Growth Narratives and Governance Dependencies in Resource Towns
Fort McMurray as Case Study

by

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Abstract

Oil sand development is the main economic engine in Alberta's Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (RMWB). Large-scale boosterism and investments in oil sand projects have mainly driven the Municipality's rapid growth during the path dependency of the last few decades. The rapid growth and increase in population, income, wealth and economic activity in the place cause a different scenario for societies and pressure on municipal services (Keough, 2015).

The dependency on a single resource and rapid development has led to cycles of ups and downs in income, workforce, and population in many places, particularly in the Canadian West (Van Assche et al., 2017). Therefore, the Municipality has faced several unique challenges, with the boom and bust in the oil industry and some difficulties of the natural disasters. The relationship between the province, the oil industry, and the local governments (first of Fort McMurray, then of the RMWB) is complex, with an initial alignment of the growth of a complete city housing a workforce for the oil sands, to a divergence with the province informally supporting the growth of work camps while appearing to restrict the growth of the Municipality.

In this thesis, I begin by reviewing processes in resource boomtowns, then briefly outline the history of Fort McMurray as a case study with the different scenarios of boom and bust in the area and explain how growth mentality and boosterism have shaped and driven the planning in the area with the evolution of the status in Fort McMurray since it became a New Town in 1964 focusing on the formal institutions in the local level. I then find the interdependency between the provincial government, oil companies and the Municipality, analyzing the dependencies in the governance of Fort McMurray with an understanding of the continuity and change in the evolution and ability of single-resource communities.

Dedication

To my beloved family,

I am proud and honored to dedicate my academic work to you. Your love, support, and encouragement have been the foundation upon which I have built my life.

Your unwavering belief in me and your constant support has been a source of inspiration and motivation, and it is because of you that I have been able to achieve this accomplishment.

To my parents, who have always encouraged me to pursue my dreams and have supported me every step of the way, I owe everything. Your love, guidance, and unwavering belief in me have made all the difference in my life.

To my spouse and children, Saleh, Joud, Albaraa, Nasser, and Abdullah have likewise been encouraging, supportive, and proud of me. Thank you for decades of love, support, and excuse for my absence abroad for such long periods; I owe everything to you.

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To my family, I dedicate this degree to you with all my heart. I hope that my achievements will make you proud and inspire future generations to pursue their dreams.

With all my love and gratitude,

Ahmed Saleh Nasser Bafgeesh

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List of Abbreviations

CCARP	City Centre Area Redevelopment Plan
CILUS	Commercial and Industrial Land Use Study
CIR	Capital Infrastructure Reserve
CRISP	Comprehensive Regional Infrastructure Sustainability Plan
EGT	Evolutionary Governance Theory
FMS	Fiscal Management Strategy
GCOS	Great Canadian Oil Sands (now Suncor)
LARP	Lower Athabasca Regional Plan
MDP	Municipal Development Plan
NGOs	Nongovernmental Organizations
REMP	Regional Emergency Management Plan
RMWB	Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo
RSDS	Regional Sustainable Development Strategy
UDSR	Urban Development Sub-Region

List of Formal Documents

1. Survey of Fort McMurray (1965)
2. Fort McMurray-Athabasca oil sands subregional integrated resource plan (1966)
3. New Town of Fort McMurray, Engineering Study of Utility Systems (1968)
4. Sub-regional plan for Fort McMurray (1970)
5. Survey of Fort McMurray (1970)
6. New Town of Fort McMurray General Plan (1972)
7. Revised General Plan for the New Town of Fort MacMurray (1974)
8. Revised General Plan (1974)
9. Fort McMurray Annual Report Town Manager (1979)
10. General Municipal Plan the City of Fort McMurray (1980)
11. Fort McMurray Annual Report of the City Manager (1980)
12. Fort MacMurray Financial Impact Study (1981)
13. Order in Council 817/94
14. Fort McMurray as an urban service area (1995)
15. Order in Council 354/96
16. Fort McMurray-Athabasca oil sands subregional integrated resource plan (1996)
17. Annual Report of the City Manager - Fort MacMurray
18. Regional Sustainable Development Strategy for Athabasca Oil Sand (1999)
19. Technical support document for the regional sustainable development strategy for the Athabasca oil sands area (1999)
20. Investing in our Future: Responding to the Rapid Growth of Oil Sands Development (2006)
21. The Lower Athabasca Regional Plan - (2012-2022)
22. The Comprehensive Regional Infrastructure Sustainability Plan (2011)
23. Municipal Development Plan - Bylaw No. 11/027 (2011)
24. Urban Development Sub-Region (2011)
25. City Centre Area Redevelopment Plan - Bylaw No. 12/003 (2012)
26. Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo Commercial and Industrial Land Use Study
27. Wildfire Recovery Plan (2017)
28. Budget and Financial Plan (2017)
29. Wood Buffalo Land Use Assessment Sub-Regions (2018)
30. Commercial and Industrial Land Use Study (2018)

31. RMWB Strategic Plan - (2018–2021)
32. Fiscal Management Strategy, Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo - (2019–2021)
33. Debt Strategy (2019)
34. Capital Infrastructure Reserve (2021)
35. Regional Emergency Management Plan (2022)
36. RMWB Council's Strategic Plan - (2022-2025)

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Background of Study

In Canada and elsewhere, municipalities dependent upon a local resource industry can face challenges due to their remote locations, economic dependence on resource development, and the interest other levels of government (provincial and federal) have in their development and planning. When a single resource or industry increases or decreases production, that can significantly affect resource towns, which attract people looking for job opportunities and interested in the industry, e.g., oil prices often result in gains or losses in revenue, population, and jobs (Keough, 2015).

Fort McMurray is an example of a Canadian resource town known for its proximity to the Athabascan oilsands. As a case study, it is an urban service center approximately 435 kilometers north of Edmonton, the provincial capital city (Ng, 2018). After the 1960s, Fort McMurray had major boom and bust periods resulting in changes in planning, population growth, and local economies.

Through this study, I aim to examine how being a single resources community affects the planning and development governance of Fort McMurray. This includes a look at the relationship between the province and the municipal government, as well as a look at how a growth mindset and boosterism in resource towns and boom-and-bust communities can come to dominate and shape the planning and development of an area. It focuses on formal institutions and government documents, examining how plans, strategies, and mindsets have evolved in the case of Fort McMurray and the Wood Buffalo region.

This study draws from theoretical frameworks rooted in Evolutionary Governance Theory (EGT) to understand the relationship between governments and their influence on planning, to study how growth mentality and boosterism affect decision-making, and how decisions are taken or proposed in the local formal institutions and identify the continuity and

change during the path history to identify the processes through which planning, and development governance has evolved.

1.2 Significance of Study

This study is not only of significant academic interest but also of practical interest, as it helps to understand the continuity and change in the evolution and ability of single-resource communities. It also explains how growth mentality and boosterism have shaped, and driven planning in the area, finds the interdependency between the participants in the governance and analyses all dependencies in the governance of Fort McMurray.

1.3 Research Question and Objectives

This study addresses how planning and development governance over time can take place in a community dominated by a single-resource independent community. In addition to exploring the interrelationships in the local governance, it aims to examine how dependencies have influenced the power and autonomy of Fort McMurray and the RMWB. It does this by examining the formal planning and development documents produced for the region.

It will be achieved by some sub-objectives as follows:

1. Exploring the changing narratives (strategies and growth) in documents at the local level with regard to planning and development and examining how that affects the interdependencies between the municipal government (first for Fort McMurray, then for the RMWB) and the provincial government.
2. Reviewing and analysing strategies and planning documents available to decision-makers and identifying the dependencies in the governance and the influences of continuity and change.
3. Examining how the planning and development strategies for the Fort McMurray community (first as a Town, then as a city, and after that as an area within a larger

regional municipality) have been shaped by the relationships between levels of government and the oilsands companies, as well as how they have been shaped by the local narratives of local growth – a form of boosterism.

1.4 Thesis Organization

This thesis is organized into six chapters. The first chapter of the thesis presents an introduction that aims to lead the reader through the research from a general subject area to a particular field of study and give background information on the significance of the study, research questions, and objectives. The second chapter provides the existing literature on single-industry towns, resource boomtowns, boosterism in resource towns, and boom-and-bust communities and reviews the literature on their effects. The third chapter explains the theoretical framework using the Evolutionary Governance Theory to realize how governance works and evolves and understand the dependencies and strategies in governance. It also covers the research methodology, including the approach of the case study, data collection, and analysis. Chapter four explains the history of Fort McMurray and explores the interdependency between different levels of governance in Alberta and the influence of the oil industry through the governance path with the different cycles of boom and bust and the population growth in the area. It also states the evolution status in Fort McMurray and RMWB. Chapter five presents the key documents in Fort McMurray's growth and development planning, focusing on two phases:

Phase 1: Community Building (1964-1995)

Phase 2: Fort McMurray Acts as an Urban Service Area

Chapter six discusses the key findings and outlines the key conclusions of this study.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

This section outlines the ideas and conceptual framework of the study. It provides an overview of the study literature, starting with the phenomenon of single-industry towns, resource boomtowns, boosterism, and boom-and-bust communities, and exploring the literature on their effects.

2.1 Single Industry Towns

Single-industry towns are settlements and cities that depend on a single economic activity based on the city's economic activity; they include fishing villages, oil resource towns, mill towns, and mining communities. The settlement, communities, and institutions of these cities are shaped and expanded by the development of the local industry (Baporikar, 2021). These communities depend on extracting or processing the region's resources.

These towns are usually linked with a specific industry or business, and in many cases, they have little formal influence over the resource development that is driving their local economy. In such cases, outside governments or corporations have authority over many of the key decisions regarding extraction and the impact on the local communities. This creates governance challenges as tensions can exist regarding decisions that may be positive for the corporations or higher-tier government but perhaps harmful to the local municipality. In many cases, their municipal strategies are affected by the main industry's and core regions' changing needs. However, their long-term survival as a community may depend upon diversification (Barnes, 1987).

Single-industry resource towns have several characteristics, such as they are located where resources are found, while other economic opportunities are usually limited. This employment specialization means these communities have populations with limited economic and social opportunities beyond the town (Hayter, 2017). Single-industry towns are also characterized by their simplified occupational system; workers frequently move between

industrial towns looking for job opportunities (G.a & Alan, 2021). Fort McMurray is an example of a traditional single-industry town, and the towns on the Burin Peninsula in Newfoundland as examples of the new dependent at a distance in a single-industry town based on resource developments, labour mobility and societal effects during periods of prosperity and recession, which created a form of dependency (Storey & Hall, 2018).

2.2 The Phenomenon of Boomtown

Once a resource is developed on a large scale, such as a new mine or sawmill, there is a need for a local workforce. While in the past, companies would often build a 'company town' to provide housing for these workers, in the last half-century or so, they typically leave this to markets and sometimes the government. Where there is a local community, perhaps a small rural town that emerged to service local farming areas, the town often experiences rapid growth. There is a flood of investment into local land development in nearby communities. An influx of workers and their families creates demand for housing, schools, commercial development, and other institutional development. In many instances, the town administration is not well prepared for this 'booming' development as rapid growth and increase in population, income, wealth, and economic activity in the place can place pressure on municipal services (Keough, 2015).

2.3 Boosterism

Boosterism is an effort that governments undertake to stimulate regional residential and commercial redevelopment through real estate and various business investments and establishing flexible local labour markets (Brenner & Theodore, 2002). Boosterism often consists of overly optimistic messaging regarding the current and future potential of a place. There is a long history of boosterism going back to early western towns seeking to attract residents from the east when towns and cities were first being settled. Boosterism attempts to

attract outside investment to enhance economic growth, such as promoting the place for a good business and life, emphasizing the existence of vibrant social and cultural life, and other attractions. The emphasis on boosterism of urban economic development is associated with a worldview that views cities as competitive in terms of business, a global scale for events, capital, mobile labour, publicity, etc. (Deas et al., 2014).

2.4 Boom and Bust Communities

While resource communities undergo an early boomtown period with new resource developments, many also experience the opposite – a bust period (Van Assche et al., 2017). A period where commodity prices decline, making the local resource less valuable, leading to declines in employment. The significant decline in exploration and extraction operations leads to decreased income, employment, and wages in the extraction sector; this can be seen recently when the sudden drop in world oil prices (Jacobsen & Parker, 2016).

The sudden bust in industries and population sometimes leads first to declining incomes and population decline due to outmigration. This leads to real estate declines, followed by the municipality's challenges in maintaining budget expenditures (Lobao, 2016). While some societies may be impacted for a long when a bust occurs due to the focus on a particular industry, limiting alternative and economic growth thinking (Ruddell, 2017). Therefore, historical data reveals that the economic boom of communities has a different cycle of boom and bust; it also has beginnings and ends. High development rates in boomtowns are directly linked to the demand and production of the resource that drives the town's growth.

Research shows that many resource based communities, particularly those in more remote locations, can experience a cycle of booms followed by busts and future periods of boom and bust. These cycles create similar problems with each boom and bust. Further, while

municipalities should be aware that such booms and busts are likely to occur, they seldom effectively plan for either (Van Assche, 2017)

Thus, this phenomenon is problematic and demands a focus from governance and key players. It can be addressed through an integrated coordination process of key actors, community leaders, and decision-makers to achieve particular goals that should be discussed and identified collectively to achieve a high-quality life with a focus on sustainability and resilience through periods of booms and busts (Hospers, 2014).

In some cases, bust periods may lead to the death of the communities. For example, when the recession hit Schefferville, Quèbec, in the early 1980s, the Iron Ore Company shut down its operations entirely and nearly shut down the city (Jahan, 2017). Early in the 20th century, mining was quickly developed, and coal was extracted in Lille, Crowsnest Pass, Alberta, which provided many job opportunities in many infrastructure projects. However, all of that went down ten years before World War I (Van Assche et al., 2017).

Bust periods are particularly difficult because many residents and political leaders may struggle to accept the nature of the bust period, including the consideration that it may last a long time or that the boom times may never return (Hayter, 2017). These types of declines are often met with a sense of disbelief by some in the community (typically those who stay) as they tend towards believing the rhetoric of their own boosterism and fail to consider the long-term decline of their community in terms of its size and economy. Planning for degrowth or 'shrink' is often ignored, with overly optimistic planning dominating belief systems and processes. (Van Assche et al., 2017).

The peak of a boom period makes all participants focus on development, overlook the negative aspects of the boom, and not think about the possibility of a bust, which keeps them focused on only growth. After a time of the collapse, it becomes difficult to imagine alternative development paths, and nostalgia for the good times dominates (Van Assche et al.,

2017). When people come to boomtown, they believe in the place's success story, which makes them slowly invest, based on the reality of that success story, and they lose thinking of alternative futures. Widespread perceptions of these places, growth, and a lack of a deep understanding of the current and future situation create difficulty in imagining alternatives and long-term strategies (Wheeler, 2014). However, dependence on natural resources negatively affects employment, income, and services due to the often-increasing short-term income (Freudenburg & Wilson, 2002). According to their dependence on those resources, these negative effects are shown in various ways in different sectors, places, and periods (Lobao, 2016). Even if the boom caused many difficulties and divisions, the matter was not addressed systematically to provide alternatives for other businesses and industries; they talk of nostalgia despite bad memories (Perez-Sindin & Van Assche, 2020). When a limited group of actors and participants with a narrow perspective dominate the situation, the decision-making process on natural resources such as mining, oilsand or forests is limited in thinking and knowledge. Concentrating capital, authority, knowledge, and interests in a single industry leads to agreement on the importance and dominance of the industry, which determines thinking about alternative activities and plans (Van Assche et al., 2017). It is hard to see an alternative future and imagine alternative economies due to the long dominance of industries and activities and narratives of industrial identity and growth, which were deeply rooted in governance and communities.

Edmonton and Calgary are two of Alberta's most populous cities, tied to resource boom and bust. Thus, strategies and plans developed during the bust differ from the plans and visions of the future created during the boom periods. Boom tends to be glorified in the bust period, and all reasons for collapses are forgotten due to the memories linked to the past and look to the future as an extended boom period (Perez-Sindin & Van Assche, 2020).

Chapter 3 Theoretical and Methodological Framework

3.1 Theoretical Framework

Evolutionary Governance Theory will be used as a theoretical framework for this study, developed by Van Assche et al. (2013). EGT incorporates ideas and perspectives from multiple theoretical sources, including social systems theory, post-structuralism, and institutional economics. It is an approach to understanding how governance works and evolves and how actors and institutions in the communities can direct their path and future in multiple directions. It is also used to understand how different elements in governance, such as actors, institutions, and discourses, are in a continuous process of co-creation and co-evolution. How they shape each other in governance paths and governance evolution over time, which shapes the area influences their future.

In this thesis, governance is considered "the taking of collectively binding decisions for a community in a community, by governmental or other actors" (Van Assche et al., 2015). Institutions are the formal and informal rules that organise social, political, and economic relations (Alston, 1992). These include plans, policies, laws, and agreed upon strategies. Such strategies can be formal and recorded or simply exist as an understanding between agents, mutually agreed upon and supported. The configuration of actors, institutions and their co-evolution is the fundamental core of governance. Actors and institutions cannot be examined separately from governance since they co-evolve. They depend on one another for survival, transformation, and shaping the governance's evolution and future (Van Assche et al., 2013). The shared visions that a place has about the future affect the decisions made in the present, plans, policies, and changes in the actor/institution configuration. This shapes the area and influences the future of the function of the current governance (Duineveld et al., 2015).

The links between the participants, players, individuals, groups, organizations, and resources in governance are known as interdependencies that create path dependence and shape what is possible in governance. Participants need each other and need policies, strategies, and laws to influence governance, governance path, and governance evolution. Thus, when the community is more complex, the pattern of interdependence is more complex, with more relationships between actors (Van Assche, 2015). Understanding dependencies, how governance evolution works, and what happens to ideas, stories, strategies, participants, and methods that develop governments and be adopted within the community (Van Assche et al., 2017). Material dependency is the physical environment, whether human-made or natural, which imparts lasting path dependencies on a place and the

people within it, including affecting decisions regarding governance (Van Assche et al., 2020).

EGT employs the concept of strategy in governance. A strategy can be a narrative of the future, organized between different actors and institutions in various governance pathways, and used to analyse the formalization and effects of strategies (Van Assche, 2015). Narratives structure the knowledge in governance, some appearing directly in the form of stories, which influence community behaviour, self-understanding, leadership decisions, beliefs, and visions of a prosperous community (Van Assche et al., 2017). The multiplicity of futures that the strategy addresses in the community should be recognized and linked to strategy development (Van Assche, 2017). This concept can give us insight into strategizing in contexts with many layers.

Structurally, the strategy could be understood as a narrative and an institution. Understanding this tangle in the governance pathway will help explore the strategy's guiding potential and influence (Van Assche et al., 2020). Analysing strategy, narrative, official documents, plans and policy documents can help to understand the evolution of governance and underlying mindsets. It also helps to understand the story of development and limitation, how this appears in the planning document, and how strategies continuously work in community and governance paths, evaluated, and reformulated before alternative strategies become visible.

EGT can shape what is possible in governance and its path and evolution. It can give us a clear picture of how governance works, develop, and understand strategies' formalization, effects and the adaptations of particular conditions, resources, and decision-making patterns. It recognizes how the narratives, ideas, visions, and plans shape the area and future. It helps understand who has power, who makes decisions, how other players make their voices heard, and understand governance.

3.2 Methodological Framework

This study will employ a case study approach by examining published government documents at the local level relevant to strategic planning for the development and growth of the Fort McMurray area.

3.2.1 Case Study Approach

Yin (2009) noted that a case study could be employed to understand a real-life phenomenon while considering relevant contextual conditions. He explained that case study research is appropriate when there is a need to answer how and/or why questions beyond the researcher's control. This study will focus on Fort McMurray as a case. In this study, I will use explanation building, which was developed by Yin (2009); it is an approach that consists of a repeated process of investigation and revision to build and understand links between different perspectives. Starting the research process by getting a background and developing a conceptual framework of the study through collecting data, then doing analysis, and looking for the links going back to the data collection and data analysis in multiple repetitions comes out with a satisfactory explanation for the study. This study will naturally fit in planning research; it allows flexibility to use different methods and in-depth analysis. Thematic analysis and path analysis will be used to analyse the data.

3.2.2 Data Collection

The data collection methods for this study will include a review of primary and secondary sources focusing on the growth mentality and boosterism in the narrative, formal documents, policies, plans and strategies at the local level for Fort McMurray and the RMWB in two periods; the first phase focuses on the time from 1964 when the first oil sand project had started to 1995, when fort McMurray lost its status as a city, while the second phase focuses on the time when Fort McMurray has acted as an urban service area in the RMWB, which will be explained more in the coming chapters. I will examine the narratives and decisions taken or proposed in plans and strategies, including maps and numbers built on the insights from the document, to observe how governance paths have changed and influenced the community and understand the continuity and change in the governance evolution. This

will enable me to find which other ideas were present and/or dismissed on various growth-focused alternatives.

3.2.3 Analytical Framework

Data analysis is the process of inspecting and analysing data to discover helpful information and inform conclusions (Nowell et al., 2017). A content analysis of municipal planning documents will provide insight into the values and practices of urban development planning and development within the RMWB and the interrelationships between the involved governments. This will be achieved by analysing the governance pathways and understanding how evolution has developed and changed over time and how the dependencies have influenced the power and autonomy of the local government. I will conduct ongoing analysis throughout the research and as the case study progresses. In this study, data analysis will consist of path analysis and thematic analysis methods that explain as follows:

3.2.3.1 Path Analysis

Path analysis is a method derived from EGT developed by Van Assche et al. (2013). It focuses on understanding the change in the governance paths and evolutions, using the context of governance, policy, and plans. Path analysis is considered an umbrella that links with other methods requiring policy documents, strategies, and maps. It depends on the framework to understand the path history of governance and how actors and institutions shape each other in governance path and evolution. It also traces strategies from the past to map the governance paths and shape future options. It analyses the evolution of the community and the economic and policy domain, including the effect of policies and plans in the community (Van Assche et al., 2019).

Path analysis addresses the coordination of strategies, investigates the gaps between strategic work, past and the future, analysing what and how path dependency has changed in

the community and organizations. It can also focus on the governance path, decision-making in the present, and the influence on the future. This method would better understand the path dependences, whether these develop within society or outside (Van Assche et al., 2019).

3.2.3.2 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is one of the most common methods for qualitative research analysis (Hayes, 1997; Nowell et al., 2017). It is a systematic method that enables researchers to identify cross-references between data and topics to examine and develop study themes (Hayes, 1997). It is a technique used to analyse the qualitative data collected directly through documents, narratives, plans, strategies, articles, and interviews. Clarke et al. (2015) mentioned that thematic analysis coordinates and analyses a data set in detail by finding themes that appear essential to the studied phenomenon.

This methodology will be one of the appropriate ways to analyse the qualitative data collected in the study and providing an opportunity for both inductive and deductive analysis. This research focuses on finding, analysing, and interpreting meaning patterns or themes in qualitative data collected directly from the planning documents, narratives, and strategies (Meco, 2020). Thematic analysis helps researcher link their various images and thoughts and compare them to data collected in different situations during the study as possibilities for interpretation (Alhojailan, 2012). It will allow us to identify how governance of growth and development has changed over time and to observe how the growth mentality is dominant in formal institutions. It will also define the relationships between concepts and compare them to data collected to understand the link between individual themes using the explanation-building method to develop a satisfactory explanation (Yin, 1994).

Path analysis and thematic analysis work together well because path analysis will help dig up many sources to understand how things have been developed and changed in the path history. While using thematic analysis will help to understand the link between different

concepts and sources with repeated data collection and analysis processes to represent the meaning and develop a satisfactory explanation.

Chapter 4 The Case Study (Fort McMurray)

4.1 Introduction

Fort McMurray is an urban service area in the RMWB (Alberta Municipal Affairs, 2007). The Municipality has long aimed to attract development, business, and residents to Fort McMurray to develop and create a quality urban environment that is a lively and dynamic area to work, play, and live (CCARP, 2012). Fort McMurray qualifies as an urban settlement by the Alberta Government for the purposes of program delivery and grant eligibility (Master Plan, 2015). In this section, I will explain the history of Fort McMurray and the relations between different levels of governance in Alberta. I will also discuss the fluctuations in industry and population in the area with the change in the status in Fort McMurray and RMWB.

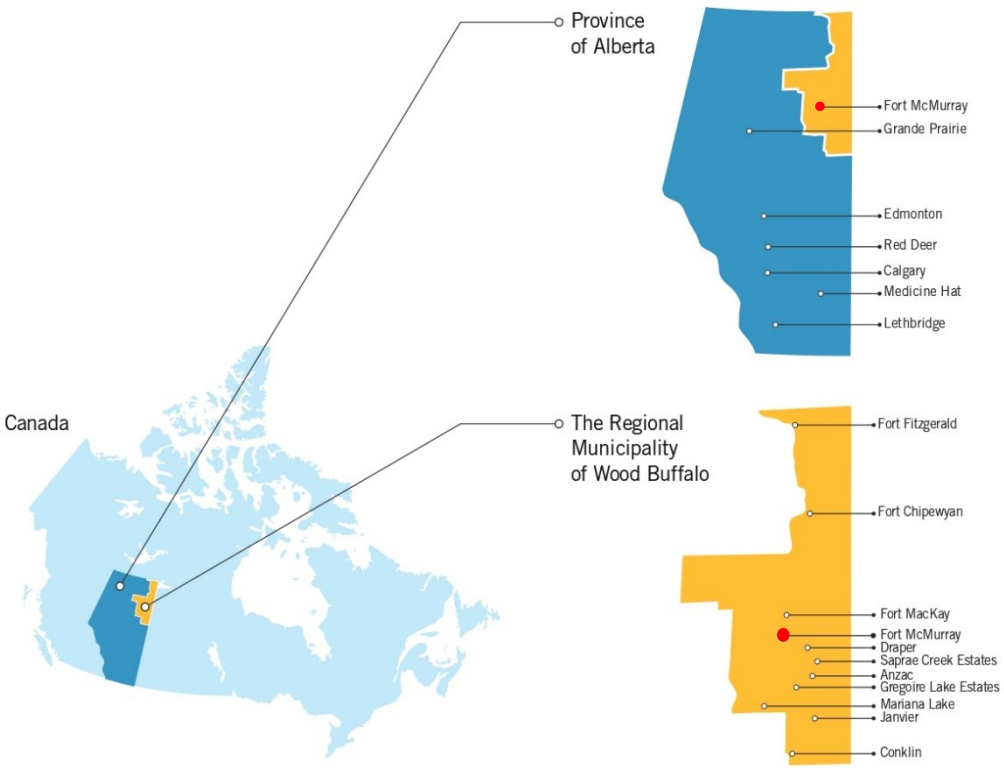

Figure 1: Location of the RMWB in Canada

Map Reference: *RMWB – CCARP. (2012) – Bylaw No. 12/003.*

4.2 Brief History of Fort McMurray

4.2.1 Early History

Fort McMurray's history spans more than a century and has always been associated with developing and using its surrounding natural resources. During the fur trade of the 1700s, the general area of Fort McMurray served as a trading post and off-loading site due to its location. Fur trading became the primary economic activity in the 18th century when Europeans began to trade for fur with the local Cree Indians. In 1875, 1881, and 1885 serious floods were experienced, completely inundating the Lower Townsite (Nafziger et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, by 1900, the population had reached 300, and the Town was enjoying its role as a major transportation and trading centre. The potential of the oil sands was evident at this time, and many claims were made along the Athabasca River north of the Town. In the 1920s, the construction of the railway, the logging industry, the salt trade, and the fish packing plant all helped to boost the economy (ENR, 1977). In 1930 the Research Council of Alberta developed an experimental hot water oil sands extraction plant at Waterways. In 1936 the next step was taken, and Abasand Oil built its commercial extraction plant on a site adjacent to the Horse River. The Second World War brought 3,000 American troops to Fort McMurray. In the years following Fort McMurray's wartime boom, the population decreased from a high of nearly 4,000 to 900. On May 30, 1947, Fort McMurray was incorporated as a village, and on December 29, 1948, it was proclaimed a town (AESRD, 1996).

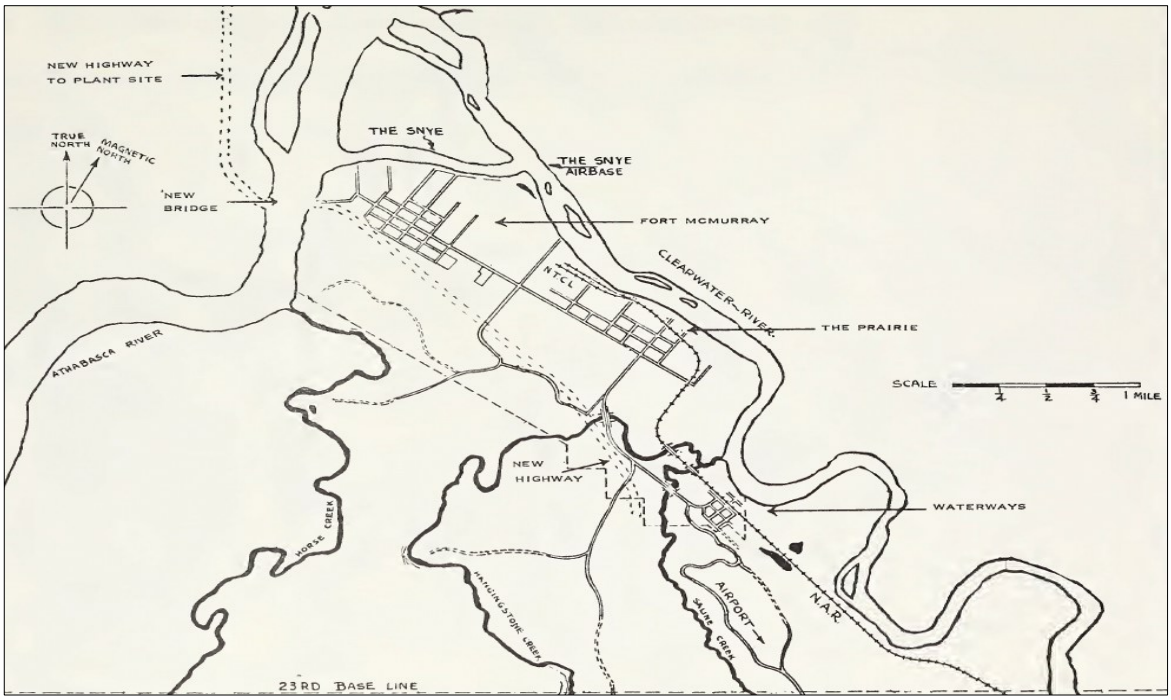

Figure 4: Fort McMurray 1965

Map Reference: Survey of Fort McMurray (1965). Department of Industry. Development Government of the Province of Alberta. https://archive.org/details/surveyoffortmcmuOOalbe

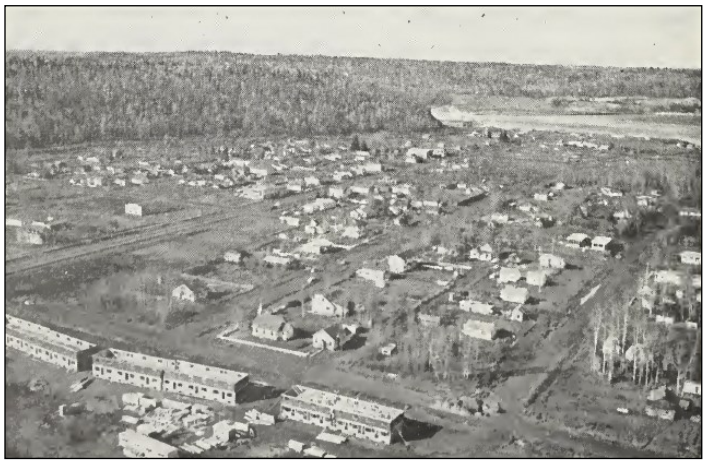

Figure 2: Town of Fort McMurray

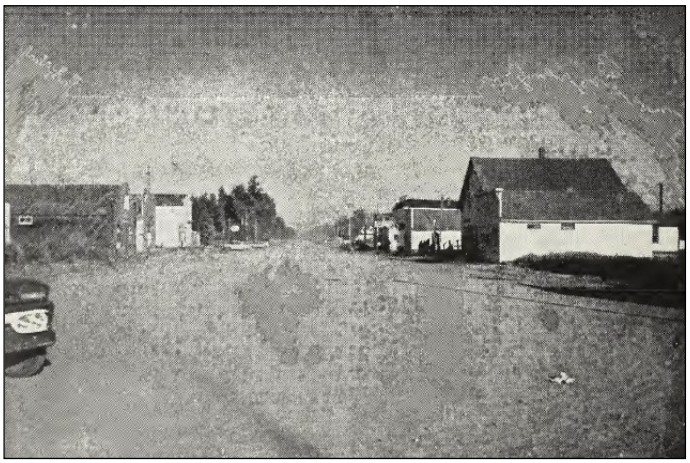

Figure 3: Main Street, Fort McMurray

Reference: Survey of Fort McMurray (1965). Department of Industry. Development Government of the Province of Alberta. https://archive.org/details/surveyoffortmcmuOOalbe

4.2.2 Recent History

In its history, Fort McMurray experienced many boom-and-bust cycles caused by natural resources such as the fur trade, salt, fish, and timber. In 1960, Great Canadian Oil Sands (GCOS, now Suncor) applied to the Oil and Gas Conservation Board for a development permit to begin processing oilsands. By 1961, 1,200 people were living in Fort McMurray. The pressures of development led, in 1962, to an application for New Town Status. In 1964, the modern Fort McMurray was established when the first oil sands project was started with significant provincial funding. This led to population growth in the community. Soon after, more oil sand plants were opened. Fort McMurray has changed dramatically due to the oil industry's development, which has drawn people from across Canada and around the world to fill the labour shortage (RMWB, 2008). By 1972, the local population had reached a threshold of more than 8000. In 1973, construction of the much larger Syncrude Canada Ltd. project began, resulting in another massive population influx to the region and, more specifically, to Fort McMurray. In 1974, the Alberta government determined that Fort McMurray was in trouble. The Town had run a deficit for several years, and planning and administrative capacity were overwhelmed (David G & Jones B., 2013). Consequently, Alberta placed Fort McMurray under special status. To be known as a New Town, the powers of the locally elected council were significantly reduced.

The province appointed a provincial watchdog to keep an eye on Fort McMurray's fiscal management, a town planning team reporting to Edmonton was installed at the New Town Office, and an agreement was signed between the Alberta Housing Corporation and the New Town of Fort McMurray to develop the land. Over the next six years, until Fort McMurray became an autonomous city, thousands of new residents worldwide were looking for jobs in the resource industry and forestry. Mining oil sands and related activities dominated the region's regional economy and reinforced the role of Fort McMurray as the

population and service centre. The Town features a relatively broad range of public and commercial facilities (AOSERP, 1980). The city experienced a slow economic downturn in the late 1980s and early 1990s when falling oil prices led to reduced interest in oil production for high-cost operations. In 1995, when Alberta's Government established the RMWB, Fort McMurray lost its status as a city and became part of the RMWB (Alberta Municipal Affairs, 2007).

Since 2000, the rapid growth of oil sand projects resulted in fast population growth, resulting in demand for significant infrastructure investments and service growth within the settlement. In 2006, many multinational companies were involved in developing the oil sands. They established many projects, leading to Alberta's oil sand industry growth and essential economic activity (RMWB, 2011). From 2000-2010, Fort McMurray's population increased from 42,600 to 76,797 (Municipal Census Report, 2015). The 2008 economic recession slowed growth, but Fort McMurray's population increased again between 2011 and 2015, reaching 82,724 (Municipal Census Report, 2018). In 2011, almost a third of the workforce in Wood Buffalo was employed in the oil industry or related activities. Most workers drawn to employment opportunities in the RMWB remained temporary residents who returned to their hometowns between shifts (RMWB, 2011).

By 2015, the region experienced a decline in total employment and economic activity, influencing the local economy and population trends. Employment in the industry dropped significantly for three years before rising slightly in 2018 and declining further in 2019. In 2016, the scenario in Fort McMurray changed again when wildfires rushed across the city, resulting in the most extensive wildfire evacuation in Alberta history and displacing more than 88,000 people from their homes. The city faced an economic recession during this period. According to the 2021 municipal census, there are 68,000 residents in Fort McMurray, a 5% decrease from the 2018 census. Recently, Alberta's record low oil prices

have dropped due to the coronavirus pandemic when the world stock markets fell. Global energy production and prices have influenced the area's economic activity, leading to significant economic and social implications for the province. However, the Canadian oil and gas extraction industry almost recovered in terms of production, employment, and exports, but it creates uncertainty about Fort McMurray's development and future (IISD, 2021).

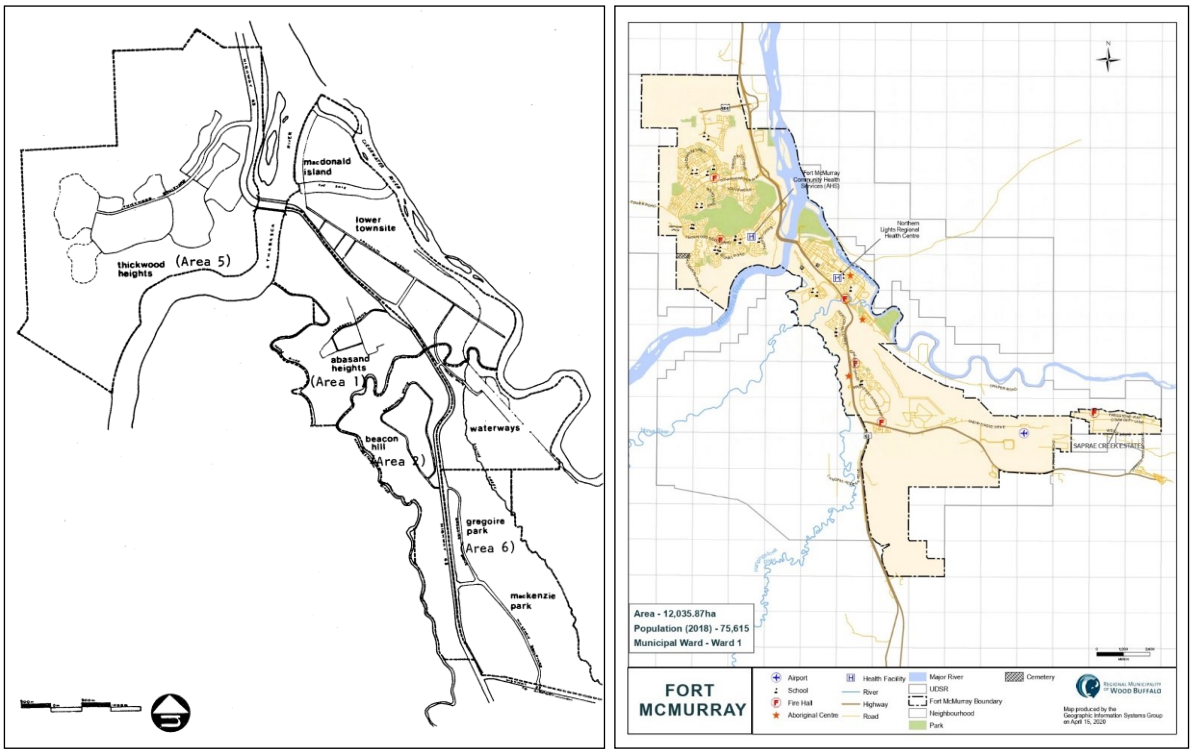

Figure 5: Fort McMurray Maps (1980-2020)

Map Reference: *AOSERP. (1980). Service Delivery in the Athabasca Oil Sands Region Since 1961. Alberta Oil Sands Environment al Research Program. August 1980. Project HS 20.3*

Map Reference: *GISG. (2020). Geographic Information Systems Group. RMWB, April 15, 2020.* https://www.rmwb.ca/en/permits-and-development/maps.aspx

4.3 Government Relations in the Alberta Oil Sands

Alberta has an area of more than 66 million hectares (Anielski & Wilson, 2001). The Crown owns approximately 81% of the mineral rights transferred to Alberta from Canada in 1930 by the Natural Resources Transfer Act. The Government of Alberta manages these mineral rights on behalf of Albertans, where the province owns most of it. Thus, on behalf of Albertans, the government collects taxes and royalties as resource owners (Alberta Energy,

2012). The provincial government has considerable control over the regulation and management of the oil sands development since it owns the vast majority of the oil sands. Alberta also has legislative power over oil development and its commercial and environmental aspects (Vlavianos, 2007). Therefore, Alberta Energy disposes of the rights to produce the province's oil and gas resources. Royalties, bonus bid payments, and rents are payable to the province in exchange for the rights to explore, drill, and capture resources. Alberta's oil and gas rights are issued through licenses, permits, or leases through a competitive sealed bid auction system (Steven & Monique, 2008).

There is a lack of public consultation at the rights disposition stage, both for the public at large and for more directly affected groups, such as surface landowners and local municipal governments, who will be left to deal with the impacts of development. It does not consider the potential impacts of development on public health and safety, municipal services, infrastructure, etc., nor does it consider impacts on private lands (Steven & Monique, 2008). Municipalities are not key decision-makers in whether oil and gas development proceeds in the province.

While local communities enjoy some economic benefits of development, they may also be disproportionately exposed to the negative impacts. Those impacts are often felt most directly by local landowners and other individuals who use the land where the development occurs (Government of Alberta, 2007).

Municipalities are granted a limited to no direct role in setting the province's energy and land use policy. This is also the case concerning decision-making around the disposition of provincial oil and gas resources and surface access to public lands. There are no official obligations to consult and inform municipalities when such decisions are made, which limits the ability of local government to influence decision-making, plan and prepare for the effects of evolution.

4.4 Importance of the Oil Industry for Alberta

Alberta is the province that produces most of Canada's oil and contains 95 percent of Canada's oil reserves in three major deposit areas: Peace River, Athabasca, and Cold Lake. It also contains around 10% of the world's oil reserves (Honarvar et al., 2011). It represents vast light and heavy crude oil, crude bitumen, and natural gas. Thus, production has increased steadily in recent years (Natalie, 2019).

The investment and revenue associated with the Alberta oil sands, the world's third-largest oil deposit, has enormously impacted both the provincial and national economy (Alberta Energy, 2017). The large natural resource benefits all Canadians due to the development of oil industries that provides many job opportunities in building, construction, supplies and services. These create significant economic benefits such as jobs, growth, and tax revenues that benefit communities across the country (Context Energy Examined, 2021). According to Statistics Canada, approximately 26% of Alberta's GDP in 2020 came from the mining and oil and gas extraction sector, increasing from 23.3% in 2010.

Consequently, the oil industry is one of Alberta's main economic strengths. Royalty revenues have built infrastructure and services in the province with solid education and health systems. It also contributes to developing Canada's economy (Alberta’s Oil Sands, 2013).

Figure 6: Alberta's Oil Sands Areas

Map Reference: *Alberta's Oil Sands Areas. (2013). A different perspective on Alberta's Oil Patch.* https://canadianmennonite.org/articles/different-perspective-albertas-oil-patch

4.5 Boom and Bust in Fort McMurray

The growth of Fort McMurray is strongly related to the development of the area's natural resources. From fur trading in the early 1800s to significant forestry and oil sand developments, Fort McMurray experienced the typical boom and bust effect exemplified by towns that rely predominantly on resource commodities for their economic viability. It is the core of Canada's oil production and is frequently referred to as a boomtown (Municipal Census Report, 2015). By 1966, the town had more than 2,000 people. Fort McMurray had fast growth once the GCOS began operating in 1967. More oil sand projects were established, particularly following the 1973 and 1979 energy crises, when severe political conflicts in the

Middle East increased oil prices. By 1971, the town had a population of 6,847, and by 1981, the city had grown to 31,000. Fort McMurray's first boom reached its peak in the early 1980s. Since two oilsands plants were operational and oil prices were high (RMWB, 2018). In 1985, the population peaked at around 37,000. By 1989, it had decreased to under 34,000. After the oil price collapse in 1986, low oil prices significantly reduced oil sand production. Oil extraction from the oil sands is costly, and lower world prices made this uneconomical (Alberta Municipal Affairs, 1989). During times of bust, the local economy is acutely felt, which has affected the area with population declines, job losses, and economic recession. At that point, Fort McMurray lost its status as a city. It was reclassified as an urban service area within a specialized municipality in Wood Buffalo.

In the late 1990s, Fort McMurray began to boom again (Alberta Municipal Affairs, 2007). Oil production increased during the 2000s, which benefited Fort McMurray and all of Alberta in terms of economic growth. It also brought up several social issues for the city. In order to meet the city's demand for labour during the boom period, a growing number of people migrated (both permanently and temporarily) from within Canada and abroad due to severe labour shortages in various industries (Statistics Canada, 2013). The rate of oilsands production exceeded Fort McMurray's capacity to meet essential infrastructure needs. By 2007, Fort McMurray had over 65,000 residents, and another 10,000 lived in work camps (RMWB, 2008).

After the 2008 global economic crash, Fort McMurray's growth slowed down. However, the area seemed to be much more prepared than most to withstand the recession as oil prices remained relatively high. By early 2010, several essential oilsands businesses had said that their previously postponed projects would proceed. As a result, there were higher expectations for the future of Fort McMurray's boom. In 2011, oil and gas extraction or related jobs made up about 30% of Wood Buffalo's workforce (Statistics Canada, 2013).

From 2009 to 2013, Fort McMurray had a significant boom based on high oil prices. Many infrastructure projects were implemented in the area to retain a permanent community (MDP, 2011). In the middle of 2014, when oil prices were up, Municipal plans were infused with optimism and confidence in Fort McMurray's development path. On a local level, a downtown redevelopment campaign was supported, resulting in a City Centre Area Redevelopment Plan that included dramatic intensification (CCARP) (WBEA, 2017).

In 2015 after a decline in oil prices, the region experienced a decline in total employment and GDP. As of 2015, Fort McMurray's official census population was 78,382. However, 43,084 shadow population residents also worked in the nearby oilsands industry but did not have a permanent residence in Fort McMurray (Municipal Census Report, 2015). However, given the significant decline in global oil prices, some major infrastructure projects are on hold until municipal funds mainly depend on commercial oil investment. As a result, oil companies were under pressure to reduce costs by cutting investment and workforce. Residential investment was affected by slower migrant flows and decreased demand for new residences. Early in 2016, as oil prices continued to fall, wildfires covered the area, forcing the evacuation of 88,000 residents in May 2016. The wildfire immediately and significantly affected both the local and global economy when several oil sand operations in the region stopped producing.

In June 2016, residents started returning to the area, and damage assessments continued (LUB, 2017). According to the region's first census in Fort McMurray following the devastating 2016 wildfire, the population decreased by about 11% over three years. According to the RMWB's 2021 municipal census, the permanent population of the Fort McMurray urban service area is 72,917 (Municipal Census Report, 2021), a change of 1.2% from its permanent population of 72,056 as reported by the 2018 municipal census. Recently, there have been difficulties for oil and gas producers around the world. However, the

Canadian oil and gas extraction industry nearly recovered in production, employment, and exports after experiencing significant declines in economic activity due to falling oil prices early in the COVID-19 pandemic (IISD, 2021). GDP, employment, and exports for the sector were 95.4%, 95.7%, and 102.5 percent, respectively, higher in April 2021 than in January 2020 (Statistics Canada, 2021).

4.6 Population Growth in Fort McMurray and RMWB

The RMWB is one of the fastest-growing populations in Canada. It saw rapid, intense growth from about 2,500 people in 1960. The population increased in the 1960s and 1970s, leading to planning and infrastructure development (RMWB, 2008). In the 1980s, Fort McMurray became an autonomous town, the oil industry dominated the region's economy, and Fort McMurray became the population and service centre (AOSERP, 1980). However, the town experienced a slow economic downturn in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In 1995 when the RMWB was formed, the population exploded, increasing to 35,213 (Alberta Municipal Affairs, 1996).

Over the past two decades, the Municipality's population saw significant change. The RMWB's population increased from 51,406 in 2000 to 125,032 in 2015, an increase of 143 percent. From 2007 to 2008, the growth rate was at its peak, but from 2008 to 2010, it was at its lowest (Municipal Census Report, 2015). Then it dropped from 125,032 to 111,687 in 2015, the first time in the previous two decades that the Municipality saw a population drop (negative growth). The represented population decreased by 10.67%. The decrease could largely be attributed to the downturn in the region's economy and the 2016 Wildfire. However, people returned to neighbourhoods hit hard by the 2016 Wildfire rebuild efforts; this partially contributed to a 12 percent increase in new housing since 2018 (Municipal Census Report, 2018).

Although the size of the commuter workforce fell during a volatile period for oil, the size of the transient workforce reflected the economic struggles of the oilsands. 2020 began with global oil prices plummeting following an economical price war between Saudi Arabia and Russia. Prices dropped even further when COVID-19 restrictions began in March of that year and shifted throughout the pandemic lockdowns. The 2021 census was completed before global oil prices rallied in early 2021 following a backlog in the global supply chain and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The population of Fort McMurray Wood Buffalo was 106,059 according to the municipal census of 2021, down 5% from the census of 2018 (Municipal Census Report, 2021).

According to the municipal census in 2018, Fort McMurray had a permanent population of 72,056, down from 82,724 in 2015 before the decline in oil prices. In the 2021 census, the Fort McMurray population centre recorded 68,002 residents, a change of 1.3% from its 2016 population of 67,123. Table (1).

Table 1 Federal census population history of Fort McMurray

Year	Pop.	±%
1951	926	—
1956	1,110	+19.9%
1961	1,186	+6.8%
1966	2,614	+120.4%
1971	6,847	+161.9%
1976	15,424	+125.3%
1981	31,000	+101.0%
1986	34,949	+12.7%
1991	34,706	−0.7%
1996	33,078	−4.7%
2001	38,667	+16.9%
2006	47,705	+23.4%
2011	61,374	+28.7%
2016	66,573	+8.5%
2021	68,002	+2.1%

***Source**: Statistics Canada, 2021*

4.7 Brief Evolution Admin Status in Fort McMurray and RMWB

Fort McMurray has contributed significantly to the growth of the national petroleum industry. By merging in 1947, Fort McMurray and Waterways formed the village of McMurray. The following year, the village had renamed the Town of McMurray (the "Fort" was deleted until 1962 when it was restored to represent its heritage) (General Plan, 1972). By 1962, the Town's name (the Town of Fort McMurray). At that time, Fort McMurray's development was driven and funded by the province to develop the oil industry and provide places for employees to live. The Provincial government gave Fort McMurray the 'New Town' status to receive more government funds focused on community building and keeping up with the development. All actors were involved in the development – the province, the local municipality, and the oil companies (influenced by the province). They shared a vision of growing the community of Fort McMurray as a location for the oil sands workers. At the same time, the work camps were established and seen as a temporary activity, and the community was expanded. The Town had more than 2,000 residents by the year 1966. Fort McMurray's growth increased after the GCOS operation opened in 1967. More oil sand plants were launched, especially in 1973 and 1979, when the Middle East had significant tensions and conflicts that increased oil prices.

However, Fort McMurray was in trouble for several years in the planning and administration. Then, the Provincial government shifted Fort McMurray to become a city with a community on September 1, 1980, assuming more power and responsibilities of the city. Thus, all actors aimed to make Fort McMurray an attractive place for everyone to work and live, building a community with infrastructure, services and utilities (General Plan, 1980). However, more people arrived at Fort McMurray, which put more pressure on the local government; an economic recession happened in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In the meantime, we see a clear shift in the discourses and thinking in the 1980s, with actual policy

shifts in the 1990s and uncertainty hanged over Fort McMurray in the fall of 1992 when hundreds of workers lost their jobs. At that point, Fort McMurray lost its status as a city.

On April 1, 1994, the status in Fort McMurray was shafted to the new Municipality of Wood Buffalo. On April 1, 1995, the Government of Alberta amalgamated the City of Fort McMurray and Improvement District No. 143 through an Order in Council to form the specialized municipality – Municipality of Wood Buffalo. Section 1(c) of the Order in Council 817/94 defines Fort McMurray Urban Service Area. On August 14, 1996, the new municipality was called the RMWB. Officially, Fort McMurray was no longer a city. Instead, it was established as an urban service area within a specialized municipality.

After the creation of the RMWB, the plans were made at a regional scale, not for Fort McMurray; oil sands areas and Fort McMurray were involved within the RMWB. This has also created more dependency for Fort McMurray on the oil sands governed by the province. However, the province has controlled the land in Fort McMurray, which put pressure on the community. As a result of the amalgamation, one government now controlled the whole RMWB. Its municipal office is located in Fort McMurray (RMWB, 2010).

It is very clear that there is a shift away from supporting the growth of a large community to the 'growth' of work camps. The camps grew while the autonomy and power of Fort McMurray shrank. Provincial investment in the area was also limited, focusing on particular resource projects in the short term.

Chapter 5 Background Document Review

The Province of Alberta and the RMWB have experienced rapid and significant structural changes. The Municipality, located in the centre of the Alberta Oil Sands, has grown rapidly in the period since 2000. In this section, I take a non-critical approach to summarizing a set of plans, documents, strategies, and reports focusing on planning and development in Fort McMurray. In the discussions section, I dive deeper into a more critical discussion of the key themes emerging through an analysis of the plans. I summarize these in two distinct phases, as follows:

5.1 Phase 1: Community Building (1964-1995)

Fort McMurray has gone through multiple cycles of economic booms and busts over the years. During this period, the development of oil in the region led to a significant increase in population. To manage this growth and address the challenge, various formal documents such as the New Town of Fort McMurray, Engineering Study of Utility Systems (1968), New Town of Fort McMurray General Plan (1972), Revised General Plan for the New Town of Fort MacMurray (1974), Revised General Plan (1974), General Municipal Plan of the City of Fort McMurray (1980), Order in Council 817/94, Fort McMurray as an urban service area (1995), and Order in Council 354/96 were created at the local level. These documents

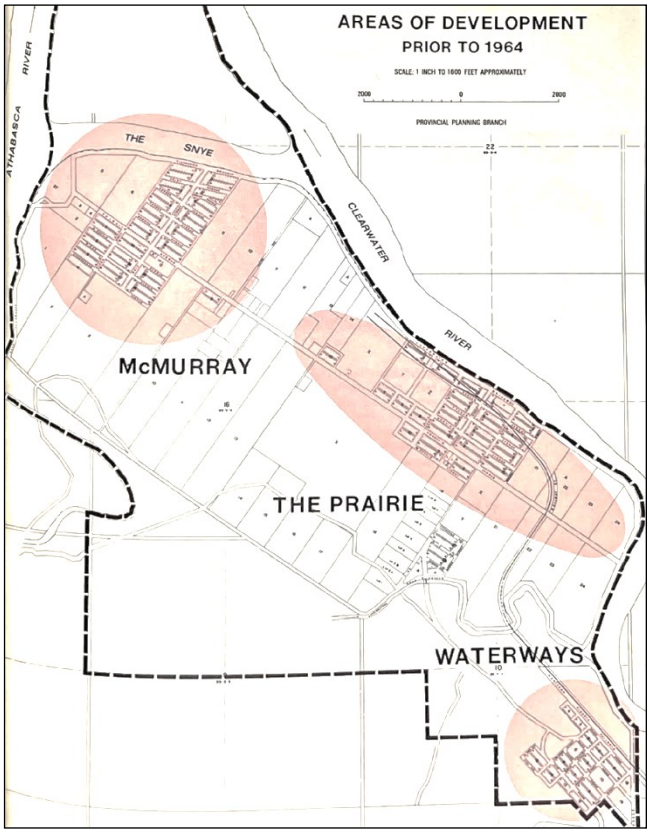

Figure 7: Area of Development Prior to 1964
Map Reference: *General Plan, (1972). New Town of Fort McMurray. Provincial Planning Branch. Department of Municipal Affairs January 1972.*

mainly focused on issues related to the oil sand industry and its development, which caused an increased demand for local and social services and put pressure on the government. Despite these challenges, all actors were committed to building a strong community in Fort McMurray that would be attractive to everyone to work and live. The population increased from 1,200 in 1960 to 6,000 in 1970, and new subdivisions and municipal services were established. However, during 1963 and the preceding years, residential and commercial development in the Town of Fort McMurray was very slow.

In 1964, Alberta placed McMurray under special status; thus, the settlements of Fort McMurray, the Prairies, and the Waterways joined together to form the New Town of Fort McMurray (Figure 7). The powers of the locally elected council were significantly reduced; a seven-man Board of Administrators governed it. The Town had many employees, including a town manager, a secretary-treasurer, an inspection officer, a recreation director, and a preventive social service director. With the new status, the New Town could get more provincial funding in anticipation of a period of rapid expansion associated with developing a Tar Sands plant by GCOS Ltd (RMWB, 2008). Meanwhile, the Board of Administrators of the New Town of Fort McMurray had approved many development projects and residential development by Fort McMurray Land Development Company. These developments created a need for immediate design and construction of extensions to the utilities and service systems. In 1965, construction of the Snye Dike was started to mitigate flooding due to ice jamming on the Athabasca (Engineering Study of Utility Systems, 1974).

The General Engineering Report was submitted to the Town in August of 1968 to provide a brief account of the history of utilities and services in the Town of Fort McMurray. The water and sewer service for the Town of Fort McMurray was addressed in the report, leading to the establishment of a system for them in the area. The Provincial Planning Branch at that time projected population growth to about 5,500 (from an existing 1,200) by 1968.

During this period, all surface drainage in the Town was carried in open ditches and culverts to the Clearwater River. In investigating the feasibility of new town status for the Town of Fort McMurray, the Provincial Planning Board retained to study the problem of flooding in the Town.

Development planning within the Town of Fort McMurray was outlined in the future land use plan proposed by the Provincial Planning Branch and the long-range plan for waterworks, sanitary sewerage, surface drainage, and road and street systems contained in the General Engineering Report. The road and street system underwent substantial change and improvement in McMurray and Waterways from 1965 to 1969. The General Engineering Report identified main thoroughfares, collector streets, and minor roads. Some of the main thoroughfares were paved during this period, substantial residential and commercial development occurred, and the waterworks and sewerage facilities were severely strained to provide adequate service. Thus, the Provincial Planning Branch estimated that a total population of approximately 9,600 people could be accommodated in the Lower Townsite, considering some increased density of development in the central area. As a result, modifications and expansion to the sanitary sewerage system were constructed. From 1969 to 1974, there has continued growth which necessitated the expansion of significant components of the systems, such as the water treatment plant, the water storage facilities, the primary water distribution system, and some trunk sewers. Some of these facilities were expanded to the maximum capacity for which they were designed (Engineering Study of Utility Systems, 1974).

Consequently, the provincial government, along with the Board of Administrators of the New Town of Fort McMurray, maintained the development of the local utilities and services to meet the growth needs. Accordingly, the participants in governments and decision-makers maintained the government evaluation considering the engineering and

economic feasibility. They developed some reports with long-range programs that aim to provide services and infrastructure that keep pace with the region's economic development and population growth.

Rapid growth continued in the region due to the much-increased mineral development. The New Town of Fort McMurray General Plan was developed. This plan was intended to cover the period from 1970 to 1980. The prime object of this General Plan was to examine the form of development within the New Town of Fort McMurray. The preparation of this plan has been divided into a two-stage project. The initial stage was a compilation of all available data considered relevant in the New Town development, both past and present. The second stage, the proposals, evolved through the previous evaluation and projections for the future, together with the suggestions of the Board of Administrators. However, Implementation must be undertaken by the local people and their representatives, the Board of Administrators. Figure 8 illustrates the proposed future land development pattern (General Plan, 1972).

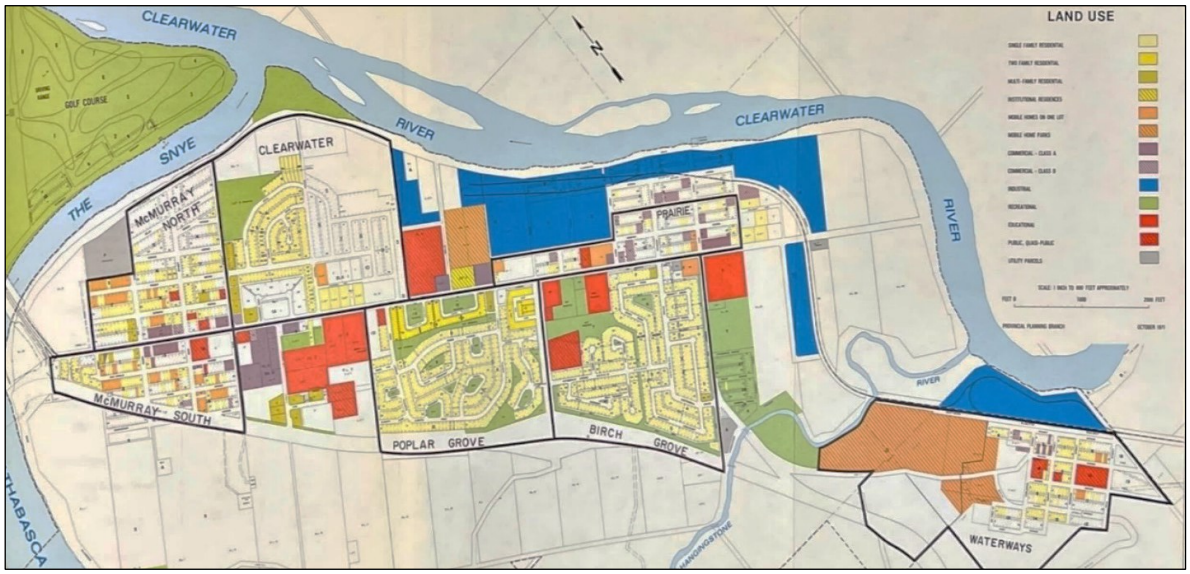

Figure 8: Land Use

Map Reference: *General Plan, (1972). New Town of Fort McMurray. Provincial Planning Branch. Department of Municipal Affairs January 1972.*

A General Plan was developed based on studies and surveys of land use, population growth, the municipality's economic foundation, the demand for transportation, local and social services, and other elements relevant to establishing a general plan. Thus, the Town must achieve several growth objectives to support the anticipated population and distribution economically and conveniently and accommodate 9,000 to 10,000 people in the immediate urban area and 5,000 people in the new expansion area. New subdivisions must also be safe, attractive, and healthy places to live or work. The population projection, which was assumed to be reasonably accurate, would influence the validity of much of the policy. The future land use plan (Figure 9) disclosed the final implications of that policy. Control of the plan became an administrative task by passing a zoning by-law.

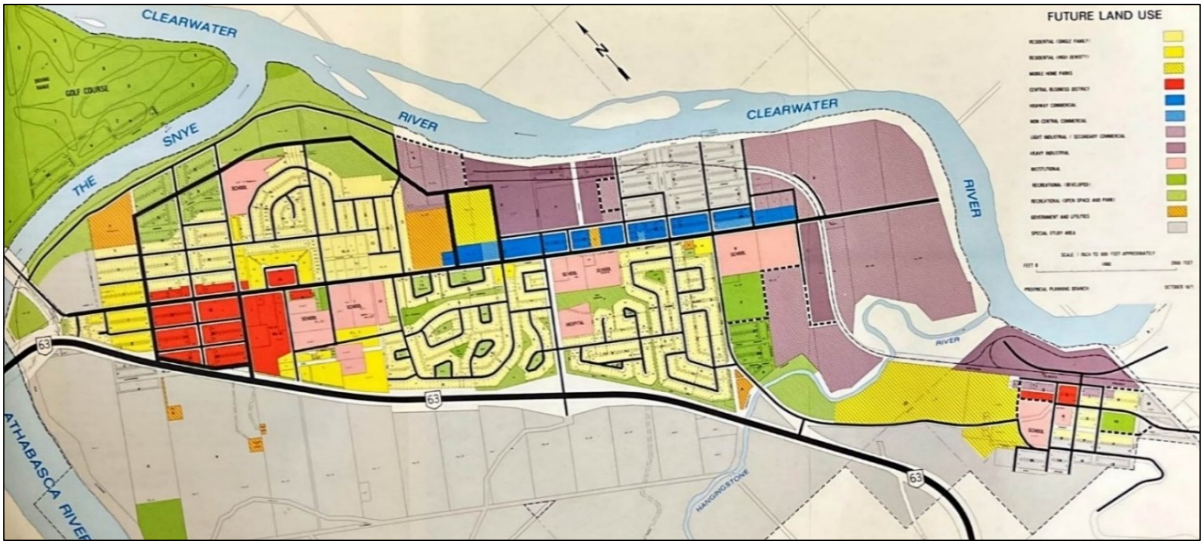

Figure 9: Future Land Use

Map Reference: *General Plan, (1972). New Town of Fort McMurray. Provincial Planning Branch. Department of Municipal Affairs January 1972.*

In July 1973, the Board of Administrators passed a resolution to appoint planning consultants to review the General Plan to make recommendations on any amendments that should, in their opinion, be made to this plan. However, in 1974, the Government of Alberta appointed a provincial overseer to keep an eye on McMurray’s fiscal management due to concerns they had about debt and mismanagement by the municipal government, and a town

planning team reporting to the Provincial government was installed at the New Town Office (The History of Fort McMurray, 2000).

The plan focused on the expected growth and development of the city to plan for basic requirements such as housing, education, marketing, and recreation to create a lively environment and make Fort McMurray an attractive place to work and live by integrating the natural landscape and vegetation into neighbourhood planning and developing a coherent structure that helped to create a community identity. They also established the format to provide a direction for the orderly and economic development of the Town (Revised General Plan, 1974). The proposed structure plan for the New Town of Fort McMurray established a land use and transportation framework for various public policy choices. Actual development within this range would be determined mainly by the resultant decisions and the effectiveness of their implementation. This framework informed public and private decisions as a basis for detailed planning and development. Action area planning provided the basis for comprehensive planning (Figure 10).

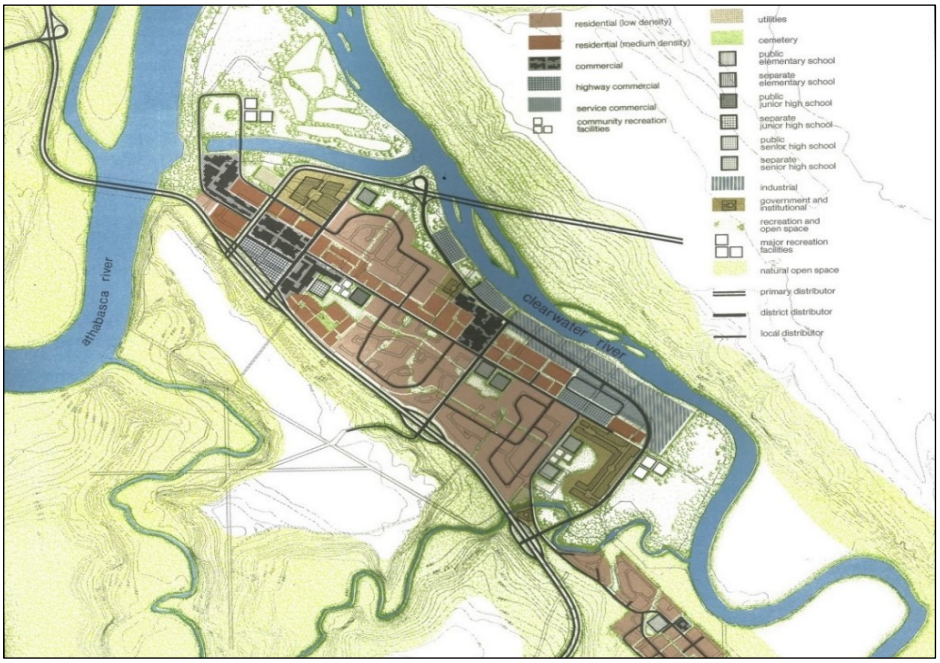

Figure 10: Proposed Structure Plan

Map Reference: *Revised General Plan, (1974). New Town of Fort McMurray. Provincial Planning Branch. Department of Municipal Affairs January 1972.*

According to the Revised General Plan (1974), the Town and Province could influence the direction of planning through land assembly, land exchange, or the taxation system. They also could initiate and stimulate development through their independent program or participation with private enterprises. The New Town Act provided additional powers to the Board of Administrators related to land acquisition and development schemes, whereby they could initiate development action and condition proposed development. The continued growth and construction of the oil industry led to the influx of large populations into the region. The rapid development necessitated a corresponding expansion in urban infrastructure and services. Not surprisingly, the municipality had difficulty providing the infrastructure and local social service needs, which put the municipality under pressure resulting in a relatively weak financial position. In addition, uncertainty occurred in resource communities regarding future development in planning, such as the size and growth rate of Fort McMurray. Specific proposals were firm in outlines, such as the new annexation boundaries and the concept of significant growth areas lying to the north and across the Clearwater River. This was done to give a sense of certainty and positive direction to the overall General Municipal Plan. The General Municipal Plan was prepared through public meetings, questionnaires, etc.; the proposed oil sand developments should result in Fort McMurray reaching the 45,000 population in 1986 (General Municipal Plan, 1980).

A significant task regarding the future development of Fort McMurray was identifying sufficient land suitable for housing, commerce industry, schools, and recreation. A vast wilderness surrounds Fort McMurray, but little land was suitable for development. Some low-lying areas were susceptible to flooding, while many slopes were unstable, and others were characterized by poor drainage and soils. Municipal Plan sought to respond to the economic and social needs to achieve a more stable population and permit a stable growth rate, which would not place negative pressure on the community. It aimed to ensure that

municipal servicing standards were safe, economical, and reliable by reviewing them every two years, incorporating new techniques, and identifying sufficient land suitable for housing, commerce industry, schools, and recreation.

According to the General Municipal Plan (1980), the status of Fort McMurray as a single-industry city with the potential for boom or bust could be stabilized by the development of secondary industries. With the increasing number of proposed oil sand projects within the Fort McMurray area, it could develop a much broader economic base, become a regional centre, and ensure that commercial and service facilities are adequate to serve the needs of Fort McMurray and the area. The City of Fort McMurray shall limit debt service levels and control expenditures, plan financial activities on an ongoing basis for a long-term period consistently and logically and actively solicit senior governments' financial and other entities' financial involvement. Therefore, the governance path uniquely impacted the municipality's overall plan, policies, and plans for the growth of Fort McMurray as needed to address population and industry growth and review reports and planned for more population stability and growth in the area.

As a result, I found that the General Plan was developed to stimulate the growth and rapid oil development of Fort McMurray, which was quickly expanded to accommodate the massive numbers of oil sands workers and service people who relocated there during the oil sands development. The magnitude of the resource projects necessitated a tremendous mobilization of employees in the oil sand operations and construction workforce from beyond the immediate region; the necessary and attendant urban and regional infrastructure development further compounded those requirements. Therefore, the General Plan defined the objectives upon which it was based and sought to address the physical, social, and economic needs of Fort McMurray.

It pursued several principal goals, aiming at strengthening Fort McMurray as the regional centre for the oil sands, diversifying employment opportunities, attracting investment to the Town, and increasing local benefits from the total economic activity of the area. The General Plan provided a land use and transportation framework which structured the future development of the New Town of Fort McMurray within the ten-year plan period. Based on the General Plan, the end of the planning period would bring major changes in the Town's physical structure. Therefore, the developing portion of the Town would require additional land and services for the expansion. To accommodate these changes, the Town must provide more roads, public services, and utilities. Following a controlled long-range plan in the continuous process would minimize many problems associated with new development. Dependencies in this plan shaped the development decisions and the governance path of the growth of oil sand operations that dominate the regional economy and constitute the only significant industry in the area. These shaped the visions of the future and influenced present-day decisions. Consequently, Fort McMurray would maintain its position as a regional industrial town.

On September 1, 1980, the New Town of Fort McMurray became a city, assuming the powers and responsibilities of a city. Thousands of new residents arrived worldwide due to the oil development. Many came only with hope and ambition (David & Jones, 2013). In 1986, oil prices dropped significantly. The low oil prices significantly reduced oil sand production due to the high cost of extracting oil which became uneconomical. Suncor company officials were weighing their options, and closure of the plant seemed imminent (Alberta Municipal Affairs, 1989). As a result, rapid growth in the city turned to degrowth, crippling the industry. After peaking at almost 37,000 in 1985, the population declined to fewer than 34,000 residents by 1989, as mining operations were scaled back, and workers lured to the area by the promise of jobs in the oil patch were laid off. However, land use

planning was marked by the reduction in planning staff in municipal, regional, and provincial planning offices due to reduced municipal budgets, the completion of plans and bylaws, and a much-reduced rate of urbanization. The Town's financial situation showed signs of stabilizing, with the population growth slowing and the significant infrastructure capacity in place. The community's financial integrity was preserved, accomplished in an atmosphere of uncertainty regarding what fiscal policies might be pursued and through customized measures and short-term solutions (Alberta Municipal Affairs, 1984).

Uncertainty hung over Fort McMurray in the fall of 1992, as one of the region's biggest employers had laid off hundreds of workers. At that point, Fort McMurray lost its status as a city by an order of the province. It was re-classified as an urban service area within a specialized municipality in Wood Buffalo (Alberta Municipal Affairs, 2007).

The first mayor of the RMWB, Boutilier, said there were periodic meetings between the stakeholders, many players, and more corporate owners to change the situation in the area (Florence, 1995). Community members came together and said, "How can we do better?" They thought if they were creating Fort McMurray all over again, what would they do? They said, "We do not need three or four local governments. We could do it with one." There was agreement. Thus, they came together. The change meant a larger municipality, more residents, and less bureaucracy (Cornwall, 2012). Taxes should eventually decrease because of savings from the end of duplicated services, Boutilier said. With that, "there was the hope that many areas would see improved services. Therefore, it was easy to see why anyone from Fort McMurray would like this amalgamation. The merger meant Fort McMurray would see more of the millions of taxes Suncor and Syncrude pay. At the same time, the city provided schooling and other services to 99 percent of the workforce of Syncrude and Suncor, Boutilier said. However, those oil-sands plants lie inside the improvement district- so that was where they paid property taxes. As a result, Boutilier said the new municipality would

retain almost $1 million per year of industrial property tax that flowed into that area (Florence, 1995). On April 1, 1994, Fort McMurray amalgamated with Improvement District (I.D.) No. 18, Central and North, to create the new Municipality of Wood Buffalo. It was Alberta's first regional government, with a domain of 67,164 square km. It would replace existing municipal governments rather than adding extra governance and administration (Ron, 1995). The new government was the first of its kind in Canada because it was not multi-layered, Boutilier said. They wanted fewer politicians and a more economical region. The City of Fort McMurray and Improvement District No. 143 merged on April 1, 1995, to create the Municipality of Wood Buffalo. The amalgamation resulted in the entire RMWB under a single government. Its municipal office has located in Fort McMurray, which accounts for most of the Regional Municipality's population (Alberta Municipal Affairs, 2010).

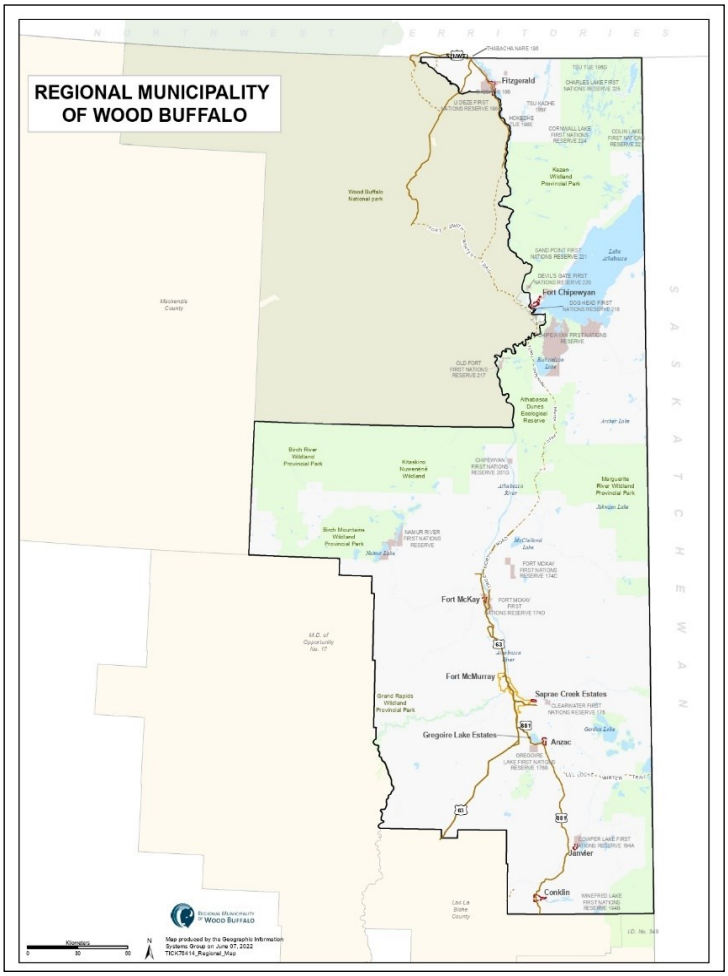

Figure 11: RMWB

Map Reference: *(RMWB, 2018)*

Fort McMurray - Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (rmwb.ca)

Map Reference: *GISG. (2020). Geographic Information Systems Group. June 07, 2022. TICK76414_Regional_Map* https://www.rmwb.ca/en/permits-and-development/resources/GIS/rmwb-regional-map.pdf

5.2 Phase 2: Fort McMurray Acts as an Urban Service Area

Fort McMurray continued to expand even after being designated as an urban service area on April 1, 1995. However, in August 1996, it was renamed the RMWB and lost its status as a city. It has become an urban service area within a specialized municipality (Alberta Municipal Affairs, 2010). During this period, the local government developed several documents, such as Fort McMurray Subregional Integrated Resource Plan (1996), Regional Sustainable Development Strategy for Athabasca Oil Sand (1999), Investing in our Future: Responding to the Rapid Growth of Oil Sands Development (2006), The Lower Athabasca Regional Plan, The Comprehensive Regional Infrastructure Sustainability Plan (2011), Municipal Development Plan - Bylaw No. 11/027, Urban Development Sub-Region (2011), City Centre Area Redevelopment Plan (2012), Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo Commercial and Industrial Land Use Study, Wildfire Recovery Plan (2017), Budget and Financial Plan (2017), RMWB Strategic Plan, Fiscal Management Strategy, Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, Regional Emergency Management Plan (2022), and RMWB Council's Strategic Plan. These documents highlight a change in focus toward deeper understanding and integration of concerns, as well as the need for a more strategic framework for managing and planning the growth of the oil industry.

However, after the economic downturn in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Fort McMurray's population increased again to 47,705 due to the growing demand for oil from high global oil prices. Due to the growing pressure on transportation, housing, and services, Fort McMurray lacked the land to keep pace with residential developments. Therefore, in

May 1996, the planning document (Subregional Integrated Resource Plan) for improving land and resource management was approved. It also provided policy guidance and government direction for reviewing and evaluating upcoming steps taken by provincial government agencies and the private sector. This plan aimed to resolve issues and conflicts involving resources and public land by incorporating goals, offering guiding principles, and providing a framework for agencies to develop and carry out their programs. It enhanced relations between the public and the government, promoted all parts of resource and land management in the planning domain, and provided information for the public, government agencies and industry on the goals and actions of managing lands and public resources in the planning area. The Fort McMurray General Municipal Plan governed land development within Fort McMurray, and other plans and bylaws were managed under the Municipal Government Act. The plan would be implemented within appropriate legislation, regular programs and government activities, and an evaluation of applications for land use projects on public lands (Protection, 1996). According to this plan, participating government agencies had many responsibilities to ensure the effective implementation of this plan. They would address any issues relating to the application or implementation of any Plan provisions. Thus, urban development would be concentrated in existing communities, emphasizing the urban service area of Fort McMurray. Municipal services would be more in demand to support business and industrial activities that required accessibility.

In July 1999, the Regional Sustainable Development Strategy (RSDS) was released, which was a framework for managing cumulative environmental effects to ensure sustainable development as a result of the phenomenal economic growth and significant environmental impacts. It was a comprehensive stakeholder management strategy for controlling the economic and environmental consequences of Fort McMurray-Athabasca Oil Sands (RSDS, 1999). In September 1998, based on the potential return on investment for the oil sands

development, RSDS established a framework for Supporting the region's continued economic growth while ensuring resource sustainability, involving regional stakeholders in collaborative environmental stewardship, and creating an enhanced environmental management system that adapted to the region's needs (RSDS, 1999). Consequently, this strategy provided a framework for balancing development and environmental protection to sustain, support and enhance the area's natural resources, manage the economy and resources, and protect the environment. It outlined a path forward to manage economic and environmental effects to ensure sustainable development and build a region and communities on sustainability principles.

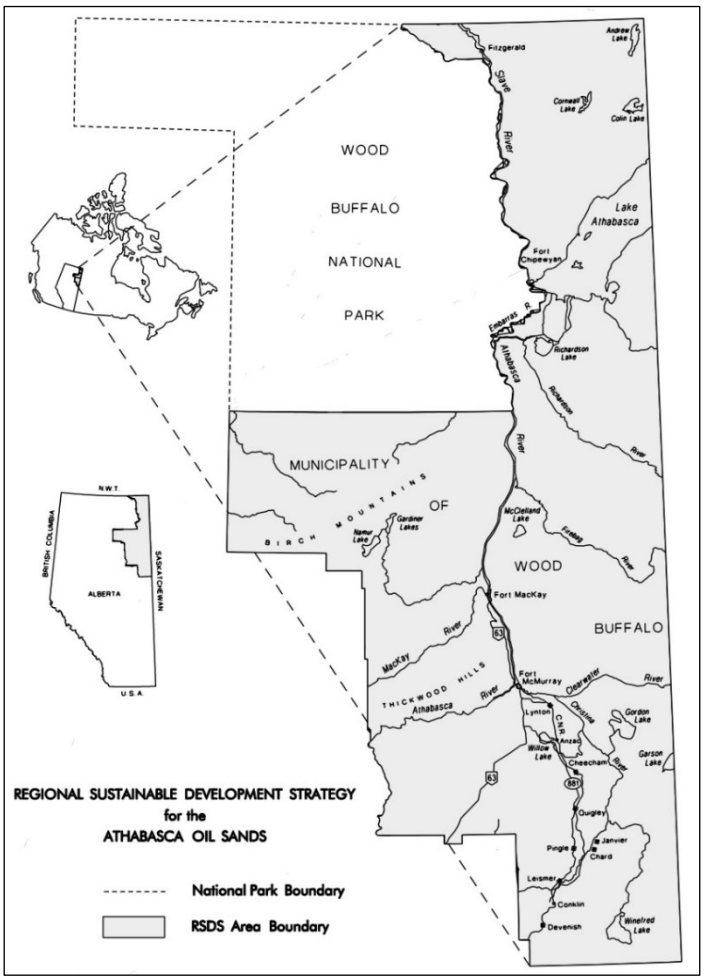

Figure 12: RSDS for Athabasca Oil Sand

Map Reference: *RSDS. (1999). Land and Forest Service. Northeast Boreal Region. Alberta Environment, Canada.*

Since 2000, Fort McMurray has experienced rapid growth in the oil sand industry growth and economic activity. In December 2006, a report was established in response to the rapid growth of oil sands development (Investing in our Future: Responding to the Rapid Growth of Oil Sands Development). It was a coordinated short-term action plan to deal with the economic, social, and environmental consequences of oil sands projects that were developed by the Oil Sands Ministerial Strategy Committee under the direction of the Cabinet to deal with the difficulties resulting from the rapid pace of oil sands development and to anticipate the effects of continued growth. The report analysed the infrastructure and services needed regardless of the rate of development. It offered a strong database regarding the effects of oil sand developments and predictions for the following five years within a longer-term framework. It recognized the gaps in infrastructure and services, such as housing, transportation, basic municipal facilities, health care, education, social services, police, and the environment. It also drew a path of addressing the challenges surrounding oil sand developments and their impact on communities and the area (Investing in our future, 2006).

Oil sands and related activities are major economic drivers in the area, and predictions showed that this would remain the case for the foreseeable future. The rate of investment in oil sands had increased significantly since the mid-1990s, with relatively high oil prices, and it was anticipated that significant investment would likely continue for the upcoming years. Thus, there was no doubt about the financial gains for the provincial government and the ongoing contribution to the region's development. However, the rapid growth put pressure on the area's local and social pressures and infrastructure. There were concerns regarding the impact of oil sand developments on the environment and the shortage of skilled workers to meet the needs of the industries. This report stated that while conventional oil and gas production was declining, there was an expected decline in oil

prices. However, oil sand development was expected to continue rapidly in the next five years and beyond. Oil prices were expected to stay sufficiently high over the medium term to sustain the expected growth and attract and maintain oil sands investment. By 2011, oil sands were expected to account for 80 percent of total production. Due to the continuous significant increase in oil sand development, Fort McMurray's population was predicted to grow over the following years. This pace of growth would be significantly higher than that of other municipalities in the province by 2011 (Investing in our future, 2006).

The development of Alberta's oil sand resources may be strongly related to the region's future prosperity; investment in oil sand development was essential to the region's sustained prosperity. Although the industrial area would develop more quickly than anticipated, a significant rise in the local labour force would be anticipated as upgrader projects pick up over the following five to seven years. Therefore, the surrounding area was anticipated to provide all or most of this labour force requirement. However, the government should prioritize building the necessary infrastructure, especially concerning utilities and transportation, as there was an obvious need for more thorough planning for the area.

In 2008 and 2009, population and economic growth began to slow due to the global economic collapse. Many proposed oil sand operations were suspended or abandoned at this time, but the majority of existing oilsands activities continued unabated. However, the area was in a much better position than most in weathering the recession. The recession dampened expectations for Fort McMurray's growth to continue. While the recession gave city planners some breathing space, they faced challenges in gathering accurate census data, predicting population increase, providing affordable housing, and balancing short-term planning with long-term objectives. However, by the early 2010s, several postponed infrastructure projects to retain a permanent community were proceeding, and Fort McMurray was experiencing a significant boom based on high oil prices (Keough, 2015).

Therefore, in 2011, the RMWB launched the public consultation phase of the Municipal Development Plan (MDP), a twenty-year guidance document approved on October 25, 2011, and would be in place until 2030. It presented a strategic path forward for managing regional expansion. It did not explicitly mention infrastructure spending or capital projects. Instead, it served as a guide for both short- and long-term decision-making in the municipality to make it a global model for sustainable living. The MDP was an essential strategy for the CCARP, which would be the perfect location and a regional centre for business and institutional growth. It would also serve as a centre for culture, entertainment, and the arts as a vibrant urban centre with the highest densities within the urban area due to redevelopment and intensification opportunities, which would become the core of Fort McMurray and a landmark of the Wood Buffalo identity. It highlighted essential strategies for the urban area included in this plan to improve and enhance established communities to make them more liveable and complete and promote the integration of urban transportation networks. It was stated to create a green network that was accessible and interconnected and promoted the construction of leisure areas. Furthermore, MDP could promote the region's diversity, First Nations and Métis culture, public areas, infrastructure and cultural. By collaborating with the local government and the stakeholders in the area, they could achieve planned service delivery, beneficial partnerships, and effective communication that contribute to a more sustainable future for all (MDP, 2011).

The MDP identified diversification of the local economy as an essential objective. However, dependence on a single industry made the local economy vulnerable to possible changes in market demand, which may impact the industry and the region over time. Thus, the growth in other aspects of the local economy was not matched with the oil sand industry's rapid growth rate. The MDP further identified the promotion of commercial and retail development, local small business opportunities, and tourism, as well as supporting the

development of local manufacturing and other secondary industries as priorities toward economic diversification. This direction was reinforced in the Municipality's Strategic Plan, where several key priority actions were outlined to encourage increased economic development, attraction, and retention of business activity in Wood Buffalo. The MDP stated that the RMWB would contribute to making short and long-term decisions and encourage the reduction of waste and energy use, in addition to global efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and create a more resilient economy by encouraging a diversified economy and supporting local business, education, innovation and culture. This would create an attractive appearance and liveable communities that provided a better quality of life, promoted a sense of home and community, and attracted people to the area who would stay there for the long term.

According to MDP (2011), the rapid population growth of the past was expected to continue into the foreseeable future. By 2030, the regional population was projected to exceed 230,000, driven by oil sand production. In the documents, it was argued that the province must provide sufficient land to the municipality to accommodate that explosive population growth and lands for commercial and industrial development. While cautiously phrased, the document indicated frustration with the reluctance of the province to free new land for development.

Consequently, the oil sand growth increased the region's economy. However, the boom in a single industry would stress the service and market locally and globally, which may influence the economic sector. Therefore, the overall strategy of the region was to seek to diversify the industry, promote local businesses in the area, and encourage a culture of innovation, education, and training to build a more resilient economy. The municipality must also be allowed for responsible development and ensure the availability of developable land to attract investment, accommodate population growth, and achieve economic success. Thus,

the municipality and stakeholders could effectively deliver services and communicate with one another to create a more sustainable future for everybody.

The Alberta Government and Mayor Melissa Blake of the RMWB signed a Memorandum of Urban Development Sub-Region (UDSR) on August 29, 2011. The UDSR would be a county-wide defined area of crown land surrounding the urban service area of Fort McMurray, where future urban development would be the primary planned land use. It was created to support the rapid growth of Fort McMurray, whose rising demand for residential, commercial, industrial, and institutional land, and facilitate the transition of designated territories from crown lands to appropriate ownership. It provided the Government of Alberta, the RMWB, and provincial stakeholders with long-term community planning and investment in provincial and municipal infrastructure. Consultations would be conducted with First Nations, energy and forestry companies and associations, and other regional stakeholders to address potential impacts and concerns (UDSR, 2011). Therefore, the rapid growth of Fort McMurray was the driving force behind the creation of UDSR. According to the MDP 2011, regional economic growth generated an increasing need for residential, commercial, industrial, and institutional land.

Also, in 2011, the Alberta government issued the Comprehensive Regional Infrastructure Sustainability Plan (CRISP). It covered a period up to 2045. Over such a long-time horizon, there may be several unanticipated developments. It was a long-term strategic infrastructure plan to accommodate population growth in local settlements and labour camp communities as oil sand production increased in the Athabasca Oil Sands Area (AOSA). The CRISP strongly emphasized community development and identified infrastructure requirements for transportation, water and wastewater service, education, and healthcare. Accordingly, CRISP could adapt to new situations. It was discussed and developed through consultation with key stakeholders, such as municipalities, industry, community groups, First

Nations, Métis, and the public throughout the Athabasca Oil Sands Area. It intended to inform decision-makers and stakeholders about possible future investment needs for the region's sustainable production growth. The CRISP proposed a staged approach to infrastructure development, with each stage related to oil production levels and linked population growth. In order to estimate oil sand production levels, it examined project start and completion dates and estimated population growth using oil industry information (CRISP, 2011).

It is clear that oil sands remain a significant economic driver, and population increase was linked with the labour demands of oil sand operations. Thus, reliable, and effective infrastructure was a strategic investment necessary for the province's future development. Therefore, CRISP, along with other essential information, would assist government and regulatory bodies with oil sands decision-making in ensuring that the plan preserved a high quality of life and sustainable communities within the area. The successful development and financing of CRISP would require extensive coordination across departments and between all levels of government and industry. Coordination would entail looking at other financial options, partnerships, and essential aspects of project delivery. As a result, it was possible to predict changes influencing the infrastructure requirements and have enough time to prepare for and respond to them.

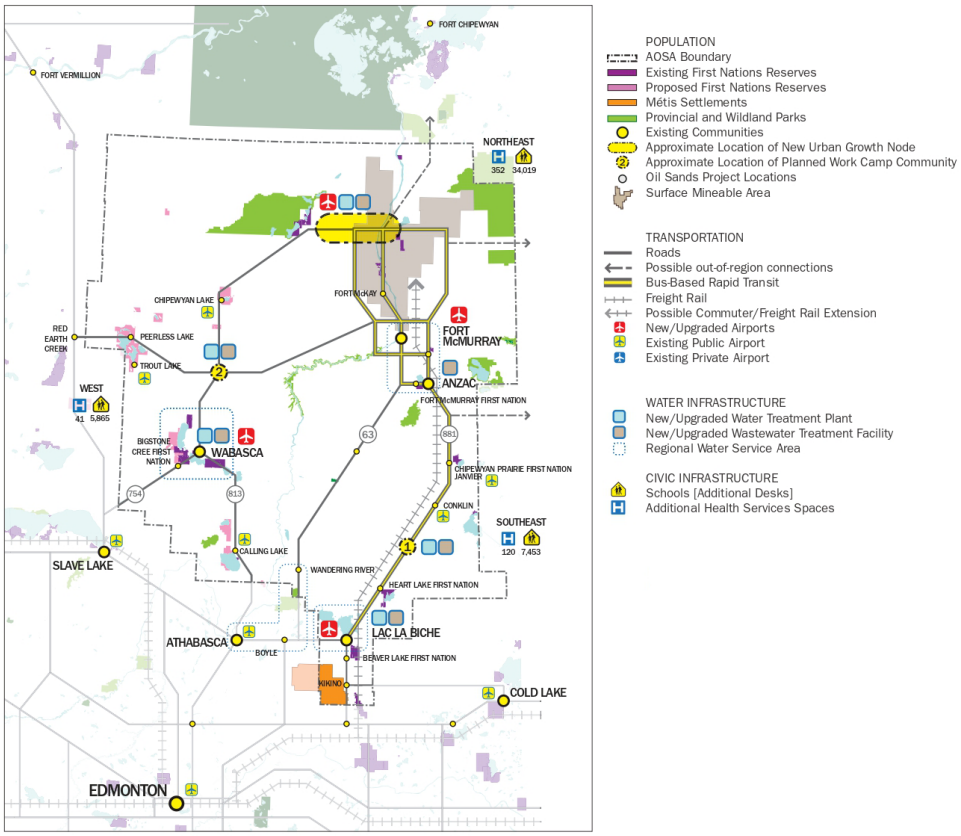

Figure 13: The Comprehensive Regional Infrastructure Sustainability Plan for the Athabasca Oil Sands Area

Map Reference: *Hovland, K., & Heyman, K. (2011). Comprehensive Regional Infrastructure Sustainability Planning. Policy, 780, 4094.*

In February 2012, the CCARP was developed to provide initiatives to attract investment and promote economic growth in the City Centre. It supported the culture and recreational activities and encouraged sustainable growth. The Plan offered a framework for regulation that was adaptable to change as the City Centre develops in the next twenty years. Every five years, the Plan would be reviewed to ensure that the vision, objectives, and policies effectively support the City Centre's needs and maintain its applicability. The Municipality would use this Plan and the Land Use Bylaw to direct and control development in the City Centre. The CCARP would serve as the framework for developing and planning infrastructure, community facilities, and services or improving current coordination with private development. It acknowledged the key element that City Centre may play in accommodating current expansion, given improvements to updated district maps and growth

projections for Fort McMurray and the surrounding area. The boundaries of the City Centre were extended to include Waterways, a community with a significant historical impact on the growth of Fort McMurray (CCARP, 2012). Therefore, the region experienced tremendous growth in the oil production sector, and this growth was expected to continue. The rapid expansion of the oil production sector created corresponding economic and population growth in the region. Therefore, the CCARP aimed to position Fort McMurray's City Centre as the focal point of the region and created an attractive and sustainable centre through good planning and design.

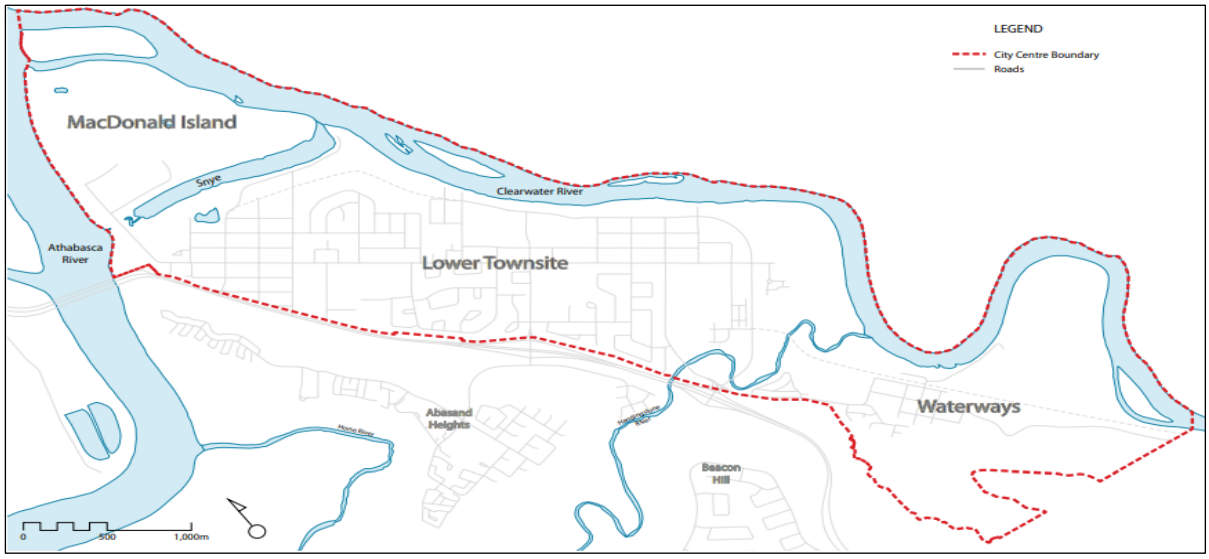

Figure 14: City Centre Area Redevelopment Plan Boundary

Map Reference: *CCARP. (2012). RMWB – Bylaw No. 12/003.*

Figure 15: City Centre Area

Reference: *CCARP. (2012). RMWB – Bylaw No. 12/003.*

Moreover, the Lower Athabasca Regional Plan (LARP) was established, which was the first regional plan to be designed and implemented that took effect in September 2012. It outlined the 10-year vision for the region, including a strategic plan, implementation plan and regulatory details, concentrating on environmental, economic, and social actions. This demonstrated a persistent commitment to including people in the region, especially indigenous peoples, in land use planning and guided provincial and local decision-makers regarding land-use management for the region. It also focused on achieving results, collaborative work with responsibility, and better integrating economic, environmental, and social factors. The Lower Athabasca region had significant population growth due to significant investment. The ability to attract and keep skilled workers in multiple fields would be important for the region's economy to grow and diversify. This requires increased pressure on the region's social and local infrastructure, service, commercial and recreation opportunities. Fort McMurray's capacity to adapt to the impacts of population growth due to oil sands development highly depended on the certainty surrounding the availability of land for future urban development (LARP, 2012).

Consequently, the government decided to allow the provincial crown land to be transformed into private land sold for development to expand the area and address growth. Alberta was moving toward a management system that was more efficient and productive through regional planning and other activities. However, this system should be flexible enough to respond to local opportunities and issues while enabling decision-makers to view the big picture and keep pace with the development in the area.

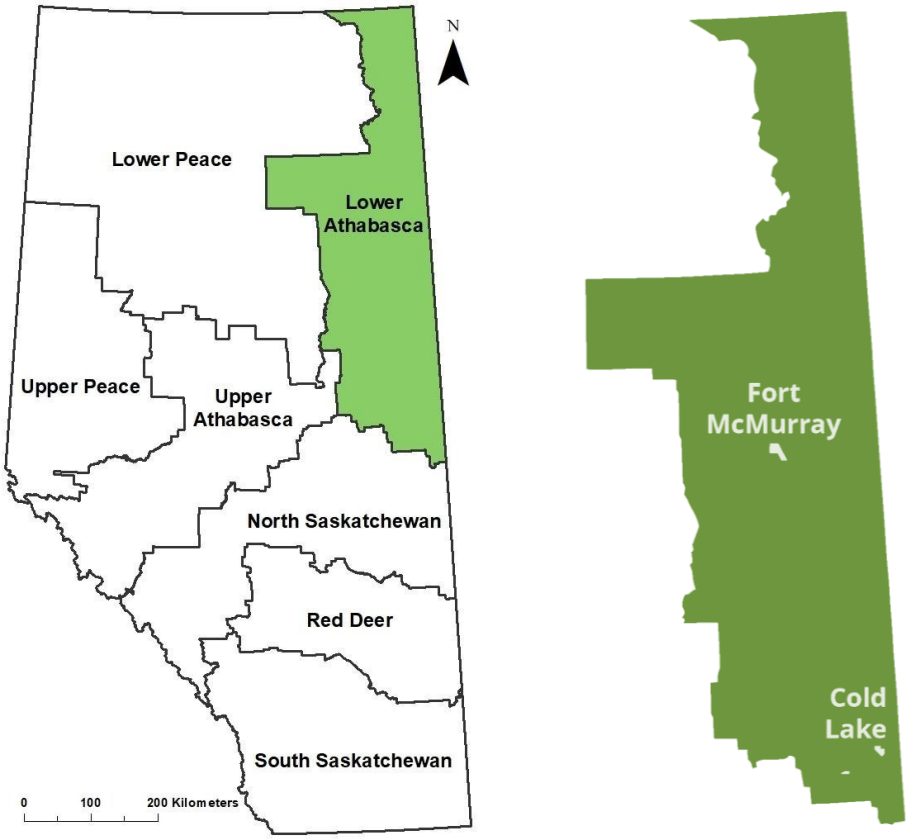

Figure 16: Lower Athabasca Regional Map.

Map Reference: *LARP. (2012). Lower Athabasca Regional Plan, (2012-2022). Alberta Government.*

It was an unexpected, dramatic, and commercially devastating event when the price of oil dropped by more than 70% in 2014. It occurred when the local economy was in a position for significant growth (Government of Alberta, 2016).

In 2015, overall employment decreased by 1.5%, while the unemployment rate increased to 7.6%. (Government of Alberta, 2015). This resulted from decreased oil prices, which had a multiplier effect in many sectors, including services, wholesale and retail trade, transportation and, most notably, construction, and caused a significant decline in investment (FMS, 2019). Consequently, the oil corporations were under pressure to reduce costs by limiting investment and laying off workers leading to a weaker economy, outmigration, and low demand for housing; all influenced commercial and residential investment. Despite the economic downturn, some businesses remained eager to expand and opened as affordable

business space became available, seeking to diversify the economy and maintain the region's stability as much as possible. However, many employed people faced considerable uncertainty regarding their continued employment and household income (The New York Times, 2015).

As oil prices continued to decline, a wildfire engulfed the area, causing 88,000 residents to evacuate on May 3, 2016. The Wildfire immediately and significantly affected both the local and international economies. Consequently, many of the oil sand operations in the region halted production in May and early July. At the beginning of June 2016, residents began to return to the area, and an assessment of the damage continued. In early April 2018, about 20% of the destroyed residence units had received final inspection permits, while most of the properties were in various stages of recovery. As outlined in the Municipality's 2016 Wildfire Recovery Plan, other recovery aspects were given much attention. Thus, the plan should position the Municipality for future growth after rehabilitating damaged areas and enable it to support its recovery. The plan would continue to be updated and modified as additional challenges and opportunities arise based on the five Pillars of Recovery, People, Environment, Economy, Rebuild and Mitigate (Wildfire Recovery Plan, 2017).

By the end of 2016, oil prices were 50% lower than in the summer of 2014. From 2015 to 2017, the region began to experience difficult economic conditions due to unstable oil prices and production. The region saw a drop in GDP, the first fall since 2009 (Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers, n.d.). In response to address the economic crisis and ensure the sustainability of the Municipality, a zero-based budgeting approach was implemented at the beginning of 2017. This approach helped identify areas where savings could be made, and processes could be reduced (Budget and Financial Plan, 2017). However, the Municipality could avoid future additional debenture interest and principal payments, in addition to delivering interest savings during the amortization period as a result of the debt

reduction strategy method launched in 2017 and expanded in 2019. Debt Strategy (2017) states that the drawn debt committed would be repaid. Therefore, Funds have been allocated within the budget and financial plan to pay for previously approved capital projects funded by bonds, and committed undrawn debt should be eliminated by 2021.

The RMWB released the Commercial and Industrial Land Use Study (CILUS) report in 2018, which examined the region's commercial and industrial land requirements until 2030 and evaluated and explained industrial and commercial land requirements' status and future development. This time frame depended on the demographic and employment estimates provided by the RMWB. CILUS has been a strategic approach to land planning, marketing, implementation, and evaluating how the demand for different industrial land types could meet local sustainability objectives. This plan also aimed to build a more resilient region, lessen dependency on the oil and gas industry, choose the sites for development, encourage business and industrial growth, and conduct a land use analysis to increase land use efficiency in the Municipality and participating industries.

It supported strategic economic development and related business and industrial plans with the use of land, rural areas, and environmental concerns. It sought to ensure the Municipality's ability to compete in attracting industrial and commercial growth. The CILUS report indicated that the area suffered from a shortage of retail services, with vacant commercial offices, garden centres, etc. On the industrial side, it indicated a need for more industrial businesses in the urban service area, in addition to limited vacant industrial spaces. Therefore, the RMWB was dealing with several issues due to the close connection between the local economy and the oil industry sectors. The RMWB adopted a CCARP and City Centre Land Use Bylaw to regulate the use and development of the area and to accommodate commercial, office and residential development in Fort McMurray and the surrounding urban service area. This plan described commercial and industrial areas in both the urban service

area and surrounding areas as they shared the same labour market, trade area, and industrial and commercial land demand. As a result, the existing and future growth of commercial and industrial areas would be influenced by the economy and resource dependence of the area. However, a more diverse economy would benefit the RMWB by providing resilience in the more unstable industry.

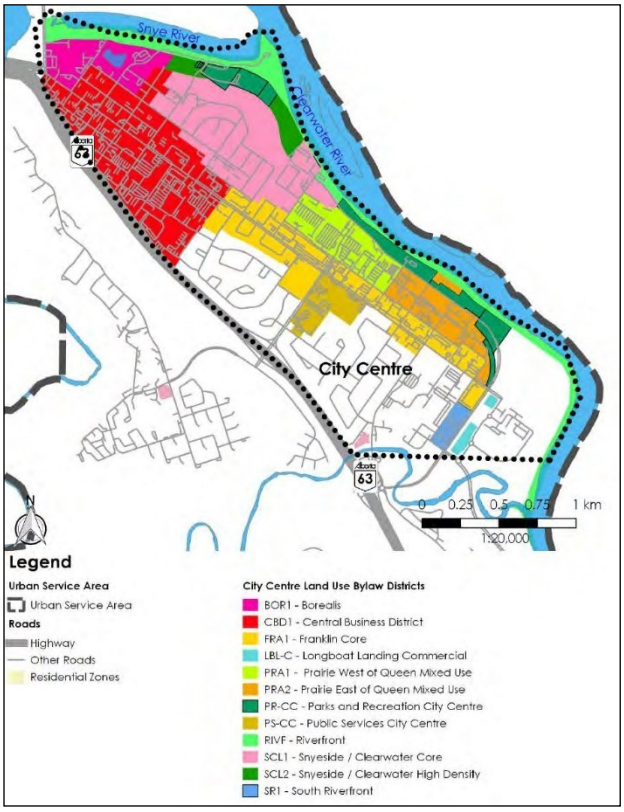

Figure 18: City Centre Land Use Bylaw Districts
Map Reference: *CILUS. (2018). RMWB*

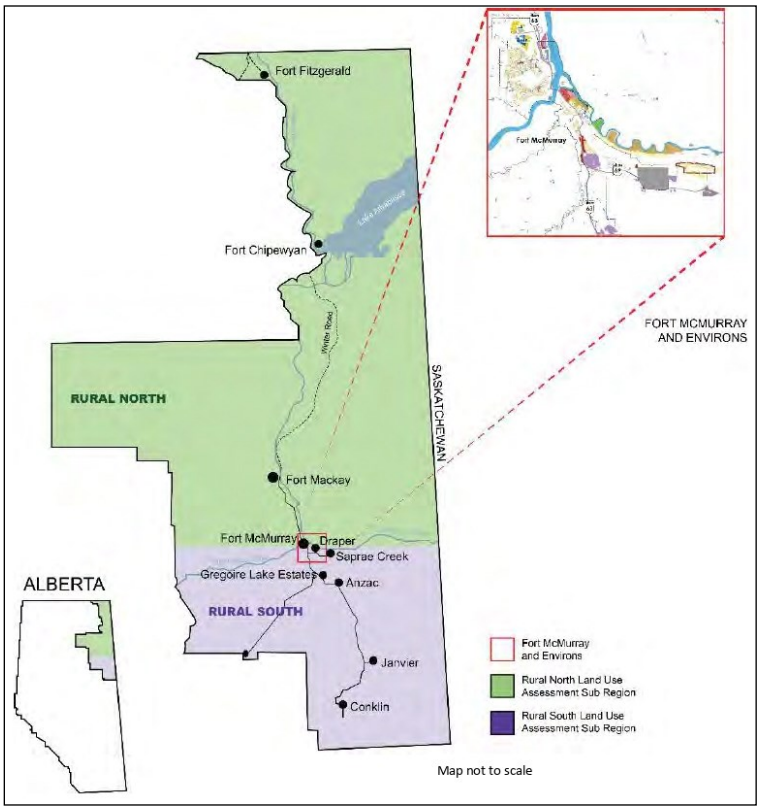

Figure 18: Wood Buffalo Land Use Assessment Sub-Regions
Map Reference: *CILUS. (2018). RMWB*

Moreover, the RMWB's Council approved the Municipality's (2018–2021) Strategic Plan in January 2018. It focused on creating a booming, sustainable city and aimed to investigate land development programs to encourage downtown revitalization, including determining the land's value, interacting with the neighbourhood and community, and investigating development incentive programs. It promoted regional economic development and developed a plan and strategies to balance and work to enhance the image and attract employment by promoting the region and integrating these strategies into the strategic plan

for economic development. It also aimed to incorporate rural communities, indigenous peoples, and partnerships in the work and continuously follow through on Municipality's calls (RMWB Strategic Plan, 2018).

Furthermore, the Fiscal Management Strategy (FMS) was developed annually and reported to Council for approval. It attempted to give a high-level understanding of the operational and capital requirements of the Municipality. The FMS also offered context for examining and choosing the appropriate property tax rates and other revenue sources. In January 2018, the Council of the RMWB (Municipality) approved the Strategic Plan to serve as the guidance from 2018 to 2021, with Responsible Government as a significant strategic focus. Key objectives included adopting a fiscal strategy by the Council and economic responsibility. A significant output of this initiative was the FMS (2019–2021). FMS focused on understanding all programme and service costs, with an ongoing focus on identifying new savings and efficiencies. Therefore, property tax income was reduced by $148M due to this budgetary method since the 2016 Budget, in addition to evaluating all revenue sources to ensure the Municipality took advantage of all available opportunities (FMS, 2019). The change in the economy presented the opportunity to refocus, revaluate and adapt as moving forward. As mentioned in the Debt Strategy (2017), the Municipality would eliminate the committed drawn debt in 2019 and that plan to convert undrawn debt from debentures to Capital Infrastructure Reserve Funds by 2021. The Municipality also had a General Reserve Strategy that covered future operating and capital spending needs. Additionally, the Municipality established the Capital Infrastructure Reserve (CIR) as a source of finance for capital projects, with a minimum uncommitted balance of $50 million. The Municipality also had an investment plan to ensure that the investments were made in a way that aimed to preserve capital (FMS, 2019).

In 2022, the Regional Emergency Management Plan (REMP) was developed. It provided a framework to prepare for likely events, adaptable to different emergency events and flexible to meet the needs of a municipality with regional communities, which would be reviewed annually to ensure it reflected the region's needs. The primary focus of the Emergency Management Plan (REMP) in the RMWB aimed to manage efficiently and reduce the impacts of disasters when possible or practical effects of disasters while preparing to respond when significant emergencies do occur. The objectives of this plan were achieved by developing appropriate strategies and plans to manage and reduce the negative effects of the disaster with a focus on the community through Community Emergency Management Plans (CEMPs) and describing appropriate response roles within the local administration and authority. Outlining operations for disaster management through a set of phases with a regular assessment process and consideration of side effects on public health and safety, public and private infrastructure, environment, and economy. The REMP recognized that emergency management involved all citizens, Individual residents, communities, municipalities, levels of government, first responders, the private sector, volunteers, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Therefore, building relationships with internal and external partners was essential to implementing this plan and enhancing community resilience through a high level of individual and collective readiness, including indigenous communities, the social profit sector, the small business sector, and the oil sands industry (REMP, 2022).

The Council collectively approved its strategic plan for the next four years, from 2022 to 2025. In its plan, the Council was based on community, cooperation, engagement, confidence, and responsibility in various aspects such as public financial management, forming partnerships between rural communities and indigenous peoples, boosting the local economy, and downtown visualization. It was created to ensure that local communities grew

more inclusive and sustainable for healthy living and the long-term prosperity of locals, immigrants, and visitors. It emphasized establishing investments and policies which are financially, environmentally, socially, and politically sustainable and developing a budget and a long-term financial plan for sustained growth and high-quality services. It aimed to enhance the area's economic development and quality of life by supporting local community growth, improving services, developing plans and strategies, and continuing its implementation (Council's Strategic Plan, 2022-2025).

Chapter 6 Discussion and Conclusion

6.1 Discussion

While the above presents a summary of the key documents regarding Fort McMurray's growth and development planning, this section presents three key themes identified through the analysis of those documents. These key themes are the divergence in the visions of the role of Fort McMurray, shifts in dependencies, and the impact of growth mentality, boosterism, and selective responses to change and shock as driving factors in planning in Fort McMurray.

6.1.1 An Informal Divergence in Policy Regarding the Role of Fort McMurray

Through examining the documents, it becomes clear that there was a shift in the discourses and thinking in the 1960s, 1970s, and1980s, with actual policy shifts in the 1990s. There has been a divergence of visions for the role of the Fort McMurray community with a shift in the role of the camps for workers. The dissolution of the city of Fort McMurray led to the creation of the RMWB as evidence of this shift.

The study area has experienced a significant economic transformation, largely driven by commercial oil sand development over the path history. Fort McMurray has played a significant role in developing the petroleum industry, which has provincial and national significance. The development of Fort McMurray was driven by key actors, the Provincial government and oil industries, which were closely intertwined in the early years, as the Province was the primary source of funding for the development (Nichols, 1980). At the outset of oil sands development, all actors involved - the provincial government, local municipality, and oil sands companies (influenced by the Province) - shared a vision of Fort McMurray as the primary, if not the only, location for accommodating oil sands workers as the community grew. Fort McMurray was envisioned as a new town that would eventually evolve into a city and an entire community. Indeed, the provincial government used the term'

New Town' in official planning documents as early as 1964 (RMWB, 2008), drawing from the larger planning movement in the UK and other places aftermath of World War II that addressed the problem of housing shortages in urban areas by building new towns in underdeveloped areas as entire communities with their own infrastructure and services (Halseth & Sullivan, 2004).

At the beginning of oil sands development, worker camps were established and seen as a temporary activity. At the same time, the community of Fort McMurray was expanded to accommodate the workforce needed for oil sand operations (Krim, 2003). At this stage, it could be argued that this was not merely boosterism but instead a planned boom town. The growth of the Town was not natural but rather the result of a top-down vision for a new town and the booming of the oil industry, which was heavily influenced by the Province (Turner, 2017). However, in reality, the growth of Fort McMurray deviated from the initial vision of a well-functioning new town that would grow to accommodate workers.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the financial position of the municipality began to deteriorate due to the heavy debt burden caused by the overextension of municipal infrastructure. Operating expenses and debt service charges increased at a rate that was disproportionate to changes in the Town's revenue and tax base, according to Keough (2015). No master plan for financing municipal services and facilities was prepared prior to or during the Syncrude development period, and there was vagueness in terms of accountability and responsibility for urban finances.

Between 1977 and 1981, during a period of rapid growth, planning activity intensified significantly. This included land use planning and the development of a long-range plan for local and social services in response to the rapid urban growth and high demands on municipal infrastructure. During this period, the Town struggled to accommodate the growth of the workforce. Town officials were uncertain about how to

finance the mounting costs, and some believed that the Province would eventually step in to rescue the community from its troubles (as announced eg in Conservation and Utilization Committee (1972). Many local residents felt that since the Province had approved oil industry projects and would benefit from them, it should also shoulder the urban costs. However, according to Hulchanski et al. (1985), the Province responded slowly and in an ad hoc manner to the growing problems.

In September 1980, the provincial government changed the status of the New Town of Fort McMurray to that of a city, assuming its powers and responsibilities. This move was aimed at addressing the capacity challenges the Town was facing with managing its growth, given its increasing size. However, this period was also marked by significant economic fluctuations, with boom-and-bust cycles affecting the region. While the new city status helped address some of the growth challenges, it also brought new challenges that the city struggled to deal with (cf Van Assche et al, 2020).

An analysis of the documents shows that a schism had occurred between the Province and the City of Fort McMurray regarding the vision of the city as the new "boomtown" that would house the workforce and their families, along with the necessary amenities such as schools, parks, and recreation centers (Lamanes & Deacon, 2017).

At some point, the belief at the provincial level in the importance and utility of establishing a classic resource town appears to have dwindled, and the notion of housing workers in camps organized by private companies took precedence. The idea was that government investment in communities located in remote areas and dependent on a single economic activity was not worthwhile. It is important to note that a generation earlier, resource companies had concluded that company towns built and managed by the company were a failed model for providing workforces for their operations (Ryser et al, 2017; cf Little, 1976; Gunder, 1981). This was due to the associated costs and complexities, as well as

because the time horizons of their activities made the entire enterprise questionable (Marais et al., 2018; Storey & Hall, 2018). It appears that the Province quietly arrived at the same conclusion at some point. However, likely due to the political challenges of formally stating it, they did not announce their decision or include it in any official documents. However, their actions and the discourse of their plans and policies make it clear that they had reached this conclusion.

It is difficult to determine when this shift took place, but a review of the documents indicates a change in discourse and thinking in the 1980s, with actual policy shifts occurring in the 1990s (cf McDonagh, 2010). What is evident is that support for Fort McMurray shrank in the years leading up to the regionalization of the municipality and the creation of the RMWB in 1996. While the booming years of the 1970s demonstrated strong provincial support for Fort McMurray as a complete and comprehensive community, this support became much less apparent in the 1980s.

Once again, with the materials analyzed and the lack of an insider's view, it is difficult to identify the specifics of who and what was driving the shift. However, the general picture that emerges from the documents, local media, and secondary sources (other research) is one in which the municipal government of Fort McMurray gradually felt that it had lost provincial support, leading to a loss of autonomy, including a downgrade in the municipal status of Fort McMurray. The move to the RMWB has been framed in terms of efficiency and economic development potential, which may or may not be accurate. However, it is evident that these status changes reduced Fort McMurray's power and autonomy to decide its own future.

After the creation of the RMWB, plans were made on a regional scale, not for Fort McMurray. Although the RMWB brought the oil sands areas and Fort McMurray area under its jurisdiction, it also increased the dependency of the Fort McMurray area on the oil sands,

which the Province almost completely governed. Further evidence of a shift away from supporting the growth of a large community with families, schools, etc., was that the Province began holding back development land (Fort McMurray is surrounded by Crown land that must be released for development) despite strong growth pressures in the community. This withholding of land supports the unspoken but implicit strong policy preference for a model of 'growth' by camp developments, where the workers for the oil sands would be flown in to live in camps instead of becoming members of a more complete community of Fort McMurray with entire households (Deacon et al, 2017; 2018; Dorow, 2015; Ryser et al, 2017).

The planning from 1997, and de facto for several years prior, primarily focused on planning for the RMWB, which emphasized resource extraction and camp planning. Detailed camp designs did not originate from governmental actors, but the Province regulated camp construction and clean-up (Chastko, 2004). The RMWB council discussed the camp locations, and it was evident that more camps would lead to reduced space, resources, people, and autonomy for Fort McMurray. Although the RMWB regularly opposed camp development, the Province provided full support for it. Further community growth in Fort McMurray would challenge the resource and camp focus of oil sand operators and the Province. Keeping the community small would free the hands of strategists aiming to sharpen the focus on resource extraction. Moreover, more community growth in Fort McMurray with households and families would increase local residents' demands for services and influence governance issues (Dorow, 2015; Lamanes & Deacon, 2017).

The residents of Fort McMurray, along with their representatives, were aware of the provincial-industry interactions that influenced municipal futures. Moreover, the industrial organization of the oil sands was so complex, involving many partners per project, that provincial support was inevitably invoked (Taylor et al, 2007; Turner, 2017). Local Fort

McMurray politicians attempted to lobby the Province to restore a focus on Fort McMurray development, arguing that a vibrant and sustainable Fort McMurray was necessary to support resource extraction and economic development in the region, but to little avail (Van Assche et al., 2017). Provincial investment in the region remained limited, with a focus on specific resource projects. Even infrastructure projects, such as the much-desired expansion of the southern highway, did not come to fruition. According to local politicians, this reveals not only a singular focus on resource extraction but also, despite official rhetoric, a focus on the relatively short term. In other words, there was a lack of belief in the long-term potential of Fort McMurray and the entire region.

As the camps continued to proliferate and grow larger, the autonomy and power of Fort McMurray declined. However, during the recent boom before 2015, this reality was obscured by the overwhelming amount of activity in the region. This allowed Fort McMurray to grow and develop new ambitions, despite its structurally precarious status. In those years, some politicians convinced oil executives to relocate a part of their staff to Fort McMurray, with the promise that this aspect of stability would benefit the companies as well. The sustainability goals of Fort McMurray, along with the focus on families and keeping people in all stages of life, seemed convincing during those years, and many believed in the future of Fort McMurray as a diverse, inclusive, vibrant, and sustainable community that could support the region (Lamanes & Deacon, 2017).

It is worth pointing out that the informal institution that presumably existed between the Province and the oilsands operators to support camp development and restrict the growth and power of Fort McMurray was not the only policy option (cf Ryser et al, 2016, 2017). Nor can it be presented as simply more rational because of supposed efficiencies. Just as rational an option could have been to turn the hierarchy upside down and substantially expand the governance area of Fort McMurray, possibly to the same size as RMWB if this is indeed the

most efficient size for making resource decisions. Amalgamating the smaller communities into Fort McMurray could have resulted in much more organic administrative development, meaning that the existing organizational infrastructure could have been easily modified for a larger size. It would also have meant a more democratic local government, as most residents, who are always in Fort McMurray, would have been allowed to determine their own future to a greater extent. This is also because RMWB would have been less dependent on transient workers (Foster & Barnetson, 2015). It would have allowed Fort McMurray to negotiate with the Province on a much stronger basis, for example, when provincial support is needed for infrastructure and resource decisions.

This analysis is not presented here as a means to critique any specific pathway of development that did or could have occurred to support the workers of the oilsands. The earlier shift away from company towns in the middle of the last century reflected a drive towards local self-organization and municipal organization, as many company towns became unstable because of economic and political unrest. The idea of local governance as a cornerstone of local democracy also became stronger. This led to pressure on the municipal organization from all sides (Gunder, 1981).

The shift in Alberta, away from the municipal model and towards a new version of the camp model, was significant, perhaps a recognition of the challenges of supporting the development of single-industry towns in remote areas. Perhaps the Province recognized, through the bust years, that at some point, the legacy of Fort McMurray will be that of a former boomtown, one without any future booms.

6.1.2 Shifts in Dependencies

In terms of EGT, the informal shift towards camps at the provincial level, an informal institution that seems to have coordinated larger-scale decisions for decades, has led to weaker goal dependencies at the local level (Beunen et al., 2016). All local plans, visions,

and strategies have become weaker due to the formal downgrading of Fort McMurray and its inclusion in RMWB and through the conflicting provincial perspective resulting from a set of informal institutions associated with camp preference. Fort McMurray has lost some of its power to articulate its own plans due to the downgrade. Furthermore, even when plans were produced, their impact could have been lessened by the reduced power of Fort McMurray. It is important to clarify that, for EGT, goal dependencies are not only a matter of implementing formal plans but also of considering the effects of future visions on governance (Van Assche et al, 2013). This means that resistance, opposition, reinterpretations, and the emergence of alternatives are also considered goal dependencies. However, in Fort McMurray, besides implementation, these types of goal dependencies seemed weak. Many plans existed only on paper as publications of Fort McMurray and later of the RMWB, with no meaningful impact (according to the literature, and the subsequent plans). The same applies to other strategic documents. EGT also speaks of dead institutions; in this case, the unstated preference of the provincial government for camp development and the restriction of Fort McMurray created 'Dead on Arrival Institutions' of the plans and strategies created at the municipal level.

The downgrade of Fort McMurray, associated with the "camp turn," also tightened the interdependencies between Fort McMurray, Alberta, and the oil companies. To achieve anything, Fort McMurray has to deal more with the oil companies, the province, or, indirectly, with their influences in the RMWB (Turner, 2017). Conversely, the oil companies needed Fort McMurray less; however, they were still aware of the need to maintain production because a large number of workers resided there, either as temporary or permanent residents.

The downgrading of Fort McMurray reinforced material dependencies, both in the impact of features of the natural system on governance and in the impact of human-made structures (Van Assche et al., 2022). That is, the constraints imposed on Fort McMurray, such

as the very limited land base and minimal infrastructure, along with the overall reduction in planning power and resources, made it more challenging to create a liveable environment for a large population. Having more freedom in terms of preserving green spaces and transforming other sites, either by greening or creating other public spaces, would contribute to the sustainable and lively environment that local strategic documents aim to achieve (Lehmann, 2010). The insignificant influence of Fort McMurray on how the landscape was processed at the RMWB during and after oil production also gradually worsened the material context to determine the future of Fort McMurray. This, too, can be seen as a negative material dependency associated with the downgrade of Fort McMurray and the rise of RMWB and the camp model.

These dependencies, in turn, reinforced the path dependencies that constrained Fort McMurray's power to determine its future. Some of these path dependencies are old, and others are younger and related to the creation of RMWB. The remoteness of Fort McMurray created material dependencies, and some were visible as path dependencies, legacies of the past in the current reproduction of governance (Van Assche et al, 2013). The limited land base and single highway connection south triggered material dependencies as everything became organized around the idea of a small land base and inferior connectivity to the south.

Therefore, in the case of Fort McMurray, not all path dependencies observed in recent years and recent documents can be ascribed to the lowered status and autonomy of Fort McMurray. In terms of organizational path dependencies, the presence of professional planners in Fort McMurray since the 1960s and their growing influence in the 1970s, including social planning, left a legacy in the administration that was not wiped out by the formation of the RMWB (Keough, 2015; cf Hulchanski & Gordon, 1985). Furthermore, one could observe a legacy of Fort McMurray's planning in RMWB. Focusing on Fort McMurray, one might say that local politicians might have been more mobile than in

southern cities, but many had a local history and memory of the thinking and organizing in Fort McMurray in times of greater autonomy. The value of planning, strategy, and using strategic documents were not truly disputed over the years, and this can be considered a positive path dependency in terms of institutional capacity, particularly the capacity to strategize, despite obvious difficulties in planning in a resource town (Hayter, 2017; Deacon et al, 2017; Keough, 2015).

6.1.3 Growth Mentality, Boosterism, and Selective Responses to Change and Shock

Some aspects of the vision for Fort McMurray and the oilsands were consistent among all actors. This includes the coupled beliefs that growth is realistic and reasonable (an inherently good growth mentality) and that oil production is good. At least on this essential point, all three key players in regional governance – the province, oil industry, and Fort McMurray – could agree (Smandych & Kueneman, 2013). It is clear that this pact was imperfect and that growth for Fort McMurray was not seen as necessary by the others in recent decades. Still, regardless of this, the shared optimism regarding oil and economic growth kept things workable.

The persistence of a growth mentality in the turbulent history of Fort McMurray is remarkable. It regularly leads to boosterism, actively promoting growth discourses at all alternatives' expense. It is marked by serious blind spots, glossing over obstacles to growth and possible negative consequences of unqualified growth. The persistence of growth discourses, even in the most challenging periods of their existence, points to the persistence of a growth mentality in local governance and a fair measure of boosterism, as growth discourse is promoted almost independently of changing contexts (cf Foran, 1979). In later years, the boosterism differed among actors, as the municipal government promoted a vision of continued growth, community building, and diversification of Fort McMurray itself.

Meanwhile, the province focused on the long-term future of the oilsands, often without commenting on the future of Fort McMurray. Still, the ongoing growth of the region's economic productivity remained consistent.

Therefore, the situation in Fort McMurray can be summarized as a history of boosterism and dwindling governance power in the context of boom-and-bust cycles, creating a local governance configuration with constrained capacities to envision and organize alternative futures (Barnes, 1987; Freudenburg & Wilson, 2002). The capacity to strategize was limited because of the dependencies that developed over time. Fort McMurray has become increasingly dependent on the province and the oil industry, which were less interested in it. As its material environment placed stronger limitations on the region, the impact of its visions for the future became weaker (cf Jacobsen & Parker, 2016).

It has always been challenging to envision anything other than growth and oil dependence, and changing this path became even more difficult after Fort McMurray was downgraded. The small insurgency against the camps in 2019 in the RMWB would probably have been more successful if Fort McMurray had not been amalgamated, as the RMWB became more interdependent with the oil industry and the provincial government for its municipal activities.

The term 'relative' in a relative lock-in implies that there is always some degree of autonomy left to envision and shape the future. One could argue that path creation remains possible or that some adaptive capacity always exists (Van Assche et al., 2017). These statements both rely on an idea of selective response to change or shocks. Even when shocks appear, some capacity to respond can be observed; ideally, this is adaptation (Chaffin, 2014). In the case of Fort McMurray, adaptation has been limited due to the weak status of the city and the deep-seated belief in oil and growth, which create strong path dependencies. This seems to be the case because of the importance of these positive ideas in the identity of Fort

McMurray, where identity construction in the turbulent frontier environment was not straightforward (Ngo, 2018; Dorow & O' Shaugnessy, 2013). Second, one can argue that this path dependency stems from the actual interdependency of the community on the oil industry and its employment. Realistic future visions must include community degrowth – a shrinking population, land area, and economic base in a world of climate change and energy transition (eg Kunze & Becker, 2015). Such futures do not align with provincial rhetoric. They are difficult to articulate publicly as they counter well-established goal dependencies of an economically sustainable (indeed growing) community that offers residents a good quality of life and a good return on investment for property owners in Fort McMurray.

In the history of Fort McMurray, several ups and downs in the oil economy (as seen in earlier chapters) can be distinguished as shocks, with both boom and bust constituting a shock where normal routines cannot be followed anymore in local governance (Van Assche & Gruezmacher, 2022). Additionally, the 2016 fire, which came very close to destroying the whole city, can be added to this list (McGee, 2019). Along with these shocks, a pervasive wave of critique of oil sand extraction after 2000 and changing indigenous relations, as well as downtown flooding, can be mentioned as relevant environmental changes (O'Connor, 2015).

The changing Indigenous relations and stronger calls for reconciliation, conservation, and benefit-sharing did lead to frequent economic partnerships and Indigenous entrepreneurship in the RMWB. However, the governance and the imagined futures (as visible in the analysed documents) in Fort McMurray changed remarkably little. Floods triggered new plans, sometimes restoring what was there and sometimes proposing more ambitious reconstruction. The fire, the most existential threat in Fort McMurray's history to date, led to plans for rebuilding rather than rethinking spatial organization or envisioning smaller economic futures (Theriault et al, 2021). It also led to renewed lobbying for regional

infrastructure. Sustaining what was there and planning for more growth remains the dominant theme in the RMWB's planning publications.

The resource growth ideology has persisted and continues to this day. Planning and strategic policies have been produced at the local level in each phase, always framed in terms of growth and often focusing on oil dependence (although more recently, there have been optimistic diversification considerations). Another persistent theme is the lobbying and anticipation for more land for Fort McMurray, reflecting a local consensus. While this is a logical element of a growth ideology (Deas et al, 2004; Brenner & Theodore, 2002), it differs from the growth version adopted at higher levels. The lobby and hope for more regional infrastructure fit into the same pattern. These recurring patterns do not represent adaptations to changing circumstances.

A focus on fiscal responsibility can be observed during bust periods, especially after 2015. This is not perceived as contradictory to growth ambitions as growth is expected to fill the coffers again. Policies and investments supporting anticipated growth are not criticized, even if growth is highly unlikely. The adaptive focus on fiscal responsibility also fits the more common Alberta neoliberal ideology (Davidson et al, 2011; Hulchanski & Gordon, 1985). The local version can be considered as an adaptation to the Alberta provincial context, besides an adaptation to economic downturns.

The second most notable adaptation that has been observed since the last boom and persists post-2015 is the local sustainability focus, which is reflected in many of the analysed documents and recent literature. Fort McMurray has attempted to position itself as a sustainable community, even as a sustainability champion. This can be understood as a response to critiques that Fort McMurray is male-dominated, short-term-oriented, unpleasant, unsustainable, and lacking a genuine community identity (Dorow, 2015; Dorow et al., 2013). The focus on sustainability in Fort McMurray can also be seen as a response to the

widespread criticism of the oil sands industry (Deacon et al., 2017) around the world, which is increasingly viewed as a threat to the survival of the industry in Alberta. The efforts of generations of Alberta politicians to create an identity based on resource extraction have been a powerful response to these critiques (Turner, 2017; Honarvar et al, 2011).

During the recent economic downturn, the belief in Fort McMurray did not falter, and the sustainability discourse aligned with the remaining boosterism. One can discern a tempering of boosterism discourse in recent discourse through sustainability discourse and mentions of inclusivity, diversity, and regionalism. However, some may consider the local sustainability discourse as greenwashing, a tactic to shift critical attention away from regional resource extraction towards local sustainability initiatives (Deacon et al, 2017, 2018; Dorow, 2015). Additionally, these initiatives often aim to present Fort McMurray as a more family-friendly community. Many services and amenities that appeared late in Fort McMurray were associated with a family focus, including maternity beds, old age services, and recreation facilities (Lamanes & Deacon, 2019).

Diversification has also appeared in recent years in documents, but without much clarity as to what it could mean, how the regional scale is involved, and which investments or policies might be necessary to support it. It is unclear whether the diversification discourse was shallow rhetoric meant to appease critics, as often happens at the provincial level, or whether awareness is dawning in the community and its governance system regarding the need to move beyond petroleum (cf Turner, 2017; Urquhart, 2018). The attachment to petroleum futures is still very strong in the same documents, and a transition path has not been clearly conceptualized yet.

The diversification discourse does not clearly feature northern tourism or a northern economic development hub as a scenario that is considered realistic or desirable. Additionally, there is no observed possibility of cooperating more structurally with the

Indigenous communities in the region. These communities have their own challenges but are often more sustainable and less defined by transience than the settler communities – especially as the area was unsuitable for agricultural development.

Another scenario that has not been systematically considered, given the dramatic boom, and bust cycles, is the managed shrink scenario (Van Assche et al, 2021). Even after the fire, when the footprint of Fort McMurray de facto shrunk when pessimism regarding economic futures was warranted, this was not seen as a strategic option. The fire presented an opportunity, at least for discussion, regarding the potential for managing the shrinkage of the community through reduced rebuilding. However, this would have been complicated by the nature of insurance companies and their policies regarding private residences, and it was politically difficult. However, the opportunity was there but was not discussed, at least not in any public manner (McGee, 2019). None of the documents consulted, from the 1960s to the present, discuss the scenario of managed shrink. There is no discussion of a future Fort McMurray that is smaller than its current size, despite the geography of Fort McMurray and the economic opportunities beyond oil in a world of the energy transition. This demonstrates a clear gap in governance. While this approach would solve many of Fort McMurray's problems, it has not been considered as an option.

It is important to note that shrinking does not mean disappearing, and a more sustainable, diverse, inclusive, and even vibrant community could stabilize with a lower population (Hayter, 2017). However, achieving this goal requires anticipation, planning, and strategy, and it also requires actors in local governance not to interpret shrinkage as a disaster or a sign of giving up (Halseth et al, 2010). As seen in places such as Detroit, unmanaged shrinkage has tremendous consequences for society, with much of the impact felt by local citizens (cf Wheeler, 2014; Hospers, 2014).

The strong path dependencies of boosterism and oil futures, combined with the core of local identity, make it challenging for local governance to consider shrinkage, regional indigenous collaboration, and diversification as strategic options (Deacon et al., 2018; Van Assche et al., 2022). If the regional landscape becomes further scarred by resource exploitation (Urquhart, 2018), and if local populations remain focused solely on oil industry jobs (neglecting other education paths and not electing other politicians; (Taylor et al., 2007)), then changing the path will become even more challenging. The weaker local governance structure of Fort McMurray after regionalization has limited the tools to implement such strategies, even if they existed. Therefore, the establishment of RMWB can be viewed as a significant step towards narrowing down the strategic options for Fort McMurray, reinforcing both cognitive and organizational path dependencies.

6.2 Conclusion

Fort McMurray is a unique community that heavily relies on its resources and has limited road connectivity with other developed areas, as well as limited influence over its future. Understanding this special case can help us comprehend the fate of resource communities more broadly and the possibilities for changing their future. Studying the changes and continuity in Fort McMurray, particularly in its governance and vision for the future, can aid in understanding the internal and external factors that make it easier or more challenging for the resource community to change course. This is important because developing adaptive capacity is essential for resource towns (cf Barnes, 1987; Gunder, 1981).

This thesis examined the adaptation and response to shocks in key policy documents for Fort McMurray and the RMWB since the 1960s. The findings revealed that there has always been some degree of adaptive capacity (cf Chaffin et al, 2014; Deas et al, 2014). Still, the responses to shocks were heavily constrained by formal institutional regimes, power relations, and a path of dependencies shaped at the local level and by relations with higher-level actors. In other words, understanding the evolution of Fort McMurray and its capacity to govern itself and envision and organize futures requires examining the relationships between oil companies, the province of Alberta, and Fort McMurray, which involve both formal and informal institutions. The key decision that determined most of what could be observed in Fort McMurray is an informal arrangement between the province and the industry, which views camps as the way of the future and considers local and regional investments not worth it unless they directly benefit industry activities within their relevant time frames.

The RMWB, created by the province and industry, reduced Fort McMurray's influence on its own future. However, recent developments indicate that Fort McMurray and the RMWB are becoming increasingly aware of their value to one another while cautiously

cultivating relationships with the province and industry. Rampant camp development resurged before the pandemic, and Fort McMurray and the RMWB strongly opposed it. However, the RMWB did not vote against the establishment of new camps.

The selective responses to shocks and changes that we observe are the result of the interplay of dependencies in the evolution of Fort McMurray's governance. While such dynamics are common (Beunen et al, 2016), what is less typical is the regular restructuring of the entire governance framework and shifts in the type of municipality. Additionally, it is unusual to see the level of higher-level pressure in its evolution, as well as the significant local swings up and down. The case of Fort McMurray highlights the importance of understanding resource towns within a multi-level governance framework (Kuteleva & Leifso, 2020) and how this can redefine what Van Assche et al. (2021) referred to as the "concentration problem," which simplifies governance and makes it difficult to envision and organize alternative futures in resource communities. Suppose provincial or higher-level pressures prevent a resource community from redefining its path and taking away its governance tools and other resources. In that case, the concentration problem is likely to worsen.

However, Fort McMurray also demonstrates that a history of planning and self-governance leaves traces (cf Keough, 2015; Deacon et al, 2017) and an identity that may be closely tied to the resource story but still independent enough to rise against perceived threats (such as the camps) and respond to shocks in a way that it defines itself (von Bertalanffy, 1968). In the case of Fort McMurray, the growth mindset and identity of the oil industry limited the options for change. The Fort McMurray story also suggests that size matters, and with enough interests clustered in and around Fort McMurray, a compromise was not on anyone's agenda. However, even a weak Fort McMurray within the context of the RMWB was able to defend itself if that was the case, soliciting support - after the unexpected

wildfires of 2016, which were another blind spot caused by a very selective perception of the environment (McGee, 2019).

Selective responses to change and shocks start with a limited capacity for observation in the governance system (Van Assche et al., 2017; Chaffin et al., 2014), and from the topics and ideas selected in the analysed documents, it is clear that this was the case for Fort McMurray. A second factor that enables or disables adaptive capacity is the presence of long-term perspectives and strategies at the local level. In this regard, Fort McMurray was better positioned than most resource communities, given its size and legacy. The selectivity in response to change and shocks arises from the dependencies in governance evolution, which create rigidity in the governance path (Deacon et al, 2018). Certain options for change may not be observed, and even if they are, they may not be easy to implement, given the pattern of dependencies.

The deeply ingrained belief in an oil future and growth, regardless of the conditions, always limited the options observed or organized in the case of Fort McMurray. The documents analysed showed remarkable continuity in this regard, along with a notable blindness to many rather obvious policy options. This blindness is another manifestation of the discussed constraints and is understandable as the growth and oil mentality were closely tied to the community's identity. This mentality was a feature of local governance that kept it close to provincial politics (cf Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Davidson et al, 2011).

The case of Fort McMurray makes it clear that even the tight-knit oil coalition and the broadly shared consensus on the importance of oil for Fort McMurray, Alberta, and Canada (Chastko, 2004) did not automatically translate into higher-level policies, both formal and informal, that benefitted the production area (cf Foster & Barnetson, 2015. The series of documents analysed since the 1960s, along with existing research, indicate a continuous struggle to define a sustainable community and create a cohesive identity that could support

further strategizing more stably. While the story is always optimistic, the documents also indicate that the previous strategies did not entirely work, sometimes that the local community no longer supports them, or things changed so much that a new reflection on the future is needed.

The adoption of the growth and oil discourse was perceived as necessary to create a sense of community and unity out of many diverse and changing elements, including unpredictable investments and a transient population. This discourse can be seen as an adaptation in itself, but it came at a cost, as it made other types of adaptations challenging (cf von Bertalanffy, 1968; Hayter, 2017. The relentless optimism and narrow focus of the discourse made it difficult to recognize other aspects of the environment and alternative futures (Halseth et al, 2010).

One could argue that Fort McMurray represents an important margin and frontier, where old-fashioned boosterism has survived, while in other places, it has given way to different forms of place branding, promotion, and elite functioning. Foran (1979) pointed out that even for a similar story, boosters in Calgary could change over time and in shifting coalitions. This also seems to be the case for Fort McMurray, and the continuity of boosterism in the documents is most likely compatible with such an interpretation. Artibise (1982) persuasively argued that in most of Canada, economic elites often identified with their own community in the phase of boosterism, while since the 1960s and accelerated since the 1980s, they have stopped doing so. Larger companies, including resource companies, did not identify or invest in their community of origin or any community in particular. This observation was also made by Halseth et al. (2010) and others in recent years, such as Van Assche et al. (2021).

These last observations shed a different light on the Fort McMurray story. The oil sands economy is dominated by very large, mostly international corporations, with complex

collaboration patterns (Honarvar et al, 2011). Therefore, the emergence of a truly local elite is quite remarkable under such circumstances, especially when the provincial government is much more supportive of the corporations than of Fort McMurray. In the eyes of the provincial government, Fort McMurray was always a tool. Despite the external pressures and internal mobility over the years, it is possible to safely infer from the documents and the discussions surrounding them that a system of governance and an embedded community emerged, which were willing and able to articulate an identity (Deacon et al., 2017), a long-term perspective, and a strategy to move in that direction. This is even more remarkable considering the limiting effect of the growth and resource discourse.

The statement affirms the theoretical position of the old systems theory that a system is more than the sum of its elements (von Bertalanffy, 1968), as people move, companies change, councils change, etc., and continuity is possible despite the forces stacked against it. It further confirms the EGT insights that perfect adaptation to an environment is usually unnecessary, and each community and governance system is limited in its capacity to strategize (Van Assche et al., 2021). The fact that Fort McMurray survived several significant downturns with its growth mentality intact points to the centrality of the thinking in the reproduction of the governance system and its embedded community (cf Luhmann, 1990).

It can be argued that the growth and oil discourse survived all the seeming counter-indications because of the coalition of local and higher-level actors around this discourse, as discussed above (cf Smandych & Kueneman, 2013; Ngo, 2018). However, it can also be added that the discourse played an additional role outside governance, shaping the bold ambition to create a community. This does not indicate that speaking of the community is just official rhetoric hiding internal disunity (cf Dorow & o Shaughnessy, 2013), nor does it indicate that Fort McMurray was only a collection of people and a place instrumentalized by capitalism (Davidson et al., 2011). This was and remains undoubtedly true. However, what is

omitted in this interpretation is the performative character of the community story associated with the oil and growth story (Perez- Sindin et al, 2020; Kuteleva & Leifso, 2020). It did have real effects and succeeded in attracting people over the years who started to identify with the place, enabling the creation and maintenance of local governance capable of articulating its own future to respond to internal and external changes, even in a relatively narrow scope. This is what was found in the series of planning and strategic policy documents analysed in this thesis.

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