by the desires of County residents and not by the development industry or other external forces. Many noted that they needed to rely on vehicles to get around (in both rural and urban areas) and that other options such as transit, cycling or walking are either inefficient or dangerous. Almost all participants agreed that they would like to see more walkable neighbourhoods with safe pedestrian and cyclist routes and trails to support and encourage active and healthy lifestyles. One group of participants discussed the need to preserve land for transportation/transit corridors (such as the future LRT line to Edmonton).

Urban residents emphasized the need for **greater density** (smaller lots, denser buildings, mixed use developments, etc.) and "European village-style" development to make neighbourhoods more walkable and sustainable. Rural residents also suggested more density in hamlets as well as more local small-scale amenities such as churches, coffee shops or corner stores where residents could walk to meet their day-to-day needs and socialize with their neighbours. In both urban and rural communities, participants emphasized the importance of **smaller, locally owned shops** and services (i.e., "mom and pop shops") rather than "big box" retailers or strip malls, noting that these larger commercial spaces lacked visual/architectural interest and took away from the community's vibrancy and rural charm. Residents stressed the need for "human scale development," which is designed for pedestrians rather than vehicles, in order to create safe, accessible and enjoyable spaces for people of all ages and abilities.

Participants also suggested that it should be easier to develop or retrofit buildings and properties to be **'green'** or incorporate **renewable energy**. Residents emphasized the significant impact these projects can have, especially on larger rural parcels. Suggestions included tax incentives or grants for developers and homeowners as well as greater flexibility in building codes and regulations, and support for working with external agencies such as Alberta Transportation (who have a say about what can happen on properties within eyesight of highways). Specific suggestions for reducing fossil fuel dependence included geothermal, solar, green buildings (i.e., LEED standard developments), passive and active heating, composting, and conserving and re-using water.

Generally, participants felt that Sustainable Development would align well with Agriculture, Environmental Management and Nature-Based & Agri-Tourism. Some felt that it could clash with Affordable Housing while others thought it could provide opportunities for housing in smaller, more walkable neighbourhoods. Most participants felt that it could clash with Industrial Land.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Affordable housing was another key topic at each of the small group discussions. Participants emphasized the need for more affordable housing and rental options in the County, particularly for **seniors** and **youth**, but also for younger families. Many expressed concern about people having to leave their communities because they can no longer afford to live here. Participants wanted Strathcona County to be a place that you can live throughout the different stages of your life and stressed the need to start planning now for an aging population. Numerous seniors noted that they wanted to downsize and remain within rural areas to be close to their friends and neighbours but found the only options for seniors housing/assisted living were in urban areas (and even those do not meet the current demand). Others were concerned about a lack of community and economic **diversity**, noting that we need a range of people (particularly younger people) to support the local labour pool and work at local businesses.

Residents suggested the need for a **greater variety of housing**, smaller "bungalow" style homes, lodging houses, garage/garden suites, resort-style homes for seniors, seniors housing with care facilities, co-housing, life leases, and denser housing options (smaller lots, smaller homes, low-rise apartments, etc.). Being able to walk to local amenities such

as coffee shops, corner stores, healthcare, and churches to meet day-to-day needs and socialize was also identified as an important aspect of affordable housing, particularly for seniors, youth and those who do not drive.

However, participants also noted the challenges of **high land costs**, particularly in rural areas, and that municipal infrastructure requirements can be a contributing factor in making affordable housing unfeasible for developers. One participant raised the issue of safety, noting that affordable housing is often denser and poorly built which can increase the risk of spreading fire in an emergency. Residents questioned how the County could better support affordable housing and seniors housing and noted that **creative and innovative solutions** would be needed to address the significant gap in housing, in both urban and rural areas. Suggestions included County policies, density transfers, taxes, subsidies, and provincial grants.

RURAL RESIDENTIAL

On the opposite end of the affordable housing spectrum was rural residential. Participants generally appreciated the options for living **rural lifestyles** so close to urban amenities and noted that this urban and rural balance is a part of the County's unique identity and what makes it such a great place to live. However, many residents expressed concern about urban and rural **sprawl** and stressed that development should be concentrated in existing areas (such as urban areas or hamlets) to limit the creation of fragmented subdivisions as well as encroachment and **fragmentation** of farmlands and natural areas. A number of participants emphasized that we should build on the great rural residential we have now by carefully adding infill and new homes as well as pathways, small local shops, and infrastructure as needed. Others felt there is too much rural development already and questioned the need for more Country Residential, suggesting that more homes and lots detracts from the rural charm that draws people to these areas in the first place.

Key issues for rural residential included affordable housing, seniors housing, walkability, traffic, schools, architecture, maintenance, and infrastructure. Residents suggested a variety of different options for rural living including a mix of larger parcels and smaller lots (1-1.5 acres) as well as Cluster Country Residential to provide for a wide range of lifestyles and needs.

Participants emphasized that rural areas are ideal for **young families** but land costs and maintenance of larger parcels is often a barrier. Some residents suggested the County promote smaller lots (near hamlets) for families as there are a number of great **schools** that need more students. Other suggestions included co-housing for seniors, "off the grid" green developments, shared equestrian facilities, a "land bank" to collect and use developer levies for larger schools and parks, and density transfers to achieve more **efficient rural development** (that is, the same overall density in rural areas but more development in areas where there is existing infrastructure and poor soils and protection/preservation of other areas such as prime farmlands and natural areas).

Infrastructure was raised as one of the biggest challenges with rural development. Some participants stressed that there should be no piped water or sewer in rural areas while others pointed out that most rural wells are not safe for drinking and individual septic systems have their own challenges such as leaks, odour, and maintenance. Also, the wear and tear on rural roads and cost of running water/wastewater trucks is **unsustainable**. A few participants wanted to see significant growth of hamlets although the cost of new water and sewer systems generally makes this unfeasible. Other participants were concerned about the impacts of new subdivisions outside existing hamlets, noting that costs of connecting to municipal water and sewer systems as well as the increased rural **traffic** are significant issues. Participants at one workshop stressed the need for relaxed architectural guidelines to avoid the "cookie cutter" look of new subdivisions that takes away from the small town charm of hamlets. Other participants noted that infrastructure (such as roads, intersection improvements, snow clearing, and ditch maintenance) is not keeping pace with new development, which creates problems for both new and existing residents.

One participant also noted they would like to see more **support from the County** in dealing with Alberta Transportation for properties within eyesight of highways. Certain property uses (such as a small coffee shop) may be allowed by the County in these areas but prevented by the provincial agency.

AGRICULTURE

Closely related to rural residential is the topic of agriculture. Participants from all workshops emphasized the need to **protect prime farmlands**. Residents noted that agriculture is part of the **County's history and identity** and should be supported and promoted. They noted the importance of **local food production** in creating a sustainable community as well as

the importance of agriculture for the **local economy**. Other key topics included youth education, agri-tourism, market gardens, community gardens, and equestrian facilities.

However, there are **many challenges** to agriculture that were raised including development pressure, soil quality, environmental impacts, high land and operational costs, aging/retiring farmers, and a lack of interest/ability for younger generations to get into farming. Several participants noted that it is harder and harder to make a living farming and that often, rural residents "need a job to support a farming habit." The County has already lost a significant amount of prime farmlands as urban and rural development spread further and further into agricultural areas, which can fragment larger tracts of land and result in land use conflicts or environmental issues (related to overgrazing or chemical pollution). This **development pressure** combined with **high costs** of land, operations and maintenance make it difficult for farmers to make money, and even more difficult for new farmers to learn the ropes or get into farming. Several participants were concerned with this loss of knowledge and the disconnect of today's youth from nature and from food. Residents stressed the need for more **promotion and education** surrounding agriculture, particularly for youth, but also for all County residents and visitors.

Other participants suggested there is a need to grow the County's **equestrian community** with shared facilities such as arenas or condominium horse stalls, trails, pasture lands, and local veterinarians. Residents suggested this is a great opportunity to support the County's rural lifestyle as well as the local economy.

A few participants stressed the need to differentiate among different **soil classes**, suggesting that areas with soil that is unfavourable for farming (i.e., Class 4 and 5 soils) should allow more development, in order to reduce the pressure on prime farmlands with higher quality soils.

ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT

This topic was closely related to agriculture and tourism as well as sustainable development. Participants emphasized the importance of natural areas and wildlife as a part of the County's **identity** and rural lifestyle/enjoyment but also as a mechanism to **support human health**. From improving air quality to supporting active and healthy lifestyles through recreation, residents stressed the need to **maintain and protect important**

ecosystems for current and future generations. Specific areas identified by participants included Elk Island National Park, the Beaver Hills Moraine area, South Cooking Lake, swamps/bogs/wetlands, and water reserves. Most participants agreed that these areas, along with floodplains, are not appropriate spaces for growth and development.

However, as with farmlands, there are certain **challenges** associated with protecting natural areas. Some residents felt that there is not enough County policy to prevent environmental degradation while others felt there are too many regulations. Specifically, **landowners** whose lands have been designated as "environmentally sensitive," felt that they should be compensated (through tax incentives, credits, or density transfers) for the decrease in their land values, as they can no longer develop or subdivide their lots. A few others felt that regulations in the Beaver Hills Moraine area were too restrictive, and that **development** should be allowed based on soil quality rather than environmental designations. These participants suggested that greater flexibility is needed for landowners and developers to find **innovative** ways to use their lands that are appropriate to the area, more efficient, and low impact (such as "off the grid" development).

Several participants mentioned examples of good environmental management that the County is currently involved with such as recycling, composting and green buildings (LEED standard). Other comments addressed re-using grey water and protecting surface and groundwater.

NATURE-BASED & AGRI-TOURISM

Tourism was also a popular topic and closely related to agriculture and environmental management. Participants noted the amazing assets that Strathcona County has but noted that not everyone knows about them. They suggested that the County could be a leader in this area and should **promote** existing natural areas, agriculture and heritage/cultural tourism opportunities to visitors but also to local residents to "let everyone know what a great place we live in." Residents noted that when people are able to see nature and wildlife they are more likely to **value** it and want to **protect** it. **Education** is important to raise awareness about environmental/agricultural protection but also to **re-connect** people (especially youth) with nature and with local food production. One group of participants suggested partnering with the surrounding region to develop a region-wide "nature-based and agri-tour."

However, participants noted the **delicate balance** of nature-based tourism; too many people or attractions can destroy the natural spaces that people come to see. Many participants stressed that we should build off what we have already and that any new tourist development should be **small-scale and carefully designed** so it does not detract from the natural beauty of the area.

Specific suggestions included working ranches, bed and breakfasts and small scale accommodations in rural areas, more camping areas (i.e., Blackfoot), more promotion of the Beaver Hills Moraine area, eco-resorts, horse trails/tours/facilities, more community gardens, cultural/historical tours, and low impact adventure tourism such as ziplines, snowshoeing, hiking and cycling. Residents noted that these ventures could attract international tourism and help to diversify the local economy and support local entrepreneurs.

A few participants recommended that the County develop bylaws to allow condominium resort accommodations as well as condominium horse stalls to provide options for rural residents or seniors who are looking to downsize but want to continue to enjoy a natural/rural lifestyle.

INDUSTRIAL LAND

This topic received less input than others. Residents generally accepted that industrial land is the **economic base** of Strathcona County and supports many **local jobs**. One participant suggested we need more dialogue about industry and why it is important. However, the majority of participants stressed the need to **control industrial growth** and keep it contained where it is now. Numerous participants raised the issue of **air quality** and implications for human and environmental **health**, noting that they lacked confidence in current **monitoring** systems. Participants noted the potential for this topic to clash with others such as Nature-Based & Agri-Tourism, Sustainable Development, and Environmental Management, and Agriculture.

One group of participants focused on the **Agri-Industrial transition zone** and were concerned that if it is used solely for industry this could place even more pressure on adjacent agricultural areas. They suggested promoting small agri-businesses in this area with incentives to ensure the area is used as intended.

One participant suggested the County should promote by-product synergies to take full advantage of the opportunities associated with industry.

OTHER

Participants in one workshop discussed the **planning process** and suggested a need for greater transparency and openness. They suggested that the current approach is too segregated and that planning processes should be more integrated as all of the topics and interrelated. For example, they suggested that representatives working on parallel processes such as the Agriculture Master Plan or industrial planning should attend MDP meetings or hold joint meetings to share ideas and provide information.

One participant suggested the updated MDP could be more accessible and **user-friendly** if it is written/edited by someone who specializes in plain-language technical writing.

NEXT STEPS

Over the summer the planning team will begin to develop policy options based on the feedback received to date as well as information from existing County plans and background research completed in Phase 1. These options will be brought back to the public for review and comment in the fall.

PHASE 3 ENGAGEMENT

Join us in Phase 3 as we dive deeper into policy options and directions to make specific choices about where the County can go. This phase will result in draft policies that will shape the updated MDP. These will be refined further into a complete draft plan in Phase 4.

Stay tuned for more information about engagement events in the fall. There will be opportunities in each phase for you to attend an event, provide feedback, and share your ideas. The best way to stay up to date on the project is to sign up to the project mailing list at www.strathcona.ca/MDP. You can also visit this website to learn more about the MDP update, check out our whiteboard video, find out about upcoming engagement activities, and view input as it is gathered.