



# How future-ready are municipalities in Alberta?

## LAND USE TOOLS AS PART OF LONG-TERM STRATEGY FOR LOCAL DEVELOPMENT

### INTRODUCTION

Alberta Land Institute's research "Land use tools as part of long-term strategy for local development: possibilities for contextual learning," investigates ways in which rural communities can use land use tools to craft more resilient local development strategies in Alberta. The development path taken by a community is shaped by how citizens value the land and its uses and the stories they tell about their future. Ultimately, the research aims at understanding key factors that enable – or impede – crafting sustainable local development strategies in rural communities.

#### What is sustainable local development?

Local development that serves the needs and desires of citizens in a way that accounts for sustainability and long-term development.

#### Why study strategies?

Because building resilient, sustainable communities requires coordinating ideas about the future with the tools to get there. Strategies can be narratives and institutions simultaneously, and therefore can have the potential to link community stories, land use tools, and different policy domains allowing for more adaptive and efficient local coordination.

Professor Van Assche and his team studied governance structures, development strategies, and land use tools in eight case study communities focusing on: Why are the connections between strategy and long-term perspectives so important, and what happens when these connections are not there?

#### Why study the connections between development strategies, long term perspectives, and land use policies?

Studying the connections between land use tools, long-term perspectives, and development strategies is imperative because a lack of coordination between land use tools and long-term perspectives can render communities less resilient and more dependent on short-term fixes or "band-aid" solutions to current and future development challenges.

### THE APPROACH

By mapping governance pathways using document analysis, interviews, surveys, and archive work, the research shows how long term perspectives emerge, how ideas about the future are linked or disconnected to strategy, and, in turn, how land use tools are – or are not – included as part of strategy.

# EIGHT CASE STUDIES

1

## Crowsnest Pass

Population size: 5,589

Municipalities: Blairmore, Coleman, Bellevue, Frank, Hillcrest

2

## Grimshaw

Population size: 2,718

3

## Jasper

Population size: 4,590

4

## Banff

Population size: 7,847

5

## Flagstaff County

Population size: 3,738

Municipalities: Lougheed, Forestberg, Killam, Sedgewick

6

## Strathcona County

Population size: 98,044

7

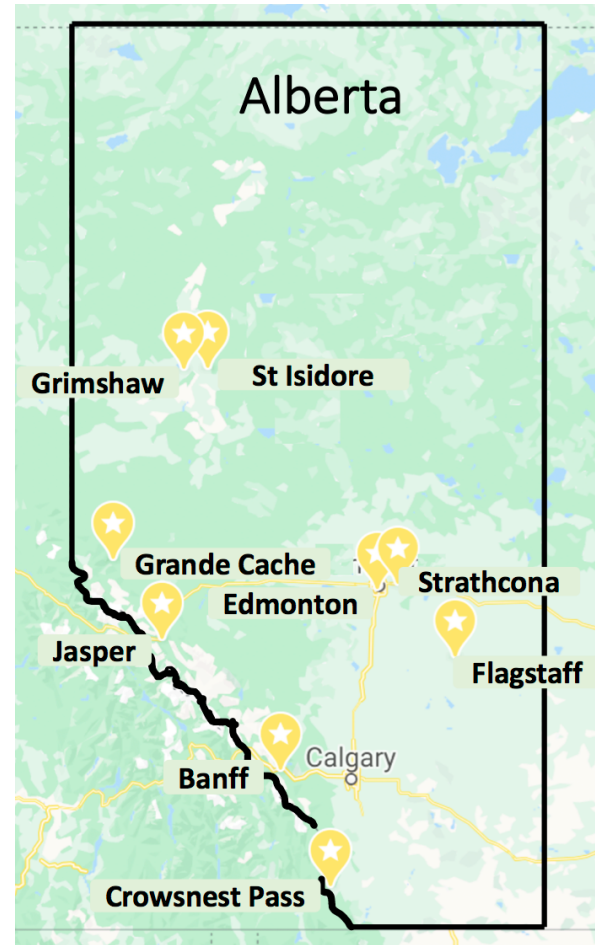
## Grande Cache

Population size: 3,571

8

## St Isidore

Population size: 266



The researchers selected eight different communities in Alberta as case studies. The case studies were selected based on their size, geographical region, and proximity to larger urban centers. Each case study illustrated the unique challenges faced by the community and highlighted the conflicts, opportunities, and decisions that are required in building a functional strategy for future development.

## THE THEORY AND CONCEPTS

A communities development path must be understood within its historical context and present-day governance structures (*see box below*). Understanding governance systems, including who takes decisions and how they are made, allows strategies to be crafted in a way that resonates with community values and beliefs.

### What is governance?

Governance can be understood simply as taking collectively binding decisions.

### What are governance systems?

A governance system is then the system in which collectively binding decisions are taken and includes actors, institutions, power and knowledge relations.

### What is a governance path?

The governance path is the trajectory of governance systems over a certain period. The governance path allows us to observe the evolution of the system.

### What is evolving governance?

Governance evolution is the changes in relationships between – and among – actors and institutions and power-knowledge relations.

### What are community development strategies?

Community Development Strategies should integrate stories, rules, and tools in order to mobilize resources and motivate the community. It is, therefore, a function, a narrative, as well as an institution.



# FIVE KEY FACTORS ENABLE OR DISABLE STRATEGY

1

## Higher-level actors

- Enable formation and implementation of local strategies through their long-term perspective.
- **Case Study:** Being within a national park provides the towns of Banff and Jasper with a clear long-term perspective and goals but simultaneously limits their autonomy.

2

## Single sector economies

- The simplification of economies to a single resource makes envisioning alternative futures and strategies difficult.
- **Case Study:** The mining town of Grande Cache struggled to agree on a future different from extractive industries and opted to dissolve into the surrounding county.

3

## Absence of strategy

- Lack of strategy may be rooted in resident's notion of local government or the broad notion that strategies should be reduced to growth.
- When a community is not used to strategizing, the creation of a strategy may become more difficult in the long run.
- **Case Study:** In an attempt to amalgamate, Flagstaff and surrounding communities struggled to envision a joint future, making the creation of a new long-term strategy difficult.

4

## Community's identity as enabling and disabling

- A community identity that fosters a shared vision of the future and enhances policy coordination often enables strategy.
- Conversely, a community where identities are contested, fragmented, or politically polarized often disables strategy.
- **Case Study:** In the Crowsnest Pass, both mining activity and its subsequent end caused shocks, affecting governance, making reflexivity difficult, and preventing the articulation of alternative futures.

5

## Strong municipal administration

- The presence and stability of municipal administration enables the creation of strategy because it fosters trust, networks, and institutional memory.
- Smaller communities, with weak administrations, are less well-positioned to develop strategies because they lack the above features, and their capacity to organize, and strategize, is constrained.



# LAND USE TOOLS & COMMUNITY STRATEGIES

Not only do the above five factors affect the creation and efficacy of community strategy, so does the linking of strategy and land use tools. When considering the development of strategies, we must also examine how land-use tools cohere because of the legal and narrative implications that strategies will have on the land — and our use of it.

Currently, the idea of creating cohesion between strategy, long-term perspectives, and land use policy is not commonplace within community administrations. When tools are not used, updated, or coordinated, communities' ability to steer in their desired future direction is impeded.

Professor Van Assche and his team find that it is imperative to consider land use tools as they enable communities to pursue their collective vision and goals. When a lack of cohesion between land use plans and policies and strategies exists, ultimately, the strategy will be less effective in moving communities towards their desired future.

## NEXT STEPS

In moving towards a desired future for sustainable land use and development, it is not the form of the strategy that matters but its ability to coordinate community narratives and institutions. Recognizing this function of strategy is important because attempting to understand pathways of governance will unavoidably also reveal tensions, problems, and conflicts within the community.

The research team is working to publish a guide to assist communities in crafting strategy. The guide entitled "Crafting strategies for sustainable local development" will outline the different hurdles and opportunities arising as communities aim to coordinate land use tools and development strategies through strategy.

**Land Use Tools as Part of Long-term Strategy for Local Development** was completed in 2021.

**Backgrounder V.01**

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### Alberta Land Institute

The Alberta Land Institute (ALI) is an independent research institute based at the University of Alberta. We are committed to research that supports and enhances land use policy in the province of Alberta and beyond. ALI's work focuses on the changing landscape and the ways that planning and policy design can ensure the long-term sustainability of Alberta's agricultural sector, its water and its natural areas.

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