



Looking Forward to Our Future

Smoky Lake Region Strategic Plan

Adopted by the
Joint Municipalities Committee

September 10, 2007

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Dear Citizens:

On behalf of the Joint Municipalities Committee, we are pleased to provide you with the Smoky Lake Region Strategic Plan. The plan is a product of the collaborative efforts of the four municipalities that make up the Smoky Lake Region. It is a 20-year plan designed to ensure that the Region continues to be an attractive and prosperous place to live, work and visit.

The plan is called *Looking Forward to our Future* for several reasons. It encourages us to plan ahead, to think about what we want our communities to look like in the future. It reminds us that we need to take specific actions to ensure that we – and future generations – can look forward to enjoying a high quality of life in the Region. Finally, it encourages us to share the responsibility of securing our future.

Rural areas such as ours are very sensitive to global economic and social trends. We know that some rural areas are doing well while others are declining. We recognize that while our Region has held its own, it isn't fully realizing its potential. We believe that there are many opportunities for our Region to thrive and prosper in the future. To take advantage of these opportunities, we need to keep an eye on the future and plan ahead.

This strategic plan establishes a vision to guide the development of the Region. It includes strategies, goals and actions aimed at fulfilling this vision. It recognizes that while we want to develop the economy of the Region, we want to do so in a manner that assures our rural and small town character; protects our environment, and preserves our historical and cultural assets.

This strategic plan is not a static document. It will be carefully implemented and professionally managed on a daily basis. It will be adjusted when necessary with community input. The Joint Municipalities Committee will be responsible for reporting on its progress on an annual basis.

Carole Carpenter
Mayor
Town of Smoky Lake

Cory Ollikka
Reeve
Smoky Lake County

Carol Trider
Mayor
Village of Vilna

Ray Huot
Mayor
Village of Waskatenau

What is a Strategic Plan?

A strategic plan is a tool to help an organization proactively plan its future. It identifies where it wants to go, what it wants to look like in the future, and how it intends to get there. Strategic planning typically involves the development a shared vision for the future. It includes strategies, goals and activities designed to move the organization from its current state to its defined future state.

What are the Benefits of a Strategic Plan?

A good strategic plan:

- promotes proactive thinking and action;
- encourages collaboration amongst stakeholders;
- focuses efforts on a common vision;
- addresses critical issues;
- identifies innovative ways of achieving goals and objectives;
- promotes the efficient and effective use of resources; and
- provides continuity during changing times and transitions of leadership.

Introduction

The Smoky Lake Region is often described as a “community of communities”. It is comprised of four municipalities: Smoky Lake County; the Town of Smoky Lake; the Village of Vilna, and the Village of Waskatenau. It is strategically located on the Highway 28 corridor in northeast Alberta, approximately 100 kilometers from the City of Edmonton and the Alberta Capital Region.

While it boasts a very high quality of life and a stable economy, concerns have been expressed that the Region is not meeting its economic potential or fully capitalizing on the Alberta Advantage.

The four municipal governments have responded to these concerns by adopting this 20-year strategic plan. The plan has several purposes:

- It commits the four municipalities to working together to promote sustainable development in the Region.
- It confirms a vision for development that balances economic growth, environmental protection and historic preservation.
- It creates a comprehensive planning document for the Region and guides the development of business plans for the four municipalities.
- It recognizes that concerted action from a wide range of partners will be required to meet the needs of the Region.
- It identifies strategies to diversify and promote the economy of the Region.
- It provides a framework for making land use decisions across the Region.

Our Vision

The strategic planning process confirmed a clear vision for the Region.

The Smoky Lake Region is an attractive, prosperous community that treasures its blend of rural and small town lifestyles, with strong values placed on economic development, social cohesion, environmental protection and historical preservation.

People in the Smoky Lake Region value their quality of life. They cherish the rural and small town character of the area. They value their natural environment and their rich cultural and historical roots. While they are interested in the economic development of the Region, they won't support industrial development that will detract from their rural and small town lifestyles.

Smoky Lake residents understand that the long-term sustainability of their communities depends upon the Region's ability to attract and retain residents and businesses. They want to pursue an economic development strategy based on promoting diversification, with an emphasis on light manufacturing, oil and gas servicing, agriculture, recreation and tourism. They believe that industrial and commercial development should be clustered along the Highway 28 corridor.

Residents want to attract more people to live in the Region, especially within existing urban areas and lakefront subdivisions. They are supportive of first parcel out subdivision of farmsteads. They are anxious to promote the Region as an attractive place to raise a family or to retire. They want to promote the Region as an easy commute to the industrial job sites in surrounding areas.

People in the Smoky Lake Region hold a close connection to the land and to their roots. They are interested in protecting agricultural and environmentally sensitive land. They place high importance on the quality of their water supply and on the protection of the regional watershed. They are adamant about preserving their cultural and historic assets.

Working Together

Achieving this vision will not be easy. It will take focused and ongoing effort to ensure the Region develops as planned. The strategic plan will only be effective if the entire Region supports it. No single government, community or committee can implement the plan on its own. Successful implementation will require the ongoing commitment and the involvement of:

- The Joint Municipalities Committee;
- Each of the four municipal councils and their administrations;
- Community groups and volunteers;
- Individual residents;
- Local businesses and business associations;
- Economic and tourism partners;
- Aspen Regional Health Authority;
- Local school districts;
- Neighboring municipalities and Aboriginal communities;
- The Government of Alberta; and
- Federal government regional development programs.

Principles

The Smoky Lake Region Strategic Plan is based upon a number of important principles. It is:

- driven by good governance principles;
- reflective of the goals and objectives of the community;
- supported by citizens and endorsed by community leaders from across the Region;
- clear in its intentions, it has to explain why it is being implemented;
- managed and supported on an ongoing basis, with access to appropriate levels of resources;
- evaluated on an annual basis to ensure that it is accomplishing what it set out to accomplish; and
- focused on the long-term - success will be achieved through consistent efforts over time.

**Diversify the Region's
Economy**

**Improve the Region's
Economic
Development
Capacity**

**Promote
the Region**

Strategic Priorities
Smoky Lake Region Strategic Plan

**Protect the Region's
Natural and Historic
Assets**

**Maintain the Region's
Quality of Life**

**Attract New
Residents to the
Region**

Improve the Region's Economic Development Capacity

Current Situation

The municipalities in the Smoky Lake Region have undertaken steps to enhance their capacity as a Region to pursue economic development. The Joint Municipalities Committee established an Economic Development Committee to pursue various economic development and tourism initiatives. The four municipalities are participating in broader regional initiatives through membership in organizations such as the Community Futures St. Paul – Smoky Lake Region; the Northeast Alberta Information HUB Ltd. and the Rural Metro Accord. The municipalities have also pursued partnerships with First Nations, Metis settlements, and other communities and organizations in northeast Alberta.

Community Perspectives

The Region needs to build up adequate capacity to undertake economic development on a daily basis. It does not have sufficient capacity to pursue economic development on a regional basis. Many residents emphasized that a bias against economic development exists within the Region. They are concerned that economic development opportunities may be missed or not identified at all. Many residents do not believe the Region is realizing the full benefits of Alberta's growth.

Desired Outcomes

The Region has an “open for business” reputation and is recognized for its innovative and entrepreneurial approach to economic development. Individuals, groups and organizations across the Region play an active role in identifying and supporting sustainable economic development initiatives. The municipalities in the Region work together and form partnerships with likeminded organizations to implement economic development initiatives.

Goals and Activities

To improve the Region's economic development capacity, the municipalities, in conjunction with community members, undertake the following:

- 1.1 Ensure the Joint Municipalities Committee works towards the implementation of the Smoky Lake Region Strategic Plan
- 1.2 Retain a full-time economic and community development officer for the Region to lead the ongoing implementation of the Plan.
- 1.3 Develop and adopt rolling three-year action plans to implement this Strategic Plan over the next 20 years.
- 1.4 Assign the responsibility for monitoring and assessing the implementation of the Strategic Plan to the Economic Development Committee. Appoint community members to the Committee to assist in the evaluation. Report progress on an annual basis.
- 1.5 Establish mechanisms to enable the Region's residents and businesses to provide input in the economic development process.
- 1.6 Strengthen collaboration with member communities of the Northeast Alberta Information HUB, Ltd. and pursue other partnerships with surrounding communities.
- 1.7 Strengthen economic development partnerships with First Nations and Métis communities.
- 1.8 Provide municipal councillors and managers with learning opportunities in the area of economic development.

Performance Indicators

- Number of successful local development initiatives led or supported by the Economic Development Committee;
- Number of successful economic development initiatives undertaken by the Region;
- Timely review and approval of three-year rolling plans;
- Attendance of training seminars offered to municipal councilors and administrators;
- Number of projects initiated in response to calls for action from residents in the Region; and
- Number of initiatives undertaken in conjunction with HUB, Community Futures, First Nations and Métis communities.

Diversify the Region's Economy

Current Situation

The economic base of the Region is agriculture. The Region has grazing lands to the north, good quality flat crop lands to the west, a climate suitable to most crops, ready access to processing facilities, and a large domestic market in Edmonton. Tourism is an increasingly strong sector of the Region's economy.

The Region is strategically located in close proximity to major industrial expansions. Opportunities lie in attracting industry, services and residents to meet the outsourcing demand of large industrial developments in neighbouring regions: oil sands upgrading in the Industrial Heartland, heavy oil and oil sands exploration in the Fort McMurray and Cold Lake areas, defense related projects concentrated in the Cold Lake area.

Community Perspectives

People in the Region respect the fact that the local economy is based on agriculture but believe that the long-term viability of the area depends on diversification of its economic base. Currently, the regional economy is not sufficiently diversified to support a strong local employment base. Residents are concerned that too many people are commuting to jobs outside of the Region and that young people in the Region are leaving to seek employment in urban centres.

Desired Outcomes

The Region's economy is driven by employment opportunities in a wide range of sectors, including agriculture, oil and gas, light manufacturing, services and tourism. Businesses in the region are respectful of the environment and the country lifestyle enjoyed by community residents. The Region is less vulnerable to global economic trends. Young people are choosing to stay in the Region to pursue their careers. Municipalities have the needed tax base to provide adequate service levels and public infrastructure. A wider range of business and government services is available in communities across the Region.

Goals and Activities

To diversify the Region's economy, the municipalities, with the support of community members, undertake the following:

- 2.1 Undertake a regional opportunity identification exercise for business attraction, retention, and expansion. Identify and pursue value-added agricultural opportunities in the Region. Ensure the identified opportunities are relevant and respond to regional and global trends.
- 2.2 Identify and pursue economic development spin-offs from the construction and operation of oil sands upgraders adjacent to the Region.
- 2.3 Identify and pursue new economic opportunities that will increase the regional employment base.
- 2.4 Ensure that the appropriate infrastructure (including water and wastewater) is in place to expand existing businesses and attract new industry.
- 2.5 Continue to support farming in the Region through programs such as weed control, pest eradication, etc. Ensure land is available for farming and minimize land use conflicts.
- 2.6 Ensure land is available for commercial development along the Region's transportation corridors (Highways 28, 36, 831, and 855) and in urban areas
- 2.7 Ensure that land is available for industrial development in the Region.
- 2.8 Identify and eliminate impediments to economic development and business growth in the Region.
- 2.9 Support networking opportunities amongst businesses in the Region.
- 2.10 Provide a forum for a series of ongoing business development and self-employment training seminars in the Region (e.g., seminars on

best practices for employee attraction, retention, and training; development ag-tourism products; global trends in agriculture; direct marketing; e-commerce; securing business financing; etc.).

- 2.11 Support a youth entrepreneurship program in conjunction with local school districts, provincial learning institutions, and Community Futures.
- 2.12 Work with partners (e.g., Community Futures, provincial government) to improve access to financing for regional businesses.
- 2.13 Work with tourism partners to encourage networking within the Region's tourism sector.
- 2.14 Encourage "buy local" campaigns. Develop an inventory of businesses in the Region. Encourage procurement practices that support these businesses.
- 2.15 Encourage local arts and cultural organizations to develop products.

Performance Indicators

- Number of new jobs created in the Region, measured on an annual basis;
- Number of new employers attracted to the Region;
- Number of new service providers (e.g., banks, gas stations) in the Region;
- Number of learning and networking opportunities provided to local businesses by municipalities;
- Acres of land available for residential and non-residential development; and
- Regional population growth.

Promote the Region

Current Situation

Local residents are proud of the Region's enviable quality of life, which offers active country lifestyle in safe, welcoming communities. The Region is involved in a number of promotional campaigns through Northeast Alberta Information HUB, Ltd., Kalyna Country and Alberta's Lakeland to increase tourism visitation.

Community Perspectives

Many residents note that the Region has been reluctant to promote itself as an attractive location to live, work and visit. Many attribute this to the history and culture of the area or to the fact that local officials are simply too busy with day-to-day business to actively promote the Region on an ongoing basis.

Desired Outcomes

The Region has gained a reputation across Alberta as an attractive place to live, work and visit. Regional promotional and communication plans have been developed and are being implemented. People are moving to the Region's urban communities and waterfront properties. The regional economy is diversified and tourism revenues have increased.

Goals and Activities

To promote the Region, the municipalities, with the support of community members, undertake the following:

- 3.1 Develop an integrated marketing plan to attract visitors, businesses and residents to the Region.
- 3.2 Develop and implement a communications plan to raise awareness of the Region's quality of life and economic development opportunities.

- 3.3 Promote the Highway 28 corridor as a key transportation corridor in the province.
- 3.4 Develop a multi-media promotional package for the Region. Initially target the greater Edmonton region and Fort McMurray.
- 3.5 Implement a branding program for the Region.
- 3.6 Continue collaboration on tourism initiatives with Kalyna Country, Alberta's Lakeland Tourism, Northeast Alberta Information HUB Ltd., Alberta's Iron Horse Trail, Métis Crossing, Smoky Lake & District Chamber of Commerce.
- 3.7 Promote the Region provincially and internationally (e.g., in cooperation with the City of Edmonton through the Rural Metro Accord).
- 3.8 Ensure that municipal and regional websites are accurate and up-to-date.
- 3.9 Work with the provincial government to ensure adequate signage is available along major transportation routes to increase visitation to regional tourism and recreational sites.
- 3.10 Encourage the development of outdoor recreation and adventure tourism products within the Region.

Performance Indicators

- Growth in tourism visitation;
- Number of successful marketing campaigns in place; and
- Website counts.

Attract New Residents to the Region

Current Situation

Each of the municipalities in the Region has pursued initiatives designed to attract new residents. They have encouraged the development of residential properties within their boundaries. The municipalities have also worked to ensure that local infrastructure and services are available to support residential development.

Community Perspectives

Residents of the Region are aware that the population of the area as a whole is declining, particularly in more rural areas where the number of farms and the size of farm families have dropped significantly. They are concerned with the decline in local services that typically result from population decline. They noted with particular concern the loss of healthcare, education, banking, automotive and skilled trades services in different parts of the Region.

Desired Outcomes

More people are choosing to live and work in the Region. The populations of the town, villages and hamlets are increasing to more sustainable levels. Recreational and retirement properties in the Region are very popular.

Goals and Activities

To attract new residents to the Region, the municipalities, with the support of community members, undertake the following:

- 4.1 Develop and implement a marketing plan. Focus the plan on attracting residents to existing urban areas and waterfront properties.
- 4.2 Develop and implement a residential attraction plan targeted at the development of oil sands upgraders west of the Region.

- 4.3 Ensure that the appropriate infrastructure is in place to attract new residents.
- 4.4 Identify and eliminate barriers to residential development across the Region.
- 4.5 Support a variety of residential developments.
- 4.6 Encourage the development of affordable housing.
- 4.7 Identify and communicate with former residents of the Region. Encourage people to “come home” to live or visit.
- 4.8 Support the creation of youth employment opportunities in the region to ensure youth remain in the region upon graduation.
- 4.9 Work with local schools to ensure that high school students are aware of career and employment opportunities available across the Region.
- 4.10 Develop and implement a plan to encourage seasonal residents to consider living in the Region.
- 4.11 Develop and implement a Regional “welcome package” for new and prospective residents.

Performance Indicators

- Number of new residents moving to the Region on an annual basis;
- Availability of a variety of housing options across the Region;
- Provincial awareness levels of the Region as an attractive place to live; and
- Value of residential development permits.

Maintain the Region's Quality of Life

Current Situation

The Region is comprised of a large rural landscape that includes a variety of small urban communities. Community organizations, events and activities are supported across the Region. Each of the municipalities has programs and services designed to support and enhance the quality of life in their communities. The Region has access to quality health care and primary/secondary education services.

Community Perspectives

Residents value their mix of rural and urban lifestyles and are committed to ensuring that the high quality of life in their communities continues in the future. While supportive of economic development, people in the Region will not sacrifice their rural quality of life. People across the Region are concerned that it is increasingly difficult to attract and retain community volunteers. Many are also concerned with the number of unsightly properties within urban areas

Desired Outcomes

The Region boasts a high quality of life. Community events and organizations are thriving and levels of volunteerism are healthy. Community programs and services are in place to meet the needs of citizens of all ages. The Region is a safe and welcoming place for Albertans and new immigrants.

Goals and Activities

To enhance the Region's rural lifestyle, the municipalities, with the support of community members, undertake the following:

- 5.1 Support cultural activities and organizations across the Region. Continue to lend support to community events and to encourage activities that promote appreciation for cultural diversity.

- 5.2 Develop a volunteer sector revitalization plan.
- 5.3 Recognize and honour the contributions of volunteers, community organizations, and businesses.
- 5.4 Identify and attract business services required by residents.
- 5.5 Continue to work with the Aspen Regional Health Authority to ensure access to quality health care services for residents in the Region.
- 5.6 Work with provincial learning institutions to identify and develop long distance learning opportunities within the Region.
- 5.7 Encourage the development of facilities and services for youth.
- 5.8 Encourage the development of facilities and services for seniors.
- 5.9 Identify and protect important open spaces across the Region.
- 5.10 Improve the visual appeal of communities, particularly the appeal of the urban downtown areas. Develop strategies to deal with vacant and unsightly residential lots in urban areas.

Performance Indicators

- Level of citizen satisfaction with the quality of life in their communities;
- Number of community development initiatives;
- Number of volunteers recognized for their contributions to communities in the Region; and
- Number of training opportunities for municipal leaders and community members supported by municipalities in the Region.

Protect the Region's Natural and Historic Assets

Current Situation

The Region is blessed with unique natural environmental features and rich cultural and historic assets. The diverse landscape includes unique rivers and lakes, forests and rolling farmland. Important cultural and historic sites are located throughout the Region. The municipalities in the Region participate in and support a range of organizations dedicated to the preservation of natural resources (e.g., North Saskatchewan Watershed Alliance) and historic assets (e.g., Smoky Lake Heritage Board).

Community Perspectives

Residents are concerned that development in the Region over the next 20 years may threaten these assets. A number of residents emphasized the importance of identifying and protecting natural resources and historical assets. Many noted that these resources and assets could be used to promote the Region and to create economic development opportunities.

Desired Outcome

The historical and ecological areas of the Region are protected. Land use designations are in place to ensure their preservation in the future. The Region has become recognized for its commitment to historical, cultural and ecological preservation. Businesses are respectful of the cultural and ecological heritage in the Region.

Goals and Activities

To improve the Region's economic development capacity, the municipalities, with the support of community members, undertake the following:

- 6.1 Develop an inventory of the Region's unique ecological sites and resources.
- 6.2 Develop an inventory of the Region's cultural and historic assets.

- 6.3 Adopt municipal policies to commits to the preservation of these resources and assets. Designate protected land in municipal land use plans.
- 6.4 Support the development of tourism products to improve awareness and visitation of the Region's cultural and historic assets.
- 6.5 Adopt a policy that encourages private landowners to protect important and sensitive ecological resources and cultural and historic assets.
- 6.6 Seek alliances with organizations to protect and preserve historic resources. Work with the province to preserve provincial assets.
- 6.7 Seek alliances with organizations to protect and preserve ecological resources. Work with the province to ensure crown land in the Region is adequately protected.
- 6.8 Continue active involvement in the North Saskatchewan Watershed Alliance and other organizations devoted to protecting water resources in the Region.
- 6.9 Create public education kits on natural and historic assets.

Performance Indicators

- Updated inventories of ecological, historical and cultural assets;
- Number of significant heritage and ecological sites identified for protection;
- Maintenance of a current land use plan that recognizes and protects natural and historic resources and assets; and
- Number of sites that have applied to the Alberta Historical Resources Foundation for funding to restore / preserve a historical site.

Implementing the Strategic Plan

Strategic planning is a dynamic process that requires ongoing, diligent management. Developing this plan was relatively easy; the hard work will come in implementing it over the next 20 years.

As goals and objectives are achieved, new ones will need to be developed. Over time, changing needs, resources and priorities will dictate revisions to specific goals and objectives.

Everyone has a stake in the development of the Region. Successful implementation of this strategic plan will require ongoing public involvement and commitment. Community groups and associations are encouraged to play an active role in implementing this plan.

The Joint Municipalities Committee is responsible and accountable for implementing this plan. It will identify resources to ensure the ongoing the implementation of the plan.

Evaluating and Reporting on the Strategic Plan

Ongoing attention to evaluating and publicly reporting the progress that is being made in implementing the plan will be critical. Doing so will ensure that everyone in the Region can see how well this plan is being implemented.

The Joint Municipalities Committee is responsible for monitoring and reporting on plan accomplishments and shortcomings. It will devote time at its regular meetings to review the progress of the strategic plan. It will use the wide range of performance indicators included in the plan to track how well the Region is progressing. It will prepare and release an annual report on the implementation of this plan that identifies areas that need more attention. Long-term demographic and socio-economic trends will be also be tracked and reported on in the annual reports.

The Joint Municipalities Committee will establish an advisory committee to assist with the ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the plan. The committee will be comprised of members of the Economic Development and Tourism Committee and citizen representatives of the Region.