

Regional Planning – Perspective on Rocky View’s Involvement

The majority on Rocky View’s Council strongly opposes the Calgary Metropolitan Region Board (CMRB) and has argued loudly for its dissolution, going so far as to hire a lobbyist to help in its efforts. While the CMRB isn’t perfect, we believe an accurate assessment of its role and impact on Rocky View is much less ominous than our Council would like us to believe.

The CMRB’s objective is to provide an integrated, regionally coordinated approach to future growth that results in more environmentally responsible and efficient land use planning as the region grows from its current 1.6 million to 2.6 million people. The CMRB forecasts reductions between 35% – 40% in the amount of land used by development, in road and other infrastructure costs, and in water consumption per household under the regional growth plan compared to continuing with the region’s “business as usual” trajectory.

The key points that the majority on Rocky View’s council raise in opposition to the CMRB are:

- It destroys the County’s autonomy.
- It is an unelected fourth level of government.
- It costs the County vast sums of money.
- It is a tool for Calgary to bully its rural neighbours.
- It sterilizes all rural land in the County.
- It removes land use decisions from the municipalities.

In our opinion, these claims range from misleading to downright bogus.

Does the CMRB destroy Rocky View’s autonomy?

There is no question that, if you work cooperatively with your neighbours, you lose some autonomy. However, the upside is that cooperation creates efficiencies and eliminates duplication. As well, no municipality should be allowed to ignore the impacts its land use decisions have on neighbouring municipalities.

Is the CMRB an unelected fourth level of government?

The members of the CMRB are the elected mayors, reeves, and/or councillors from each of the member municipalities. They were not elected to the CMRB directly; but they were all elected to represent the interests of their municipalities. Rocky View’s Reeve sits on the CMRB and its key committees and, to the best of our knowledge, fully participates in all discussions and decisions.

Working cooperatively does require some structure; however, describing it as another level of government exploits anti-government biases. Comments from the Province consistently indicate that the CMRB is unlikely to go away. If Rocky View doesn’t participate, it loses its voice at the table. The real question is whether Rocky View is willing to play nicely in the regional sandbox.

How much does the CMRB cost the County?

The costs of running the CMRB are paid by the province. To date, its operations have always come in under budget. Despite recent comparisons to Portland's Regional Board, the CMRB has limited authority that extends only to land use planning. It has no authority to levy taxes or to mandate its members to levy taxes.

The County estimated that participating in the CMRB's activities in 2020 "cost" the County \$250,000 for the time intergovernmental staff and the Reeve spent to prepare for and attend meetings.

This cost is trivial relative to RVC's overall budget and would not be avoided in the absence of the CMRB. RVC has had intergovernmental staff for many years. It is highly unlikely that these positions would be eliminated if the CMRB was not there. The Reeve's salary has always been higher than the rest of council. It did not change when the CMRB was established.

Is the CMRB a tool for Calgary to bully its neighbours?

Calgary accounts for 85% of the region's population. In a democracy, majority rules – numbers count. The voting structure does give Calgary a "veto"; but it can't act alone. The voting structure requires support from at least two-thirds of the member municipalities representing two-thirds of the region's population. This structure reinforces the importance of collaboration and cooperation.

In addition to having the bulk of the region's population, Calgary also provides infrastructure and services for residents in Rocky View and other neighbouring municipalities that ratepayers in those municipalities do not pay for – such as roads, libraries, public transit, recreation facilities.

The CMRB is also in the final stages of developing a dispute resolution mechanism for member municipalities to use if they disagree with CMRB decisions. There have always been mechanisms to address intermunicipal concerns with development proposals; however, they were all after-the-fact, costly litigation-based alternatives.

The CMRB does constrain some development that might have occurred in its absence, both for Calgary and for its regional neighbours. Whether this is a "sign" of Calgary bullying its neighbours is a matter of perspective.

Does the CMRB "sterilize" rural land in the County?

The short answer is – it depends. Small-scale development can proceed unimpeded. Larger scale developments either need to be consistent with one of the pre-2018 ASPs or conceptual schemes or comply with the CMRB's regional growth plan. Additionally, the CMRB can approve other developments if the sponsoring municipality can make a sufficiently compelling case.

What are the costs / benefits from being part of the CMRB?

The benefits to Rocky View include:

- All ASPs approved before the beginning of 2018 when the CMRB was established are grandfathered.
 - These ASPs already provide between 20 – 200 years of anticipated growth (depending on the ASP).
- Smaller developments below “regionally significant” thresholds will not be reviewed by the CMRB – first parcels out and small-scale subdivisions will continue, so long as they are consistent with RVC’s County Plan / Municipal Development Plan.
- The East & West Balzac, Conrich, and Omni ASPs are part of two of the three Joint Planning Areas in the regional growth plan,
 - Joint Planning Areas are expected to account for 20% of the region’s growth over the next 20 – 30 years.
 - Higher intensity development is possible in these areas with regional cooperation. This means that RVC will be able to develop at densities beyond those currently anticipated in the County’s ASPs.
 - If RVC chooses to not work with its neighbours, development in those areas can continue under the rules of the existing ASPs – without CMRB intervention.
- Langdon, Harmony, and Bragg Creek can build out as priority hamlet growth areas under the regional growth plan.
- Rocky View’s 3% share of regional population growth is expected to be maintained over the next 20 – 30 years.
- Rocky View is forecast to account for 14% of regional employment growth over the next 20 – 30 years.
 - RVC has long argued that increasing the County’s non-residential tax base is important for financial sustainability. Here is an opportunity to do just that.
- There are possibilities for reduced costs through shared infrastructure for water, wastewater, storm water, transportation, etc.

The costs to Rocky View include:

- The unfettered ability for major landowners / developers to develop whatever they want, whenever and wherever they happen to own the land will be significantly restricted.
 - This means that several developer-funded Area Structure Plans and large conceptual schemes are unlikely to proceed.
- New ASPs and development applications that exceed the CMRB’s “regionally significant” thresholds will require an additional level of approval before they are implemented. While this sounds like a negative, most applications for larger developments in Rocky View take years to commence after approval – for example, Bingham Crossing and Glenbow Ranch.

Our assessment of the costs & benefits to RVC from the CMRB

The limitation on Rocky View’s approach to development is the crux of the County’s objections to the CMRB. For many years, the County has employed developer-friendly

land use “planning” that facilitated individual landowners capitalizing on their often-speculative investments in the County’s agricultural land. This will be much more constrained under the CMRB. Again, whether this is good or bad is a matter of opinion.

From our perspective, Rocky View’s dartboard approach to development has resulted in more fragmented development than would have occurred if the County put a higher priority on orderly, environmentally, and fiscally responsible development. It has left the County with a multiplicity of groundwater and stormwater problems from stand-alone “solutions” permitted over the past 20 years. Rocky View’s approach has also offloaded much of the infrastructure costs required to support development in the County to our municipal neighbours. By leveling the playing field, the CMRB should alleviate some of these issues.

Foothills and Wheatland Counties are also opposed to the CMRB. However, comparing Rocky View to either of these rural municipalities is like comparing apples and oranges. Neither of them has engaged in large-scale dartboard development like Rocky View. From their perspective, they were never part of the problem, so why should they have to be part of the “solution”.

The question is – should Rocky View continue operating in a "development silo" with all its associated costs, even though the County surrounds Calgary and Chestermere on three sides and completely surrounds Airdrie and Cochrane? The CMRB does impose constraints on Rocky View to develop more responsibly, as it does for all its members. Thus far, the CMRB has not appeared inclined to abuse its authority and, as such, we consider it to be a useful constraint on poorly planned development.

Prepared by:
Rocky View Forward
March 16, 2021