

Strathcona County
Building a Better Future Together
Community Consultation 2002
Final Report Volume I

Prepared for:
Strathcona County

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	Introduction.....	2
2	Methodology	4
3	Findings	6
3.1	Quality of Life and Community Values.....	6
3.2	Community Concerns	8
3.3	Climate For Business.....	8
3.4	Growth	10
3.5	Tax Issues.....	12
3.6	Governance Issues.....	12
3.7	Written Public Submissions	13

1 INTRODUCTION

Strathcona County is one of Alberta's most desirable municipalities. The County is characterized by a large and robust economy that is heavily reliant on the petrochemical industry, an enviable selection of urban and rural amenities to suit any lifestyle or business need and rapid growth. Strathcona County last undertook a community-wide plan process in 1992 with *Strathcona Tomorrow*. Much has changed over the past 10 years. As a result the County determined that it was timely to commence another strategic planning exercise.

The first step in the strategic planning exercise was to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the wants, needs and concerns of constituents. This information would then form the foundation upon which to build and implement the plans. *Community Consultation 2002* was developed as the vehicle for consulting with County constituents to understand their perspectives.

Three specific objectives were articulated for the consultation:

- Provide Strathcona County with an important component of the information needed to effectively craft a vision and strategic long-range plan.
- Identify the community's interests and values as a guidepost for decision-making into the future.
- Communicate with the residents of the Strathcona County that their views and priorities were important.

This report (Volume I) provides a summary of the consultation process, participation and findings. A companion report (Volume II—Appendices) provides complete copies of the detailed reports produced throughout the project.

CONSULTATION PROCESS

To meet these objectives, an extensive consultation process was undertaken:

- **Telephone survey**—A survey of 1200 residents was conducted in late May.
- **Focus groups**—In total nine focus groups were held in two rounds.
- **Questionnaires**—A tailored questionnaire was developed for and completed by three groups.
- **Discussion groups**—Five discussion group sessions were held in September.
- **Public written submissions**—Advertisements and a letter from the Mayor invited organizations to contribute.

Each step of the process was designed to build upon the information gathered during earlier steps, developing and refining a view of the community's views, interests and values.

The consultation process used for *Community Consultation 2002* is more fully described in Section 2—Methodology.

PARTICIPATION

Community Consultation 2002 enjoyed strong participation and support from the residents of Strathcona County. Reaction to the telephone surveys was good with a very low refusal rate. Participation in the questionnaire process was strong with a good response rate. Written submissions, while limited in number, were thoughtful and well considered. Focus groups and discussion groups were well attended, and the residents attending were active in the sessions and supportive of the process. It was clear that residents are proud of their community and share a strong desire to see their community prosper.

Details of resident participation in each step of the process are provided in Section 2—Methodology.

RESULTS

The findings for *Community Consultation 2002* reflect a blend of quantifiable results and anecdotal feedback received. A vibrant community like Strathcona County speaks with many voices and sometimes with diverse views. Common themes and views did emerge during this consultation, however, often reinforced at several points in the process.

- **Strathcona County is a special place**—Residents value the quality of life and lifestyle that the County represents. They enjoy residential choices ranging from rural, agricultural living through the semi-rural setting of acreages to the urban lifestyle of Sherwood Park.
- **Growth has generally been good for the County**—Regardless of lifestyle choice, residents generally feel they have benefited from the growth in the county. Growth in the county has increased the selection of commercial services and recreational opportunities, and the prospering commercial and industrial sector are seen as having helped contribute to a diverse tax base.
- **Growth threatens that which makes Strathcona County special**—The high growth rate and resulting development contributes to feelings of unease in the County. Residents are worried about increased traffic and pollution, stress on education facilities and health services, and fear the loss of green space, both in the rural areas and within Sherwood Park itself.
- **Strong leadership is needed**—Residents are looking to the County to provide strong leadership, particularly in the areas of planning and growth management. They feel local and long range planning is important, and they believe the planning and development processes must be open and inclusive. Residents feel that once developed and accepted by the community, development plans should be respected by the developers and enforced by the County.

In a study such as this the larger volume, quantifiable results bring statistical significance and a level of certainty to the findings, but the individual comments and written submissions bring the results to life. This report and its supporting documents reflect a balance between the quantifiable and the anecdotal results.

A complete summary of the findings of *Community Consultation 2002* is presented in Section 3—Findings.

2 METHODOLOGY

To meet the objectives of Community Consultation 2002, an extensive process was used to explore a set of six themes provided by the County Council. The methodology started with a survey process to establish quantifiable measures of residents' views and ended with small, targeted discussion sessions to explore specific areas of concern. The specific activities undertaken in support of the consultation were:

- **Telephone survey**—This step of the process involved contacting 1,200 randomly selected residents by telephone in late May. The sample was stratified with 65% urban, 25% suburban and 10% rural residents. A random sample within each stratum ensured a representative sample of the population.
- **Focus groups**—An initial round of focus groups was held with residents and businesses. A total of six groups involving 47 residents and businesses resulted. A second round of focus groups was held with targeted stakeholders involving builders and developers; community groups and organizations; and large institutions. A total of three groups with 24 stakeholders resulted.
- **Questionnaires**—To provide as much opportunity for community input as possible, questionnaires were developed for and completed by three groups:
 - **Residents**—In June 24,000 questionnaires were distributed to all households in Strathcona County. Residents could complete the 'pen and paper' questionnaire or respond via an on-line version available on the County Website. A total of 3,881 responses was received for a 16% response rate. This response rate is well above the 10% projected for this type of research.
 - **Businesses**—1,500 were delivered to all businesses that had voluntarily registered with the County. 70 were returned undelivered due to reasons such as business closures and moves. Respondents could complete the 'pen and paper' questionnaire or respond via an on-line version via the Internet. The 204 responses represented a 14% response rate, higher than projected for this type of survey.
 - **Employees**—Similar to the residents and businesses, employees had the choice of using 'pen and paper' or an Internet survey to participate in the study. A total of 297 responses was received, representing a strong 26% response rate.
- **Public written submissions**—Written submissions were invited from individuals and organizations through an open advertisement in the local paper, in the brochure that was delivered to each home in the county, and on the study website. Eighty-five organizations were invited by a letter from the Mayor to contribute to the consultation via written submissions. Eleven of the organizations contacted provided written submissions, representing a 13% response rate.
- **Discussion Groups**—To more fully explore some specific areas identified through the survey process, five discussion group sessions were held in September. These sessions were designed to provide a facilitated forum for residents to discuss four specific topics; growth, population density, environment and traffic. Four types of sessions were held in support of this phase of the consultation:
 - **Invitational sessions**—Attendees at these two sessions were people invited based on a random selection of Strathcona County residents. Demographically, the attendees matched the makeup of the County's population, with the majority of people residing in Sherwood Park. A total of 80 residents attended these sessions.

- **Open session (Sherwood Park)**—Attendees at this session chose to attend in response to advertisements placed by the County. Twenty-four residents attended this session.
- **Business session**—Seven business people attended this open house session in response to advertisements placed by the County.
- **Open session (Ardrossan)**—Attendees at this session chose to attend in response to advertisements placed by the County. Sixteen county residents participated in this session.

The methodology resulted in a clear sense of the community's views on a range of topics. The findings are based on the statistical significance of the survey results augmented by the anecdotal feedback of the focus groups and discussion group sessions.

In general terms, the larger the sample size and the more random the selection of participants, the greater significance can be placed on the results as representative of the County as a whole. In terms of this study, the input can be ranked in terms of statistical significance (higher to lower) as follows:

- **Telephone survey**—This large, randomly selected sample for the telephone survey and the use of quantifiable questions gives this feedback the highest statistical significance in the study.
- **Questionnaires**—The high return rate of the questionnaire and its quantifiable responses characterize this as the second most reliable source for representative input.
- **Discussion groups, invitational**—Typically of a good size and attended by randomly selected, invited participants, these sessions were a good source of input to the consultation process.
- **Written submissions**—Written submissions are an important source of information, particularly those from organizations and groups. Their self-selecting nature (people choose to participate versus random selection) makes the resulting information less reliable as being representative of the community.
- **Discussion groups, open house style**—As with the written submissions, the self-selecting nature of attendees makes the resulting information less reliable as being representative of the community. Care must also be taken to be cognizant of the size of the group. Small groups sometimes tend to not coalesce and form group opinions, but instead remain a collection of individual opinions.

None of the above is intended to denigrate the value of any individual input to *Community Consultation 2002*. Different mechanisms were used to gather information for different purposes, and the individual comments were helpful in developing a fuller understanding of the community and its views.

Detailed reports were produced for each stage of the consultation, and a complete summary of the findings of *Community Consultation 2002* is presented in Section 3—Findings.

3 FINDINGS

The County Council identified six themes to be addressed by the *Community Consultation 2002* process:

- Quality of life and community values.
- Community concerns.
- Climate for business growth.
- Growth.
- Tax issues.
- Governance issues.

These areas are by definition interrelated and residents of the County hold a range of opinions on any one topic. During the consultation common themes and views did emerge, however, often reinforced at several points in the process.

The remainder of this document provides a summary of the findings organized along the above themes.

3.1 QUALITY OF LIFE AND COMMUNITY VALUES

Overall, County constituents rated the quality of life as very high in the County. Almost half to two-thirds (range of 49% to 60%) of residents feel that the quality of life has stayed the same compared to three years ago; 20% to 26% feel it has improved; 13% to 21% feel it has worsened. Businesses rate the business climate as high and almost half feel that the business climate has stayed the same compared to three years ago; one-third feel it has improved while 10% report a worsening. Employees rate the quality of life as high with 52% feeling that the quality of life has improved; 34% feeling it has stayed the same and 8% feeling it has worsened.

Residents view the Strathcona County as a wonderful community with excellent amenities and services and a unique mix of urban and rural lifestyles. Focus group participants identified the core values to be preserved:

- **Country and natural**—Residents perceive and value a quiet, simple, unhurried and relaxed lifestyle, encircled by nature, wildlife, green spaces, trees and trails.
- **Family values**—Strathcona County represents a caring environment that looks after and supports children, aged, disabled and other members of the community. Residents value the “small town” nature of the County, a friendly place with welcoming, caring and generous people.
- **Safety**—The County represents a closeness among people, where the community looks out for each other (especially children), enjoys low crime, and experiences excellent policing.
- **Active and vibrant**—Residents value sports, leisure and recreational opportunities that characterize and active and vibrant community. They value the amenities of a city being within easy reach, but hope to avoid the negative aspects of urban development.

- **Proud**—Residents take pride in their community and value comfortable, clean, visually appealing, and well-maintained homes that reflect pride of ownership. They value reasonable housing prices, yet they enjoy the appreciation in property values seen across the County.
- **Successful high performers**—The County benefits from a culture of high performers as reflected by the predominantly affluent middle class makeup of the population, the strong support for the sport, and entertainment communities, the high level of volunteerism, and the healthy business community.

Perceptions of the County were also sought from survey respondents. Residents were asked to identify their level of agreement with a number of perception statements. They were also asked to identify the priorities to be addressed by the County. The major results were:

- Perceptions:
 - Agriculture is viewed as an important part of community and its role needs to be preserved.
 - Revenue from industry is viewed as contributing to the quality of life for the community.
 - Residents expressed mixed perceptions as to whether or not the County as being a safe and clean environment
 - Opinion was evenly divided as to whether there was a good choice of housing options. Many respondents felt that the choice of housing options is limited, especially rental or multi-housing accommodation.
 - Residents are evenly divided on their perception as to the availability of a good choice of employment options.
- Priorities:
 - Protecting the environment.
 - Preventing crime.
 - Maintaining trees, green spaces and other natural areas.
 - Establishing and enforcing buffer zones.
 - Assessing future needs for water, sewer and roads.
 - Attracting a good mix of businesses into the community.

The subsequent discussion group sessions reinforced these values, perceptions and priorities. In exploring the areas of growth, population density, environment and traffic, they identified a strong desire to maintain a unique identity for the County. Residents value the small town nature of Strathcona County, desire a park-like environment, and want development managed and controlled.

Participants in the discussion groups identified a need for a strong vision for the county, one that could be used to support both long-range planning and community promotion.

3.2 COMMUNITY CONCERNS

Growth and growth-related issues topped the list of community concerns and were identified as the top priorities for the County. The community concerns most frequently identified by the surveys and focus groups were:

- **Rapid growth**—The rapid growth within the County of the last few years has resulted in a perception of a lack of management of growth and development. “Urban sprawl” is penetrating deep into the once quiet and peaceful rural setting, resulting in tensions between urban and rural living. Some residents are not confident that growth is being well managed.
- **Loss of green space**—Residents want to maintain and/or increase trails, parks and green spaces (“keep the Park in Sherwood Park”), preserve the rural nature of the County and protect agricultural land and natural spaces.
- **Pollution**—The environmental pollution from the refineries, industry, and increased traffic have residents concerned about the potential effect on the health of the community and the air, land and water quality.
- **Traffic and Transit**—In addition to pollution concerns, residents are concerned with traffic congestion in the County. Public transit services are also a concern, such as a lack of services for seniors and a gap in services to recreational amenities such as Millennium Place.
- **Culture change**—Residents worry that as the County grows it will lose its distinctiveness. The “small town” nature could be lost, giving way to “big city” problems like increased crime, gambling, and an increase in “undesirable elements”.
- **Rising costs**—Growth could result in a higher cost of living, through higher taxes, higher housing prices, or both.
- **Services**—The lack of a hospital or other 24-hour emergency facility within the County was expressed as a concern. Residents are also concerned about the stress that growth has placed on the educational system, particularly the educational facilities (schools).
- **Safety**—Crime prevention, public safety and traffic enforcement were also high on the list of community concerns.

As well, focus group participants felt that there was a differing and lower quality of life for some residents such as seniors, young people and those on lower incomes.

3.3 CLIMATE FOR BUSINESS

Community Consultation 2002 included a focus on the business sector. Overall, businesses rate the business climate in the County at a high 7.27 out of 10 points (1 = very poor, 10 = excellent). Compared to three years ago, 49% of businesses surveyed feel the climate for operating a business in Strathcona County has stayed the same, while a solid one-third (34%) of businesses feel the climate has improved.

Businesses were asked about how to make the County a better place to do business. Three suggestions most frequently mentioned:

- Cut down on the bureaucracy and red tape that businesses face in dealing with the County.

- Encourage County residents to patronize local businesses.
- Hold the line on or decrease taxes.

Other frequent suggestions were:

- Address the smoking bylaw.
- Increase road construction and/or alleviate traffic congestion.

Business survey residents were asked to identify their level of agreement with a number of perception statements and asked to identify the priorities to be addressed by the County. The major results were:

- Perceptions:
 - Many businesses (59%) feel there is a good future for their business.
 - Half of the businesses feel the County is business-friendly.
 - Less than half of the businesses (41%) agree the environment is safe and clean.
 - Less than half (39%) agree that the County has one of the lowest taxation levels for business properties.
 - Businesses are evenly divided on the relationship between crime and growth.
 - Some businesses (36%) agree that County supports and facilitates opportunities to succeed in business; 20% think the County does not do enough to entice new businesses into the community.
 - Businesses are evenly divided on whether there is too much interference by the County in the affairs of business.
 - Many businesses (40%) disagree there is good choice of housing.
 - A majority of businesses (64%) agree with the statement "revenue generated from industry contributes to a good quality of life for all people in the County." This is consistent with the residential questionnaire and survey results.
 - Businesses approve of most County actions in addressing issues except the provision of rental accommodations for low-income families and individuals.
- Priorities:
 - The taxation level was viewed as the most significant issue facing County in the next five years.
 - Other issues mentioned were the pace of and planning for growth, road quality/insufficiency and traffic congestion, and the smoking bylaw.

At the subsequent discussion group session business attendees explored the idea of slowing growth and expressed reservations as to the implications: "If a lower growth rate reduces the relative tax base resulting in higher taxes, how much are residents willing to pay?"

3.4 GROWTH

Despite the overall high rating for the quality of life in the County, residents do have concerns in a number of areas, many related to growth. Approximately two-thirds (range of 67% to 68%) of residents feel that the rate of growth in the County is too fast. About one-third feel that the rate of growth is “a bit too fast” (33% to 38%) and about one third feel the rate of growth is “much too fast” (29% to 35%). Businesses are less negative about growth, yet about half feel that the rate of growth in the County is too fast. Half of the businesses (50%) feel that growth has had a positive impact over the last three years, yet just over one-quarter of residents see growth as having had a positive impact over the same time frame.

The specific results were:

- The personal impact of growth received a mixed reaction—with some viewing it as having a positive impact and others viewing it as negative...with a similar feeling about the impact of anticipated growth.
- Most feel that the County has to better manage growth and development, ranging from 80% (residential telephone) to 57% (businesses).
- Most feel that growth is inevitable, with the highest being among residents (87%, residential telephone) and employees (82%).
- A segment of the community feels that the County needs to stop growth as much as possible, ranging from a low of 17% (businesses) to a high of 38% (residents paper survey).

Future growth was also addressed. Most respondents favoured a balanced future growth that was primarily dispersed at lower densities. The specific results were:

- Most favour future growth to be balanced between urban and rural areas, ranging from 73% (residential telephone) to 48% (residential paper).
- Most favour growth primarily dispersed at lower densities but in more locations, ranging from 68% (residential telephone) to 55% (businesses).
- Most emphasis in future growth is desired on preservation of agricultural areas and natural areas.
- Less emphasis in future growth is desired on heavy industrial development and to a lesser extent on residential development.
- Residents and employees expressed strong support for future initiatives such as a 24-hour medical facility, retaining independence, and developing a town centre. Businesses gave diversification beyond petrochemical industry and expansion of public transit higher support than the town centre.
- Lowest support was given for reducing lot sizes and increasing densities, high rise apartments, legal basement suites and establishing a new town outside Sherwood Park.

Subsequent discussion sessions explored the implications of growth and related topics such as population density, environment and traffic to develop a clearer understanding of resident's concerns in these areas. The common themes follow.

■ Growth.

- Residents recognize the value of growth to the County through an expanded tax base, improved commercial services, a stronger business base and improved recreational opportunities.
- Residents expressed concern with the pace of growth, and specifically with the ability of the infrastructure (roads, schools, health care services, etc.) to keep up. Residents expressed concern with the loss of green space, trees, natural areas, and agricultural land.
- Residents feel that the growth needs to be controlled and managed. Open, participative planning processes should be used to develop local and long range plans, and those plans should be respected.
- Repeated support was expressed for the idea that the County needs a vision, a long-range plan to support that vision, with the leadership and firm management to stick to that plan.

■ Population density.

- Residents offered some support for increased density, but not beyond medium density low-rise apartment buildings. Such developments should be planned in advance and spread around throughout Sherwood Park.
- Support was expressed for some higher density development in or near commercial areas, potentially for seniors or to provide more affordable housing options.
- Some residents expressed opposition to any increase in density within the County.

■ Environment.

- When discussing the environment, residents primarily focused on green space and air quality. Green space included trees, parks, natural areas, and agricultural land throughout the County.
- Water quality and waste management (including recycling) were identified as the next most important areas.
- Residents expressed an expectation that the County should play an active role in the air quality arena. They expect open, honest communications with respect to air quality and testing. Residents feel the County should demonstrate leadership in seeking region-wide solutions.

■ Traffic.

Discussion group participants expressed frustration with a wide range of traffic issues. Some of the key areas identified were:

- Not enough traffic enforcement of speed limits and traffic lights, particularly at rural intersections.

- Traffic congestion and volume make it harder to get around the County, particularly within Sherwood Park.
- Rural roads and major intersections (i.e., Clover Bar Road, Hwy. 16 & Sherwood Drive, Whitemud Drive) have not kept up with demand due to growth.
- Some frustration was expressed at traffic control, particularly poorly synchronized lights on major routes and inconsistent speed zones (i.e., 60 kph section of Wye Road).
- Frustration was also expressed over road design, such as the lack of use of access roads in new commercial developments, poor design resulting in “fixes” that just make things worse, and general difficulty in getting around Sherwood Park, compounded by the fact that everything is so spread out “you have no choice but to drive everywhere”.

3.5 TAX ISSUES

Respondents were also asked their preferences about raising taxes, reducing services and levying fees. The clear preference was for user fees over tax increases. The specific feedback was:

- Levying user fees was preferred to raising taxes or reducing services.
- Second option varied by respondent group: employees and residents (telephone) favoured raising taxes as second option; residents (paper survey) and businesses favoured reducing services as the second option.
- Telephone respondents were evenly divided at 48% for and 48% against a tax increase pegged to inflation. Respondents to the residential questionnaire opposed such an increase by 43% to 30%.

3.6 GOVERNANCE ISSUES

Specific feedback was requested on various aspects of County governance. The results were:

- The County received good ratings for its governance: value for tax dollars, bylaw enforcement, and communicating with citizens.
- The County received fair ratings for its governance by all respondents: planning for the future, input in to decisions, and input into land use planning.
- The lowest ratings were given by business on the efficiency of the processes involved in development and building permits. Other respondents gave a fair rating in this area.

In the subsequent discussion groups the need for open communication was identified in several areas:

- Residents want to see open, participative planning processes, particularly related to new developments.
- The need for the County to play an active role in communications and education in the area of air quality measuring and monitoring.

Employees were requested to provide feedback on the capacity and capability of the County. The specific feedback was:

- Areas where County is perceived as being best equipped: supplies and equipment, financial resources, IT systems, training and development, organizational structure, corporate management style, internal communication, and plans to guide the future—all received 3 or higher score out of 5.
- Two areas where County is perceived as less equipped to meet needs—scoring less than 3: staffing and workspace.
- Four areas that need the most focus over the next five years: staffing, financial resources, training and development, plans to guide the future—all scored 4 or higher out of 5.
- All remaining areas were also viewed as important scoring 3.5 or higher out of 5.
- Four areas most frequently mentioned for enabling staff to better perform their jobs: more staff (23%), improve interdepartmental communication (17%), training and development (14%), better and more equipment (11%).
- Next most frequently mentioned areas: improve workspace (7%) and financial resources (6%). Other areas received 4% or less of respondents' mentions.

3.7 WRITTEN PUBLIC SUBMISSIONS

As part of the community consultation process, eleven organizations provided written briefs. Our analysis of the briefs identified several common themes and messages. The more common priorities or suggestions were (the number in brackets indicates the number of times that the topic was identified):

- Attention to issues of taxation (5x). This includes not only the levels and amount of taxation, but also:
 - Pushing for more equitable return on what the County tax-base puts into provincial funds.
 - The need to monitor the diversity of the tax base.
- The need to expand the capacity of the County's roadway system (5x).
- Governance suggestions (5x) around better leveraging of joint initiatives with other municipalities in the Capital region, particularly Edmonton; and the need to enhance cooperation with, and further promote, community based organizations.
- Establish a more transparent plan for dealing with growth issues (4x).

Second tier priorities included:

- The need for a hospital (3x) or enhanced medical service.
- Proactive economic development and economic diversification (2x).
- Focus on cultural and arts pursuits (2x) with the same attention as is paid to sports and recreation.

- Safety and environmental concerns around heavy industry (2x).
- Addressing the lack of affordable housing (2x), particularly for seniors and young people of County families.
- Improving the aesthetics (2x) at the various entry points to the County.

Overall the written submissions were supportive of and complementary to the feedback received in other areas of the consultation.