



Regional Governance Roundtable

Summary Report

Kari Roberts, Ph.D.
Senior Policy Analyst

November 2007

Canada*West*
FOUNDATION

LAND STEWARDSHIP INITIATIVE

Canada West Foundation's *Land Stewardship Initiative* is a two-year research and communications endeavour focused on the role of public policy in facilitating land stewardship in western Canada. Land stewardship is the practice of responsible land use to ensure that natural capital is maintained or enhanced for future generations.

Funding for the *Land Stewardship Initiative* has been provided by the Agriculture and Food Council of Alberta and the Investment Agriculture Foundation of British Columbia under Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's Advancing Canadian Agriculture and Agri-Food (ACAAF) program, Alberta-Pacific Forest Industries Inc., Alberta Sustainable Resource Development, AltaLink, the Arthur J.E. Child Foundation, Ducks Unlimited Canada, EnCana Corporation, Shell Canada Limited, Suncor Energy Foundation, and Westcorp Inc. The Canada West Foundation expresses its sincere appreciation for this generous support.

This report was prepared by Canada West Foundation Senior Policy Analyst Kari Roberts. The opinions expressed in this document are those of the author and are not necessarily those of the Canada West Foundation's Board of Directors, advisors, or funders. Permission to use or reproduce this report is granted for personal or classroom use without fee and without formal request provided that it is properly cited. Copies may not be made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage. This report is available for download from the Canada West Foundation website (www.cwf.ca) at no charge. Many thanks to Canada West Foundation President and CEO, Dr. Roger Gibbins, and Intern, Erin Mullinger, for their assistance with this report.

1. Introduction

On 30 October 2007, the Canada West Foundation hosted a roundtable on regional governance at the Delta Airport Hotel moderated by Canada West Foundation President and CEO Dr. Roger Gibbins. The roundtable, sponsored by the Alberta Department of Sustainable Resource Development, brought together 30 local and international government officials, academics, planners, and stakeholders to discuss inter-municipal and regional growth planning pressures in Alberta and beyond.

The roundtable began with an invitation to the international experts to share their knowledge of, and experience with, various forms of regional organization. These overviews of some of the successes and challenges faced in distant jurisdictions over land and resource management issues helped to frame the discussion that followed. With these examples in mind, participants were then asked to consider three key questions to help frame their discussion of regional governance issues:

1. What are the opportunities for, and limitations of, voluntary forms of regional cooperation, that is to say, forms of cooperation in which the decision rule is unanimous consent?
2. Are there forms of regional governance that include the capacity for binding decisions based on a formula other than unanimous consent, but that stop short of an institutionalized regional government (i.e., where the decision is majority rules)?
3. What can we learn from the international experience with regional governments (i.e., is a more formalized regional government appropriate)?

These questions launched a fruitful discussion of the challenges to regional planning and governance in Alberta, many of which are shared, and some of which have been remedied, in other jurisdictions. Throughout this discussion, a number of recurring themes presented themselves and found their way into general and informal recommendations moving forward.

These themes are identified and extrapolated in the next section and are followed by a summary of general recommendations from roundtable participants on managing regional growth and governance in Alberta.

II. Key Themes

Crisis can be a significant motivator

There was a general consensus among participants that Alberta is facing an ecological infrastructure crisis. For too long, municipalities have been left to do their own planning, without any requirement of sustainability or compatibility with neighbouring jurisdictions and without any regional vision in mind as an overarching guide to making decisions.

While participants placed different degrees of emphasis on this notion of crisis, there was widespread agreement that the time for action is now; provincial departments and municipalities must mobilize cooperatively to plan better and more sustainable regional communities, and to devise processes that best allow these goals to be achieved.

It was noted that it often takes a crisis like this to motivate action. There are few examples of jurisdictional agreements being struck when times are good, as parties are more likely to enter into voluntary agreements when their hands are forced, so to speak, or when there are few other options available to them.

Regional governance is dead; long live regional governance!

It was stated at the outset that the debate over whether Alberta needs regional governance is over. Now the issue is the design details.

There was no desire among participants to return to the old form of regional governance in place in Alberta prior to 1995 when the Regional Planning Commissions (RPC) were scrapped. This system did not work well, and it created a lot of problems that were not easily overcome.

However, the regional hole created by the abolition of the RPCs is now a hole that needs to be filled. Thus, while the RPC format is unwelcome, there was widespread agreement that some form of regional planning or regional governance is necessary in Alberta. This has been overlooked for a long time. One participant noted that putting regional planning in the “too hard” basket and thus avoiding the issue is no longer acceptable.

Consensus was lacking on what this new form of regional coordination should look like specifically, but it was agreed that a regional perspective is needed in planning deliberations across Alberta and that there is a role for the province when it comes to regional planning. Regional planning works best within a framework of clearly articulated provincial goals, objectives and priorities.

There is a need for provincial vision and leadership

An important contribution the province can make to improve regional coordination and governance involves providing a strategic vision for the province. As one participant noted, “if you don’t know where you’re going, any path will take you there.” In other words, there is less to be gained through inter-municipal planning if the end goal—what is to be achieved in the long run—is not identified. It is easier to keep an eye on the ball if you know what that ball looks like. Thus, it was suggested that the province might best involve itself in the goal setting and “big picture” side of things, and perhaps even the dispute resolution side of things (though some were reluctant about this), and leave the implementation of policy to municipalities, as they are best positioned to execute decisions locally.

There is a difference between creating and managing a formula for regional cooperation

The example of the Calgary Regional Partnership (CRP) was offered by one participant as an example of where striking a cooperative regional body was relatively easy, but that finding the right process for decision-making and dispute resolution is the tricky part. Moreover, just because the process for creating an institution like the CRP is voluntary and unanimous, this does not mean that its decision-making infrastructure must necessarily be bound by these rules.

More generally, municipalities often recognize in principle the importance of cooperation and participating in a forum for joint decision-making, in particular because it gives them a forum to share their concerns and challenges with their neighbours. But, when it comes down to making sacrifices for the greater good of the region, officials risk losing sight of the regional context and strive to defend the interests of their municipalities instead. This is not surprising, as the politics of leadership and

re-election demand this focus, but it does add to the challenge of regional planning, particularly when disputes arise. This is where the importance both of public education and trust-building among elected officials are elevated.

Financial motivation is important

There was much talk of how to get stakeholders to the table to discuss regional issues and be prepared to make decisions jointly that may not always be in the perceived immediate interests of their municipalities. How do you achieve compromise and get politicians to make sacrifices? The quick and easy answer is money. It was suggested, and echoed by several participants, that the best way to ensure voluntary membership in, and compliance with, regional decision-making bodies or partnerships, is to offer financial incentives and disincentives. This is where the province may be able to play a role. Financial incentives need to be substantial enough to bring people to the table and bring about change, and monies need to be targeted toward community needs in order to be relevant.

On this same theme of members having a financial stake in the process, it was also suggested that asking members to make their own financial commitment to the process may help to ensure their continued participation and may help them to take the process more seriously. This is not to suggest that it is all about money, but rather that financial incentives can be an important lubricant.

Trust, flexibility, and relationship-building are keys to regional governance

One participant noted, to a chorus of agreement, that social and political capital must be built first before any partnership can be struck, and before specific processes for addressing the issues can be identified. A number of participants felt that trust was one of the most, if not the most important tool in the regional coordination toolkit. Confidence-building, as well as flexibility, among municipalities and with the provincial government will also be key to any successful regional governance architecture in Alberta. These points came up frequently in the discussion of consensus decision-making, which is discussed in the following section.

An excellent example of building a foundation of trust to move forward from is the Calgary Regional Partnership. Stakeholders first perceived a value-added approach to acting regionally. Early work focused on building the confidence of members, which has sustained the partnership in its first few years. Through building trust and a sense of joint purpose, this will (with hope) bind partnership members and give them the tools necessary to deal with the tougher issues such as the Regional Land Use Plan presently under construction.

There was no consensus on the meaning of consensus

The word consensus was ever-present in much of the day's discussion. The need for it, how to achieve it, the challenges of achieving it, and what it actually means were hot topics.

Consensus decision-making can be a slow process, but it does build social capital and trust, and decisions made this way are more durable and may be more likely to stand the test of time. One participant in favour of voluntary, unanimous consent for entering into a cooperative, structural decision-making body, noted that it is essential to build frameworks that actually have teeth because this builds ownership, enhances trust, and allows for buy-in of stakeholders. But, moving forward, you may get into the language of "voluntary binding," which means that, while joining and forming the organization and committing to its processes are voluntary, once the arrangements have been struck, resulting decisions could become binding.

There was some willingness to acknowledge that "unanimous consent" may be unrealistic and may necessitate some later form of binding decision-making, which made some participants nervous. One participant asked, "what in life operates on the principle of unanimous consent? Certainly not my family! So why are we so hung up on this notion? It is an unnatural process."

Again, part of the appeal of unanimous consent is that it builds trust. Some agreed it is best to start small, address manageable tasks and build consensus. Success here can be a catalyst for tackling larger, more comprehensive issues. One participant referred to this as "sequencing." In other words, voluntarism can begin the process, but as the process matures, a move toward more formal mechanisms may be appropriate.

Others felt that starting small was problematic and that this process of consensus-building can take too long, which can dampen the inspiration to accomplish big things and can even destroy political will to cooperate, as political winds can change at the first sign of trouble. Some participants were frustrated by the perpetual insistence on unanimous decision-making because it often leads to the "lowest common denominator" problem. This means that the focus remains on the small things because the big choices are too hard to make when unanimous consent is required. This potential restricts organizations to doing small things in perpetuity. One person wondered if this was really of any benefit when it is the hard decisions—the issues of crisis in Alberta—that have to be addressed.

Ultimately, the group seemed to agree that consensus-based decision-making did build trust and would eventually lead to good and durable decisions, but there was a concern over the pitfalls of endlessly seeking consensus in areas it was unlikely to be achieved. Due to time constraints, and the crisis that Alberta now faces regarding its future sustainability, some kind of binding decision-making option might be necessary, though the specifics were not laid out. The group did seem to feel that consensual decision-making could be the essential foundation upon which other decision-making rules might eventually be built.

Dispute resolution

The possibility for success in regional planning and governance is great, but the perils of failure are ever-present. As one participant noted, "when one party (or municipality) perceives a loss they do not just go away, they go away and re-load."

There may not always be agreement, and even the best laid out formula for decision-making and dispute resolution may not always work in a voluntary organization. A consensus model for reaching decisions is desirable in theory, but may not always work well in practice. There is need for a "plan B."

On this subject, Dr. Wendy Craik, of the Murray-Darling Basin Commission in Australia, noted the "plan B" in place for making decisions in the absence of consensus in her experience with the Commission was to bring in an adjudicator from another jurisdiction (arguably without bias regarding the issue at hand) to make binding decisions. There was some concern among

roundtable participants over municipalities relinquishing this kind of power to a third party, notably the province. And if the dispute resolution mechanism is sufficiently unattractive, this may help to drive the group toward consensus. Alternatively, if handing off the dispute is too easy, participants may not invest sufficiently in trying to find consensus.

Nonetheless, it was noted that how disputes are resolved within a partnership is a key indicator of success. Put another way, the best measurement of a relationship is not how it performs when things go well, but rather how it functions when times are tough. The key for any form of regional planning or governance in Alberta will be how to handle conflicts among municipalities and to balance the different interests represented in a way that is best for the region as a whole—a determination that is itself rife with challenges.

The risks and benefits of public engagement

While there was an appreciation of the importance of backroom discussions in planning deliberations since a lot can get done efficiently and quickly this way, there was also an appreciation for the importance of public engagement in the process of regional planning, especially when it comes to striking a vision for the region as a whole.

Of course, “backroom” negotiations are not appropriate for politicians, but they are possible for administrators, who are ultimately the ones tasked with implementing decisions. Backroom discussions do need to be in place because they can overcome weaknesses in the public input stage.

That being said, public input remains critically important because it helps to identify key stakeholders and ensures fair process. The group seemed to feel public input was absolutely necessary though perhaps it would best take place later rather than earlier in the regional planning process. One participant noted that one reason to favour public engagement was that the public was actually ahead of the decision-makers when it comes to the environment and sustainability. Thus, he suggested that, if the public was asked if it favoured regional planning, the likely response would be, “you mean you’re NOT doing it now?” Another group member attributed this to a changing public in general, due to globalization. He felt that younger generations do not see borders the way older generations do, and this forces new options to the table.

III. Conclusion

Whether it is a blessing or a curse, Albertans are indeed living in interesting times when it comes to land and resource management, regional planning, and governance issues. These interesting times warrant an appropriate policy response. The trick is figuring out what this response should be.

Roundtable participants were asked, “if they could give advice to the Minister on how to proceed with regional planning and governance, what would it be?” Many of the ideas have been discussed above, but the general sentiment is that regional planning is vital for Alberta. Many participants believe that Alberta is facing a crisis situation when it comes to its ecological infrastructure and that, to ensure sustainability for future generations of Albertans, some sort of integrated regional land use framework is both necessary and overdue. The province must make clear its expectations for sustainable regions in the form of a strategic vision—it must be more than simply the banker; policy direction is desperately needed.

That being said, it became clear that each region is unique in style and circumstance and therefore a one-size-fits-all model will not work. As such, municipalities must retain a strong voice in the regional governance structure and process, and must be given sufficient latitude to govern effectively and to implement decisions. To achieve this, there was acknowledgement that the province must note the difference between *governance* and *government* (most participants agreed that another level of government is not the answer) and that regional planning partnerships should be voluntary. The province should offer incentives for municipal engagement in collaborative decision-making processes; it should seek consensus, but also be prepared to find ways to ensure that regional plans are carried out effectively.

Regional planning in Alberta as it was done prior to 1995—under the Regional Planning Commissions—is not the answer, but something must fill the void left by their abolishment. One participant advised that the province should not be afraid to be bold. In the words of Will Rogers, “even if you are on the right track, you’ll get run over if you just sit there.”

Instituting a workable model of regional planning in Alberta will be difficult, but there are many reasons to get it right. We hope the October roundtable was an important step in this critical process.

IV. Roundtable Participants

Rick Butler, Calgary Regional Partnership
Paul Cochrane, The City of Calgary
Rob Coon, Municipal District of Rocky View
Wendy Craik, Murray-Darling Basin Commission, Australia
Tim Creelman, The City of Calgary
Bob Demulder, Alberta Chamber of Resources
Bill Diepeveen, Alberta Municipal Affairs and Housing
Craig Evans, Consultant, Agricultural, Land Use and Renewable Fuels, USA
Roger Gibbins, Canada West Foundation
Guy Greenaway, Mistakis Institute for the Rockies, University of Calgary
Tania Kajner, University of Alberta
Brenda King, The City of Calgary
Douglas Knight, University of Alberta
Paul Leeder, Alberta Sustainable Resource Development
Eilish Lemieux, Alberta Sustainable Resource Development
Sylvia LeRoy, Alberta Sustainable Resource Development
Matthew McKinney, University of Montana
Hon. Ted Morton, Minister, Alberta Sustainable Resource Development
Erin Mullinger, Canada West Foundation,
Brad Pickering, Alberta Sustainable Resource Development
Michael Quinn, Mistakis Institute for the Rockies, University of Calgary
Gerald Rhodes, Alberta Association of Municipal Districts & Counties
Kari Roberts, Canada West Foundation
Colleen Shepherd, Calgary Regional Partnership
Morris Sieferling, Alberta Sustainable Resource Development
Bruce Thom, Q.C., Alberta Urban Municipalities Association
Henry David (Hank) Venema, International Institute for Sustainable Development
Evangeline Winfield, Alberta Sustainable Resource Development
Ken Woitt, Alberta Capital Region Alliance
Sharon Wood, The City of Calgary

About the Canada West Foundation

Our Vision

A dynamic and prosperous West in a strong Canada.

Our Mission

A leading source of strategic insight, conducting and communicating non-partisan economic and public policy research of importance to the four western provinces and all Canadians.

Canada West Foundation is a registered Canadian charitable organization incorporated under federal charter (#11882 8698 RR 0001).

In 1970, the One Prairie Province Conference was held in Lethbridge, Alberta. Sponsored by the University of Lethbridge and the Lethbridge Herald, the conference received considerable attention from concerned citizens and community leaders. The consensus at the time was that research on the West (including BC and the Canadian North) should be expanded by a new organization. To fill this need, the Canada West Foundation was created under letters patent on December 31, 1970. Since that time, the Canada West Foundation has established itself as one of Canada's premier research institutes. Non-partisan, accessible research and active citizen engagement are hallmarks of the Foundation's past, present and future endeavours. These efforts are rooted in the belief that a strong West makes for a strong Canada.

More information can be found at www.cwf.ca.

Canada*West*
F O U N D A T I O N

British Columbia Office:
#810, 1050 W. Pender Street
Vancouver, BC, Canada V6E 3S7
Telephone: 604.646.4625

Head Office:
#900, 1202 Centre Street SE
Calgary, Alberta, Canada T2G 5A5
Telephone: 403.264.9535

www.cwf.ca