

STRATEGIC REGIONAL PLANNING

Gord Hume...April 2014

Municipalities of all sizes are discovering the clout and benefits of regional-scale thinking in their planning and economic development strategies.

Larger agglomerations offer greater economic and partnership possibilities than smaller, isolated communities. Seeking international links and opportunities is becoming more and more important for progressive towns and cities that grow impatient at the bumbling of provincial and federal politicians.

There is a growing determination by local government leaders to assume greater control for local economic prosperity. One of the newest trends is direct, city-to-city economic and cultural partnerships. Last year the Mayors of Chicago and Mexico City signed an economic and cultural trade agreement for their two cities—no federal politicians involved. This was a city-to city, mayor to mayor initiative.

Another trend emerging to support growth and prosperity is regional-scale planning. Smart leaders understand that infrastructure issues, transportation planning, economic opportunities and cultural vibrancy don't arbitrarily end at some municipal boundary.

The Capital Region Board (CRB) in northern Alberta was created in 2008 with representatives from 24 municipalities, including Edmonton. The mandate was to establish regional partnerships for growth, and to recognize the benefits of shared infrastructure, development and policy frameworks. In other words, towns and cities are now looking at long-term planning decisions from a regional point of view. Municipalities that may be 50 kms away understand that decisions in one community affect the growth and development of others.

The CRB is focused on the integration of regional land use policies, inter-municipal transit, social and market affordable housing, and GIS, with an emphasis on infrastructure planning. How and where land will be serviced has vast implications on future growth and development. The regional approach offers local municipalities greater participation in that decision-making process, and provides greater certainty of long-range planning. It also opens the door for regional economic development and cooperation.

The Region of Peel, west of Toronto, is undergoing a thoughtful regional planning discussion right now. It is engaging its community and looking ahead to 2041—what kind of community, what transportation issues and infrastructure needs, how to develop employment lands as well as accommodate the expected substantial residential growth.

Large cities Mississauga and Brampton, and the smaller community of Caledon and surrounding green and rural spaces, make up this region. Peel has some very unique planning and development concerns. The process the Region is undertaking is thorough and inclusive.

I've had the opportunity in recent weeks to be a keynote speaker at both of these municipalities as their leaders wrestle with hard, fundamental questions. I have been impressed with both the professionalism and knowledge of the staff, and by the interest and determination of their elected officials to engage in great community planning.

The opportunity for public input and engagement is paramount in such a large planning exercise. So is a realistic view of the costs that are going to be involved.

There are a variety of formulae and jurisdictions when it comes to Development Charges, PPPS and other growth-related costs for municipalities across Canada.

Almost invariably, however, is the reality that municipalities have to pay for the basic new infrastructure up-front, and then gradually recover those costs as building lots are sold to developers. That is huge dollars for municipalities, and it may take years, even decades, to fully recover those initial development expenses.

Just as seriously, the debt-financing for towns and cities gets added to the annual operating budget, which increases the tax rate and limits the municipality's financial capacity.

And, generally, municipalities never reclaim 100% of their expenditures for growth. Some provinces limit what municipalities can charge for, or restrict claims for things like cultural amenities that most people would agree are important elements in building a great quality of life for communities.

With the on-going financial pressures facing municipalities across Canada, there is growing angst about growth, development, the costs involved to taxpayers, and at the same time still having to fight old concepts about municipal borders and battles for businesses.

New methods of funding growth--extracting money up-front from the private sector, increasing and broadening development charges, seeking new PPPs—are on-going issues for municipalities. The financial pressures are demanding a new way of thinking.

Regional scale planning and regional economic development offer a clear step forward. With often divided and dysfunctional provincial governments continuing to fumble the municipal file, local leaders are searching for new opportunities and ways of doing business.

Designing, building and supporting strong, prosperous municipalities that are indulging in regional planning and economic development is smart 21st century thinking.