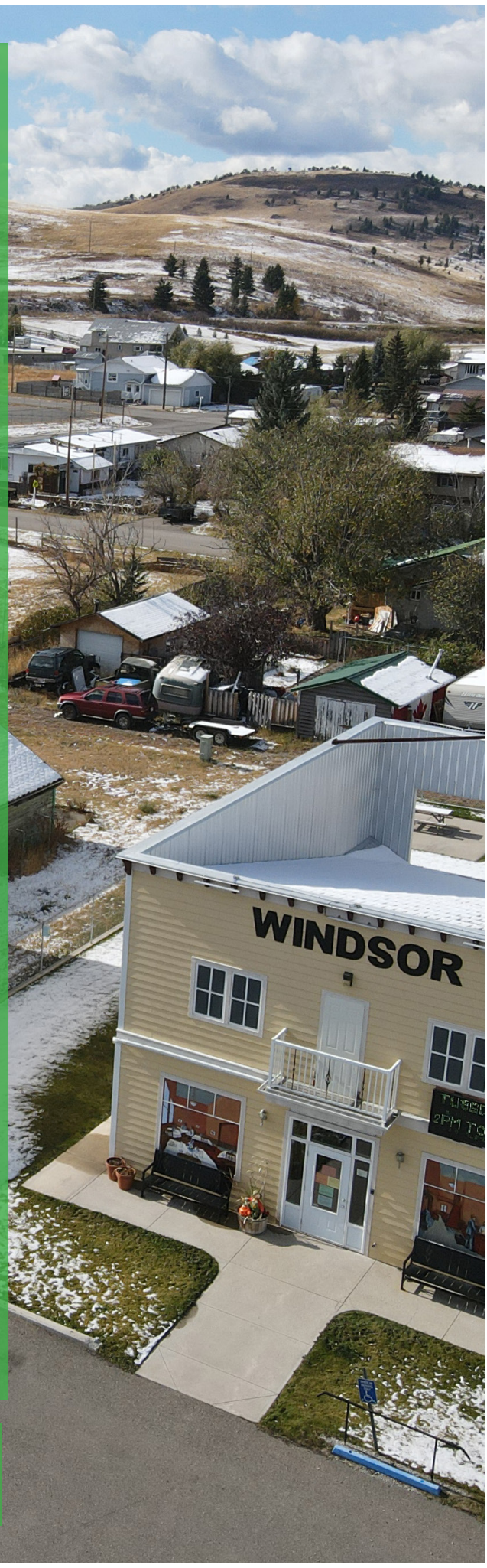


Hamlets

The urban element of rural planning and its potential for sustained growth.

Hamlets are common throughout southern Alberta and exist in all shapes and sizes in the jurisdiction of rural municipalities. For a typical hamlet to thrive, key ingredients must be provided – some of which will not be present unless substantial investment is made. Where a hamlet is in decline, it can be preserved through careful land use management to provide for these lasting settlements to maintain their potential for renewed significance.



Hamlet Context

In Alberta, municipalities are incorporated as entities including cities, towns, villages, municipal districts & counties, and specialized municipalities. The benefits of incorporation are conventional and well-understood, the most obvious of which is autonomy – the ability to manage an entity’s own affairs to the extent afforded to it by the province. On the other side of the coin, unincorporated communities are commonplace and come in a variety of forms spanning the spectrum from informal to organized and small to big - even Gasoline Alley in Red Deer County or the Vegas Strip in Clark County! Unincorporated communities include localities (any place or area with scattered population), townsites (federally administered villages), improvement districts and special areas (governed by the province), and hamlets. This periodical looks to examine the characteristics, challenges and opportunities pertaining to hamlets common to the ORRSC Region and the process of becoming and/or departing from this form.

Hamlets are usually small population centres that typically don’t exceed 1000 people (although many exceptions exist) and are governed by the rural municipality within which they exist. In this framework, the notion of a hamlet boundary is somewhat of an oxymoron. Still, boundaries can be useful for the administration and planning of these settlements and can be established by resolution of Council when a hamlet is designated. In reverse fashion, a municipality becomes unincorporated when it goes through a dissolution process and foregoes its governance structure in favour of the municipality that takes it over.

If hamlets don’t have control over their own land use and administrative decisions what’s the point of congregating together in a fashion that might incite land use conflict? Humans settle together to enjoy the social and economical benefits of proximity to one another. As these settlements grow, so do the concerns and challenges that come with proximity, which is why it’s sometimes desired to take control of the matters that directly affect them. For many hamlets, formation (incorporation into a municipality) is unrealistic, which means that hamlets will continue to be fixtures on the rural municipal landscape.

Legislative Framework & Dissolution

Part 4 of the *Municipal Government Act* (MGA) deals with the form of municipalities – including formation, amalgamation, annexation and dissolution. Specifically, Section 77 of the MGA provides for the formation of a: municipal district, village, town, city or specialized municipality. Formation can be initiated by a municipality but is ultimately at the behest of the Minister of Municipal Affairs. Despite the ability for new municipalities to form, no new formations have taken place since 2001. Of note are Summer Villages, which continue to exist despite that new Summer Villages cannot officially be created.

Most hamlets were established as rail siding communities, agricultural service centres or coal mining communities and have since receded in population after the associated economic activity was no longer viable or disappeared. For example, in Lethbridge County, the origins of Kipp are initially associated with a trading post in the area called Fort Kipp. Diamond City has a history going back over 100 years as it became a village in 1910 and just two years after incorporation as a village it was incorporated as a town with a population of 800 people. Its fortunes as a community were tied to the coal mine, and when the business foundered in the 1920s, the population began to decline.



Source: ORRSC

Notable Designated Hamlets in ORRSC Region:

Grassy Lake – 856
(MD of Taber)

Granum – 557
(MD of Willow Creek)

Shaughnessy – 388
(Lethbridge County)

Burdett – 331
(County of Forty Mile)

Lundbreck – 289
(MD of Pincher Creek)

Monarch – 217
(Lethbridge County)

Diamond City – 204
(Lethbridge County)

Hays – 196
(MD of Taber)

Moon River Estates – 145
(MD of Willow Creek)

Mountainview – 87
(Cardston County)

Beaver Mines – 85
(MD of Pincher Creek)

Source: Statscan 2021 Census

Dissolution, on the other hand, is the process where a municipality disbands as a corporate entity. The MGA stipulates procedural requirements respecting dissolution, for the purpose of ensuring that it is not undertaken whimsically and without due process. A viability review must be undertaken if requested by the municipality, if a sufficient petition is submitted (30% of electors of the municipality) or if the Minister believes a review is warranted. The viability review process includes an in-depth look at the financial affairs of a municipality and engagement with the rural municipality that would prospectively inherit the subject municipality should it dissolve. Following submission of the review the Minister can elect to initiate an Order in Council to address matters stemming from the review or hold a vote of electors respecting dissolution. If the vote is in the affirmative, the Minister will recommend that the Lieutenant Governor in Council dissolve the municipality.

A dissolution order will stipulate the effective date of the dissolution and address governance and financial matters. Like with annexation, the plans and bylaws of the former municipality remain in place until the receiving municipality elects to change them. For example, the Land Use Bylaw of the former Town of Granum (dissolved in 2020) will remain in place until/if the MD of Willow Creek decides to establish new zoning and standards for it within the MD's Land Use Bylaw.

Hamlet Scenarios and Challenges

The Municipality of Crowsnest Pass – a specialized municipality created in 1979 that brought together 4 former urban municipalities and Improvement District No. 5 – is an interesting case study on unincorporated community management. The CNP scenario is so unique that the Crowsnest Pass Regulation (repealed in 2022) was brought into place to address the geographical and organizational circumstances, including the calculation of grants and distinguishing between urban and rural fire service areas. When a municipality dissolves, like in the case of Blairmore, Coleman, Bellevue and Frank, its former boundary typically continues to have meaning – whether it is formalized or not. This is often reflected in some type of urban oriented zoning to distinguish developed areas from fringe areas. The CNP used a system of 3 wards in attempt to provide distinct political representation and resource allocation for different areas of the municipality up until 1998 when it was abandoned in favour of a single political system. Similarly, in terms of zoning, the CNP's Land Use Bylaw uses a standard set of urban districts applicable to all urban areas within the municipality. Although eligible to be designated as hamlets, the fact that the municipality has not gone about this process begs the question of whether there is still value in doing so in Alberta.

The presence of hamlets across rural municipalities owes its existence to pioneering industries like mining, farming and most of all, the railway. The sprawling Canadian Pacific Railway (now Canadian Pacific Kansas City - CPKC) was built largely between the late 1800s to 1930. Settlements



Source: ORRSC

were strung out along the railway lines like beads on a string, at separation distances of 5 to 10 miles to maintain accessible distances for steam engine functionality. This also served farmers by providing a reasonable distance to get their crops to market. Some of these settlements flourished while just as many gradually lost prominence. This effect is readily apparent along the CPKC lines including the mainline that traverses in an east-west orientation through the County of 40 Mile, MD of Taber, Lethbridge County, MD of Willow Creek and MD of Pincher Creek – where a linear pattern of settlement exists. The close proximity of competing service centres led to many settlements falling out of favour. For those that didn't incorporate, hamlet status often means a countdown to eventual abandonment.

While dying with dignity is the reality for some hamlets, many others are enjoying growth and the amenities that come with it. In the MD of Taber, the hamlets of Hays, Enchant and Grassy Lake (former village dissolved in 1996) have the benefit of piped water (including water meters) and wastewater utility systems operated by the MD through partnership with the Highway 3 Regional Water Services Commission and the Vauxhall & District Water Services Commission. The provision of municipal services is an obvious facilitator of growth, with the MD continuing to develop residential subdivisions in response to the demand – having the effect of increasing the population of Grassy Lake to well beyond its pre-dissolution level. In the case of the former Town of Granum in the MD of Willow Creek, an infrastructure assessment was undertaken as part of the dissolution study, revealing the need for infrastructure improvements that the MD funded using a Special Tax levied against hamlet landowners under Section 382 of the MGA.

Whereas small urban municipalities often struggle with the financial burden of developing and maintaining infrastructure, rural municipalities may be better equipped to handle such an undertaking. The old adage of “if you build it they will come” is a double edged sword as it relates to land development done by municipalities. Although a private developer is free to take market risks as it sees fit, a municipal council must be more careful as a public entity answerable to the electorate. Still, the case for hamlet servicing as a means of community revival is unlikely to attract the attention of a private developer. A municipality equipped with the financial resources may choose to invest in its hamlets, and if so should be sure to have in place the benefit of hamlet specific planning to support and guide the investment.

For many municipalities the existence of a post office, grain elevator or school is reason enough to invest. With the post office comes a reason to come to “town” and perhaps stay for coffee at the cafe. With the grain elevator a place to do business. But with a school a sense of community is strengthened and can be a foundation upon which further investment in the hamlet is justified. With schools comes housing and sports facilities which can garner pride, citizen driven volunteerism and a real sense of place. Within the ORRSC Region ten hamlets have schools.



Source: Livingstone Range School Division

Municipal Government Act

59(1) The council of a municipal district or specialized municipality may designate an unincorporated community described in subsection (2) that is within its boundaries to be a hamlet.

(2) An unincorporated community may be designated a hamlet if the community

a. consists of 5 or more buildings used as dwellings, a majority of which are on parcels of land smaller than 1850 square metres,

b. has a generally accepted boundary and name, and

c. contains parcels of land that are used for non-residential purposes.

(3) The designation of a hamlet must specify the hamlet's name and boundaries.

Planning and Regulating Hamlets

Lethbridge County recently completed hamlet growth studies for 8 of its hamlets. The studies took stock of existing conditions, providing a yardstick of future opportunities in the face of current challenges. In terms of scope, a hamlet will identify growth opportunities like servicing capacity, vacant lots, employment opportunities, growth areas and recreational amenities, against a review of contaminated sites, servicing shortfalls, and conflict with existing land uses like confined feeding operations. While these documents don't have statutory standing on their own, Lethbridge County linked these studies in its municipal development plan, thereby giving standing to the vision established in the hamlet studies. The implementation of the growth studies included bestowing Urban Fringe zoning to help safeguard certain growth areas until needed for urban hamlet expansion.

The land use bylaws of rural municipalities typically contain one or more hamlet land use districts that address their hamlets as a whole, or in some cases, individually. For example, in addition to its uniform hamlet districts, the MD of Willow Creek's Land Use Bylaw deals with the Hamlet of Moon River Estates in a separate land use district – providing for a custom solution to the unique circumstances of the community. Given the variable nature of hamlet servicing scenarios, most districts will be clear about parcel sizes for serviced (or partially serviced) hamlet lots as well as for unserviced lots. For example, the County of Warner's Land Use Bylaw requires a 929 m² (10,000 ft²) lot where it has only piped sewer, but 1,858 m² (20,000 ft²) where no services or only water service is provided. This lot size range aligns with the MGA requirement for hamlets, and the unserviced lot size can be thought of as the absolute minimum needed for a soil based private sewage disposal systems – depending on a multitude of considerations like system size and soil composition - and comes from early versions of the *Planning Act*.

Given their sparse population, and low land prices, hamlets can be magnets for hoarding, derelict properties and challenging socioeconomic situations. It's important that a rural municipality set clear expectations in the form of an unsightly premises or community standards bylaw to ensure that hamlets don't succumb to the downward pressure that sometimes exists. The regulation of recreational vehicles (RVs) is another matter that often comes to light in the hamlet context. A rural land use bylaw should be clear about RV storage and RV use in a hamlet, necessitating clear definitions and corresponding development standards. For instance, the Vulcan County Land Use Bylaw allows for the use of one RV on a developed hamlet parcel for a period not exceeding 72 hours, either consecutively, or cumulatively within a 7-day period.

The Planning of rural municipalities takes on a duplicity of thought one rural and one urban. Urban planning need not be equated to the needs of cities and towns, but needs to have enough standards to create a foundation for investment.



Source: ORRSC

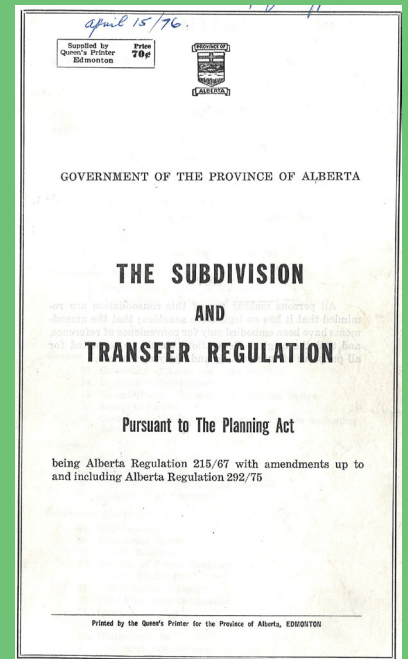
Grassy Lake: A Story of Change

It's clear that the corporate status of a community isn't a pre-requisite to its ability to grow, as evidenced by the significant growth the Hamlet of Grassy Lake has experienced over the past 25 years. At the time of dissolution in 1996, Grassy Lake had a population of 327 persons. According to the 2021 federal census, Grassy Lake's population is 856. The Hamlet serves an important role in advancing the MD of Taber's Municipal Development Plan goals to accommodate higher density residential development within hamlets and bolster their economic viability and service centre function.

Concluding Remarks

Hamlets exist in a no-man's land on the spectrum of organized communities – with some ability for recognition but little in terms of status. For rural municipalities, promoting hamlet development helps to serve the objective of preserving farmland, while also allowing for some diversification of the assessment base. When a hamlet thrives, it can be a useful service centre with employment generating uses and recreational amenities. A strong sense of place is attached to historic hamlets that sometimes contain nothing more than a general store, community hall and a postal box (like Twin Butte in the MD of Pincher Creek). Whether or not a hamlet is on a growth trajectory to reach critical mass and an opportunity for incorporation is irrelevant to the fact that hamlets must continue to be safeguarded as an important part of the rural municipal landscape.

It is common for hamlets to be unserved or partially serviced with water and sewer. The lot size requirements found in most Land Use Bylaw's in the ORRSC Region come from the 1967 Subdivision and Transfer Regulation pursuant to the Planning Act. The Act stipulated a minimum lot size for single-unit residential use of 10,000 ft² for lots with only sewer servicing; 15,000 ft² for lots with only water servicing; and 20,000 ft² (or 0.45 acres – the same as is in Section 59 of the MGA) for lots not having any services.



For more information on this topic contact admin@orrsc.com or visit our website at orrsc.com.

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