Dirt Roads and Highways: Reforming Municipal Governance and Government in Alberta

Dr. Lars K. Hallstrom and Naomi Finseth
Presentation Goals:

1) Examine challenges for rural municipalities and regionalization in Alberta

2) Examine shifting policy and strategic landscapes that affect rural municipalities in Alberta

3) Explore the democratic, representative and institutional implications of 1 and 2

4) Operationalize through the results of a one year project on the implementation the Land Use Framework and its affects on municipal governance in Alberta.
Provincial Context in Alberta: Challenges and Solutions

• Integrated approaches vs. Project-based
• Revised municipal governance?
  • E.g. Edmonton/Calgary Charters
  • E.g. Penny sales tax – Canada West Foundation
• Land Use Framework (2008 - ?)
• Possibility of amalgamation
• Integration and compliance, planning, implementation, monitoring and enforcement increasingly engage municipalities
Working hypotheses

• There are multiple “democratic deficits” of different forms at play
• Municipal autonomy and individuality are unlikely for all (long-term)
• Evidence of competing (political vs. bureaucratic) rationalities
• May require/prompt functional and structural change for municipal government AND governance
Alberta – the Current State

• 300+ municipalities
• Wide variation in population/size
• Geographically dispersed
  – Eg. Lower Athabasca vs North Saskatchewan
• Variable capacity
• All governed by one MGA – treats municipalities as largely homogeneous
  – Review process 2013-14
• New pressures emerging (eg. LUF)
Land-Use Framework (LUF)

- 7 regions – loosely based on major watersheds
- Plans developed by interdepartmental committee under the Land Use Secretariat
- Secretariat receives recommendations from Regional Advisory Council (RAC)
- All plans must be approved by Cabinet

History of Land-use Planning in Alberta

- 1948 divided Alberta’s land into white and green zone.
- 1970s introduced regional planning commissions
- 1980s funding cuts and reduction in regional planning
- 1990s: move from regional planning to market-driven approach

Source: http://www.aehs.ca/heritage/history/canada_map.html
Alberta Land Stewardship Act (ALSA)

- In 2008: creation of the ALSA and LUF
- “Super-legislation” – unites all planning documents
- Shift from project by project planning to coordinated integrated land management
- Increased provincial involvement in land use planning
Regionalized Governance: Pressures

• Provincial Context: (as shown by the Rural Economic Development Action Plan 2014)
  – Business government
  – Empowerment/Regional/Collaborative

• Aligns with the 3 C’s: Collaboration, Competition/Capitalism and Capacity Building

• Need to consider (beyond proximate economic goals) what these strategies may cause...
Results: Scenario Planning (Fall 2014)

• Scenario planning is about exploring the future
• Scenario planning does not predict the future
• Scenario planning provides ‘clues’ for what could be possible drivers of change
Scenario Planning Process

• Scenario planning process was broken down into 4 sessions:
  1) Better governance – where do municipalities want to go?
  2) What affects municipalities? Proximal and distal causes
  3) What are we missing?
  4) Trends and Patterns
Scenario Planning Process Results

• Session 1 (ideal): Sustainable, survival, even playing field, growth, high quality of life, uniqueness of rural municipalities.
• Session 2 (causes): legislation, viability, funding, economy, other municipalities
• Session 3 (absent): quality of service, long term planning, definitions of urban/rural
• Session 4 (trends): urbanization, increased downloading, uncertainty, viability reviews
Scenario Planning Results 1

• Two ways to municipal reform:
  1. Highway: accelerated/top down = amalgamation
  2. Dirt road way: slower, incremental/bottom up = collaboration
Scenario Planning Results 2

• Two perspectives/rationalities for municipal reform:
  1. Political: Get ahead of the province, leave history in the past
  2. Administrative: Must be pragmatic, work with what we have
Where does this take us?

What is the right “unit” for regionalization?
- Geography?
- Proximity?
- Functionality?
- Sector?
- All/some/none of the above?
Where does this take us?

Factors to consider:

A) Size and distribution of municipalities

B) Facilitators and constraints on collective action and decision-making

C) Role for non-governmental stakeholders (governance)
Where does this take us?

• Geo-political regions are convenient, but not the only answer

• Also need to consider decision-making structures (institutions) between and within regional structures
  – Eg. LUF: representational & proportionality issues
  – Municipalities currently have limited venues for collective decision-making
  – Still have potential for Madisonian Challenge:
    • Tyranny of the majority
    • Tyranny of the minority
  – Do we need a “Great Compromise” (1787)?
Where does this take us?

• Need to consider institutional/representational/collective structures that facilitate and balance municipalities and regions (heterogeneity vs. homogeneity)

• OR: Calgary v. Edmonton v. everyone else (ie, the Battle of Alberta)

• Ex: bicameral body composed by rep by pop AND equal representation (USA)
Conclusion

• Regionalization has a (negative) history and possible future in AB
• Recent exercises are not perfect
• Municipalities have options, may not have choices
• Core tension between competition and collaboration needs to be addressed:
  – Inter-personally, inter-municipally, inter-regionally
Questions?
Contact Information:

Naomi Finseth
Alberta Centre for Sustainable Rural Communities
University of Alberta
Tel: 780 679 1643
Email: acsrc@ualberta.ca
Website: http://www.acsrc.ca/
Facebook: UofA.ACSRC
Twitter: @ACSRC