

Okotoks to re-examine cap on growth
Town's mayor wants limit removed

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Propped against a shovel and with a ceremonial hardhat on, Okotoks mayor Bill McAlpine was chatting with locals following official ground-breaking ceremonies for a mixed-use development.

Ranked as one of the fastest-growing communities in Canada, Okotoks has become a magnet for people wanting to escape the big-city lights, rediscover the small-town atmosphere and raise their kids -- but still be close enough to their work or lifestyle interests in Calgary just 32 kilometres up Highway 2.

There was such a deluge of people moving in, concern grew that the existing infrastructure might not be able to handle the stresses of growth.

A cap of 30,000 was put on the population. Well, growth pressures are once again at work and in all likelihood, that cap put in place by McAlpine and his council could well be gone.

"We'll be holding a series of public meetings and open houses in January and February to decide what has to be done," says McAlpine, heading for the sales and presentation centre of Willow, An Urban Village in Okotoks, which is being planned by Developments2.

The project will provide 50 apartment-style condos and 18,000 square feet of retail/commercial space across Northridge Drive from historic downtown Elizabeth Street.

McAlpine welcomes the added retail amenities as the town's population continues to climb.

But back to the future of the cap.

"Personally, I'd like to see the cap go -- I think it's something that has to be done," says McAlpine.

"But it won't be up to me alone. We want input from everyone in town."

The decision, whatever it is, has to be made prior to next June, when the Calgary Regional Partnership moves forward with its plans for growth.

The CRP's regional growth and sustainability framework will, among other things, provide guidance for regional growth and economic development over a 30- to 50-year timeframe.

It will also look at transportation, municipal servicing, general well-being and the environment.

In 1998, Okotoks became one of the first communities in Canada to recognize its environmental limits to growth were restricted by the carrying capacity of the local watershed.

Dependent on the Sheep River for its water, the town faced two possible courses of action.

The first would see a continuation of growth without limits, where the local infrastructure would exceed local carrying capacity and create the need for a larger, regional infrastructure system.

The second course would see the town function within the limits of the watershed's carrying capacity.

The community chose the latter -- to limit population growth, focusing on quality of life and the environment rather than on quantity of growth and standard practices.

"This isn't 1998 anymore," says McAlpine. "Continued growth all around us is forcing up to consider taking the cap off."

Besides being a bedroom community for Calgary, Okotoks will likely feel the impact of planned commercial and industrial development along the Aldersyde Corridor -- Highway 2A -- running between there and High River.

Many of the workers that will be employed at the various businesses will be looking for somewhere to live, rather than commute to and from Calgary.

If the decision is made to drop the population cap, McAlpine says an annexation process will have to be started -- one that will include negotiations with the MD of Foothills and involve the provincial government.

"There's no doubt there will have to be some land annexation to accommodate growth, if that's the route we choose to go," he says.

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