

Prairie Urbanism in Manitoba: Planning for Urban Areas outside Brandon and Winnipeg

Carley Holt BDes, MCP Candidate

Jacqueline East, MCP, MCIP, RPP Manager of Planning | WSP Group



Abstract

Prairie-Urbanism
Rural Planning
Manitoba

Municipalities' need the right tools available in order to create communities that can achieve economic, social and environmental sustainability. In Manitoba, provincial regulations acknowledge the importance of strong urban centres for long-term prosperity and yet little planning focus has been placed on how to plan for the change experienced by thriving communities located outside of Brandon and Winnipeg. Without planning support, these communities and councils are missing opportunities in land development, municipal servicing, and community design.

In 2014, Dillon Consulting in partnership with WSP Group, created a Development Plan that addressed both rural and urban land use issues for The MSTW Planning District (Morden, Stanley, Thompson, and Winkler). The Plan was prepared for the Planning District to promote good planning and sound decision-making for development within the region. It was the first of its kind to bring both a rural planning advocacy and an urban planning advocacy role directly into the process. The consequent plan weaves rural issues with urbanist principals and provide policies for both the wise use and management of land resources and direction about future community-building.

This case-in-point project explores the need for an approach to planning for *Prairie-Urbanism*. The analysis considers whether the policies presented in the MSTW Development Plan are a step in the right direction.

Background

Despite its increasing importance, information and guidance on planning for rural urban centres is almost nonexistent. Even the term ‘Prairie-Urbanism’ has no clear definition, and is used to discuss topics ranging from prairie cities to architecture. This needs to change. Manitoban communities are thriving and usually at the whim of developers and Council with little guidance

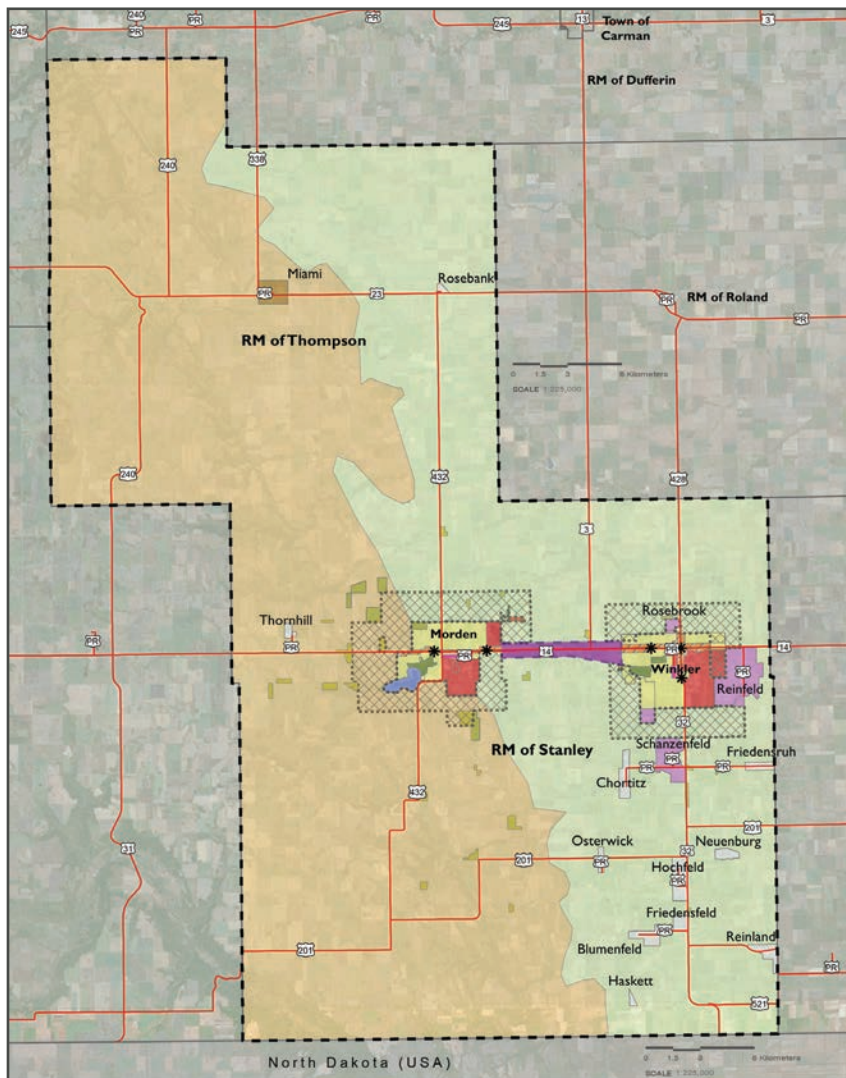
from the province or professional planners.

Articles such as *Planning in Rural Areas*, written by Alan Hahn for the Journal of the American Institute of Planners in 1970, demonstrates that management concerns over rural urban growth have been around for decades. Hahn identifies issues that are still prevalent today, such as the transition pains of rural to urban, budget restraints

to hire consultants, and the informal nature of rural governments.

The fact is, rural planning is still thought of in terms of land, resource and watershed management, and with little consideration, if any, for the urban centres. This neglectful approach has created challenges for thriving rural communities to address land development, municipal servicing and urban design opportunities.

The Planning Act in Manitoba, first adopted in 1916 with new Acts in 1964, 1976, and 2006, outlines the legislative framework for planning on private lands, outside the City of Winnipeg. All municipalities or planning districts must adopt a Development Plan to guide the growth of their areas. These Plans must also address the Provincial Land Use Policies (PLUPs). The PLUPs reflect the essential provincial interests that must be respected with focus on environment, natural resources, protection of agricultural lands, and infrastructure management. However, the authority of the Province over the approval of the Development Plans coupled with the absence of professional planners working directly with municipalities, has resulted in a method of rural planning that is primarily focused on meeting provincial



ABOVE MSTW Planning District. (MSTW Development Plan, 2014)

requirements rather than developing a meaningful local community plan for the future.

Today much of the province, outside of Winnipeg, is served by only a few professional planners working for the Department of Municipal Government out of regional offices in the southwest, central, southeast, and Interlake areas. While the City of Brandon is in the process of creating its own progressive urban planning department and Council, the lack of access to relevant and progressive urban professional planning resources, coupled with the sole focus on rural issues, has created development challenges for many smaller Manitoba cities like Morden, Winkler, Portage la Prairie, Dauphin, Steinbach, and Selkirk.

The new MSTW Development Plan, completed in November of 2014, is a first in the province to address both rural and urban land issues for a planning district. In Part 3, *Urban Areas*, the Plan provides a modern urban planning framework for the Planning District's urban centres, Morden, Winkler, and the local urban district of Miami.

Plan Approach

During the consultation process a variety of

themes were brought up for discussion including the need for the four municipalities to develop an urban/rural balance. MSTW Planning District Board Chair Henry Siemens noted that, "there's definitely a need for urban [focus], and there is a need for the different kinds of urban, and we have that. We've got that in Morden, in Winkler, we have that in Miami, and to a degree even the villages, quite a few of them could be considered urban" (Pembina Valley Online, 2013). The consultant team of Dillon and WSP recognized that not only did the Plan need to address urban areas, but would require a structure that would incorporate both an overarching strategy for the entire District but allow for a flexible application of policies to address the unique needs

of individual communities.

The policies listed in the MSTW Development Plan are intended to provide decision-makers with direction rather than be followed as a detailed action plan. Phrases such as, "where applicable" and "where relevant," are used in some policies to support the appropriate and flexible application of the Plan by the Planning District and Council. Its structure also reflects how people live, work, and play in the region by creating policies in five distinct categories: Urban Areas, Emerging Communities, Stanley Corridor, Village Areas, and Rural Areas. These area designations were created based on how lands in the MSTW Region are used. Guiding Priorities identified through consultations with the

BELOW May 2013, Municipal officials, councillors, and stakeholders from across the region attend an open house. (Pembina Valley Online, 2013)



public and key stakeholder groups list the overarching objectives of the plan. These objectives identify priorities and guidelines for future development within the region.

Unique to the Plan is Part 3, *Urban Areas*, which are identified as the City of Morden, City of Winkler, and the Local Urban District of Miami. Due to the complexity of this category, five sub-area designations were created within this section: Urban Neighbourhoods, Urban Employment Areas, Urban Activity Nodes, Urban Downtown, and Urban Recreational and Open Spaces. To allow insight into the developed of the final plan, each category lists its clearly defined Intent, Principles, and Policies. The proposed structure accommodates a flexible application of policies to the diverse needs of the District, however the success this approach can only be evaluated once the municipality begins implementing the Plan.

Lessons Learned

Development Plans provide planning districts with policies to guide decision-making and manage land use and development within a region. It should be a visionary and strategic

document for the public, the development community, Councils, the Planning District, and other levels of government to promote sound decision-making with respect to development within a region. Reflection and discussion in the context of this project revealed the following two lessons respecting the were learned through the development of the MSTW Development Plan. Planners should consider these lessons when creating future development plans for rural areas that include urban centres.

LESSON #1: Planners must approach smaller urban centres with sensitivity when applying urbanist ideas that are most often developed for larger cities.

EXPERIENCE: A previous planning process attempted to apply New Urbanism ideas to the City of Winkler.

The outside effort engaged the imaginations of many residents. However, the actual application of the Master Plan was not practical for Council to consider implementation. This recent experience was a caution to the planners leading the MSTW Development Plan process and therefore the scope of effort to engage in a meaningful planning dialogue for the two cities about their development aspirations was limited. In fact, municipal staff expressed some frustration about their lack of ownership and involvement in the MSTW Development Plan.

SUGGESTION: One size does not fit all and planners should distill urbanist ideas to their basic principles and then study the small city in order to assist in helping them create a sensible plan that addresses their values and circumstances. Planners must re-think how



ABOVE MSTW Planning District Board Chair Henry Siemens (Pembina Valley Online, 2013)

“There is also an understanding there’s definitely a need for urban, and there is a need for the different kinds of urban...”

- Henry Siemens, MSTW Planning District Board Chair, 2013

to formulate new urban Development Plan policies to be relevant to these communities

LESSON #2: Community objectives must also be included in the Development Plan in order to direct the evolution of the built environment in ways that promote healthy and successful towns and cities.

EXPERIENCE: In Manitoba, formal planning efforts are guided by requirements in The Planning Act. The Province requires that planning districts develop Development Plans that align with Provincial Land Use Policies (PLUPs). These PLUPs represent the essential provincial interests that must be considered when concerning the environment, natural resources, protection of agricultural lands, and infrastructure management, however, contain limited urban policies. Provincial authority over the approval of the Development Plan coupled with the absence of professional planners working with municipalities, has resulted in a local planning more focused on meeting the

provincial requirements than creating a meaningful local community plan for the future.

LESSON LEARNED: It is imperative for local jurisdictions to adopt policies in their plans to address broader goals like managing natural resources and protecting the environment, however, other community objectives must also be included in the Development Plan in order to direct the built environment to evolve in ways that promote healthy and successful towns and cities. Big city urbanist policies do not always translate well to smaller prairie cities and towns. Planners must re-think how to formulate new urban Development Plan policies to be relevant to these communities.

Conclusion

While the success of the MSTW Development Plan has yet to be determined, this case-in-point can best be summarized by repeating an earlier conclusion that there needs to be more emphasis placed on rural urban centres. As many rural communities continue to attract new

residents, the Province of Manitoba needs to ensure that approved Development Plans include appropriate guidance for responsible growth management. And since communities are all unique, a flexible and adaptable approach for individual communities, as demonstrated in the MSTW Development Plan, may be the best course of action. Flexible policies leave room for interpretation but overarching principles ensure long-term objectives are met. The policy direction may be difficult to implement effectively until professional planners are working directly for communities, municipalities, and planning districts. This is Manitoba’s challenge. □



A special thank you to Jacqueline East for her contribution and insight into this project.



Resources

Hahn, Alan J. (1970). Planning In Rural Areas. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 36.1: 44-49.

MSTW Planning District Holds Open House For New Development Plan. (2013, March 01). *Pembina Valley Online*. Retrieved from: http://www.pembinavalleyonline.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=32163%3Amstw-planning-district-holds-open-house-for-new-development-plan&Itemid=338

MSTW Planning District. (2014). *MSTW Development Plan: Strong Together*. Winnipeg, MB: Planning, Property and Development Department. Winnipeg, MB: WSP Canada Inc, Dillon Consulting.



TOP IMAGE Elevator in Winkler, Manitoba. (Train Geek, 2011) • MIDDLE IMAGE Miami Northern Pacific and Manitoba Railway Station. (The Manitoba Historical Society, 2009) • BOTTOM IMAGE Aerial Shot of Mordon, Manitoba. (Mordon Tourism, 2014)