

# Okotoks wants to gamble on growth

By Jason Markusoff December 28, 2008

Okotoks' population cap, long hailed as one of Canada's boldest sustainability measures, is now being depicted as a hurdle to a regional rail system--and even the town itself is casting it in not-so-glowing terms.

Public meetings and a survey are planned for early 2009 to ask residents if they want to lift the policy of living within the carrying capacity of the Sheep River and limiting growth to 30,000 people, a ceiling it is projected to hit in the next six years.

Mayor Bill McAlpine is pitching the change as a "tweak" that would see Okotoks annex surrounding lands, pay into a regional water system that taps the Bow and perhaps hit 50,000 or 60,000 people by mid-century.

Although the cap has long been popular among Okotoks residents, the town faces pressure from its Calgary-region neighbours and their growth ambitions. The municipal alliance known as the Calgary Regional Partnership is sketching a land-use plan that envisions 80,000 to 100,000 people living between Okotoks and Calgary's south border by 2070.

It could also damage Okotoks' vision of joining a regional transit system with Calgary, Airdrie and Cochrane that would include express buses and commuter trains, said Linda Bruce, the mayor of Airdrie and the group's chairwoman.

"Heavy rail cannot be supported by 30,000 people," she said. "If you say that this is where we're stopping, then there will be no ability to run heavy rail to that community."

But no one will force a decision on Okotoks council or residents, she said.

McAlpine has made it clear he supports lifting the cap. It was brought in months before he became mayor in 1998, when the town's population stood at 10,000 (it's now 21,000). He sees an emerging problem in new residential developments springing up around Okotoks.

"If they're just going to build a bunch of houses and expect Okotoks to provide the amenities and the social services, then in my opinion we should annex that land and have those taxes coming to this community because we're providing services to them already," the mayor said.

Towns and cities across Canada have for years praised Okotoks as a model of responsible planning and eco-sensitivity. Prime Minister Stephen Harper once called it "the greenest community in Canada, maybe the world," though he cited its solar-power-heated subdivision, not the growth cap.

Ahead of February open houses and a March survey, the town tried to stoke debate on the cap recently with five weeks' worth of columns in the town's newspaper. They pitched an aggressive growth plan as the "green light" choice, while the current cap is "status quo" and a red light on expansion. They touted the benefits of better co-operation with other communities within the Foothills municipal district as a "measured growth option," or the yellow light.

McAlpine explained the third option as, "Just tweak it a little and go forward in between."

Newspaper articles urged Okotoks residents to discuss growth plans on the town's website, but the mayor bemoaned the "apathetic" reaction so far.

Among those who have commented, there is often a sense of resignation that the town's rapid expansion in recent years has already wounded the soul of the once-small town the population cap was supposed to preserve.

"The Okotoks we knew and loved is all but ruined already," Colin and Jane Aldridge wrote. "It's become crowded, noisy and impersonal. If I had my way all development would cease now -- permanently. Alas . . . you have allowed a very pleasant small town to become a suburb of Calgary."

Laurie Hodson, a former town councillor, is trying to mount an opposition, but admits he hasn't found much interest.

"There's a sense held by many, either you grow as a community or you die," said Hodson, who is mulling a run for mayor in 2010. "But we failed to learn from other, more-populated parts of the world."

Hodson was an architect of the population cap in 1998, but said its advocates failed to stress that it was primarily an environmental decision and not about the non-urban lifestyle factor that appealed to many residents.

In 2006, a community survey found that 73 per cent of Okotoks residents wanted the population limit based on the Sheep River's limits.

jmarkusoff @ theherald.canwest.com

© Copyright (c) The Calgary Herald