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Growth Management in Smithers

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PLANSmithers

O C P R E V I E W

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1. Introduction

The Town of Smithers is currently reviewing and updating their Official Community Plan (OCP). The OCP is the guiding document for all decision and policy making in Smithers. A large component of the OCP is designating specific areas for specific uses such as commercial, residential, agricultural, industrial and so on. Determining how these lands are designated is based on how the community and Town decides growth will be managed. Essentially, the question around growth management is: *where are current and future residents going to live, work, play, and learn?* The answer to this question must consider population projections as well as the Town's commitment to sustainability and compact, complete communities.

The purpose of this discussion paper is to outline how growth management and sustainability are connected as well as to discuss the key growth management issues that face Smithers and the recommended strategies for addressing them. As such, this discussion paper is intended as a backgrounder to the OCP and will help to inform decisions around the future location, type, and intensity of development, and the regulatory framework that governs land use and growth management decisions in and on lands adjacent to the Town of Smithers.

2. Growth Management and Sustainability

The recent focus on community sustainability in many local governments has been sparked by:

- The loss of increasingly scarce farmland and natural ecosystems to development;
- Automobile dependency and its negative impact on climate change and human health;
- The need for social and economically vital communities, and
- The recognition of the paramount role community growth management plays in addressing all of these issues.

Sustainable growth management is premised on creating neighbourhoods where there are opportunities to work, shop, learn and play within close proximity to housing that is mixed in form, tenure, and affordability. The result, proponents claim, is a more efficient, equitable, and sociable use of land, resources, and energy. In Smithers issues related to growth management and sustainability have been raised as amongst the most important to be addressed as part of the OCP update process that is currently underway.

Generally defined, sustainability is the balancing and integrating of economic, social and environmental dimensions in all development and ensuring the needs of current generations are met without undermining the ability for future generations to meet those same needs. Cities of all sizes, from metropolitan centres to small rural hamlets like Smithers, play a critical role in ensuring local and global sustainability as they are vital locations at the heart of economy and society. Further, settlement areas experience the most intensive environmental damage and it is here that many improvements can be made. For example, extensive research has shown that lower density and scattered development that has characterized growth patterns throughout North America since the 1950's has:

- Increased the costs of services and infrastructure provisions.
- Increased land and energy consumption;
- Increased the direct and indirect costs of travel (particularly commuter travel);
- Inhibited social interaction, and has discouraged social integration.

A sustainable growth management strategy focuses on the relationships between settlement patterns and the activity patterns that result. Specifically, sustainable growth management focuses on encouraging land use patterns that use land, infrastructure, and resources efficiently, and minimize the need for and dependency on cars. One of the key aspects of community sustainability therefore is encouraging residential development that is located close to, or integrated with, every day uses and destinations like shopping, employment, entertainment, schools and other community uses so that residents can walk or ride a bike for everyday activities. Another key aspect of community sustainability is ensuring a range of housing choices that address the range of ages, income levels, and lifestyles in the community.

In smaller communities, particularly those with a strong rural and agricultural component like Smithers, not all residential development can be compact and located close to everyday services. Also, in smaller centers, there is often not a sufficient population to support convenient local transit services within the community.

Amenity migration, the phenomenon of people moving to a place not for economic reasons but because it has amenities they cannot enjoy where they are and because their incomes are mobile, has played a significant role in the economy and the housing market in Smithers. One of the key attractions drawing many people to live and/or purchase a home in Smithers and the larger Bulkley Nechako Regional District is the 'rural' lifestyle and the large, suburban and rural residential lots associated with it.

For these reasons, cars are likely to continue to play a necessary role in the community's economic and social fabric, as a demand for large lot single family homes in peripheral locations. However, despite these constraints, there are a number of key growth management strategies Smithers can employ to use land, infrastructure, and resources more efficiently and to reduce dependence on automobiles. The following sections outline what these key growth management strategies may be for Smithers

3. Fly-through of current growth management issues in Smithers

For decades, rural communities in Canada have generally suffered from depopulation and economic contraction. Recently, however, some of them have benefited from amenity migration. Through the research out of UNBC, we know that people are moving to Smithers for the natural beauty, outdoor recreation opportunities, small town life etc.

As with many forestry based communities, Smithers has experienced a negative growth rate of 3.6% from 2001 to 2006. Despite this downturn, there has been an increase in the number of housing starts, and there is still a demand for new housing in the community. It is anticipated that with the continued mining exploration activities in Northern BC, it is entirely possible that Smithers will see a dramatic population increase should the mining companies choose the town as their main point of administrative and worker housing activities. In addition, the eventual redevelopment of the Mt. Hudson ski hill will have housing and growth management implications for the Town of Smithers. Namely, if housing is located in town, it will help achieve the stated community vision and sustainability goals, as are being currently developed as part of the OCP update process. If housing associated with the ski hill is located outside of the town, it will create demands for the expansion of infrastructure and by extension the Town boundaries, which would be inconsistent with the emerging OCP vision and goals.

Through a community survey as part of the OCP process, the community of Smithers has indicated strong support for the provision of more seniors housing as well as medium support for alternate housing forms and tenure such as: town houses , small apartment buildings, single family homes, secondary suites, social housing, mixed use (Live Work) and, garden suites.¹

The community was also asked what growth initiatives are priorities for the Town of Smithers. High Priority items (in order of importance) were

¹ Information based on an on-line community survey that concluded April 28, 2008 and had 366 respondents.

reported as: revitalize the downtown, protect sensitive areas on private land, and preserve the agricultural land reserve. Medium priority growth management topics (in order of importance) were reported as: beautify the community, control the appearance of commercial and industrial developments, provide more parks and recreation facilities, affordable housing, maintain neighbourhood character, expand the town's boundaries, limit growth in certain areas, control the town's rate of growth. The community has also expressed a desire for greater local and inter- regional transit services. Specifically, local community shuttles and regional rail and bus links were identified as opportunities.

The Town's ability to realize these priorities is intrinsically related to how the Regional District lands outside of the town boundary are managed. Decisions regarding land use and growth management within the Regional District have a significant impact on growth management strategies within Smithers related specifically to housing supply, demand and uptake. As such, growth management decisions should be coordinated to ensure they address objectives of each of these two entities.

As noted above, Smithers is the amenity centre for a large region whose residents use the Town's private businesses and public facilities and services including the road network, parks, community centres, and other public facilities and programs. However as many community members, who live in the Regional District and are not technically residents of Smithers, do not directly pay for these services, funding for these facilities and programs are collected and dispersed by the Regional District. Tax rates in the Regional District are less than those for properties within the Town proper, creating an additional attraction for development of properties outside of the town boundaries in peripheral locations.

4. Current housing capacity within the town boundary

Currently, and for the lifetime of the updated OCP, the town of Smithers does not need to consider the expansion of the town boundary to accommodate growth as there is adequate capacity within the town boundaries for a range of housing types and tenures. Consider that the housing demand is relatively low with housing starts over the last 10 years averaging 7-10 units per year, amounting to less than 0.5% per year.² Consider also, that Smithers has experienced a negative growth rate in the

² The census indicates a reduction in total dwellings from 2,195 in 2001 to 2,172 in 2006. This is likely an error in calculation. Given that the population growth rate from 2001-2006 is -3.6% and housing starts are 0.5-1% over the past 10 years, this means that it is likely that people are moving towards smaller households (i.e. fewer people per household= more houses for the same population), increase in the purchase and construction of vacation homes (i.e. accounts for housing starts but not population increase), and a desire for newer housing (i.e. existing residents building new homes).

past several years. Assuming that this population decline trend will stabilize and the growth rate in Smithers will increase to 1% per year, the un-built housing capacity in Town will continue to be sufficient into the future. It is thought that even with population increase associated with the ski hill redevelopment and mining operations, that Smithers will be able to accommodate a dramatic population burst in terms of housing for new residents.

Projecting a 1% growth rate into the future, there is a significant amount of un-built capacity for a range of dwellings types in a range of locations. With regards to single family dwellings specifically, there is a remaining un-built capacity for single family dwellings for over 25 years, even if total annual growth of all dwellings was from single family dwellings. (i.e. at 20 dwellings/year, there is 20 years of un-built capacity for single family dwellings alone.). However, future expansion of the ski hill and of resource extraction activities adjacent to the Town would result in significant demands for housing related to these possible future activities, in turn using up a lot of this un-built capacity.

Specifically, un-built capacity within the town includes the Willowvale subdivision (phases 1 - 8) represent an un-built capacity for approximately 400 single family dwellings, and roughly 100 multi-family dwelling units. Further, there is extensive capacity under existing OCP policy for multi-family dwellings (row houses, town houses, apartments) in existing residential and commercial areas through infill and redevelopment. The majority of this un-built capacity under existing OCP policy is for dwelling types currently un-represented and for which there is likely not a strong market desire for currently.

This OCP process has identified a strong community desire to accommodate additional growth in existing built residential and commercial areas through infill and re-development in the form of multi-family and mixed use developments. As such, there is a significant capacity for this type of development in the community due to the predominance of single family dwellings, and one story commercial buildings.

A high-level capacity analysis of un-built capacity in the regional district indicates there is an un-built capacity for 72 new single family homes. Based on current OCP policy of the Regional District, there is significant un-built capacity for dwellings large, rural lots (minimum 3 acres).

5. Conclusions & Policy Recommendations

Based on public input, high-level analysis of current capacity within the town boundaries, and population projection estimates, the main conclusion to be drawn is that Smithers has ample un-built capacity within the town boundaries to accommodate future growth. Below are policy recommendations for how to support this overall growth management strategy.

OCP Policy Recommendations:

The majority of new growth and development will be accommodated through sensitive infill and intensification (redevelopment) of existing built and serviced areas and will be given priority over development proposals on previously undeveloped (Greenfield) sites within the Town boundaries.

The majority of new residential growth will occur within the Downtown and the adjacent mixed residential neighbourhoods.

The majority of lands within the Town boundaries have already been developed under existing zoning. Any changes in the allowable use, height and density would therefore require that property owners apply for rezoning, with the Town considering the merits of each application through the public rezoning review process and based on the policies of this plan. Commercial, mixed-use and multi-family development proposals also need to demonstrate how they meet the established Development Permit Area design guidelines. The District may require the development of a set of standards and guidelines for any proposals to create housing and building forms that are new to the community.

Development of previously designated residential lands in existing built areas will be substantially complete before the expansion of development onto currently un-serviced and undeveloped sites, specifically the Willowvale subdivision, to ensure the efficient and orderly provision of municipal infrastructure, public facilities and transportation systems.

OCP Policy Recommendations:

Undeveloped greenfield sites currently designated for residential use will be given a designation consistent with their current zoning until such time as there is a need for additional capacity to meet the housing needs of the community.

Town Boundary expansion will not be considered until existing residential lands within the Town boundaries are substantially developed and there is a need for additional capacity to meet the housing needs of the community. Given the remaining un-built capacity in the Willowvale lands, Boundary expansion is not likely to be considered during the planning horizon of this plan.

Prior to considering major municipal boundary expansions, the Town shall undertake an independent study that addresses servicing, fiscal and municipal taxation, and governance issues, and will conduct consultation with affected local governments and residents.

Development in future growth areas will be contiguous to existing urban areas to capitalize on existing infrastructure and community services and minimize the length of infrastructure extensions.

The Town of Smithers will work closely with the Regional District to ensure regional growth is managed to achieve goals and objectives, and address issues, of mutual interest and concern to each jurisdiction.

Employee housing, tourist accommodation, and commercial uses associated with expansion of Hudson's Bay Ski Resort is strongly encouraged to be located within the town boundaries of Smithers.

Focus and mix new residential, commercial, and community uses within the downtown area to reinforce its role as the heart of the community, to create a compact, complete and walkable downtown, and to support continued downtown revitalization.

Downtown Smithers is the preferred location for multi-unit residential buildings, mixed use commercial and residential buildings, office

OCP Policy Recommendations:

buildings, institutional buildings, and arts and cultural facilities.

Mixed use development, specifically, residential uses located above commercial uses, is strongly encouraged in the downtown to provide a balance of jobs, amenities, and housing for all stages of life. Daily services and activities should be provided within walking distance of housing to offer independence to those who do not drive such as the elderly and the young, and to those who choose not to drive.

Encourage proposals for new commercial uses developed in areas designated for mixed use commercial/residential uses to be designed and constructed to accommodate the permitted residential component at a future time.

All new development in the downtown will be oriented towards creating pedestrian oriented streets.

Proposals for significant development projects shall demonstrate how their proposal will encourage non-automobile transportation services, through the provision of bicycle facilities, parking reductions, car-share programs, and other appropriate Transportation Demand Management (TDM) strategies (cross reference transportation section).rough connections to pedestrian and bicycle networks and public transit