ALBERTA REAL ESTATE FOUNDATION

Enabling Housing Choice Project

Preliminary Research

Executive Summary

April 2022

SHI RDN

LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The Enabling Housing Choice Project encompasses all of what we call Alberta, and is the traditional and ancestral territory of many peoples, presently subject to Treaties 6, 7, and 8 including the Blackfoot, Cree, Dene, Saulteaux, Nakota Sioux, Stoney Nakoda, and the Tsuu T'ina Nation and the Métis People of Alberta. We acknowledge the many First Nations, Métis and Inuit who have lived in and cared for these lands for generations. We are grateful for the traditional Knowledge Keepers and Elders who are still with us today and those who have gone before us. We make this acknowledgment as an act of reconciliation and gratitude to those whose territory we reside on and that which we refer to in this research.

RDN is committed to supporting the implementation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action, and believes in the need for meaningful engagement and consent with Indigenous peoples in the community. Colonialism is a current ongoing process, and we need to build our mindfulness of our present participation. As this project specifically touches on development and planning concepts which are built on a colonial system of governance and land use management, we also recognize that we have more work to unpack the systems in which we are upholding and working within.

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PROJECT CONTEXT

The Enabling Housing Choice Project aims to provide insight on how Albertan municipalities can support growth in their communities and help provide more housing options and choices to their residents through local policy changes and capacity building strategies. In the first stage of our project, we conducted a literature review, stakeholder interviews, and case studies.

We have broken our findings into five main themes, in order to make the relevant information more easily accessible:

- » Housing and the Economy;
- » Housing and Equity;
- » Housing and the Environment;
- » Housing and NIMBYism; and
- » Housing and Capacity.

It is important to note that all these themes intersect with each other. A holistic approach to enabling housing choice that considers all of these themes is required to make meaningful change that positively impacts various groups and their unique needs within a community. These preliminary findings will inform the next phases of our project, including the creation of our Guidebook for Enabling Housing Choice.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The Enabling Housing Choice (EHC) Project aims to provide insight on how Albertan municipalities can support growth in their communities and help provide more housing options and choices to their residents through local policy changes and capacity building strategies. In the first stage of our project, we conducted a literature review, subject matter expert interviews, and case studies.

The goal of this research is to provide interested groups information about our initial findings through case studies examples and recommendations. Through our findings, five themes emerged which we developed into five reports. These reports will be used by EHC to raise awareness of housing choice and policy. The methodology used for this initial research phase is explained below.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS
» What are the different barriers to growth and redevelopment?
» How can more sustainable, equitable and efficient housing and land use practices be designed and implemented in communities?
» What municipalities have successfully implemented changes to support real estate revitalization? What did they do? What did they not do?

LITERATURE REVIEW
A literature review was conducted to inform the development of a policy change framework that will be used to guide policy changes in Phase 2 of this project. This literature review focused on housing choice, and the various elements that impact it, including a review of academic literature and best practices in municipalities.

Using snowball sampling, the team reviewed over forty articles, pulling mainly from these areas of focus:
» Real estate development;
» Land use policies (Zoning, Municipal Development Plans, Growth Strategies);
» Alberta policy context;
» Policy accessibility/outreach; and
» Other jurisdiction's policy context.
» The team searched scholarly databases, such as the University of Alberta library research databases and Google Scholar, as well as the following housing networks:
» Canadian Housing and Renewal Association;
» Homeless Hub;
» Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation; and
» The Canadian Council for Refugees.

CASE STUDIES

Six case studies were selected to highlight policy changes and the processes that were taken to implement those changes. These case studies were extracted from our conducted semi-structured interviews with additional research to confirm our findings. Each of the case studies demonstrates how policy changes can be understood and executed in a real-life context.

Our case studies are located from across Alberta which include:
 » The City of Medicine Hat;
 » The Town of High River;
 » The Municipal District of Lesser Slave River;
 » The City of Edmonton;
 » The Tribal Chiefs Employment & Training Association (working with six First Nation Groups located in northeast Alberta); and
 » The City of Beaumont.

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Interviewees were selected based on their subject matter expertise. Planners that work with municipalities that had recent Land Use Bylaw, Municipal Development Plans, or other relevant policy updates that support housing choice and housing diversity were chosen to give insight into the catalyst for change and the process of implementing these changes. Developers were also engaged to give their perspectives from the other side of policy and the challenges they face.

As well, academics who specialize in planning policy and economic development in Alberta were chosen to speak to the changes in the province over time. Indigenous leaders and former Band council members were selected because of their experience with the complexities of Indigenous housing both on and off of the reserve.

Finally, subject matter experts across diversity and accessibility groups were engaged to understand the challenges that different equity seeking groups face with housing choice and to identify specific policy barriers.

In total, the research team conducted nineteen semi-structured interviews with:
 » Economic development experts;
 » Academics;
 » Indigenous leaders and former Band council members;
 » Planners from municipalities, planning commissions, as well as private consultants;
 » Developers;

» Accessibility and diversity experts; and
» Former Politicians.

INITIAL FINDINGS

From the semi-structured interviews, case studies, and literature review, we used thematic analysis to gather the findings into major themes where topics intersected. Where these intersections were identified as common themes, the team developed them into five separate reports summarizing these, adding some initial calls to action for municipalities based on best practices discovered.

The main five themes that we extracted from this preliminary research and into individual reports are:
» Equity Seeking Groups and Housing;
» Economic Impacts of Development;
» Sustainability (Economic, environmental, social);
» Implementation and Capacity; and
» Engagement and Community Pushback.

LIMITATIONS

For this environmental scan, there are several limitations to note. Existing research focuses on urban centres more so than rural areas. Some literature exists on a regional level, but this was a limitation the research team faced on many planning concepts that tend to be developed for a higher population centre. As well, many articles focused on urban centres were focused outside of the Province of Alberta, where housing prices tend to be the highest, like Vancouver and Toronto.

Finally, while many municipalities are working towards implementing policy changes across Alberta, identifying which community is doing work and being able to connect with their staff there was not obvious to us. This limitation means that our research and in particular, the case studies, are not an exhaustive list in the Albertan planning context.

FUTURE RESEARCH & PROJECT WORK

Separate from this initial research, we also administered an Alberta-wide survey to understand what residents of the province look for when choosing where to live. The survey data will be disseminated and anonymized and made available for municipalities to access to provide more information on housing choice and availability. This data will also help inform our work going into Phase 2 of our project and feed into the final recommendations and findings in Phase 3 of our project.

REPORT SUMMARIES

REPORT #1: HOUSING AND THE ECONOMY

In this report we discuss the fiscal impacts of urban and rural sprawl and explore the merits of density. This covers the fiscal impacts and considerations that urban and rural sprawl has on a community. We also look at the dynamics of attracting and retaining population including having employment opportunities and attractive main streets.

Finally, we explore the value of growth management strategies for future planning and visioning for population growth and future housing demand to help municipalities plan for the future and create strategic frameworks to manage and foster growth.

Overview of Major Findings

Considering location efficiency in municipalities of all sizes can be a good way to approach how attractive a community is. Creating a housing growth policy, housing development standards, and behavioural interventions to help influence more efficient home location choices could see more economically viable development.

Municipalities can also look for opportunities to increase development and encourage growth by identifying underutilized buildings and proposing adaptive reuse projects for them. Municipalities should also look at the barriers to development like restrictive land use districts and instead provide incentives like fast-tracking applications and reducing architectural guidelines.

REPORT #2: HOUSING AND EQUITY

In this report we discuss the complexities of housing choice and how planning policy impacts equity. This covers the cultural barriers that affect housing choice and diversity, as well as potential strategies to implement inclusive housing diversity. We also look at the unique obstacles faced by marginalized communities when accessing housing.

Finally, we explore housing equity through an intersectional perspective in order to gain knowledge about the layers of inequity in housing and how to better serve equity seeking groups.

Overview of Major Findings

Opening ways to implement housing choice within municipal policies is a key way to start creating more equitable and inclusive communities. Finding ways to broaden housing choices can include gentle density initiations, enabling development of underutilized land, encouraging intensification and main street development. These can all help

a community creatively and rightfully increase housing affordability and choice.

Municipalities should consult with different groups to understand the various obstacles and needs they experience when tackling the housing crisis. While changing policies and land use plans to have an increased focus on equity would significantly impact communities, understanding marginalized groups and acknowledging their needs is essential in creating non-discriminatory policies to help in the housing. Safe and equitable communities consist of a mix of people of different ages, incomes, sexualities, origins, ethnicities, and abilities living together.

REPORT #3: HOUSING AND THE ENVIRONMENT

In this report we discuss the relationship between housing development and the built environment. With a particular focus on sprawl development, this report covers the challenges relating to the prevalence of sprawl and supporting sustainable land development. We also look at the dynamics of the social, economic, and environment impacts of sprawl.

Finally, we explore strategies to mitigate the impacts of sprawl on the environment through land use efficiency principles and applying intensification strategies.

Overview of Major Findings

Poor planning can lead to inefficiencies in land use and services which negatively impacts peoples' quality of life and the natural environment. Communities must be strategic about where they encourage development and take into account the location, surrounding infrastructure, and the unique characteristics of their area.

Urban and rural sprawl contributes heavily to the degradation of the natural environment. Municipalities must use land more efficiently to combat climate change. Being able to strategically develop density in targeted areas will create a more sustainable and healthy lifestyle for residents. Through the different ways of being more efficient with land uses by Transit Oriented Development, 15-minute neighbourhoods, or the clustering of amenities, municipalities must look at their locale and determine what strategies work best for them.

REPORT #4: HOUSING AND NIMBYISM

In this report we discuss housing developments and the pushback they can receive in the community, known as NIMBYism. This report explores the dynamics of NIMBYism and potential approaches to mitigate community

opposition. We also look at the dynamics of engagement methods and the factor that convenience plays into successful engagement.

Finally, we explore the importance of providing thoughtful and accessible engagement with residents and the public to provide more equitable opportunities to hear from more of the community.

Overview of Major Findings

Municipalities can better communicate with their residents by thinking outside the box for engagement methods. Making communication more accessible and open can be the best way to gain buy-in on projects and deliver effective policies. Strategies should be adapted to meet the needs of each unique community.

Municipalities should plan to engage with their residents in ways that are convenient to them. This can mean setting up info booths that are popularly frequented hubs in the community and ensuring that the locations and times work for a diversity of people. When a municipality can accomplish successful engagement, they are able to build relationships with their residents and combat negative NIMBY attitudes.

REPORT #5: HOUSING AND CAPACITY

In this report we discuss the varying ways communities can build capacity through attracting and retaining a skilled workforce. We also look at the dynamics of economic development and housing and building capacity through shared knowledge.

Finally, we explore the value of utilizing existing staff capacity more efficiently and effectively as well as the role partnerships and relationship building play in creating change.

Overview of Major Findings

Capacity building can be done in many ways and municipalities need to consider what they have and what they need to find the right solutions that work for them. Investing in creating vibrant downtowns and main streets helps to attract and retain skilled workers, which ties in to attracting new businesses. Communities can also benefit from engagement and leverage the existing social capital they have by providing more education or being more transparent on housing needs.

Municipalities should consider partnering with other municipalities, private enterprises, or non-governmental organizations and build the relationships they need to better serve their communities.

Finally, municipalities should look within their structures - such as their Land Use Bylaw - to continually adapt to the needs

of their community. By updating a Land Use Bylaw to reflect the evolving nature of planning, a municipality can free up valuable time to focus on strategic and impactful initiatives.

GET INVOLVED

Our Sustainable Housing Initiative (SHI) Enabling Housing Choice Project team is working to support communities across Alberta to create innovative and transformative local policies that promote housing diversity, access and choice. If you are interested in learning more about the project, current partnership opportunities, and research, please get in touch by contacting us here at **housingchoice@ruraldevelopment.ca** or by visiting our **webpage**.