

## Limits to growth on horizon

Greater role for regional government seen as city runs out of room to develop in 35 years

BY ELISE STOLTE, EDMONTON JOURNAL OCTOBER 18, 2011

The green zones are the city's urban growth areas, expected to be fully developed in 35 years.

Edmonton has 15 years left before all its planned neighbourhoods are full, new number crunching by the city and development industry suggests.

If current growth trends hold, the three remaining large tracts of land where no plans have been developed to date will be fully developed in 35 years, say city staff.

That has Coun. Ed Gibbons calling for a greater sense of urgency to plan for the 7,300 hectares. An industry group warns that a strong regional government needs to be considered to balance interests when Edmonton runs out of land.

"I'm not trying to be alarmist," said Michael Mooney, executive director of the Urban Development Institute.

But "we're close enough to that key milestone when these decisions have to be made."

If Edmonton runs out of land in about 35 years, it won't make sense for the city to simply stop growing outward. That would send growth leapfrogging into the surrounding municipalities.

Instead, it would be "logical" to have another body - potentially the Capital Region Board - to make decisions and coordinate growth among the municipalities, Mooney said.

"But that government has to have enough control to assist," he said. "The capital region has to act as a region. Why shouldn't we have a regional government by then that allows barrier-free movement?"

The Capital Region Board - formed by the provincial government in 2008 - has set regional growth goals, but it doesn't get involved in the type of intermunicipal disputes that would likely arise if Edmonton wanted to annex part of Leduc County, for example, to keep growing south.

City administrators continually calculate how much land is available for new development, with the aim of having a 10-year supply ready, said Peter Ohm, branch manager for urban planning and environment.

City staff recently turned their sights to measuring the total area left as they try to quantify how much new communities cost the city, and create a better plan for growth.

Ohm's new estimates assume 80 per cent of the residential area will still be single-family homes. The estimates are based on 10-year growth trends. A major spike in fuel costs would also change building patterns and the number of years it takes to fill out each area, Ohm said.

Gibbons, whose ward includes the contentious Horse Hill development proposal in the northeast, said the estimates should convince everyone planning needs to happen soon.

"People were saying we didn't need those area structure plans done," he said. But if the city wants to do proper planning to accommodate higher densities, it will take a lot of work.

"That means you've got to do municipal airport-type development 15 times," Gibbons said, taking into account all the land available. "That is exactly what we're looking at. We're not looking at acreages."

The region needs help from the province, too, he said. "Our transit, our roads - the province has to be at the table to help us get this interregional road and transportation study done."

From a regional perspective, Edmonton is not the only municipality restrained by its current boundaries.

"That's probably the first thing on everyone's mind," Fort Saskatchewan Mayor Gale Katchur said. Already, there are homes just on the other side of Fort Saskatchewan's boundaries that have the town's addresses but pay taxes to Strathcona County.

"We are going to have to be more of a metropolitan region."

The province is beginning to push municipalities in that direction, she said. Several summer villages have been amalgamated; affordable housing dollars are being allotted among six sub-regions rather than by municipality, she said. "I think they are trying to make us think sub-regional."

But taxes will be the key challenge, she said. While Fort Saskatchewan has a fairly good balance of industry and residential, that's rare. Most of the industry in the capital region is located in the counties, while most of the residents live in cities, she said. "The county has all the money, the city has all the debt."

Mayor Stephen Mandel said Edmonton would look for a way to grow co-operatively with counties such as Leduc when it needs more land, rather than pursuing annexation. It's unclear exactly how that would work.

It would be "silliness" to assume Edmonton won't build new neighbourhoods once the three corners are complete, he said. "Contiguous growth is important."

The city tries to encourage growth close to the core, but "that's a challenge because outside of the airport lands, there's not a lot of land left."

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