

# Edmonton's Current City Planning Framework: A Diagnostic Assessment

A Guiding Document to the Modernization of the City Planning  
Framework

**Written By:**

Bruce Irvine, MCIP  
CityFORUM Consulting Ltd.

**In Collaboration With:**

Daniel Boric, CPT MCIP RPP  
City of Edmonton

*This technical study was initiated to inform the development of The City Plan. The technical studies were considered alongside public engagement, modelling and professional judgment to determine overall outcomes for The City Plan.*

# City Plan

## Investigating the Need for the Modernization of Edmonton's City Planning Framework

The City of Edmonton is currently developing a new integrated Municipal Development Plan (MDP) referred to as *The City Plan*. As a subset of that exercise, Administration has undertaken an assessment of the current city planning framework (the Framework) to determine if it is sufficient to support the aspirations of *The City Plan*. The Diagnostic Assessment (the Assessment) examines the efficiency and effectiveness of current planning framework through consultations with internal and external stakeholders. The Assessment makes five recommendations that could be employed to improve the effectiveness of current framework in anticipation of Edmonton's new MDP.

# Investigating the Need for Modernization of Edmonton’s City Planning Framework

This report is focused entirely within the plans and strategies under the purview of the Administration’s City Planning and Development Services Branches. The preliminary recommendations of this diagnostic assessment are intended to be further explored as part of subsequent phases of the Framework modernization process.

This work is an important accompaniment to the development of a new *City Plan* for Edmonton

Like most modern cities, Edmonton has experienced both successes and challenges in advancing leading practices in municipal planning. Two significant tools used by the City are the current Municipal Development Plan (MDP) *The Way We Grow*, which is a 10-year plan designed to guide Edmonton’s growth and the Transportation Master Plan (TMP) *The Way We Move*, which sets the framework for how the City will address current and future transportation needs. As both of these plans are approaching the end of their time horizon the City of Edmonton is embarking on an ambitious new strategic policy direction to align and renew the MDP and TMP. To achieve this *The City Plan* project is divided into three main objectives; plan development, planning framework modernization and an overarching city-building narrative.

These three elements will be developed to both map out and deliver a new vision for Edmonton’s future. As part of these efforts, an examination of the current city planning framework (the Framework) was engaged in order to assess the ability of Edmonton’s current planning framework to deliver on the new integrated MDP, *The City Plan*. While still under development, the aspirations of *The City Plan* are to enable a shift in Edmonton’s urban form through new and revised policies designed to encourage vibrant, complete and liveable neighbourhoods, support appropriate density and housing choices, utilize multi-functional and accessible infrastructure, enhance culturally sensitive lands and ensure protection of ecologically sensitive areas. *The City Plan* is of paramount importance to the City’s ability to achieve Edmonton’s new strategic goals established in *ConnectEdmonton*. As such, the ability of current Framework to deliver on the vision of *The City Plan* will be crucial to achieving Edmonton’s strategic vision.

## Orientation to The City Plan

*The City Plan* is an ambitious undertaking designed to guide Edmonton's future growth. *The City Plan* is envisioned as a people-centred plan that places people at the forefront of its thinking and implementation. This means that *The City Plan* is to be an instrument that delivers the outcomes Edmontonians want to achieve. These outcomes will be derived from robust public feedback and in alignment with Edmonton's four strategic goals and the six guiding values of the *The City Plan*.

*The City Plan* will guide decision-making related to short-term situations through policy that is predictable, simple and focused. Longer term and more complex goals such as doubling the population of a city over many decades will require additional planning tools that can respond to emerging trends and future conditions.

In order to enable *The City Plan* to better respond to future changes, a more nimble and adaptive city planning framework is necessary in response to the trends, challenges and future innovations Edmonton will encounter. While growth to two million people is the macro-level population target of *The City Plan*, the magnitude, pace and timing of change to achieve this growth cannot be reliably predicted. At the same time, as growth occurs, *The City Plan* must also account for and remain responsive to potential economic, social, technological, and environmental disruptions that may take place over time. A new approach to guide our land development and investment decisions must be focused, but flexible, in the face of uncertainty.

## Project Context

This diagnostic assessment report (the Assessment) is focused exclusively on the strategies, policies, land use plans, and Bylaws developed and administered by the Administration's City Planning and Development Services Branches.

## Modernization of Edmonton's City Planning Framework

Efforts to improve the current City planning framework have been included as part of the *The City Plan* project. The modernization of any planning system will undoubtedly be a considerable challenge that will require both cultural and procedural changes to the way the City plans for growth. As a first step in this process, a diagnostic assessment of the current Framework was completed. The goal of the Assessment was to both determine the fitness of the current Framework in supporting the ambitions of *The City Plan* and to make specific recommendations that could be engaged in subsequent phases of the Framework modernization process.

The Assessment is divided into three sections which provide:

1. An outline of the major elements of the current Framework
2. An estimate of the ability of the current Framework to support *The City Plan* based on stakeholder feedback
3. Recommendations for improvement and modernization of the Framework

## Diagnostic Assessment Step 1: Understanding the Current City Planning Framework

The *Municipal Government Act* (the *MGA*) empowers municipalities over most elements of local planning and development. The *MGA* sets out both a municipality's abilities as well as numerous requirements on how these powers can be used. Within this structure, Edmonton has created a series of statutory and non-statutory plans and strategies that govern municipal growth and land development. Collectively, these planning tools and procedures can be regarded as the "City planning framework" (Framework).

The Framework refers both to the policies and plans intended to oversee how growth and redevelopment occurs over time. The major elements, or planning "tools" of the Framework, include both land based plans as well as more general planning tools including the following, among others:

- The Municipal Development Plan
- Area Structure Plans
- Neighbourhood Area Structure Plans
- Neighbourhood Structure Plans
- Area Redevelopment Plans
- The Zoning Bylaw
- Servicing and Development Agreements
- Development and Building Permits
- Plan Authorization Requirements
- Environmental Review/Environmental Impact Assessments
- Non-statutory Land Use and Community Planning Studies (e.g. Servicing Concept Design Briefs, Corridor Land Use Studies, etc.)
- Design guidelines (i.e. Residential Infill Guidelines and the Transit-Oriented Guidelines, etc.)
- Concept plans
- Broader strategies (i.e. Infill Roadmap 2018, Transit Strategy, etc.)

Under the requirements of the *Municipal Government Act*, the City establishes goals and objectives for the City's development through the Municipal Development Plan, Statutory Plans, the Zoning Bylaw and other pertinent planning tools the City sees fit to establish. In theory, each planning tool provides guidance for any specific land project while the development review process allows for a step-by-step approval process of development applications. In addition to land based plans, the City creates and administers other planning tools (like the Transit Oriented Design Guidelines) and subject specific strategies (like Breathe) to guide the development of the city. Any development project must be evaluated against these plans and policies as well as a large volume of policies, plans and directives from other departments within the City.

Important to our understanding is that Edmonton's planning framework is unique. Even under the legislated aspects of the *Municipal Government Act*, there are a considerable variety of planning frameworks across Alberta in terms of how different communities organize their work flows and processes. Essentially, no two cities employ exactly the same approach. This reinforces that while the legislative requirements must be met, there are indeed opportunities for Edmonton to modify the planning tools utilized and even significantly change the Framework itself.

In order to complete the Assessment, a basic overview of current planning tools was needed. Aligned to traditional planning roles, some of the most significant planning tools within the Framework relate to large scale land use plans. As with most cities, Edmonton uses the hierarchy of planning tools established in the Municipal Government Act to guide development of new and renewing areas. Step one of the Assessment was to gain clarification of current primary planning tools and their application and to begin the evaluation of how the City utilizes these tools to plan.

## Diagnostic Assessment Step 2: Feedback and Evaluation

The broad components of the existing Framework establish the foundational planning tools Edmonton employs to direct growth. However, in order to improve our ability to achieve Edmonton's growth and development goals, it is essential to understand how effective the current process operates, and how realistic it is to expect our current Framework to deliver on the ambitions of *The City Plan*. The second step of the Assessment was to engage key informants and stakeholders in an assessment of the current Framework's effectiveness, and more pointedly, seek out potential ways to improve the Framework in anticipation of *The City Plan*.

### Methodology

The Diagnostic Assessment used stakeholder driven feedback to assess current challenges and make recommendations for improvement. The Assessment employed a series of workshops and direct interviews with key internal and external stakeholders involved in the planning process. Stakeholder groups included:

- Industry representatives
- Civic partners
- Community representatives
- City Administration

### Key Informant Interviews

As part of the Assessment, stakeholders were asked to provide feedback in terms of what is currently working well in the existing planning framework and what areas they saw needed the greatest improvement. Small group workshops were then used to further test the assessment. The Assessment workshops further explored potential recommendations to improve the current Framework which in turn may be completed in subsequent phases of the City Planning Framework project currently underway.

Importantly, consultation is not yet complete. Additional engagement will be undertaken to test ideas, potential solutions and gain additional feedback. Consultation will occur as part of subsequent phases of the City Planning Framework project.

### Subject Expert Assessment

Three internal workshops were completed with policy and development staff. Staff were challenged to review all major planning tools to identify both their intended theoretical use as well as the actual

application as applied in Edmonton. Staff evaluated the effectiveness of over twenty planning tools that are most commonly used in Edmonton. Some of these included:

- Area Structure Plans
- Neighbourhood Area Structure Plans
- Neighbourhood Structure Plans
- Area Redevelopment Plans
- Outline Plans
- Community Development Plan
- Community Concept Plans
- Neighbourhood Improvement Plans
- Land Use Studies
- Neighbourhood Planning Study
- Master Plans
- Implementation Reports
- Urban Design Strategy
- Urban Design Plan
- Design Guidelines
- Heritage Interpretive Plans
- White Papers
- Council Policy Resolutions
- Administrative Directives
- City Strategies

For each of the above planning tools stakeholders completed exercises to identify the tools ability to:

1. Clearly delineate and explain a unique “purpose” of each tool
2. Identify the decisions being informed
3. Identify essential dependencies between planning tools
4. Confirm the essential inputs required for tool development
5. Identify challenges within the planning tool

### **Findings from Internal Stakeholders**

Stakeholders recognized the complexity of the current Framework and identified that certain planning tools have distinct and vital roles. Further, stakeholders provided feedback on the challenges specific to any one particular tool.

Drawing from the individual assessment, the project team identified several common themes that presented particular challenges to the current Framework. These overarching challenges will need to be addressed if Edmonton’s planning framework is to be improved enough to deliver on the aspirations of *The City Plan*.

While a number of common themes emerged, such as lack of consistency and lack of predictability (discussed in more detail below), one issue seemed to generate a large number of challenges. Specifically, the Assessment was able to identify approximately 200 individual land-based plans now in effect in the city. Further, an additional 200+ strategies, City Policies, guidelines and other planning tools currently exist. These additional policies serve to layer on to the volume of directions the City is giving.

The aggregate of land use plans in particular stems from Edmonton’s age and long history in planning without having a formal mechanism to “retire” plans once they stale date.

On its own, the sheer volume of policies and plans presented challenging issues. Additionally, there was considerable feedback related to the challenges with the current Framework itself. The below table summarizes the most significant challenges identified by the internal stakeholders.

<b>Existing City Planning Framework Challenges Overview</b>		
<b>Deficiency</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Result</b>
Scope Inconsistency	Current land-based plans vary considerably in scope dependent on the Project Manager’s decisions and the specific problems presented	The overlapping succession of planning tools is producing both redundancy and conflict as multiple plans address similar issues often with different outcomes.
Volume	An estimated 200 land-based plans and 200 strategies and City Policies are currently in effect	Administration and the public find it challenging to adhere to all the plan and policy requirements
Stale-dated Plans	In addition to adding to the challenge presented by the volume of plans, a challenge exists in applying plans created over several decades ago	The lack of a formal plan review and update process produces complexity in determining priorities and approaches developed in different eras
Lack of Prioritization	No formal prioritization method exists to balance the numerous goals generated across the larger volume of plans	Administration and the development industry are often making trade-offs on policy goals without formal guidance
Implementation Deficiencies	Challenges relate to creating plans which are not funded or ready for subsequent implementation actions	After engaging the public and key stakeholders, it was noted that long pauses in implementation erode confidence in the plan, dilute the collective memory of the agreements reached and can lead to stakeholder fatigue

## Broader User Group Assessment

In addition to the internal workshops, a broader stakeholder consultation session was completed with development industry leaders, institutional organizations and community groups. Rather than focusing on individual examples or problems from any one particular project, the stakeholders were challenged to help to identify the qualities and characteristics of what a modernized planning framework in Edmonton should include. Common themes included:

- Adaptable, responsive to change and disruption
- Clear and easy to understand by businesses and community
- Enforceable - development shouldn't happen outside of the Framework
- Clear distinction between the tools in the Framework (i.e. Area Redevelopment Plans vs TOD guidelines)
- Flexible and adaptable to allow for creativity
- Reduced restrictions and barriers to development
- Strong entrepreneurial focus
- Doesn't have to be perfect
- Strong focus on implementation, rather than the creation of plans themselves
- Predictable and transparent planning Framework
- All plans to be stored digitally in one place online
- Tools in the Framework will be aligned with investment (implementation)
- Metrics and evidence-based decision making will be undertaken
- Tools in the Framework will be continuously monitored and updated

Respondent's concerns were grouped into larger categories with a specific emphasis on identifying those major issues which, if addressed, were seen as having the most substantive impact toward improving the existing Framework.

Examining the stakeholder feedback in more detail, four overarching areas of focus were identified that represent fundamental challenges to the current planning Framework that may hinder the delivery of *The City Plan*. These challenges are summarized in the below:

Summary of Stakeholder Areas of Focus for the Current Framework	
Identified Challenge	Description
Predictable and certainty	In general, the planning tools in the Framework were seen to lack clarity in terms of balancing goals and clearly identifying a hierarchy of goals and requirements
Flexible	Stakeholders called for more goal oriented approaches which would allow for more flexible ways to meet requirements
Measurable	While plans were seen as ambitious, they were criticised for failing to monitor their success and adjust as they go
Clear and understandable	A large number of stakeholders felt that the existing Framework structure, as well as the language and structure within current planning tools, lacked the ability to identify and communicate goals clearly

## Diagnostic Assessment Step 3: Findings and Recommendations

This assessment should not be seen as a condemnation of Edmonton’s existing planning framework. Importantly, all cities find challenges with the complex balance of process efficiency, quality attainment, and stakeholder engagement. In Edmonton’s case, the City is willing to engage in meaningful efforts to modernize the current Framework. This will be timely given the importance of *The City Plan*.

### Analysis and Synthesis

The project team assessed all feedback and worked to classify the identified challenges of the planning process. Combining the internal and external feedback, five primary challenge areas have been identified for consideration:

- I. Policy deficiencies related to inconsistency and lack of predictability
- II. Lack of policy clarity and meaning
- III. Overwhelming quantity of existing plans, guidelines, strategies, etc.
- IV. Inadequate Corporate alignment/ resources challenges by competing priorities resulting in lack of implementation

Stakeholders were then engaged again and challenged to help suggest potential solutions to the identified issues. The project team, drawing from these primary challenges, then further developed specific recommendations that were seen as offering the best opportunities to improve the Framework over the near term.

City Planning Framework Challenges and Recommended Actions: Overview	
Challenge	Recommended Action
Policy deficiencies related to inconsistency and lack of predictability	<p><b>Recommendation 1:</b> Reduce the variety of planning tools used in the planning framework</p> <p><b>Recommendation 2:</b> Standardize and improve current planning tools through pre-established templates and standards</p>
Lack of policy clarity and meaning	<p><b>Recommendation 3:</b> Create measurable goals within planning tools to increase transparency and accountability of implementation</p>
Overwhelming quantity of existing plans, guidelines, strategies, etc.	<p><b>Recommendation 4:</b> Develop a dynamic evaluation process that will systematically review planning tools and establish ways to update and retire these planning tools</p>
Inefficient Corporate alignment/ resources challenges by competing priorities resulting in the lack of plan and policy implementation	<p><b>Recommendation 5:</b> Link planning policy tool creation, evaluation and implementation to the Corporate Business Plan</p>

## Conclusion: Fitting the modernized City Planning Framework into the Edmonton Context

Five principal recommendations were identified during the course of the **Assessment**. These recommendations were chosen based on which actions were seen as delivering the strongest results within a short-term timeframe.

Implementation of these recommendations requires stakeholder buy-in. The modernized City Planning Framework must be accessible and understandable in order to ensure the changes take hold within the Edmonton planning culture. Developing new planning tools, an evaluation approach and a new work plan creation and prioritization process will propel the effectiveness of the City Planning and Development Services Branches in supporting the goals of *The City Plan*. Anticipated results should include: strengthening the Framework, increased consistency across planning tools, effective implementation prioritization and greater collaboration between stakeholders.

Connecting the modernized City Planning Framework to the delivery of *The City Plan* will be a critical next step.