



April 29, 2004

Dear City Council:

This is the second submission of the Infrastructure Technical Advisory Committee (ITAC) to City Council's Four Pillars of Urban Sustainability process.

As in our first submission, which dealt with a New Fiscal Deal for Cities and the Strategic Use of Debt, we have approached Urban Form from the perspective of infrastructure management. Our submission is not exhaustive: if City Council should decide that it would like more detail from ITAC on any of its suggestions or comments, we would be pleased to provide the same on request to Council or its designate.

We encourage City Council to acknowledge the existing expertise developed within the City administration on several sustainability issues, especially those staff with the Office of Infrastructure who are responsible for implementing the *Infrastructure Strategy*, and the staff leading Planning and Development's *Smart Choices* initiative, particularly as both these efforts apply to Urban Form.

We commend Mayor and Council for embarking on this crucial exercise to articulate a vision for the City in the new century and we look forward to the results of this process.

Should you have any questions, please feel free to contact me directly and I will act on ITAC's behalf.

Sincerely,

JACK MCMANIS, ITAC CO-CHAIR
Institute of Chartered Accountants of Alberta
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Phone: (780) 486-5898

cc: Konrad Siu, Director of Infrastructure Planning, Office of Infrastructure
ITAC members (see next page)

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NOTE:

The opinions expressed in this submission are those of the individual members of ITAC and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of their appointing organization.

The Urban Development Institute will also be making an independent submission.



Four Pillars of Urban Sustainability – Urban Form submission

Introduction

ITAC's submission to Edmonton City Council on Urban Forms builds on the themes and ideas presented in our previous submission, which was in support of the second and third pillars, a New Fiscal Deal and Strategic Use of Debt, respectively.¹

It would be redundant to duplicate the introduction from that first submission; however, ITAC must emphasize that the individual pillars should not be considered in isolation. Further, the Four Pillars initiative must also give consideration to the significant efforts undertaken by the City's Administration to address sustainability issues through initiatives such as the *Infrastructure Strategy* and *Smart Choices*.

Long-term urban sustainability will be best supported by a coordinated integration of all these efforts into a comprehensive policy position focused on Edmonton's future. It should be acknowledged that the City does not make these decisions in isolation. The City should work with citizens, developers, and its regional neighbours to ensure that urban development issues are addressed at the neighbourhood, city, and regional levels.

Integrate the Four Pillars with other sustainability initiatives

On March 23, City Council adopted the recommendations of Planning and Development's *Smart Choices for Developing Our Community* initiative. These recommendations, which are concerned almost exclusively with sustainable urban forms and intensified land use, include:

1. Develop a comprehensive transit-oriented development strategy;
2. Make 'walkability' a prime consideration in infrastructure and development decisions;
3. Develop a neighbourhood reinvestment program;
4. Develop a small-scale and medium-density residential infill strategy;
5. Improve Planning and Development consultation processes;
6. Develop an approach to the redevelopment of under-utilized commercial and industrial lands;
7. Develop a comprehensive growth scenario with the next Municipal Development Plan review;
8. Develop urban design guidelines; and
9. Establish a Smart Choices Communication Strategy.

Planning and Development presented an interim report to ITAC in July 2003, and ITAC is pleased to affirm its support for the *Smart Choices* recommendations. Successfully implementing *Smart Choices* will provide direction to existing and future Councils, Administration and developers on specific design characteristics to make future neighbourhoods more livable and sustainable. The real key to the success of *Smart Choices*, or any other sustainability initiative, is to ensure its principles and recommendations are incorporated at the foundation of other policies, programs or strategies.

Initiatives such as *Smart Choices* have a tremendous potential impact on the City's ability to manage its infrastructure assets. For example, efforts to develop residential neighbourhoods to the full extent of their

¹ ITAC did not make any recommendations concerning the first pillar, Regional Strategy.

servicing capacity will affect the City's ability to build and maintain its infrastructure assets, with implications both for capital investment and on-going operations and maintenance.

For that reason, ITAC suggests that policy arising out of *Smart Choices* needs to be coordinated with other Urban Form initiatives such as the *Infrastructure Strategy*. While *Smart Choices* will articulate the planning policies concerning development by providing a long-term vision for the City, the *Infrastructure Strategy* will provide many of the decision-making tools to ensure effective investment decisions are made to build new infrastructure or to update existing infrastructure.

These initiatives do not exist independently: linkages to *Plan Edmonton*, the Long Range Financial Plan, and the Capital Priorities Plan should be made. Future development must also complement the specific direction provided in these plans if Edmonton is to meet its sustainability goals. There can be a serious and negative impact on urban forms when the City disregards or overrides an existing neighbourhood development plan, or approves low-priority infrastructure projects.

Accommodating population growth

Population growth exerts mounting pressure on existing infrastructure – increasing traffic flow from outlying areas, for instance, on collector and commuter roads – and creates the demand for new or improved services and facilities. To evaluate the comparative costs and benefits of urban redevelopment against suburban development, Council needs effective decision-support tools.

There is considerable debate regarding the cost of new subdivisions, largely because there is no agreed upon method to capture operating and maintenance costs in the long-term. One side of the debate argues that inner city homeowners subsidize suburban development. The opposing side argues that new homeowners pay their way through higher, market assessment based tax rates and that new neighbourhoods draw little in the way of the services listed above until they are sufficiently mature to sustain those services. In the middle is the assertion that new neighbourhoods do not receive the same quality of municipal services in comparison with established neighbourhoods – such as schools, police and emergency response stations, recreation facilities and green spaces – and there is no agreement how to remedy that inconsistency.²

To meet growth demands for new housing, Council should consider various sustainable urban development options. Developers pass on initial development costs – including roads, sewers, underground and shallow utilities, sidewalks, walkways and street lighting – to new homeowners in the purchase price of their houses and lots. However, despite the significant property tax revenue generated by new development, it does not necessarily cover the cost to maintain infrastructure or provide some services over the long-term.

Increasing densities in existing neighbourhoods can reduce required capital investment by leveraging existing infrastructure and using it to its full capacity. Decisions to intensify land use, however, must proceed with a careful analysis of the carrying capacity of existing infrastructure. If the costs to improve existing infrastructure to support infill cannot be recovered through an increased tax base, then redevelopment may not be warranted. Redevelopment plans should also consider the expectations of citizens. The net benefit of new neighbourhoods to accommodate growth should be assessed using the same decision-support tools.

² Developers provide 10% of their allocated land for school and park sites and prepare the sites for these purposes. However, the land often remains empty for several years because the City cannot afford to complete the development.

While Council is considering future policy options with respect to density outcomes, ITAC cautions that it should not confuse *dwelling* density (eg. medium rise, sole occupancy apartments) with *population* density (eg. houses with young families). Well-designed, multi-purpose family-friendly neighbourhoods may be as densely populated as existing inner-city neighbourhoods. In any case, population density is an important consideration.

ITAC believes that City Council should not ignore consumer demand for different housing products. Many consumers in the greater Edmonton area prefer to own detached single-family homes and developers have responded by providing a wide range of products with a corresponding range of costs. At the same time, consumer choice should reflect real costs. The challenge for City Council is how to best ensure that development – infill of existing neighbourhoods or creating new subdivisions – meets market demand and pays for itself rather than placing undue burden on other taxpayers.

To make sound planning decisions, other factors may apply. For example, as petroleum reserves decline and the cost of fuel increases, Council may wish to leverage investment in public transit; other strategies to reduce car traffic – again, by encouraging public transit and ‘walkability’ – will reduce pollution; and the proximity of neighbouring municipalities may limit suburban options.

Move to marginal cost recovery

Council should understand that property taxes are not simply a revenue-generating tool; they can have a significant impact on other initiatives and be used to help meet policy goals.

Average-cost accounting negatively affects urban form by reallocating property tax dollars from one neighbourhood to another without consideration for the true costs of providing services and maintaining infrastructure. Service and infrastructure costs vary from neighbourhood to neighbourhood, so it is possible, using average-cost accounting, that property owners from one neighbourhood subsidize property owners in other neighbourhoods to receive the same services or infrastructure. This is especially inappropriate if residents of less affluent areas are paying more than their fair share.

Property taxes, development fees and user fees, wherever practicable, should be determined on a real-cost basis for both infrastructure and services. The concept of marginal cost recovery would set the net homeowner obligation – including property taxes, user fees and, in new developments only, development fees – that approximates the long-term marginal costs, including operating, maintenance and capital expenses. Implementing long-term marginal cost recovery means that all ratepayers will pay the best approximation of actual long-term costs incurred by the City to provide specific services or infrastructure. This, in turn, will enable citizens to make informed choices about where they wish to live, taking into account anticipated costs associated with services or taxation rates.

The result would be an incentive for “smart development,” corresponding to “smart debt.” “Smart debt” is the wise use of borrowed money, to enhance the wealth and well-being of future generations; “smart development” ensures that development costs are borne by the appropriate parties, without placing undue burden on other taxpayers or future generations.

Develop a coordinated, long term investment strategy

The vast majority of the \$1.9 billion³ in unfunded planned growth capital projects is in two infrastructure classes: roads and transit. Edmonton will need to spend almost \$800 million on roads, street lighting and traffic control systems by 2012 to keep up with growth projections. Transit system projects are expected

³ *Edmonton’s Infrastructure Strategy Overview: Leading the Way*. Pages 4-7. Office of Infrastructure, 2003.

to cost at least \$660 million during the same time frame, not including possible LRT expansion or the more recently proposed alternative, Bus Rapid Transit (BRT).

Council should develop a coordinated, long-term investment strategy to achieve the highest return possible on the City's investment in existing infrastructure assets and to limit new growth unless the net return at least covers costs over the lifespan of *all* the assets required to service growth. Decisions need to be made on a longer-term basis: not a ten-year but a 40- to 50-year timeframe. That means implementing Life Cycle Costing when making capital investment decisions about infrastructure.

Use appropriate decision-support tools

Smart Choices will provide the broad perspective required to develop effective planning and development policies that lead to sensible densification of inner-city neighbourhoods and the self-sufficient development of new neighbourhoods.

City Council and the Administration will require decision-support tools, however, to enable the development and implementation of these policies. The management tools developed through the *Infrastructure Strategy* by the Office of Infrastructure greatly enhance the City's ability to make strategic decisions concerning infrastructure and services.

Perhaps the most important action City Council could take is to direct the Administration to develop a long-term planning and investment strategy that aligns and coordinates investment in multiple asset classes – drainage, roads, parks, schools, recreation facilities, and police and emergency response stations – with existing departmental master plans, such as the Drainage, Transportation and Facilities master plans. Council is currently considering progressive transportation options; ITAC recommends that Council better integrate road and transit decisions with decisions regarding other infrastructure – such as drainage, parks and other municipal services and programs. Although *Plan Edmonton* is the umbrella strategy document for all initiatives of this nature, it requires more detailed objectives to effectively guide development.

Secure a more equitable share of public sector revenues

Cities could better shape their destinies if tax revenues were better shared among the three orders of government. Taxation authority is vested in the provincial and federal governments, and Canadian cities are forced to rely on the most regressive form of taxation in the country. Property taxes are, at best, a nineteenth century solution to twenty-first century fiscal challenges.

American cities, which have access to a broader set of revenue tools – including sales tax, hotel tax, 'head' tax (captures workers who reside outside the city) and others – are able to take some of the economic burden off property owners and better absorb changes in the economy.

Property taxes were also never intended to pay directly for national and provincial programs, yet municipalities are required to collect the education tax for provinces. The limited revenue generating capacity of cities impedes effective urban planning and development. Municipalities too often encourage suburban development and collect higher than anticipated property taxes as a 'quick' way to generate revenue when, in fact, suburban development may strain existing infrastructure. Edmonton, and all Alberta cities, must have a reliable, steady source of funding to plan for the future.

Recommendations

ITAC endorses the *Smart Choices* recommendations without reservation and offers these additional recommendations, which should lead to the development of decision-support tools to enable full implementation of the *Smart Choices* initiative.

1. Develop a long-term planning and investment strategy to align and coordinate capital investment in infrastructure— both rehabilitation and growth – in multiple asset categories (sewer, water, roads, parks, natural areas, schools, protective services, recreation, *etc.*), and that also integrates departmental master plans. This should be the goal for the revision of *Plan Edmonton*.
2. Renew existing design standards to incorporate more sustainable options and guidelines to accommodate integration and consistency with other municipalities. This process needs to be flexible to reflect rapid changes in technology, construction practices, *etc.* Consider a ‘regional’ approach that could even extend provincially or nationally.
3. Improve the quality of design by establishing an effective review body that supports Planning and Development.
4. Develop analytical tools to assess net return on investment over the life of all infrastructure assets, which requires not a ten-year but a 40- to 50-year timeframe. Decision-making support tools should include the ability to estimate the tax consequences of every investment decision.
5. Develop policies to promote more compact, higher density development in older neighbourhoods through the use of intensification guidelines that calculate the surplus carrying capacity in existing systems, such as drainage. If net returns are substantial, then the neighbourhood is a good candidate for intensification.
6. Promote family-friendly, mixed-use developments – integrate commercial, residential and clean industry in suitable neighbourhoods with appropriate changes to zoning bylaws.
7. Balance increased density with greater investment in recreation, parks, and natural areas.
8. Provide incentives for construction that reduces strain on infrastructure assets, such as the LEED (Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design) Green Building Rating System. Incentives might include tax relief, service cost reductions, *etc.* For more information about LEED, visit the U.S. Green Building Council website at www.usgbc.org/AboutUs/mission_facts.asp.
9. Integrate effective public transit with all development planning activities.
10. Examine the possibility of using FCM Quality of Life indicators as performance measures or benchmarks to determine appropriate levels of service and the effectiveness of planning policies.

Desired outcomes

1. A coordinated planning strategy and corresponding long-term investment strategy that aligns and coordinates all capital investment in infrastructure across the corporation, and that encourages best practices, innovative design and construction, and sustainable development.
2. Improved decision-making based upon long-term financial implications that consider the net return on investment for all infrastructure assets, whether rehabilitation or growth-related.
3. Appropriately intensified, mixed-use development in suitable neighbourhoods, based upon quantifiable data, such as surplus carrying capacity, that also ensures intensification does not compromise ‘soft’ infrastructure, such as parks and recreation facilities, or other quality of life enhancements.



Edmonton Federation of Community Leagues

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April 26, 2004

Maryann McConnell-Boehm
Senior Planner
Planning and Development Department
City of Edmonton
5th Floor, 10250 101 Street
Edmonton AB T5J 3P4

Dear Ms. McConnell-Boehm:

RE: Comments on Four Pillars of Urban Sustainability

The Edmonton Federation of Community Leagues (EFCL) is pleased to provide feedback on the Urban Form component of the City of Edmonton's Four Pillars of Sustainability initiative. Attached are our comments, the Planning and Development Committee's planning principles, and a copy of the Smart Choices comments we previously submitted on September 9, 2003. This feedback has been prepared by the EFCL's Planning and Development Committee with the endorsement of the EFCL Board of Directors.

The EFCL appreciates the opportunity to comment on the Four Pillars of Urban Sustainability, and looks forward to the successful implementation of the Smart Choice recommendations.

Sincerely,

Don Kuchelyma
President
Edmonton Federation of Community Leagues

EFCL Comments on Urban Form component of the 4 Pillars of Urban Sustainability

The Edmonton Federation of Community Leagues (EFCL) is pleased to provide input on the Urban Form component of the City of Edmonton's Four Pillars of Sustainability initiative. This input has been prepared by the EFCL's Planning and Development Committee and endorsed by the EFCL Board of Directors.

The EFCL is of the opinion that the City of Edmonton should move ahead with the Smart Choice recommendations. The EFCL is pleased that many of the comments in our correspondence to Mr Larry Benowski, General Manager, Planning and Development Department dated September 9, 2003 (attached) have been reflected in the recommendations that were approved by Council on March 23, 2004. In terms of priorities, as discussed in our Sept 9, 2003 letter, the EFCL is of the opinion that the first two ideas (Comprehensive Transit Oriented Strategy and Walkability) should serve as the broad goals under which all other Smart Choice recommendations should operate. For example, transit-oriented development strategies and walkability should be two of the main goals of the Comprehensive Growth Scenario (recommendation #7). Similarly, the Small Scale and Medium Density Residential Infill Strategy should have transit-oriented development and walkability as its two goals in order to continue in the creation of enhanced, healthy neighbourhoods. The Smart choice recommendations should be implemented in such a way that they are mutually supportive of each other.

The EFCL is in full support of the recommendation to improve planning and development consultation, and looks forward to working with the City of Edmonton to help improve consultation processes with community leagues and the citizens of Edmonton. The Community Consultation handbook produced by the EFCL, in collaboration with other organizations including the City of Edmonton, is one such step in that direction.

The EFCL also feels that the timeline suggested for implementation of Smart Choice #6 (Commercial and Industrial Transformation) is not ideal. As with the other recommendations, the EFCL would like to see this recommendation implemented as soon as possible, ideally as part of a 2005 budget request.

Regarding the level and location of any potential intensification, the successful implementation of the Smart Choice recommendations will provide guidance to locations where intensification should occur. Furthermore, intensification should be appropriate in scale to the neighboring zoning. The EFCL would like to reiterate the importance of meaningful, effective, and transparent consultation with communities to address such important issues as intensification.

Infrastructure plans, namely the Transportation Master Plan, will need to be reviewed to reflect the new directions outlined in the Smart Choice recommendations. As previously discussed, a commitment to implementing the policies and tools contained in these plans is absolutely necessary.

The EFCL's Planning and Development Committee have developed policies that outline the values and vision of the community leagues in relation to planning issues in Edmonton. These policies (see attached) were adopted by the membership at a general membership meeting on

October 20, 2003. It is encouraging to see that many of the Smart Choice recommendations are in line with the vision and values of the EFCL.

While, for the most part, the City of Edmonton's planning tools and policies accurately reflect the desires and aspirations of communities, the EFCL would like to emphasize the importance of effective implementation. Furthermore, without the will to enforce and stand by the plans and policies that are in place, their usefulness is greatly diminished.

The EFCL also feels that there are some areas where policies could be strengthened. These areas include protection of historical/heritage resources, protection of the River Valley, including the ravine system and top of bank, guidelines in support of mixed use development, and architectural controls/design guidelines.

As Edmonton grows, it is vital that we provide opportunities to protect the unique historical and cultural heritage of the city. Improved guidelines on the protection and preservation of Edmonton's historic sites is of vital importance to preserve this heritage, and to prevent the "homogenization" of urban form that is presently occurring in many other Canadian cities.

The benefits of mixed use development are well-documented, including improved walkability, an increased sense of community, increased environmental sustainability, and increased transit use. Many of the Smart Choice recommendations are implicitly supportive of mixed use. The creation of specific guidelines on mixed use, outlining how and where mixed use can occur, combined with the implementation of the Smart Choice recommendations will provide the tools needed for appropriate mixed use to occur.

The River Valley, including the ravine system and top of bank, is Edmonton's prime asset. Other cities can only dream of such an accessible natural area. Effort should be directed to protecting it for the enjoyment of Edmontonians and visitors (current and future generations). This enhances our quality of life and makes Edmonton an attractive place for investment and business location. Development of this policy should consider ways in which the River Valley can be fully integrated with Edmonton's other urban elements (other parks, recreational/cultural amenities, transit nodes, walking/biking corridors, historical/heritage resources, and mature neighbourhoods).

Development of architectural controls and design guidelines will ensure that future developments are in line with the character of the surrounding area and that the built urban form reflects the uniqueness of Edmonton and its neighbourhoods. Architectural controls/design guidelines will also assist in the implementation of the Smart Choice recommendations, as good design guidelines will support walkability, transit-oriented development, mixed use, and appropriate infill development. Development of architectural and design guidelines also give planning control over the way a neighbourhood functions in addition to the existing controls over use and density. The existing controls often prove to be the focal point for resistance to change. Being able to guarantee some control over function and design may make change easier and more desirable.

The creation and successful implementation of these policies, the implementation of the Smart Choice recommendations, and the continued implementation of existing City plans and policies will ensure that Edmonton's urban form is shaped in such a way that reflects the values and desires of Edmontonians.

The EFCL appreciates the opportunity to provide comments for Council's session on Urban Form as part of the Four Pillars of Urban Sustainability discussions, and looks forward to the successful implementation of the Smart Choice recommendations.

EFCL Planning and Development Committee Principles

Consultation

We believe that community leagues and citizens have a right to be involved and a partner in the planning and development process in Edmonton. In particular:

- Their participation must be based on mutually understood practices of consultation;
- They should be allowed to provide input on any development that affects their neighbourhood;
- They should be allowed adequate time to respond to planning and development matters; and
- They should have access to relevant resources which can assist them as a partner to effectively and pro-actively deal with planning issues.

Environment and Quality of Life

We encourage development that maintains and enhances, but does not detract from, citizens' quality of life. In particular, we:

- Oppose proposed developments that unduly compromise Edmonton's air, soil, water, health and quality of life;
- Support urban design which is mass transit and pedestrian friendly;
- Support development which values open space as equally important as built space;
- Believe that park spaces are an integral part of every neighbourhood;
- Recognize Edmonton's River Valley as a unique and significant natural environment in our urban setting; and
- Support the preservation of and public access to all significant natural areas.

Efficient Growth

We encourage efficient use of land within Edmonton and surrounding areas' and increased regional planning in the Alberta Capital region. In particular, we support development that ensures that:

- Open space is not unnecessarily lost;
- The City's core is not compromised by expansion at the outskirts;
- Green-field development occurs only in a contiguous manner within the existing communities of Edmonton; and
- A diversity of housing types are constructed.

Preservation of Neighbourhood Character

Development should occur in a manner that is compatible with its surroundings. In particular, we believe that:

- Communities should clearly identify the aspects of their community character that are important.
- All participants in the development process should consider these aspects when making decisions that affect communities
- Changes to the character of the communities should not be made without community input.
- Architecture and neighbourhood design are as critical to a healthy city as good planning
- A dynamic downtown is essential to a healthy and vibrant Edmonton



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September 9, 2003

Larry Benowski, General Manager
Planning and Development Department
City of Edmonton
5th Floor, 10250 101 Street
Edmonton, AB T5J 3P4

Dear Mr. Benowski:

Re: Smart Choices Project

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this project over the last two years. We are pleased with the work that has been done to date. The EFCL would like to take this opportunity to provide feedback on that work, namely the Smart Choices Catalogue of Ideas.

In our view, the 'Land Use and Mobility' ideas should function as the goals of the implementation. We want our city to develop by way of these integrated, mutually supportive concepts. None of these three ideas can or should be excluded if implementation is to succeed. The Catalogue's other seven ideas should be used as tools to realize Transit Oriented Mixed Use Development, Multi Use Corridors and Mixed Use Development, and Walkable City.

Much of the 'Residential Development in Established Neighbourhoods' section seems to reflect what is already occurring in Edmonton. One problem with the present situation is that while density is carefully controlled through the Zoning Bylaw, the City and the community lack a mechanism to exercise some degree of control over a development's place in the community. In our view, design and neighbourhood function are equally important as density and should be subject to City regulation and community input whether through a design review panel with jurisdiction, design guidelines or otherwise.

In addition, by Edmonton's standards of medium density, the EFCL feels that there is a significant amount of this type of infill. As a result, we only support Medium Density Residential Infill as it serves to realize the 'Land Use and Mobility' ideas and does not interfere with neighbourhood function. Small Scale Ground Oriented Residential Infill should occur with the same goals in mind.

While the EFCL certainly supports the concepts of business, commercial and industrial transformation and neighbourhood reinvestment, the section of the catalogue leaves us with some reservations. Idea six is lowest on our priority list due to the relative lack of a residential or community component. For idea seven, the goal should be the improvement of neighbourhood quality of life, which includes property value, rather than too heavy a focus on enhancing property value itself. When the latter approach is taken, the result is often gentrification. To avoid this displacement of lower income residents, affordable housing mechanisms and other creative tools must be employed to protect the positive aspects of what presently exists in these communities.

Throughout our discussions of the Smart Choices project, the importance of consultation has always been a central theme. We cannot overemphasize the essential need for consultation to occur with the communities that will experience change as the result of the implementation of any of these ideas. These interactions will ensure a good fit between the development and the community.

In addition, we feel that the City Administration must take an active role in the consultation process. Rather than waiting until a development application is made, the Planning and Development Department, for example, should facilitate community discussion about planning and land development in all parts of the City. One element of this is the Smart Choices Planning Certificate Program, which we support and are willing to assist with its implementation.

In conclusion, we strongly support the vision that is the 'Land Use and Mobility' ideas, which should be implemented with the assistance of the remaining ideas. Similarly, we believe that proper consultation and redevelopment process is critical to the success of this project.

Sincerely,

Don Kuchelyma,
President

Cc: Mary-Ann McConnell-Boehm, Planning and Development Department

Edmonton Natural Areas Advisory Committee

Edmonton City Council
1 Sir Winston Churchill Square
Edmonton, Alberta

April 20, 2004

Dear Members of City Council:

Re: **Four Pillars of Urban Sustainability / Urban Form
Natural Areas Advisory Committee Submission**

**2004 Committee
Membership**

Citizens at Large

Patsy Cotterill
Robert Gibbs
Adele Mandryk
Andrew McCready
Lara Pinchbeck
Susan Tiege
Pat Wishart

**Environmental Law
Centre**

Keri Barringer

**Ducks Unlimited
Canada**

Rick Shewchuk

University of Alberta

Dr. Ross Wein
Dr. Tara McGee

**Urban Development
Institute**

Jodie Wacko

The Natural Areas Advisory Committee (NAAC) is a new City of Edmonton committee providing advice and counsel to the Planning Department since October 2003. In brief, our mandate is to provide a public perspective on implementation of Policy C-467, Conservation of Natural Areas on Edmonton's Table Lands.

In its advisory capacity, NAAC has been coming to grips with how Edmonton can strengthen the role that natural areas have in our city. Consequently, we have a unique perspective on the issue of Urban Form. We respectfully request your consideration of our submission, attached to this letter.

Ecologists and urban planners have long understood that cities can be built that provide an acceptable standard of living without depleting the ecosystems and ecological processes on which citizens depend. Many civic leaders around the world are convinced that sustainable human life on this globe cannot be achieved without sustainable local communities, and that cities and towns are key players in the process of changing lifestyles, production, consumption and spatial patterns. Municipal governments are closest to where environmental problems are perceived and therefore in a position to make the most significant long-term impacts¹.

We think Edmonton is at a crossroads. We can continue the traditional lower density expansion with its high cost to service and maintain, or we can move toward higher densities that are lower in cost to service and maintain. To do the latter, we need to balance higher densities in our built form with more natural areas and green space. Our message, simply stated is **"create more compact, dense urban development but balance the built environment with more natural areas."**

¹ Charter of European Cities and Towns Towards Sustainability (The Aalborg Charter) approved by the participants at the European Sustainable Cities and Towns Campaign in Aalborg, Denmark on 27 May 1994.

The economic value of the North Saskatchewan River valley and ravine system is clearly recognized by those who market Edmonton nationally and internationally and by developers and landowners. In this instance quality of life and economics are not at odds and the tangible outcome has been, and should remain, the hallmark of our City.

Research has clearly shown that nature in cities provides economic, social and ecological benefits^{2,3}. Our City's natural assets can be significantly enhanced with conscious planning and timely acquisitions that protect upland natural areas and incorporate them into a network of natural areas across Edmonton's tablelands.

We applaud the Four Pillars of Urban Sustainability initiative. It is an opportunity to create a progressive vision for positive change.

We urge members of Council to incorporate our perspective as you envision Edmonton's future. We ask you to do the following:

- explicitly include the identification and protection of natural areas (forests, wetlands, grasslands, and river valley/ravine system) into a new vision for our City.
- integrate protected, ecologically sound natural areas on the tablelands as a foundational planning principle across all City departments.
- develop a high level concept plan for natural areas in the City.
- increase funding for Natural Areas land acquisition.
- help to establish a land trust.
- find innovative funding strategies and ways to receive eco-gifts.
- strongly support the new Office of the Conservation Coordinator with additional administrative resources to accelerate the work that needs to be done.

The Natural Areas Advisory Committee appreciates this opportunity to contribute to shaping Edmonton's future. We look forward to the prospect of assisting Council and administration create and implement a new vision for Edmonton.

Yours sincerely,

Edmonton Natural Areas Advisory Committee

Attachment

² Roach, Robert. April 2004, "Green Among the Concrete: The Benefits of Urban Natural Capital", Canada West Foundation, Calgary

³ Hough, Michael. 1995. "Cities and Natural Process", Routledge, New York.

Four Pillars of Urban Sustainability – URBAN FORM
submission by the City of Edmonton Natural Areas Advisory Committee

***CREATE MORE COMPACT, DENSE URBAN DEVELOPMENT,
BUT BALANCE THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT WITH MORE NATURAL AREAS***

Edmonton can be justly proud of its environmental leadership -

- Edmonton's 'green' focus distinguishes us and makes us a leader in Canada.
- Our City has demonstrated a profound commitment to its natural heritage, and to leadership in recycling, composting, and energy conservation initiatives.
- Our natural areas are one of our defining characteristics. They are a national and international marketing feature. The 'ribbon of green', our river valley, is a major element in many promotional and economic development campaigns.

- - - but can do better!

However, improvement is possible. The NAAC has identified the following challenges:

- We think the legislative protection for the river valley could be improved.
- The City has policies and procedures in place to protect our river valley, but there are no equivalents for sensitive environments on the table lands.
- Policy C467 'Conservation of Natural Areas in Edmonton's Table Lands', has been in place since mid 1995. A Conservation Coordinator was appointed within Planning & Development in 2002. Inventories and assessments have been completed, but little has been fully protected. In 1986 over 1,000 sites of interest were identified; 85 sites were identified in 1993 as significant or sensitive but we've so far been able to preserve or protect (in whole or in part) only about 30 so far. Of the 85 noted, in ten years 8 have been completely lost forever.
- We are not sure that all the valuable, viable natural areas have been identified.
- We believe it is important to work with our regional neighbours to capitalize on opportunities to conserve the river valley and other shared natural features (such as Big Lake).
- Municipal reserves appear oversubscribed; there are too many possible uses and too little land – so we do not expect that these reserves can be used as the basis for significant additions to the inventory of protected areas.
- Funds to acquire significant natural areas are too limited. As a result the City has mainly conserved small remnant areas rather than the large significant sites. Unfortunately, small sites are at greater risk of being ecologically unsustainable.

We recommend more compact, dense urban development -

We applaud Council's Four Pillars initiative. This forum offers Council an opportunity to extend its 'green' leadership by shaping Edmonton's urban development in ways that are even more 'environmentally friendly'.

Future urban form is defined by planning and infrastructure choices and is guided by municipal planning documents, land use density, land uses, live/work relationships, the location, size and timing of major trunk water and sewer and investment in road and transit systems and more.

We note that suburban development patterns of relatively low densities lead to higher unit capital and operating costs for municipal infrastructure, coupled with inequitable distribution of some urban services (schools, recreation). On the other hand, higher densities and more compact urban form lead to lower unit capital and operating costs. Therefore, we believe that Council should be looking to plans, policies and tools that will bring about livable communities with more compact, intensive forms of development – infill housing and commercial, transit integration and safe, family friendly community design.

Four Pillars of Urban Sustainability – URBAN FORM submission by the City of Edmonton Natural Areas Advisory Committee

Council has a choice – to continue with costly traditional development patterns or opt for more cost-effective compact, higher density urban forms.

- - but the built environment should be balanced with more natural areas.

However, to balance the emphasis on the built environment, to help make the result worth living in, we believe that Council should commit to increasing the amount of land dedicated to preserving our important natural heritage.

We define a natural area as *“An area of land especially dedicated to the protection and maintenance of biological diversity, and of natural and associated cultural resources, and managed through legal or other effective means.”*¹ We do not include areas such as groomed parks, recreational areas for sports, and school yards in this definition.

These natural areas have great value for the citizens of Edmonton.

- They are high in value but are also low in cost to operate and maintain,
- They have high educational value for children and adults,
- They perform vital ecological functions (e.g. habitat for rare/uncommon species),
- They perform a cleansing function for surface drainage,
- They add to property value for adjacent landowners,
- They enhance quality of life for all citizens,
- They promote active, healthy lifestyles by providing destinations for walkers, hikers, nature/bird lovers,
- They mitigate some hard infrastructure costs (e.g. surface drainage).

We believe that natural areas have intrinsic value – warranting their protection and integration into Edmonton’s network of protected and conserved open spaces.

The City should focus first on protecting existing valuable natural areas

The City has already identified many important natural areas. Resources are always limited though, so trade-off choices must be made. The NAAC has some suggestions how to proceed:

- Focus on larger areas under most immediate threat by development,
- Acquire natural areas large enough to be biologically sustainable in the long term and develop management plans based on ecological principles,
- Work with developers and landowners to capitalize on existing natural assets and integrate them into subdivision planning. (In our view, the recent Terwilliger plan approved by Council was a great example of appropriate and balanced development. The City needs more natural areas like this – and let’s connect them together.)
- Focus on conserving and protecting what has already been identified.
- Focus on existing water bodies and wetlands that act as filters and support a myriad of plants and wildlife.

- - and also work on linking and extending the 'ribbon of green'.

We believe that with denser development more emphasis should be placed on creating ‘green linkages’ throughout the City. Such linkages are vital to maintain the ecosystem health and sustainability of ‘island’ natural areas. Benefits of doing so also include convenient access to natural environments, trail corridors and improved quality of our urban environment.

¹ Based on the definition of a protected area adopted by International Union for the Conservation of Nature.

Four Pillars of Urban Sustainability – URBAN FORM submission by the City of Edmonton Natural Areas Advisory Committee

These linkages can be created efficiently and effectively – connecting school yards and community core areas to the local ravine, table land natural areas, naturalized storm water retention facilities or parks. The City can use its own considerable inventory of property to further extend and model our commitment to environmental issues. Unused or underused rights of way for road allowances and utility corridors can become elements linking the table land natural areas into the ribbon of green. Cooperation with land owners can further enhance this concept.

To do this the City needs to develop a detailed plan -

There is a lot of work to be done. We would like to see the following:

- Development of a **high level concept plan for natural areas** in undeveloped areas.
- Planning for natural areas integrated in long term, strategic infrastructure planning.
- Effective priority setting to make sure we're focussing on the right areas.
- More detailed inventory and mapping of natural areas.
- Research on natural systems including hydrogeology, vegetation, & habitat studies.
- Revisions to planning and urban development processes that will foster inclusion of natural areas and green linkages in our urban fabric.
- Development of natural area management plans for all conserved natural areas.
- Identification of disturbed sites that could be added to the inventory of natural areas by developing pilot ecological restoration plans.

- - and needs to marshal and commit resources.

- Council should **increase funding for natural areas land acquisition**. The phrase '*time is of the essence*' is most important when conserving significant ecological features that cannot be replaced. Additional money should be earmarked. Ideally, other levels of government should be involved in providing resources to protect natural areas.
- **Innovative funding** methods should be found. A method to accept eco gifts or conservation easements should be arranged and such gifts encouraged.
- We strongly recommend that a **land trust** be established so that citizens and businesses can contribute personally and know that their contribution will count directly towards protecting and conserving natural areas in our City.
- **Research grants** may be available and should be actively pursued.
- The Conservation Coordinator, who deals with natural areas issues, is very busy – with a broad range of administrative, technical, promotional, and coordination tasks. If he were provided with **more administrative assistance**, more could be accomplished.

A new urban vision can strengthen Edmonton's environmental leadership!

Our Committee realizes that political leadership is essential to successful change. We believe that the public has a good understanding of the importance of environmental matters and that it values the contribution natural areas play in everyday life. We know that our citizens will be broadly receptive to well considered change to Edmonton's urban form, particularly if it is lower in cost and is balanced by greater civic commitment to our natural heritage.

As Edmonton rethinks how to develop the city, sound strategic choices will lead to our own unique form of sustainable community. By committing to more natural areas, Council will maintain and strengthen our reputation for environmental leadership.

As we go forward, the Natural Areas Advisory Committee looks forward to the prospect of assisting Council and administration create and implement a new vision for Edmonton.



Sent: Monday, March 08, 2004 11:48 AM
To: urban.sustainability@edmonton.ca
Subject: intensification and transport

I moved to Edmonton recently and love it. I moved here from a much larger city with horrible sprawl and transportation problems. My friends here complain about traffic jams and long delays, but I know that they can easily get far, far worse. That's why I think it is important that strategic intensification and public transport (also bike) be developed now.

With respect to intensification, three, four and five story condos, mixed with regular residential housing, often make for great urban neighbourhoods. This is what most of the most sought-after neighbourhoods in the city I came from looked like.

This also leads to transit solutions, since walking and biking becomes more possible if you live close to where things are happening, and public transit becomes more cost effective, due to higher population density (still only medium density in absolute terms, though).

In my experience, (sub)urban sprawl leads to traffic jams, lack of neighbour interaction and obese adults, teenagers and children who drive everywhere. Lets try to reduce and even avoid the worst excesses of this problem in Edmonton.

Sent: Thursday, March 25, 2004 11:24 PM
To: urban.sustainability@edmonton.ca
Subject: urban form

Greetings

I'm delighted to see that your are engaging public discourse on urban form - this is a timely and important topic.

Edmonton must focus on strengthening its urban form in developing downtown as a vibrant, healthy and dynamic living city. Downtown Edmonton is coming to life. More emphasis on the importance of Downtown to our Economic future. Sustainable urban form depends on implementing many of the Smart Choices policy recommendations - and more ! Sustainable urban form balances the needs of the human social and natural environment, accounting for environmental function as well as aesthetics of form.



The Smart Choices report should be implemented in its entirety, as soon as possible. Intensification should start with downtown. The City has a significant investment in infrastructure in the Urban core - and yet much of our land between 95th street and 124th street is dedicated to asphalt-covered parking lots. The City's first priority should be to strengthen downtown. This may require reduced "powercentre" or "box store" developments. A moratorium on big-box developments for about a 5-year period should be considered, to allow the downtown to re-develop.

Urban form is linked to infrastructure needs, including water, sewer, roads and related systems. By making the most use of existing infrastructure, we create both an economic and architectural powerhouse. Edmonton is at a crossroads - and the time is now, to focus on the importance of urban form and outstanding architecture and design to the health and well-being of our community.

Sent: Friday, April 16, 2004 4:08 PM
To: urban.sustainability@edmonton.ca
Subject: My thoughts on urban sustainability

Do we have the right policies, tools and supports to shape the future form of Edmonton?

Edmonton may have policies and tools in place, but the policies/tools/support do not seem to have any teeth. Does City Council heed the recommendations by City Planning and Development or other the thoughts of other committees dealing with urban form (i.e. Urban Design Review Panel)? Council and city bureaucrats need to apply and enforce policies with consistency and commitment. Perhaps one needs to consult with urban designers on shaping the city- afterall, architects, urban designers and planners are professionals who have the know-how to create visions and make them reality.

Should Edmonton move forward with the [Smart Choices](#) recommendations?

Yes. It is a good start to bringing life back to downtown and limiting urban sprawl. It also addresses some transportation and



infrastructure issues. In terms of the environment, it's a step in the right direction. Edmonton cannot continue to overtake valuable greenspace on the outskirts of the city. It must re-energize and re-develop its downtown and inner city.

What priorities and implementation activities should come out of the Smart Choices report?

Sustainable design strategies and benchmarks (such as LEED) that are mandated by Planning and Development and the City's Asset Management department.

High density, MIXED USE development- particularly in "nodes" or the hearts of areas like 124 Street, Little Italy, Chinatown, Fort Road, Jasper East Village, etc.

Transit orientated development. It's about time our city had a good, reliable, frequent transit system. Good public transportation will encourage development around transit hubs. Walkable Cities! People need to be encouraged to live close to where they work and play.

High quality of design! Pay architects/designers appropriately for the added value they create!

To what level should we intensify? And where?

DOWNTOWN and inner city neighbourhoods! Disused and vacant commercial/industrial lots are also a good start.

What is required for urban elements (mobility, open spaces and public services) to support urban form directions?

Good public transportation!

Renovating existing infrastructure (old schools and hospitals, re-using historic buildings, etc.)

Municipal government support (tax incentives/grants)

Do we have the appropriate infrastructure plans and programs for the new urban form?

I am unaware of any infrastructure plans and programs that would support the smart choices program/forms.

Risks of not setting new direction?

The status quo development pattern will persist.

Opportunities for new urban forms will be lost.

Our environment will suffer and our quality of life will decline.

Why does Edmonton need to set new directions for urban form?

To ensure sustainable future growth and development.

To derive maximum benefit from infrastructure.

To sustain our quality of life.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this endeavour. I would be happy to discuss my ideas further. Good luck!



Four Pillars of Urban Sustainability

Urban Form

Sent: Sunday, February 15, 2004 10:21 AM
To: Edmonton This Quarter
Subject: Urban Form: Smart Choices Recommendations
Importance: High

While I have at this point only had the time to briefly look through the ideas on the "smart choices" website (edmonton.ca/smartchoices/) I really do like what I see.

Long term planning for this city's development is long overdue, and direly needed. We are a mess of urban sprawl and backwards planning... As many would attest, South Edmonton Common is the perfect and commonly used example of horrible, short-sighted urban planning at its worst, and at the expense of our only major traffic corridor into this city!!

Please, Mayor Smith, City council... Have some vision for once and seriously look at **sustainable** long-term planning for the city... While we are on our way to becoming the ugly, commuting and polluted sub-urban sprawl that Mayor Smith may want to have for his SUV, we do have a chance to use some vision and foresight to ensure we don't end up in the same horrendous, polluted, traffic oriented state.

I support long-range city planning, and "Smart choices" recommendations, especially the ideas of **transit-oriented mixed use development** (quite viable and realistic) and a goal towards a much more **"walkable city"**. EDA's plans definately peaked my interest, and over the coming months I will look at them more thoroughly and provide other comments/feedback.

Thanks for asking for our input!

I've always had interest in City policy , especially in our city (the one I've called home for 22 years). However, in my studies I study something rather different (Biological sciences and International relations)

I look forward to seeing Edmonton become a true world-class city through sound, sustainable long-term planning and true vision! We have so much potential for true greatness.