



# Enabling Housing Choice North Project

Enabling Diverse Housing Development in Big Lakes County



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Executive Summary</b>	1
Project Scope/Methodology	2
Report Overview	3
<b>Section 1: Housing Needs in Big Lakes county</b>	4
1.0 Introduction	4
1.1 Importance of Housing Diversity	4
1.2 Housing Needs in Big Lakes County	6
1.2.1 Increased Rental Housing Options	6
1.2.2 Housing for Seniors	8
1.2.3 Accessible Housing	9
1.2.4 Attached Housing Options	10
1.2.5 Diverse Single Detached Homes	11
<b>Section 2: Policy Incentive Recommendations</b>	12
2.0 Introduction	12
2.1 Exploring Policy Incentives for Big Lakes County	13
2.1.1 Secondary Suite Development Incentives	13
2.1.2 Attached/Multi-Family Development Incentives	16
2.1.3 General Residential Development Incentives	18
2.2 Advertising & Promoting Development Incentives	19

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

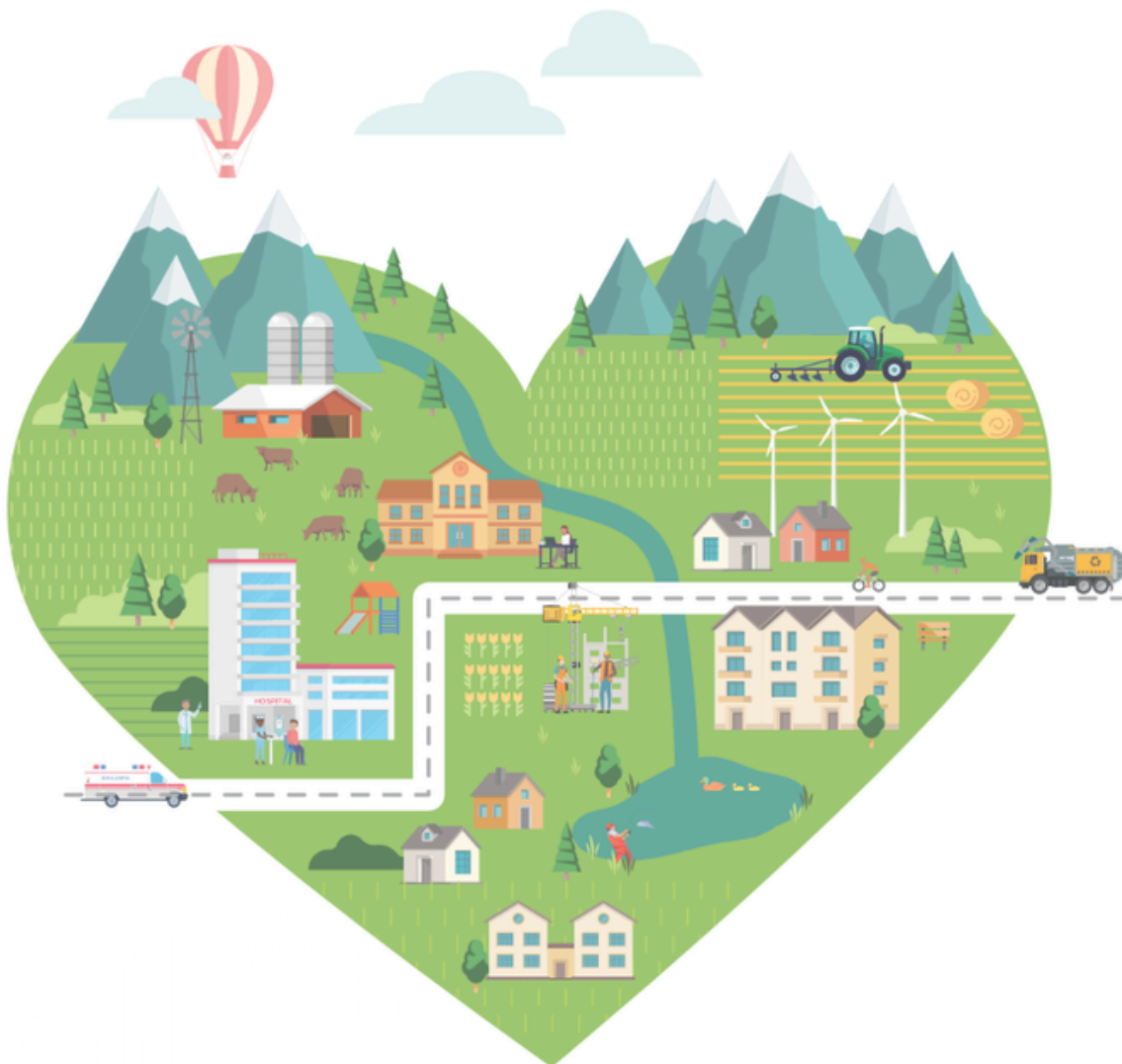
<b>Executive Summary</b>	1
Project Scope/Methodology	2
Report Overview	3
<b>Section 1: Housing Needs in Big Lakes county</b>	4
1.0 Introduction	4
1.1 Importance of Housing Diversity	4
1.2 Housing Needs in Big Lakes County	6
1.2.1 Increased Rental Housing Options	6
1.2.2 Housing for Seniors	8
1.2.3 Accessible Housing	9
1.2.4 Attached Housing Options	10
1.2.5 Diverse Single Detached Homes	11
<b>Section 2: Policy Incentive Recommendations</b>	12
2.0 Introduction	12
2.1 Exploring Policy Incentives for Big Lakes County	13
2.1.1 Secondary Suite Development Incentives	13
2.1.2 Attached/Multi-Family Development Incentives	16
2.1.3 General Residential Development Incentives	18
2.2 Advertising & Promoting Development Incentives	19

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Section 3: Land Use Bylaw Recommendations</b>	21
3.0 Introduction	21
3.1 General Land Use Bylaw Recommendations	22
<b>Section 4: Housing Solutions for Consideration</b>	26
4.0 Introduction	26
4.1 Exploring Potential Solutions for Rural Housing Challenges	27
4.1.1 Modular Housing Solutions	27
4.1.2 Co-Op Housing Solutions	28
4.1.3 Fast-Track Housing Solutions	30
4.1.4 Accessory Dwelling Unit Solutions	31
4.1.5 Tiny-Home Dwelling Solutions	32
4.1.6 Land Trust Solutions	33
<b>Section 5: Areas of Opportunity Recommendations</b>	34
5.0 Introduction	34
5.1. Facilitate Continual Community Engagement	35
5.1.1 Establish Community Engagement Committee	35
5.2 Education, Promotion & Marketing of Big Lakes County	36
5.2.1 Create a Marketing Campaign	36
5.2.2 Provide Readily Available Information	37

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

5.3 Facilitate Housing Partnerships & Collaboration	38
5.3.1 Foster Developer/Builder Relationships	38
5.4 Invest in Community Improvement & Infrastructure	39
5.4.1 Beautify & Improve Amenities in Big Lakes County	39
<b>Section 6: Next Steps</b>	<b>41</b>



# LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT




We, the Rural Development Network (RDN) and the Enabling Housing Choice North (EHC) project acknowledge that Big Lakes County, Alberta, Canada is located on Treaty 8 territory, signed in 1899. This territory is the shared traditional and ancestral home of the Cree, Dene, and Métis peoples.

We acknowledge that we are all treaty people with a shared unity that is tied to the land. Through our work we take part in that responsibility and with our treaty connections. We stand in alliance with all treaty people and take ownership in all that we do, with a mind toward reconciliation now and in our ongoing endeavours.

Furthermore, we acknowledge the ancestors of all Treaty 8 Nations who have lived on this land and their descendants who will continue to live here. We appreciate and honour the traditional Knowledge Keepers and Elders who are with us today and those who have gone before us.

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. 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.

It is our sincere hope that the findings provided in this report will serve to address Big Lakes County's diverse housing needs and provide greater housing security and inclusion for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in the community and surrounding area



# PROJECT ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the Alberta Real Estate Foundation for their funding and support of this project. We would also like to express our appreciation to Big Lakes County in their efforts to help tackle housing diversity and choice in Albertan communities through participation in the Enabling Housing Choice North project.

Furthermore, we would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to all the individuals from Big Lakes County who participated in the internal interview process for this project. Your willingness to share your valuable insights, experiences, and perspectives has been instrumental in shaping the recommendations provided in this report.

Lastly, we extend our gratitude to all the external interview participants from the local housing industry in Big Lakes County and surrounding area. We greatly appreciate the time and effort you dedicated to sharing your insights, identifying key challenges, highlighting opportunities, and suggesting ways to advance Big Lakes County's diverse housing goals. Your expertise and contributions have played a vital role in shaping the understanding of the current housing landscape and guiding us towards meaningful solutions.



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## INTRODUCTION

On the behalf of the Rural Development Network (RDN), the Sustainable Housing Initiative (SHI) partnered with Big Lakes County to prepare Enabling Diverse Housing Development in Big Lakes County, which offers recommendations for diversifying housing choice and development in the community.

The Enabling Housing Choice North Project aims to provide insight on how rural Alberta 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.

SHI and Big Lakes County's partnership will support the project's goals in constructing meaningful policy change while contributing to the Enabling Housing Choice Guidebook. Furthermore, it is intended to assist Big Lakes County in determining municipal tools and areas of opportunity for enabling diverse housing development that meets the needs of Big Lakes County's residents.

## PURPOSE

The purpose of *Enabling Diverse Housing Development in Big Lakes County* is to investigate and analyze the current barriers to diverse housing development in the County, while also identifying municipal tools, incentive policies, and areas of opportunity that can be leveraged to enable more diverse housing options. By examining the existing landscape, the report seeks to provide actionable recommendations and strategies that the municipality can implement to foster a more inclusive and sustainable housing environment, while also accommodating the diverse needs of its residents.

It is crucial to acknowledge that our research, coupled with insights gathered from our community engagement efforts, underscores Big Lakes County's commendable progress in enhancing the availability of diverse and affordable housing options within the community. This report stands as a testament to the County's ongoing commitment to addressing housing needs. By offering substantive recommendations, we aim to fortify Big Lakes County's existing achievements and stimulate constructive dialogues about how the County can sustain and expand its efforts to foster housing choice and diversity. Furthermore, this report is intended to support and advance objectives and policy directions outlined in the following documents:

- Big Lakes County *Municipal Development Plan* (2025)
- Big Lakes County *Land Use Bylaw* (2025)

## PROJECT SCOPE

The scope of *Enabling Diverse Housing Development in Big Lakes County* consisted of the following main elements:

- Researching best practices and reviewing Big Lakes County’s statutory plans, strategies and relevant guiding documents.
  - Understanding the context that characterizes Big Lakes County’s current housing landscape through a review of published housing related data.
  - Gathering locally informed opinions on Big Lakes County’s housing situation through interviews with subject matter experts and housing interest groups.
  - Identifying the various opportunities and challenges associated with diverse housing development within Big Lakes County’s housing landscape
  - Making recommendations on municipal tools and approaches that will have the highest potential to encourage diverse housing development in Big Lakes County.
- 

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology used to obtain information and findings for *Enabling Diverse Housing Development in Big Lakes County* consisted of the following:

- **On-line Community Survey:** The survey was prepared by the EHC team and was conducted using an online survey platform. It was made available from March to April 2025. A total of 64 responses were submitted.
- **Interviews/Focus Groups:** The key actor interview and focus group process consisted of conducting 6 interviews and 3 focus group sessions with developers, home-builders, realtors, residents and staff from Big Lakes County to gain a variety of insights and opinions on the current state of Big Lakes County’s housing landscape. The interviews/focus groups were conducted from May to August 2025.
- **Key Topics/Themes of the Interview and Focus Group Process:** The following key topics and themes were discussed throughout the course of the interview process:
  - Barriers/challenges for developing diverse housing types in Big Lakes County
  - What municipal tools the County can utilize to encourage diverse housing development
  - How the County can further incentivize diverse housing development while strengthening partnerships with the development industry.

## REPORT OVERVIEW

**Section 1** provides an overview of the importance of housing diversity for Big Lakes County, while highlighting key areas of housing needs in the community.

**Section 2** provides an initial exploration of potential development incentive policies that Big Lakes County can adopt to encourage the development of diverse housing. The primary focus of this section is to provide incentive examples that address key areas of housing need within Big Lakes County, while outlining different avenues for incentivizing developers to undertake housing projects within Big Lakes County.

**Section 3** draws upon input gathered from the community survey, developers, realtors, home builders, and various community stakeholders, and contains recommended amendments to Big Lakes County's current Land Use Bylaw (2025).

**Section 4** presents and examines various solutions, options and approaches that are available to address housing challenges within Big Lakes County.

**Section 5** identifies additional areas of opportunity that Big Lakes County can explore to continue attracting residential development and investment within its hamlets.

**Section 6** outlines next steps of the project as the Enabling Housing Choice team will continue to monitor progress and key milestones related to diverse housing development in Big Lakes County



# SECTION 1: HOUSING NEEDS IN BIG LAKES COUNTY

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

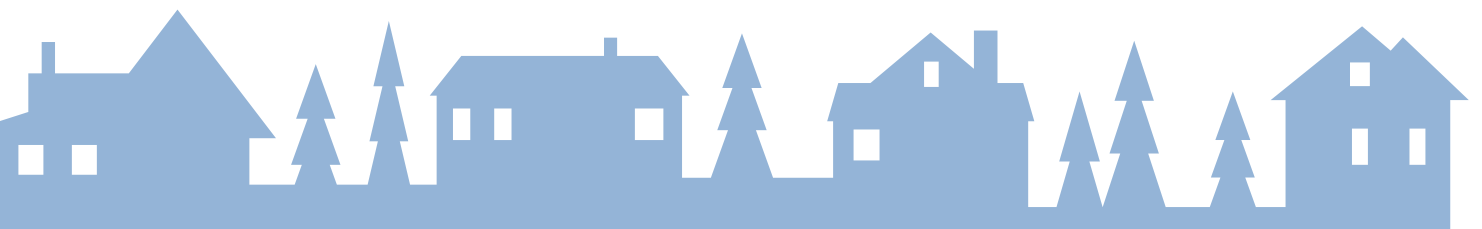
This section emphasizes the value of housing diversity for Big Lakes County, while also providing an overview of housing needs as identified by community engagement participants. It underscores how diverse housing options are crucial for the County and offers insights into why various participants believe such housing is necessary. By showcasing these perspectives, we can better understand the significance of housing diversity in meeting the County's needs and aspirations.

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## 1.1 IMPORTANCE OF HOUSING DIVERSITY

Housing diversity refers to the range of housing types and forms in a community. A diverse community has various different dwelling types and sizes – which may be achieved by flexible zoning that promotes a variety of building forms. By providing greater housing choice, communities can meet the housing needs of increasingly diverse residents and household types (such as young families, professionals, retirees, people with disabilities). The importance of housing diversity for Big Lakes County, or any community for that matter, is significant and can have various positive impacts on the residents and the county as a whole. Such impacts include:

- **Social and Economic Diversity:** Housing diversity attracts a broader range of residents with varying income levels, backgrounds, and lifestyles. This fosters a more diverse and inclusive community, creating a vibrant social fabric and supporting local businesses with a broader customer base.
- **Population Growth and Retention:** Offering a diverse range of housing options can attract new residents to Big Lakes County and encourage existing residents to stay. Young professionals, families, retirees, and individuals with different housing needs can all find suitable accommodations, helping to sustain or increase the County's population.



- **Attracting a Skilled Workforce:** If Big Lakes County aims to attract businesses and industries, a diverse housing market is crucial. Potential employees will be more likely to consider moving to the County if there are housing options that address their preferences and needs.
  - **Aging Population and Accessibility:** As populations age, the need for accessible and age-friendly housing becomes more important. Housing that includes designs which accommodate people with mobility challenges allows older residents to continue to live comfortably in their community.
  - **Community Stability:** A mix of housing types can contribute to community stability. If the County's housing market is solely reliant on one type of housing, fluctuations in that market can have a disproportionate impact. A diverse market can mitigate these effects by spreading risk across different housing sectors.
- 

## WHAT WE HEARD:

When asked about the **importance and meaning of housing diversity** in Big Lakes County, participants provided the following comments:

- *It [housing diversity] is crucial for both urban and rural areas, as it helps people make informed decisions about where to live. In rural areas, having diversity in housing types, price points, and locations is important, as some individuals prefer living in hamlets over more remote rural settings.*
- *Diverse housing means providing appropriate accommodation so individuals are neither over-housed nor under-housed. This is particularly relevant in rural areas where some may live in excessively large homes, while urbanized centers often experience overcrowding.*
- *Having diverse housing types is a significant concern for the municipality, with the primary issue being attracting new residents.*
- *A wide range of housing options ensures that different socioeconomic groups and cultural communities can find suitable places to live.*
- *There is a need for affordable housing options that are accessible to a diverse population, including young professionals, families, and seniors. This means both rental and purchase options, as well as proximity to essential services.*

## 1.2 HOUSING NEEDS IN BIG LAKES COUNTY

The EHC team gauged community engagement participant's perspectives on the need for diverse housing in Big Lakes County. The following areas of need were considered to be the most important by participants.

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### 1.2.1 INCREASED RENTAL HOUSING OPTIONS

During the engagement process, participants consistently emphasized the urgent need for **increased rental housing** options in Big Lakes County. Participants noted that a shortage of rental properties is affecting both newcomers seeking temporary accommodations and long-term residents in search of more flexible living arrangements. The participants noted how additional rental housing would not only address housing scarcity but also support the County's economic growth by attracting a diverse workforce. Their insights emphasized the impact that an enhanced rental housing market could have on Big Lakes County's long-term sustainability.

#### WHAT WE HEARD:

When asked about the **need for more rental housing** in Big Lakes County, participants provided the following comments:

- *Rental housing is currently seen as more important than housing for purchase due to affordability issues and difficulty saving for down payments.*
- *Rental housing is very important - it goes back to affordability, because a lot of people cannot save for a down payment. So how do they do that? Sometimes you just need affordable rental housing so people can save over the long term for a down payment.*
- *We need rental units for teachers and professionals. We need rentals and houses that are affordable for the everyday minimum wage earners as well. Because without them we don't have a community.*
- *I think rental housing is critical right now, because it's more of a short-term thing. People want to find work here but don't know how long they'll be there.*
- *Rental housing is huge and it's more affordable - a lot of people can't buy a house - so you need that rental market.*

## 1.2.2 HOUSING FOR SENIORS

Community engagement participants also emphasized the urgent need for additional housing options tailored to Big Lakes County's senior population. Participants expressed concerns about the limited availability of suitable housing for seniors, emphasizing the need for age-friendly accommodations that are close to amenities/services and reduce the current pressures put on Big Lake County's limited senior's lodging facilities.

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### WHAT WE HEARD:

When asked about the **need for more seniors housing** in Big Lakes County, participants provided the following comments:

- *Right now in our community we don't have seniors housing, like Barrhead or Slave Lake or High Prairie - and in Big Lakes County this is a huge need.*
- *I believe seniors stay in our homes longer because they tend to be more fit - they are rural farmers and are tough and don't want to leave their home. We have small places in Faust and Kinuso - but otherwise they have to go to Barrhead. So we put up small one bedroom and kitchen apartments and expect them to live there, but it's very hard for them.*
- *Duplexes, small rowhouses, at least 2-bedrooms - this is what they would prefer. They also want extra bedrooms for their family to stay in when they visit.*
- *Quite often, and it's an issue across Alberta as everybody in every lodge has the same issue. They have seniors coming in that stayed at home too long. We see it all the time - so it's creating an issue where residents' needs are much higher. Lodges now need to provide 24 hour care to accommodate higher care needs and are now providing a broad range of care instead of specific levels of care.*
- *There is a need for smaller, single-level homes for seniors and retirees within or near High Prairie, with a preference for designs that minimize stairs for accessibility.*
- *While there's debate about the location, there's a perceived need for seniors housing, particularly one-level homes that require less maintenance and are closer to services in larger centers like High Prairie.*
- *Seniors want proximity to amenities (pharmacy, doctors, hospitals). Existing seniors' housing in outlying areas like Faust or Kinuso is less desirable for retirees.*

### 1.2.3 ACCESSIBLE HOUSING

Throughout the community engagement process, participants were vocal about the need for more accessible housing in Big Lakes County. The need for more accessible housing types extends beyond just seniors to include younger individuals with mobility challenges and disabilities.

Interestingly, there was a strong correlation between the need for accessible housing types and the need for attached housing forms, such as duplexes, apartments, and Countyhouses/rowhouses.

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#### WHAT WE HEARD:

When asked about the **need for more accessible housing** in Big Lakes County, participants provided the following comments:

- *I have patients that have accessibility challenges, and it is difficult to find housing for them. It's tough for those under 65 years of age - there is nothing for them to access housing if they have mobility challenges. If you don't have the income to privately own and modify your home, there are no options here for them.*
- *Accessibility is a huge piece, and there is no real drive to develop that housing. There is an advocacy group [in Big Lakes County] that talks about it, but there are no investors that bring in the money to build the houses that we know there are gaps for in the community.*
- *I think there are not many people who want to invest money in developing apartments, low cost housing, condos, accessible housing - but these are areas . . . that we lack - accessible housing and enough affordable housing*
- *Accessible housing for those with disabilities that require single level homes (wheelchair accessible). Rentable apartments or condos or something that is accessible. We have a lot invested in seniors, but we have people who have accessibility needs that are younger but there are no options for them in the area.*
- *People with disabilities -this is one of the biggest gaps. We have one group home in High Prairie and it is small and we have many people come through here with different disabilities, but we are seeing more and more cognitive delays who need supported living.*

## 1.2.4 ATTACHED HOUSING FORMS

Throughout the engagement process, participants frequently mentioned the need for multi-unit and attached housing (such as apartments, condos, and rowhouses). Some recognized that these housing types are crucial for specific demographics, including workers, short-term residents, young adults, and seniors. Conversely, others doubted the feasibility of attached housing within Big Lakes County's hamlets, suggesting they would be a more appropriate fit for the Town of High Prairie instead.

### WHAT WE HEARD:

When asked about the **need for more attached housing** in Big Lakes County, participants provided the following comments:

- *My impression is that we need more working-age people to find apartments or condos at the very least - but it would be nice to have higher quality housing - cheaper housing that is brand new.*
- *There are 5 hamlets and every one of them could use row housing or apartments.*
- *There is no apartment or condo availability, and if there was a vacancy, it would be very low quality.*
- *I think it's more valid to some of the hamlets - condos/apartments/rowhouses this is probably more concentrated to the hamlet areas.*
- *When talking about multi-family dwellings, there may be an argument that these can bring more low-income people to the neighbourhood - but this is just an assumption, whereas people might not want the hassle of a larger house, or have the mobility to take care of larger yards.*
- *When you get into attached houses and you get into projects worth millions of dollars - where will you put them in the County? You have to be around High Prairie.*
- *There is low demand for smaller, multi-unit dwellings like condos or rowhouses, largely due to lifestyle needs and pet ownership.*
- *Duplexes or attached homes are not seen as viable in most County communities (Faust, Grouard, Kinuso) due to lack of services and proximity to amenities. They would only make sense near High Prairie.*

## 1.2.5 DIVERSE SINGLE DETACHED HOMES

Participants in the engagement process noted that there is high demand and undersupply for two distinct single-family home types: smaller, affordable homes (under 1,000 sq. ft.) needed by first-time buyers and downsizers, and larger residences with multiple bedrooms and greater square footage essential for big or multi-generational families. Participants felt that Big Lakes County's housing market must expand to offer a better balance of both compact, affordable options and substantial, family-sized homes to meet diverse community needs.

### WHAT WE HEARD:

When asked about the **need for more diverse single detached housing** in Big Lakes County, participants provided the following comments:

- *Small homes that come up for sale sell quickly. Anything under 1000 sq. ft. is considered a small home.*
- *It would be good to have small homes (1000 sq ft) for seniors. It might be good to have a community of small homes for retirees, either in High Prairie or just outside of town.*
- *The average sized home is 1200 sq. ft. plus a basement with 3 to 5 bedrooms. That's what people are looking for or larger.*
- *People generally want 1500-1800 square feet with a double attached garage. However, you have to ask \$450-500,000 for those homes but people won't buy it for that.*
- *In my personal experience, there is not enough housing available for big families. You see lots of 2-3 bedrooms available here, but after that the properties are rare. For larger families there is a difficult niche market where those properties become high in demand and sell for high prices.*
- *Clients primarily seek detached homes, acreages, and larger homes suitable for families with teenagers.*
- *There is a large market for acreages and blended families who need larger homes.*

# SECTION 2: POLICY INCENTIVE RECOMMENDATIONS

## 2.0 INTRODUCTION

This section explores potential development policy incentives Big Lakes County can implement to encourage the development of diverse housing options. The goal is to identify strategic opportunities for new incentives that will attract developers and contribute to the County's economic growth and overall advancement.

Additionally, this part includes critical insights and perspectives gathered from our engagement process with internal and external stakeholders. It is important to note that the perspectives presented here are those of the participants and do not necessarily represent the views or official positions of Big Lakes County or its administration.

## 2.1 EXPLORING POLICY INCENTIVES FOR BIG LAKES COUNTY

This section outlines additional areas of opportunity the Big Lakes County could explore to adopt policy incentives that encourage the development of the diverse housing needs identified in [Section 1.2](#) of this report.

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### 2.1.1 Recommended Action: Create a Secondary Suite Development Policy Incentive

**Targeted Area of Housing Need:** Secondary suites increase **the supply of rental housing** quickly by making use of existing homes without the need for major new construction. They also offer more affordable options in established neighborhoods, helping meet diverse rental needs.

**Description:** The purpose of this policy incentive is to encourage developers, homebuilders and property owners to facilitate the creation of secondary suites within residential properties in Big Lakes County. Secondary suite development incentives vary by location and can take many forms, but are critical in helping address rental housing needs in both rural and urban communities.

Examples of secondary suite incentives can include:

- **Reduced Permit Fees & Expedited Permit Processes**
  - **Reducing Parking Requirements For Secondary Suites**
  - **Tax Deferral, Rebate or Refund Incentives**
  - **Secondary Suite Grant Programs**
- 

#### **BENEFITS:**

- Secondary suites can provide additional affordable and low end of market housing options within a community, helping to address housing shortages and affordability challenges.
- These incentives promote housing diversity by allowing homeowners to generate rental income from their properties, making it financially feasible for them to remain in their homes or invest in upgrades. This, in turn, can contribute to neighborhood stability and diversity.
- Secondary suites can ease the demand for housing in tight markets, potentially reducing rent increases and making housing more accessible to a broader range of individuals and families.

## IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS:

- **Financial Impact on the County:** The County should consider the overall impact of any incentives on municipal revenue and budget.
  - **Equity and Clarity of Incentives:** Consider whether the incentive applies to new construction only, or includes upgrading existing suites to bring them up to code.
  - **Establish Eligibility Criteria:** The County should consider establishing eligibility criteria for property owners, builders or developers who want to participate in the incentive program. Factors that could be considered consist of the following:
    - Compliance with existing Land Use Bylaw regulations and building codes
    - Setting a minimum size for secondary suites to ensure they meet livable standards
    - Prioritizing applications in locations that have limited availability of affordable rental housing.
    - Conduct public engagement to gather input and address concerns while creating transparency and building support for the incentives.
- 

## WHAT OTHER MUNICIPALITIES ARE DOING:

The Town of Okotoks established a *Secondary Suite and Accessory Dwelling Unit Grant Program* in 2023 to provide financial assistance for the development of secondary suites or accessory dwelling units that meet Safety Codes requirements. This program offers grants of up to \$5000 or \$10,000 depending on the type of project, on a first-come first-served basis, subject to funding availability.

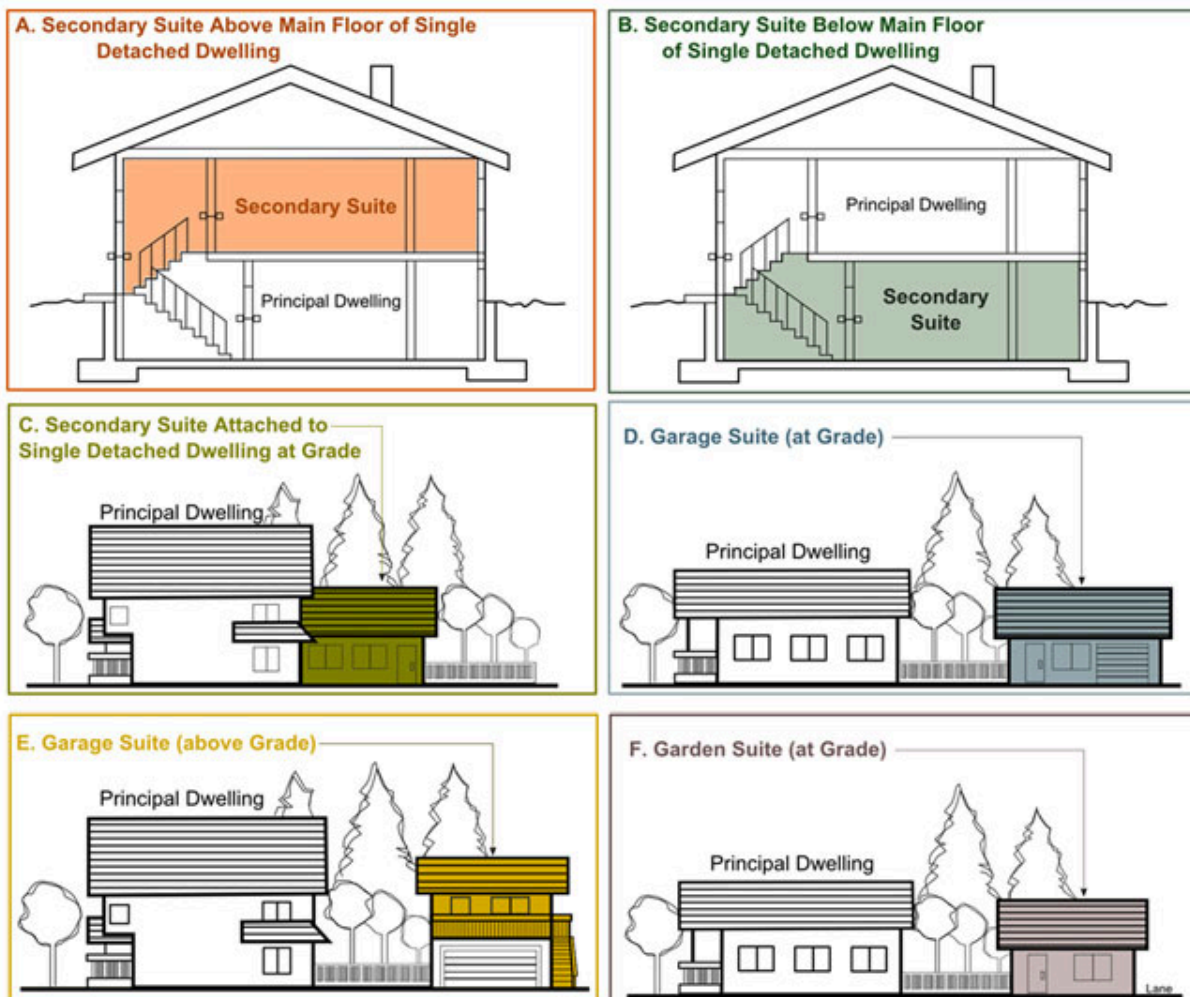
The City of Cold Lake created a *Secondary Suite Development Incentive Program Policy* that aims to stimulate the development of new secondary suites, or the legalization of existing suites by offering a cash grant of \$5,000 for each new or legalized suite created. Secondary Suites may take the form of basement suites, garage suites, or garden suites, and may only be constructed on the same parcel as a single-detached dwelling.

## WHAT WE HEARD:

Engagement findings related to secondary suites and incentivizing them are provided below:

- Accessory Dwelling Units (garage/basement/garden suites) were chosen **35%** of the time by *Community Survey* participants as a **preferred type of rental property**.
- A *Community Survey* respondent felt that the County should provide incentives to help encourage the construction of secondary suites in Big Lakes County

## EXAMPLES OF SECONDARY SUITES/ACCESSORY DWELLING UNITS:



## 2.1.2 RECOMMENDED ACTION: CREATE AN ATTACHED/MULTI-FAMILY DEVELOPMENT POLICY INCENTIVE

**Targeted Area of Housing Need:** Multi-family/attached homes are important for Big Lakes County because they provide diverse, affordable, and lower-maintenance housing options that help retain residents, support local workers, and make efficient use of existing infrastructure.

**Description:** An attached or multi-family development incentive would help Big Lakes County increase housing supply by encouraging projects such as duplexes, townhouses, fourplexes, apartment buildings, and seniors-oriented housing. These incentives can support more attainable and lower-maintenance options, including rental apartments, age-friendly units, and mixed-use residential developments in serviced areas.

Examples of attached and multi-family development incentives that municipalities commonly use include:

- **Financial Incentives:** waiving or reducing development permit fees, building permit fees, off-site levies, or municipal utility connection fees for projects such as duplexes, townhouses, apartments, or seniors housing.
- **Tax Incentives:** multi-year municipal property tax exemptions or tax rebates for new multi-family rental buildings or affordable/seniors-oriented developments.
- **Planning and Regulatory Incentives:** density bonuses, reduced parking requirements, relaxed lot size or setback standards, and expedited development approvals for attached or multi-family housing.

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### BENEFITS:

- Increases housing supply and choice by encouraging duplexes, townhouses, apartments, and seniors-oriented housing that meet diverse community needs.
- Improves affordability by lowering development costs, which can translate into more attainable rental and ownership options.
- Uses existing infrastructure more efficiently by supporting compact development in serviced areas.
- Supports aging in place and workforce retention by providing lower-maintenance housing options for seniors, young families, and local workers.

## IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS:

- **Local Housing Need and Market Demand:** Confirm which housing types are most needed (e.g., duplexes, rentals, seniors housing) and where demand is strongest within the County’s hamlets and serviced areas.
  - **Infrastructure and Servicing Capacity:** Assess water, wastewater, roads, and emergency services to ensure they can support higher-density development without creating long-term cost pressures.
  - **Financial Impact on the County:** Evaluate the short-term revenue impacts of fee waivers or tax incentives against the long-term benefits of assessment growth and population stability.
  - **Alignment with Planning Policies:** Ensure incentives align with the Municipal Development Plan, Land Use Bylaw, and growth management objectives, including appropriate locations and design standards.
  - **Community Acceptance and Design Quality:** Consider public perception and incorporate design guidelines that ensure multi-family and attached housing fits well with existing community character.
- 

## WHAT OTHER MUNICIPALITIES ARE DOING:

The Town of Vermilion established a *Multi-Family Development Incentive Program* to encourage the development of new multi-family residential dwellings within Vermilion. The intent of this program is to provide an incentive for the construction of new multi-family dwellings with 4 or more units.

The Town of Drumheller created a *Multi-Unit Residential Rental Incentive Program* that encourages the construction of new attached and multi-unit housing — including multi-unit rental buildings with at least two units and other qualifying residential dwellings — by offering a municipal property tax abatement over four years. The incentive reduces early carrying costs for developers, appears as a credit on tax notices, and stays with the property if sold during the incentive period.



## WHAT WE HEARD:

Engagement findings related to attached/multi-family homes and incentivizing them are provided below:

- Attached housing types, such as apartments, townhouses/rowhouses and duplexes/triplexes/fourplexes were chosen by **49% - 62%** of *Community Survey* respondents as a preferred rental option.
- *“Look at tax incentives for multi family dwellings possibly.”*

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### 2.1.3 RECOMMENDED ACTION: CREATE A GENERAL RESIDENTIAL DEVELOPMENT INCENTIVE

**Targeted Area of Housing Need:** A general residential development incentive could help Big Lakes County attract new housing investment across all housing types—such as single-family homes, duplexes, townhouses, multi-family units, and seniors or accessible housing—while targeting areas of greatest need, increasing the overall supply of diverse and affordable homes.

**Description:** The purpose of this policy incentive is to encourage developers, homebuilders and property owners to facilitate residential development within Big Lakes County.

Examples of general residential development incentives can include:

- **Fee reductions or waivers:** Development permit fees, building permit fees, off-site levies, and utility connection fees.
- **Property tax incentives:** Multi-year municipal property tax exemptions, rebates, or phased reductions for new residential developments.
- **Land support:** Discounted sale of municipal land, long-term leases, or provision of serviced lots for residential construction.
- **Planning and Regulatory Flexibility:** Density bonuses, relaxed lot size or setback requirements, reduced parking minimums, and expedited development approvals.
- **Financial Grants:** Upfront grants for pre-development costs, infrastructure improvements, or construction of affordable or multi-family units.

## BENEFITS:

- **Encourages Diverse Housing Development:** Supports a mix of single-family, multi-family, seniors, and accessible housing to meet the needs of Big Lakes County’s residents.
  - **Increases Housing Supply and Affordability:** Reduces development costs, making new homes more attainable for families, workers, and seniors.
  - **Promotes Efficient Use of Infrastructure:** Concentrates growth in serviced areas, maximizing existing roads, water, and sewer systems.
  - **Supports Community Growth and Retention:** Attracts and retains residents, workers, and businesses by providing a range of housing options throughout the County.
- 

## IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

- **Determine Housing Needs:** Identify the types of housing most needed—single-family, multi-family, seniors, rental, or accessible units—and which areas of the County have the greatest demand.
- **Infrastructure Capacity:** Assess whether existing roads, water, sewer, and other municipal services can support additional development without significant upgrades.
- **Financial Implications:** Evaluate the short-term cost of fee waivers, tax exemptions, or grants against the long-term benefits of increased property assessment, population growth, and economic activity.
- **Alignment with Planning and Policy:** Ensure incentives are consistent with the Big Lakes County’s Municipal Development Plan, Land Use Bylaw, and long-term growth management objectives.
- **Equity, Clarity, and Community Support:** Design transparent eligibility criteria, timelines, and performance requirements, while engaging residents to ensure incentives meet community goals and are widely supported.

## WHAT OTHER MUNICIPALITIES ARE DOING:

- The Town of Ponoka's Residential New Build Incentive offers a municipal property tax reduction for new residential construction, where qualifying newly built homes receive a phased municipal tax break — 75% in the first year, 50% in the second, and 25% in the third year — helping lower upfront carrying costs for builders and new homeowners.
- The Town of Westlock's Residential Development Incentive Program provides grants of \$15,000 per new housing unit (up to four units per property), a one-time property tax cancellation of up to \$5,000 per unit, and pre-approved construction plans to reduce barriers for diverse housing types including singles, duplexes, and multi-unit builds

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## 2.2 ADVERTISING AND PROMOTING HOUSING DEVELOPMENT INCENTIVES

Advertising and promoting development incentives to developers, builders, and property owners in Big Lakes County holds crucial importance for the County's growth, economic vitality, and long-term sustainability. Effectively communicating these incentives can lead to a range of positive outcomes:

- **Attracting Investment:** Clear and compelling promotion of development incentives can attract developers, builders, and property owners to consider Big Lakes County as a viable and attractive location for their projects. This can stimulate increased investment in the community, leading to the creation of new developments, job opportunities, and economic growth.
- **Enhancing Competitiveness:** Effective promotion of incentives can set Big Lakes County apart from other communities and regions competing for the same investment and development projects. By showcasing the unique benefits and opportunities the County offers, Big Lakes County can position itself as a preferred destination for developers and builders.
- **Encouraging Collaboration:** Promoting development incentives can foster collaboration between the County's municipal government, local businesses, and property owners. When stakeholders are aware of the incentives available, they may be more willing to work together to realize mutually beneficial projects that contribute to the community's development and prosperity



# SECTION 3: LAND USE BYLAW RECOMMENDATIONS

## 3.0 INTRODUCTION

This section outlines recommended amendments to Big Lakes County's existing *Land Use Bylaw* (2025), in light of the responses from the community survey, developers, realtors, home builders and community stakeholders.

The intention of these recommendations is to initiate and promote discussion among community stakeholders - County administration, developers, planners, businesses and residents. They are suggestions that may help to reduce development barriers, increase housing supply and encourage housing diversity in Big Lakes County.

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### 3.1. GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS TO INCREASE HOUSING DIVERSITY AND DENSITY IN RESIDENTIAL DISTRICTS

Big Lakes County’s current *Land Use Bylaw* (2025) regulates the type of housing and uses that may be built in residential districts. It has been identified that diversifying the types of housing that may be built in the various residential districts will help increase housing choice and potentially influence affordability of housing in the county.

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The following *Land Use Bylaw* (2025) amendments are recommended for consideration to enhance housing options in the community.

#### GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS:

To the **Country Residential (CR)**, **Hamlet Residential (HR)**, **Hamlet Residential Estate (HRE)** Districts:

- Add modular and (Ready-to-Move) RTM dwellings as **permitted use**.
- 

#### WHY SHOULD MODULARS AND RTM’S BE A PERMITTED USE IN THESE RESIDENTIAL DISTRICTS?

Big Lakes County should consider making RTMs (ready-to-move) homes and modular homes a permitted use in the identified residential districts because both would allow the County to increase housing supply quickly and affordably, providing more options for families, seniors, and workers.

Making RTMs and modular homes a permitted use rather than a discretionary use helps streamline approvals, providing faster and more predictable development.

A simplified definition of RTM and modular dwellings is that they’re homes that are built in a factory setting and then moved onto the site, either as one unit or as several pieces, and typically (but not always) onto a basement. The end result is a dwelling that is difficult to distinguish from a dwelling that was built on-site (stick built). These factory-built homes are as durable and livable as anything built on-site and should be permitted in the same way as a stick-built home.

## GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS CONTINUED:

- **To the Country Residential (CR), Hamlet Residential (HR), Hamlet Residential Estate (HRE) Districts:**
  - Use a generic term and definition for garden suite/garage suite - example: Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU)
  - Consider making Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) a permitted use
- **To the Hamlet Manufactured Home Court (HMHC) District:**
  - Use a generic term and definition for garden suite/garage suite - example: Accessory dwelling unit (ADU)
- **To the Hamlet Mixed Use (HM) District:**
  - Use a generic term and definition for garden suite/garage suite - example: Accessory dwelling unit (ADU)
  - Consider making ADUs a permitted use

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### WHY SHOULD BIG LAKES COUNTY USE ACCESSORY DWELLING UNITS AS A GENERIC TERM?

Defining Accessory Dwelling Units (ADU) to include all forms of secondary suites will make things easier to evaluate for permitting. As long as the ADU has the basic requirements for construction, whether they are built in or beside the home, or as a separate unit, is not important. If the municipality wants different requirements for each, they may be set up in the definitions section or in the General Regulations section.

### WHY SHOULD ACCESSORY DWELLING UNITS BE CONSIDERED AS A PERMITTED USE IN THESE RESIDENTIAL DISTRICTS?

Defining Accessory Dwelling Units (ADU) to include all forms of secondary suites will make things easier to evaluate for permitting. As long as the ADU has the basic requirements for construction, whether they are built in or beside the home, or as a separate unit, is not important. If the municipality wants different requirements for each, they may be set up in the definitions section or in the General Regulations section.

**Table 1: Existing & Recommended Uses in the Country Residential (CR) District:**

Existing Permitted Uses	Existing Discretionary Uses	Recommend Adding as Permitted Uses
Single Detached Dwelling	Boarding or Lodging House	Modular Home Dwelling
Manufactured Home Dwelling	Garden Suite	RTM Home Dwelling
	Garage Suite	Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU)



**Table 2: Existing & Recommended Uses in the Hamlet Residential Estate (HRE) District:**

<b>Existing Permitted Uses</b>	<b>Existing Discretionary Uses</b>	<b>Recommend Adding as Permitted Uses</b>
Single Detached Dwelling	Boarding or Lodging House	Modular Home Dwelling
	Garden Suite	RTM Home Dwelling
	Garage Suite	Accessory Dwelling Units (ADU)

**Table 3: Existing & Recommended Uses in the Hamlet Residential (HR) District:**

<b>Existing Permitted Uses</b>	<b>Existing Discretionary Uses</b>	<b>Recommend Adding as Permitted Uses</b>
Single Detached Dwelling	Boarding or Lodging House	Modular Home Dwelling
Duplex Dwelling	Garden Suite	RTM Home Dwelling
	Garage Suite	Accessory Dwelling Units (ADU)
	Row House Dwelling	Cabin
	Manufactured Home Dwelling	

# SECTION 4: HOUSING SOLUTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

## 4.0 INTRODUCTION

This section presents and examines various housing solutions and approaches that are available to address housing challenges within Big Lakes County.

Through our research, all EHC North community partners indicated a shared commitment to tackling not only the overall shortage of housing but also several specific challenges, including:

- Limited availability of affordable, accessible, and attainable housing
- Shortage of rental housing
- High construction costs and a lack of builders
- Insufficient senior housing

Each of these challenges will be addressed individually, while also considering their interconnections, as they are closely linked and often influence one another.



## 4.1 EXPLORING POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS FOR RURAL HOUSING CHALLENGES:

The information provided below regarding potential solutions to Big Lakes County's housing challenges will address the general desire/need for more housing, more rental housing, and affordability. Information and links will be provided to the following alternative and innovative housing solutions/types:

- Modular Housing
- Co-op Housing
- Land Trusts
- Accessory Dwelling Units
- Fast-Track Housing
- Tiny Homes

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### 4.1.1 MODULAR HOUSING SOLUTIONS:

Modular housing could offer a practical solution for Big Lakes County by providing faster, more cost-effective construction compared to traditional building methods. Its flexibility allows for a range of housing types—including affordable, rental, and seniors housing units.

#### WHAT IS MODULAR HOUSING?

A modular home is a type of prefabricated house built in sections in a climate-controlled factory and then transported to a building site for assembly by a builder on a permanent foundation. Unlike mobile homes, modular homes must meet the same building codes as traditional, site-built homes and are not intended to be moved once assembled. This method of construction can result in a faster build time and lower costs due to factory efficiencies. These homes are often called factory-built, system-built or prefab (short for prefabricated) homes.

On the other side of this solution, modular home companies need to work with a local builder and/or municipality to facilitate and install the housing. For example, [ATCO Structures](#) has teamed up with [Attainable Homes Calgary](#) to provide lower cost, attainable housing in Calgary.

In order to pave the way for modular housing, Big Lakes County must think differently and set themselves apart from other northern Alberta communities.

For example, it may be helpful to set up a **housing authority** to facilitate the process to bring modular homes into the community. The housing authority would work with the municipality to acquire land, make sure all the pre-development needs are met (services, permitting, etc), secure funding and then liaise with the modular housing company to install the housing.

#### **FURTHER RESOURCES ON MODULAR HOUSING:**

- [10 Basic Facts You Should Know About Modular Homes](#)
- [What is Modular Construction?](#)
- [Modular Building Systems: Overview and Benefits](#)

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### **4.1.2 CO-OP HOUSING SOLUTIONS**

Co-op housing could help address Big Lakes County's housing challenges by providing affordable, community-owned options that keep costs lower for residents. This model fosters long-term stability, encourages local involvement in housing decisions, and can help meet the demand for rental and accessible housing in the region.

#### **WHAT IS CO-OP HOUSING?**

Co-op housing is a form of residential ownership where members buy shares in the housing cooperative corporation, not a specific unit, and then pay a monthly fee to cover the costs of the building and land. Each co-op is a legal association, and members are called shareholders who have a voice in the co-op's governance and democratically make decisions, often through an elected board of directors. Co-op members purchase shares in the corporation that owns the entire property. The share includes the ability to lease or purchase a specific unit.



Co-op housing has the potential to provide housing that can be offered to residents at **‘below-market’** rates, whether to rent or to purchase. Since the co-op controls the property, the price of the housing is set and controlled by its members. The co-op model can be applied to any type of housing, including multi-unit attached or single detached housing, below-market housing, and seniors housing. A co-op model could also champion the construction of tiny homes (discussed below) or modular housing (discussed above).

Again, in order to facilitate co-op housing, Big Lakes County must think differently. It may be helpful for the community to **set up a housing authority** to research and gather interest in this housing model. It could provide local investment opportunities so that appropriate and affordable housing is developed that truly meets the needs of the community.

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#### **EXAMPLES OF CO-OP HOUSING:**

- [Sangudo Opportunity Development Co-op](#)
- [Linden Housing Co-op](#)
- [Community Economic-Development Investment Funds \(CEDIFs\) | Nova Scotia Securities Commission](#)

#### **FURTHER RESOURCES ON CO-OP HOUSING:**

- [Alberta Community & Co-Operative Association](#)
- [Federal Co-operative Housing Development Program](#)
- [Co-op Housing Development Program](#)
- [Canadian Co-operative Investment Fund](#)

### 4.1.3 FAST-TRACK HOUSING SOLUTIONS

Fast-track housing could help Big Lakes County quickly increase its housing supply by streamlining approvals and accelerating construction timelines. This approach can rapidly address shortages, reduce wait times for rentals and affordable units, and respond efficiently to the community's urgent housing needs.

#### WHAT IS FAST-TRACK HOUSING?

Fast-track housing refers to a streamlined development process, either through expedited permit approvals or a project delivery method where construction of a new house is accelerated. In this instance, the focus is on projects that will use pre-approved designs or that meet specific criteria outlined in the Land Use Bylaw, with the intention of building housing faster and more affordably.

To make this work efficiently, the community/municipality will typically use a pre-approved set of designs that can be approved by municipal staff more quickly. These designs could include both multi-unit attached and single detached housing types, as well as 'below-market' housing or seniors housing.

For example, the federal government has developed the [Housing Design Catalogue](#), which could be used as a guide to develop fast-track housing types in a municipality. The municipality could also work with a modular home company (i.e. [Atco](#)) to develop housing that would address specific community needs.

#### EXAMPLES OF FAST-TRACK HOUSING:

- There are not a large number of municipalities using pre-approved designs to facilitate fast-track housing. Here are a couple of examples:
- [Infill Fast-Track Housing](#) - Kelowna
- [Housing Accelerator Fund | City of Edmonton](#) - an accelerated permitting process for housing is in the development stages
- [Modular – Anhart Construction](#) - a developer that installs modular tiny homes



#### 4.1.4 ACCESSORY DWELLING UNIT (ADU) SOLUTIONS:

Accessory dwelling units (ADUs) could provide a flexible and cost-effective housing option for Big Lakes County by allowing homeowners to add small, independent living spaces on existing properties. ADUs can increase rental and affordable housing availability, support multi-generational living, and make efficient use of existing land and infrastructure.

##### WHAT ARE ACCESSORY DWELLING UNITS?

An accessory dwelling unit (ADU) is a secondary, self-contained living space on the same property as the primary home (typically a single-detached dwelling). It is also known as a secondary suite, granny suite, garage suite, in-law suite, basement suite, and more. These units will have a private entrance, and will include their own kitchen, bathroom, living area, etc. They can be internal (basement suite), attached to the main house (granny suite), above the garage (garage suite) or completely detached (backyard suite). ADUs provide flexibility for homeowners, serving purposes such as housing for family members, generating rental income, or creating a home office. They cannot be sold separately from the primary residence.

As suggested in the review of the Land Use Bylaw earlier in this document, one of the quickest ways to increase the number and affordability of housing in a small community is to add Accessory Dwelling Units as a permitted use. In addition, developing an incentive for residents to install these ADUs could help meet the housing needs for specific residents, such as students who need short-term accommodation, elderly parents who are not ready to move into care homes, or single people who do not need a great deal of space.

##### EXAMPLES OF FUNDING & INCENTIVES FOR ADUs

- [CMHC Refinance - Encouraging Gentle Densification](#)
- [Accessory Dwelling Units: Case Studies and Best Practices](#)
- [Secondary Suite Development Incentive Program Policy No: 237-AD-24](#)
- [Secondary Suites and Accessory Dwelling Unit Grant Program](#)

## 4.1.5 TINY HOME DWELLING SOLUTIONS:

Tiny homes offer a potential alternative housing solution in Big Lakes County by providing more affordable and flexible housing options for residents facing limited availability and rising costs. Their smaller footprint suits rural and lakeside environments, allows for more sustainable development, and can help the County address housing shortages without having to build extensive new infrastructure.

### WHAT ARE TINY HOMES?

Tiny homes are small, efficient dwellings, typically under 500 square feet 46 (sq m), that are designed to promote a minimalist lifestyle. While size is the primary factor, the definition also encompasses the intention of living simply, with many tiny homes being mobile (built on wheels) or using space-saving designs like lofts.

For tiny homes to be relevant and suitable for rural communities, this definition will need to be amended to ensure that the dwelling meets the requirements of the National Building Code and Land Use Bylaw. For example, minimum floor areas in new residential development in a Land Use Bylaw are typically 900 to 1000 square feet (84 to 93 sq m). In addition, since tiny homes are typically intended to be mobile, consideration will need to be given to where in the community they would be most useful, or whether mobility of the home would have to be not allowed.

### EXAMPLES OF TINY HOME DEVELOPMENT & COMPANIES

- [Canada Tiny Home News - information and resources around tiny home development](#)
- [Rohe Homes - tiny home developer](#)
- [Bluegrass Meadows Micro Village - a tiny home village built in BC](#)
- [Modular – Anhart Construction - tiny home developer](#)
- [The First Tiny House strata in Canada is approved in Okotoks - tiny home community still under construction](#)
- [Veteran Villages - Homes For Heroes Foundation - tiny home development specifically designed for veterans](#)

## 4.1.6 LAND TRUST SOLUTIONS:

Land trusts could be a strong option for Big Lakes County because they help keep housing affordable over the long term by reducing the cost of land and limiting price increases over time. They also allow the community to have more control over how land is used, helping balance new housing needs with protecting local land and supporting sustainable growth.

### WHAT ARE LAND TRUSTS?

A land trust is a legal, non-profit entity that holds land for the benefit of the land's owner or for a specific purpose. Community land trusts are incorporated organizations created to acquire and hold land in trust for community use, such as affordable housing. Land trusts are typically membership-based organizations. They're governed by a board of directors, which is made up of community members and non-profit organizations with a stake in their community.

Again, in order to use a land trust to develop housing, Big Lakes County must think differently. It may be helpful for the community to set up a housing authority to research and gather interest in this housing model. It could provide local investment opportunities so that appropriate and affordable housing is developed that truly meets the needs of the community.

### EXAMPLES OF COMMUNITY LAND TRUSTS:

- [Creation of a Community Land Trust for Affordable Housing](#)
- [Community Land Trusts in Canada](#)
- [The Temiskaming District Community Land Trust | CMHC](#)

### FURTHER RESOURCES ON COMMUNITY LAND TRUSTS:

- [CLT Funding Sources - Canadian Network of Community Land Trusts](#)
- [Affordable Housing Innovation Fund](#)

# SECTION 5: AREAS OF OPPORTUNITY RECOMMENDATIONS

## 5.0 INTRODUCTION

This section presents and examines the various areas of opportunity that may be available to address housing challenges within Big Lakes County.

Through our research, all EHC North community partners indicated a shared commitment to tackling not only the overall shortage of housing but also several specific challenges, including:

- Limited availability of affordable, accessible, and attainable housing
- Shortage of rental housing
- High construction costs and a lack of builders
- Insufficient senior housing

Each of these challenges will be addressed individually, while also considering their interconnections, as they are closely linked and often influence one another.



## 5.1 FACILITATE CONTINUAL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

To successfully increase housing diversity and choice, Big Lakes County needs to conduct early and continuous engagement with all community members. A broad spectrum of residents—landowners, renters, young and old, families, childless couples, businesses, homebuilders, and developers—will provide valuable insights that are essential for expanding housing options in Big Lakes County. Furthermore, involving a diverse group of residents in discussions about housing diversity will naturally open the door to conversations about housing needs, wants and preferences in the community.

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### 5.1.1 RECOMMENDED ACTIONS: ESTABLISH COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT COMMITTEE

To facilitate continual community engagement in Big Lakes County, it is recommended that the County consider the following:

- Set up an ad hoc **steering committee** to facilitate this initiative. Suggested members include community leaders, seniors, young people, couples, realtors, developers, home-builders, County employees, business owners and anyone else who has something to say about housing;
- Prepare a mandate and/or guidelines for the steering committee that outlines its objectives and goals; this mandate will be updated by the committee as needed;
- Committee tasks could include, but are not limited to, the following:
  - Plan and host community events to encourage participation, connection, and feedback from local residents.
  - Build partnerships with local organizations and stakeholders to support shared goals and initiatives.
  - Gather and relay community feedback through surveys, meetings, or forums to inform decision-making.

#### **BENEFITS:**

- Engaging residents and stakeholders early in the process and having them review and take ownership of suggested changes to policy and bylaws about diverse or affordable housing will help to reduce negative reactions and pushback from the community
- Having community members spread the word about the benefits and implication of the changes should help increase ‘buy in’ by the community

## 5.2 CONTINUE WITH EDUCATION, PROMOTION AND MARKETING OF THE COUNTY

This section outlines additional initiatives that could add to Big Lakes County’s promotion and marketing campaigns for the community.

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### 5.2.1 RECOMMENDED ACTION: CREATE A MARKETING CAMPAIGN

A strategic marketing campaign is recommended to effectively highlight Big Lakes County's significant development potential, capitalize on growth opportunities, and actively promote the area as an optimal choice for housing development. This campaign should integrate elements that demonstrate Big Lakes County's commitment to sustainable and diverse growth and make it appealing to prospective developers, builders, and property owners.

The initiative should go beyond emphasizing the County’s unique character and community spirit to also showcase its progressive approach to rural planning, development and investment. Key features to spotlight within the campaign include current and future development incentives, and the availability of vacant land for purchase.

#### **BENEFITS:**

- Attracts developers and investors by promoting available land, housing demand, and local incentives for building.
- Raises awareness of Big Lakes County’s quality of life, community strengths, and long-term growth potential.
- Encourages partnerships and interest that can lead to more diverse and much-needed housing.



## **5.2.2 RECOMMENDED ACTION: PROVIDE READILY AVAILABLE INFORMATION ABOUT THE COUNTY**

To further promote the County, provide local information about residential development opportunities and initiatives. It is recommended that this information be in both digital and print formats, to engage all age-groups and demographics.

Suggestions for informational packages/resources include the following:

### **Centralized Housing Information Resource**

- Promote local housing rental availability
- List available homes, vacant buildings, and vacant lots for purchase

### **Accessory Dwelling Units:**

- Provide a definition, an outline of the process and any current incentives for construction of these units
- Provide information about where ADUs may be built in the County

### **Big Lakes County As A Great Place To Live:**

- Market and advertise the above information and other amenities in the County

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## **WHAT WE HEARD:**

Engagement findings related to providing readily available housing information about the County are provided below:

The most common suggestions about housing resources included the following:

- Collect information in a centralized area / platform or app; of notable interest was promoting local rental availability
- Create a dedicated website of housing resources: suggestions included, County Office, Property Management Companies, Realtors
- Use Newsletters/Newspapers to disperse information about housing availability

## 5.3 FACILITATE HOUSING PARTNERSHIPS AND COLLABORATION

Stakeholder interviews and discussions in Big Lakes County consistently emphasized the value of collaborative partnerships involving the County, developers, home builders, and the community. This section provides strategies for connecting developers with community members to foster these partnerships. The goal is to advance County initiatives and effectively address the diverse housing needs within the community.

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### 5.3.1 RECOMMENDED ACTION: CONTINUE FOSTERING DEVELOPER/BUILDER RELATIONSHIPS AND PARTNERSHIPS

As provided in **Sections 5.1** and **5.2**, and continuing with the community engagement theme, it is recommended that the County consider the following:

- Create an ad-hoc Community Development Committee to facilitate this initiative;
- Include a variety of community members on the committee, such as community leaders, seniors, young people, couples, realtors, developers, home-builders, County employees, business owners and anyone else who has something to say about housing
- Prepare a mandate and/or guidelines for the committee that outlines the project objectives and goals; this mandate will be updated by the committee as needed;
- Committee tasks could include, but are not limited to, the following:
  - Review and explore various housing solutions outlined in **Section 4** of this report to address Big Lakes County’s housing needs.
  - Research and prepare a plan to form partnerships between developers and other stakeholders, as listed above;
  - Educate developers and community members about development incentives, issues and opportunities that are available in the County;
  - Facilitate the creation of a housing cooperative, or other housing initiative, between developers and local stakeholders. These documents to help with 2 potential initiatives are available on the RDN website:
    - “Paths for Housing Co-ops: Guidebook”
    - “Step by Step Guide to Developing Affordable Housing”

## WHAT WE HEARD:

Engagement findings related to improving communications and relationships with local developers/builders are provided below:

- *Major barriers include red tape with permits and communication issues with the County.*
- *It's really about collaborating with the County and they [developers/builders] may come up with ideas that we can seriously consider - so being cooperative and willing to entertain new ideas.*
- *Engage collaboratively with developers, essentially, how do we get to a yes and not a no?*

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## 5.4 INVEST IN COMMUNITY IMPROVEMENT & INFRASTRUCTURE

A consistent theme emerging from the community engagement feedback highlighted the critical need for the County to prioritize investment in community improvement and revitalization efforts. This focus area is viewed as essential for enhancing the overall quality of life and making Big Lakes County's hamlets more attractive destinations for new and current residents.

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### 5.4.1 RECOMMENDED ACTION: BEAUTIFY & IMPROVE AMENITIES IN BIG LAKES COUNTY

Based on engagement feedback, there is a desire for the County to improve, develop, or expand local recreational facilities, parks, and communal gathering spaces. Participants noted that well-maintained and modern amenities are key to fostering a strong sense of community and providing essential services and leisure opportunities to residents.

Another recurring suggestion from participants was that the County undertake general beautification initiatives within the hamlets. This includes improving the appearance of public spaces, maintaining infrastructure, and potentially even offering incentives for private property improvements.

To beautify the hamlets and improve local amenities within Big Lakes County, it is recommended that the County consider taking the following actions:

- **Conduct a Community-Wide Needs Assessment:** Determine which facilities and spaces are most valued by residents by launching a community consultation process that focuses solely on recreational and communal amenities. This will ensure investment is directed to projects with the highest community priority and will increase buy-in, usage and support.
- **Develop a Phased Revitalization Plan:** Based on the results of the above assessment, create a long-term, multi-year plan that phases in the improvement or expansion of key amenities in hamlets, starting with areas identified as having the most urgent need or highest potential impact.

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## WHAT WE HEARD:

Engagement findings related to beautifying the hamlets and improving amenities within Big Lakes County are provided below:

- *We can always make any area we live in more beautiful. It's easy to make that recommendation to Council to put funds towards beautification.*
- *Aesthetically, things could be done to attract people to the smaller communities / hamlets.*
- *The County could make our hamlets more desirable places to live by investing in amenities, cleaning up unsightly properties, and improving municipal services.*
- *Create amenities and work on beautification in the hamlets, like having grocery stores and restaurants, and getting rid of unsightly properties, to attract people to the area. Focus on making what they have better.*

# SECTION 6: NEXT STEPS

This report on Enabling Diverse Housing Development in Big Lakes County was initiated to provide locally-relevant information about housing challenges and barriers in the County, and then prepare suggestion to facilitate the development of more diverse housing options in the County.

## **FACILITATE CONTINUOUS DISCUSSION**

As stated previously, the purpose of providing these recommendations is to help facilitate discussion among community stakeholders - County Administration, residents, home-builders, local businesses and others - to review, analyze and disseminate the suggestions in a way that will work best for the County. It is expected that the recommendations will be implemented over a period of time, as funds become available, and as the community learns how to move forward in addressing its diverse housing needs.

## **MONITOR AND TRACK PROGRESS**

Following the completion of this report, the EHC project team will develop a progress tracker to report on project milestones and achievements with respect to the report's recommendations. In addition, the project team will check in with Big Lakes County Administration on a regular basis to keep track of progress and provide feedback or insights, as needed.

## **GUIDEBOOK FOR DIVERSIFYING HOUSING DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL COMMUNITIES**

One of the final outcomes from this research project is the forthcoming update of RDN's **Guidebook for Diversifying Housing in Rural Communities**. The Guidebook will outline strategic planning tools and suggestions for accomplishing housing diversity goals in northern rural communities. The EHC team anticipates that the Guidebook update will be ready for release in April 2026.

## FINAL WORDS

Pursuing the goal of diversifying housing in Big Lakes County will be a complex and ongoing endeavor. It will require collaboration and commitment among numerous stakeholders. The Big Lakes County will have a pivotal role in being active and dedicated to diversifying housing in the community. In collaboration with other community stakeholders - residents, home-builders, local businesses - the County will be able to address its housing needs and provide a positive example for other communities facing similar challenges.

With perseverance and collaboration, Big Lakes County can pave the way for a more inclusive community, where all residents have access to diverse and affordable housing.

# RESOURCES

[Government of Alberta \(2023\). Municipal Government Act \(MGA\)](#)

[Big Lakes County Municipal Development Plan Parts 1, 2 and 3. Bylaw No 25-2024. ISL Engineering, February 2025.](#)

[Big lakes County Land Use Bylaw No 26-2024. ISL Engineering, February 2025.](#)

[Joussard Area Structure Plan, Bylaw 10-2018. Invistec Consulting Ltd., August 2018.](#)

[Grouard Area Structure Plan, Bylaw 09-2018. Invistec Consulting Ltd., August 2018.](#)

[Faust Area Structure Plan, Bylaw 08-2018. Invistec Consulting Ltd., August 2018.](#)

[Peace River Nuclear Power Project. Initial Project Description Summary: English. Energy Alberta, April 2025.](#)

[Rural Development Network \(2021\) Paths For Housing Co-Ops Guidebook](#)

[Sustainable Housing Initiative \(2023\). Big Lakes County's Affordable Housing Strategy](#)

[Sustainable Housing Initiative \(2023\). Big Lakes County Needs and Demand Analysis.](#)

[Sustainable Housing Initiative \(2023\). Big Lakes County What We Heard Report](#)

[Sustainable Housing Initiative \(2023\) Step-By-Step Guide to Developing Affordable Housing](#)

[Drumheller \(2023\). Multi-Unit Residential Rental Incentive Policy](#)

[High River \(2021\). Land Use Bylaw](#)

[Mayerthorpe\(2017\). Subdivision Tax Refund Program \(X-003\)](#)

[Okotoks \(2021\). Below Market Housing Incentive Grant Program Policy](#)

[Okotoks \(2023\). Secondary Suite and Accessory Dwelling Unit Grant Program](#)

[Vermillion \(2018\). Community Improvement and Infill Program](#)



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