OPASKWAYAK CREE NATION

20-Year Community Vision Master Plan: Planning & Community Engagement

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Community engagement is considered to be a critical component of urban planning which involves inclusion of varied communities to express their needs, aspirations, desires and viewpoint towards a vision of their future (Deep, 2023). Various planning approached provide ways to enhance communication in urban planning and policy development. For instance, "communicative planning" offers mechanism to support the dialogue, communication and decision making based on consensus in creating urban development projects (Hoffman, 2024). While planners increasingly recognize the importance of incorporating local knowledge and engaging communities in the planning process, sometimes the stakeholder engagement is minimal or symbolic. In many cases, community residents are asked for inputs but have little actual influence over the decision making of the project. This can be understood from the Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation where "citizen control" is defined where the communities have true authority and autonomy (Gearin and Hurt, 2024). One of the example for such planning where the community was an integral part of the planning process is the 20-Year Community Vision Master Plan developed for Opaskwayak Cree Nation in 2022.

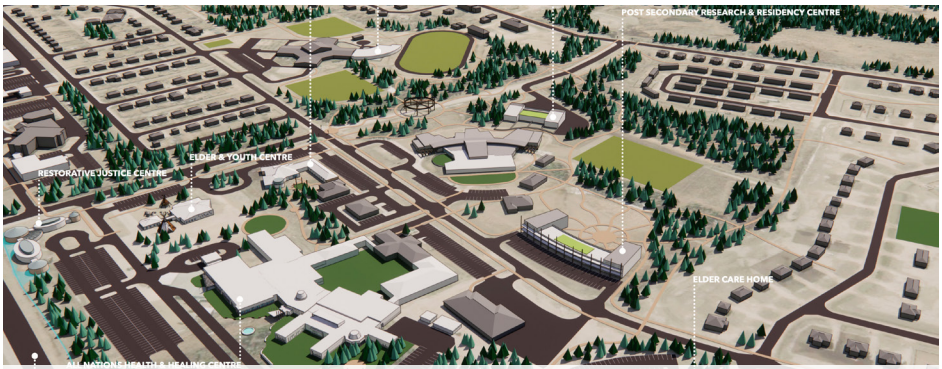

Figure 1: Axonometric of Community Hub - A

Figure 2: Elder and Youth Cultural and Wellness Centre

Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody.

Jane Jacob , 1961

1.2 OPASKWAYAK CREE NATION

OCN is a community which has rich cultural traditions that are revived and woven into every part of their community life. To create stronger and more resilient future for the community, Community Elders, Chiefs and Council, residents and youth, all play a key role. The development of the Community Vision Master Plan is a great example

of participation, openess and hard work of the Opaskwayak community members.

2.0 BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Opaskwayak Cree Nation (OCN) has a growing population of more than 6,300 members holding an area of approximately 80,000 acres of the land. The population growth in OCN has been tremendous doubling over last 30 years since 1986. The average 5 year on-reserve population growth has been 9.2% over the last 20 years whereas it's 21.1% off-reserve (HTFC, 2022). OCN (Opaskwayak Cree Nation) has long been a self-governing and culturally conscious First Nation, developing their community vision plan as early as 1977. In 2019, they planned to move ahead and create their 20-year community vision master plan.

2.1 Development Program

The Community Vision Master plan has OCN's future development needs for next 20 years. This includes the project that are already underway, planned, identified by the community for next 20 years and identified necessary by OCN Comprehensive Commuity Plan Community Vision and Future Plans survey.

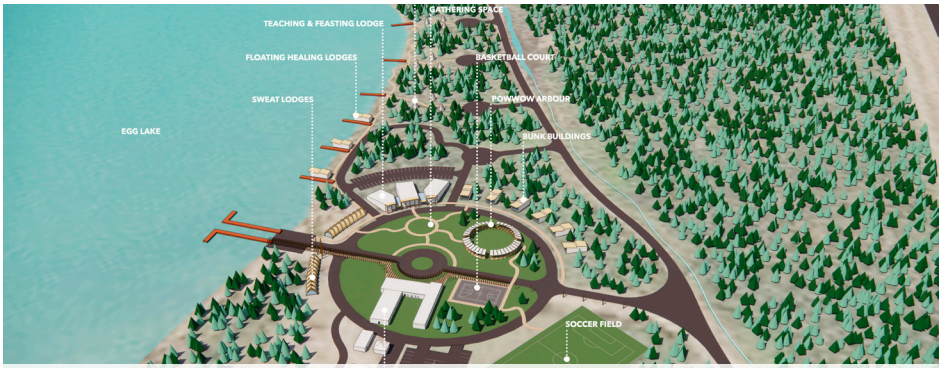

Figure 3: Axonometric of Egg Lake Community Healing Centre

Categories in development plan:

- Housing
- Civic & Community Services
- Health & Healing
- Commercial & Office
- Entertainmnet & Tourism
- Agricultural & Environmental
- Industrial
- Outdoor Recreation & Green Spaces

The Plan has been developed through multiple iterations and reviews by the community and other stakeholders. The proposed development locations are based on the best functional, ecological, operational, and financial fit, providing high-level recommendations for future projects. This document serves as a roadmap for the OCN community for developments over the next 20 years and should be regarded as a living document.

2.2 The Vision Plan

The Plan is developed considering the best planning practices including active transportation, cultural expression, efficient wayfinding, protection of special lands and servicing routes. The Master Plan is divided into several areas of development:

- Community Hub (IR 21E)

Figure 4: Project Timeline for 20-Year Community Vision Master Plan

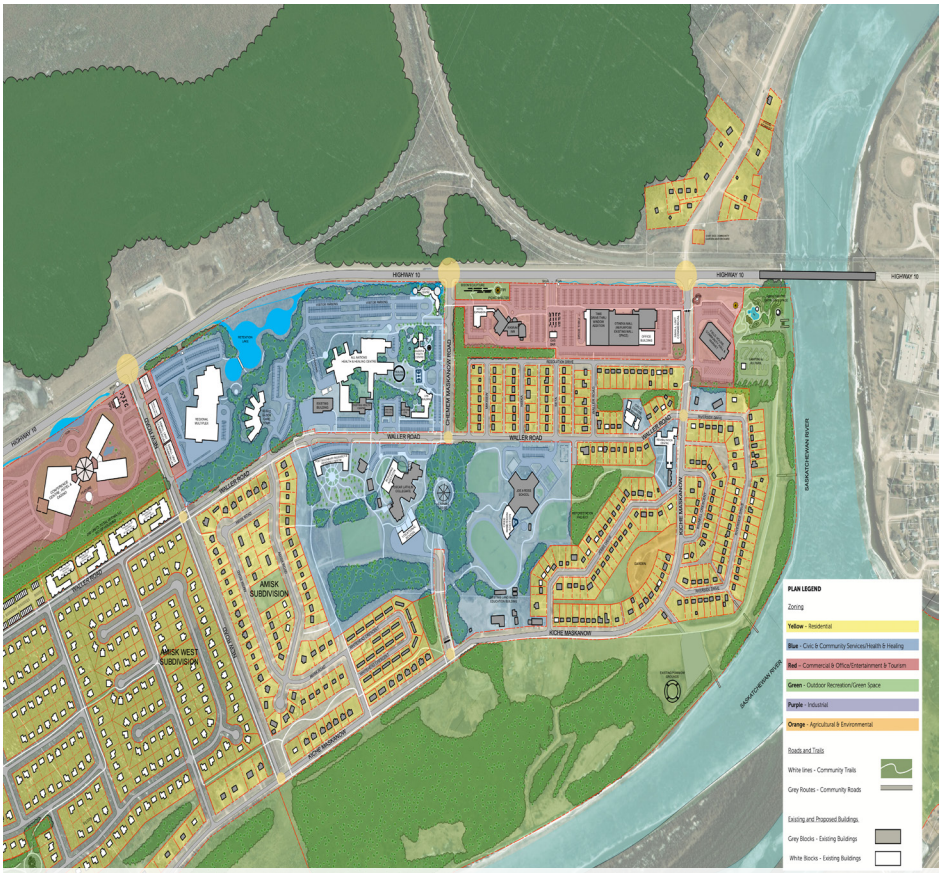

Figure 5: Plan of Community Hub - A

- Big Eddy Neighbourhood (IR 21E)
- Industrial Development Zone (IR 21E)
- Additional Residential Neighbourhood Developments:
- Agriculture:
- Cottage Developments
- Community Health & Recreation

3.0
FACTS OF THE CASE

The project was conducted in approximately one year period starting in May 2021. Figure 4 illustrates the timeline of the project where June 2021 marked the field research and identification of developement areas. The team also consulted the previous studies and survey conducted under Community Vote for Projects 100 year plan for 7 generations. Moreover, they held consultations with all the departments within the OCN governance. The first review of plans, programs and development list was conducted in June 2021 by the steering committee, while the second review of preliminary planning options were conducted in July 2021. August 2021 marked the third review of selection of preferred directions and lastly forth review was held in February 2022, during which the steering committee agreed on final directions. The project team met in February and March 2022 for final follow up meetings with various departments and presented their Vision Plan in April 2022. A community open house presentation was occurred in May 2022 , showcasing the completed master plan vision to the community, which enabled them to provide feedback to the planning team. In June 2022, the planning team submitted the final report and uploaded the details to the website specifically created for the community member to stay updated at all times.

3.1 Community Planning & Visioning Process

The master plan is developed on the basis of previous plans developed by OCN. The plan extracts information from OCN Comprehensive Community Plan (2020), OCN Land Law for Land Use and Community Plan (2009), OCN Zoning Regulation (2009), OCN Land Code (2002), the OCN First Nation Infrastructure Investment Plan (2017-2022), the UNIMA KA PIMOTAYEKOWUK OCN Strategic Plan (2014), and various OCN housing plans, along with ongoing capital projects across multiple community branches. The project followed an intensive and collaborative process to create development ideas while building strong relationships with different community departments and Chief and Council. The plan is developed through site visits and consultations with steering committes, elders, youths and different departments of OCN. As the project began amid

COVID-19 restrictions, it prevented the project team from meeting with community members until June 2021, following strict COVID protocols.

3.2 Planning Process & Community Engagement

The process included four steps:

- Getting started and setting goals
- Visioning
- Refining
- Finalizing, sharing and adopting

Examining these steps more closely will help us understand how the overall planning process and community engagement were conducted in creating this Community Master Plan.

3.2.1 Getting started and setting goals

Getting started on a project requires careful planning and the esatblishment of clear directions. The planning team started with formation of the steering committee. This lead to the next critical step of conducting research into the lands or resources to be utilized within the project. Once these aspects were established, the project team began setting project goals that aligned with the vision of the steering committee, chief and council, various departments, and OCN members. The information was dissipated within the community through the Council and social media. The aim of the engagement was to connect with all stakeholders and residents of OCN to create inclusive planning for the project. In the earlier stages of project development, meetings were held over the Zoom platform. However, as OCN has different departments and various stakeholders, it was challenging for the project team to conduct community engagements and meetings virtually. It was early July 2021, when the planning team was able to meet with the steering committee and the community in person.

The goal of this Master Plan is to foster Mino Pimâtisiwin (the good life) for Opaskwayak community members both now and for future generations.

OCN, 2022

Figure 6: Community Engagement at Open House

3.2.2 Visioning

Visioning is a collaborative process that involves engaging with all relevant departments and community contacts to gather diverse perspectives and insights. The visioning process included site tours and the development of preliminary plans. One of the first steps the project team undertook was visiting the community. This presented a challenge due to the COVID restrictions. The community was under strict lockdown and had its own checkpoints and protocols to follow. Before the team could enter the Reserve, everyone had to provide negative COVID tests and proof of immunization. But the community enagement at this stage was fruitful to create the vision of the plan.

3.2.3 Refining

Refinement is a crucial phase in which the initial project plans are thoroughly reviewed and

One of the gifts of working with Indigenous communities is their ability to think generations into the future. It's a practice we must build into our engagement and planning processes, recognizing that true, meaningful outcomes can't be rushed. The challenge, of course, is balancing these long-term considerations with the pressures of real-world timelines and expectations.

Adam Kroeker, 2025

Figure 7: Community Engagement during Plan Development

adjusted based on feedback and additional technical insights. The team engaged with the steering committee and the Chief and Council to gather their perspectives and ensure that the project remains aligned with the OCN vision. The community and the departments provided feedback that facilitated the refinement of all plans. Various stakeholder engagements, including those with the Chief and Council, took place in Winnipeg and the community.

3.2.4 Finalizing, Sharing and Adopting

This is the concluding phase, where all elements of the project come together for presentation and formal adoption. The plan was finalized by incorporating all revisions and feedback provided by community members. This stage also included the 3D models and video created for the community to visually understand the design and planning of the master plan. The team conducted an Open House during the OCN treaty days for residents and various stakeholders to review and engage for final input. Following community engagement, the feedback was incorporated back into the plan. To ensure transparency and continued engagement, the Vision Plan materials are uploaded to the community website, making the final plan easily accessible to everyone and officially adopting it as the blueprint for future development.

4.0 LESSONS LEARNED

The 20-year vision master plan is developed through comprehensive planning and community engagement. The analysis has taught me several lessons that will shape my understanding of how the project evolves and the value of community engagement in any planning process.

4.1 Respect the Rythms of Community

The development of the OCN Master Plan has provided me

with insight that planners must understand and respect the rhythms of the community. This means that working with an Indigenous community can be different in some ways than working with other neighbourhoods or communities. One example is OCN's biennial yearly election cycles. While creating the plans, the planning process was paused in September for elections, and a new Chief and Council were elected. This created significant uncertainty for the planning team where they had to present entire plan again to the new Chief and Council. Therefore, it is imperative for the team to understand how the community functions in different regions and to comply with various scenarios. Moreover, it was observed that OCN staff enjoy summer holidays outside the reserve; thus, it was recommended that stakeholder engagements be scheduled during the fall or winter season. Additionally, there are certain cultural occasions when none of the community members were available for review and engagement. As such, for a planner, it is essential to understand the community better before commencing the planning work to create efficient schedules and smooth working experience.

4.2 Inclusive Planning & Engagement

One of the most important lessons from the development of OCN Community Vision Master Plan is the different roles that community members, different departments and Chief and Council play in the planning process. The succesful planning outcome and efficient stakeholder engagements demonstrates how diverse participation contributes to successful planning processes and helps create a futuristic plan for the entire community aligning with their vision.

4.3 Interdepartmental Collaboration

OCN has various departments operating within their governance system. However, although the planning team aimed to conduct community engagement, it encountered numerous challenges stemming from limited communication, cross-departmental collaboration, and resource sharing. As the team conducted get-to-know sessions, different departments presented conflicting visions of development for specific locations within the community, which caused challenges for the planning team. Streamlining processes across different departments is essential to prevent confusion and overlaps. Moreover, resource and knowledge sharing are crucial tools for enhancing efficiency when collaborating with various stakeholders.

4.4 Follow Rigorous process

It is crucial to adhere to rigorous processes for both planning and stakeholder engagement within a project's timeframe. While it's easy to become sidetracked by new opportunities during a project, prioritizing careful and ethical planning and community engagement is essential. Planners must understand that effective planning and community

Figure 8: Community Engagement during Plan Development

Seven Sacred Teachings ~ Love, Respect, Honesty, Wisdom, Humility, Truth, and Courage.

OCN, 2025

Figure 9: All Nations Health & Healing Centre Perspective

engagement require time and effort, and these processes should never be rushed. To establish a community vision, recommendations must originate from the heart of the community, necessitating proper planning and time management.

4.5 Feedback oriented processes

Another important lesson that I learned from this project is incoporating community feedback into the deveopment process is the key to succesful inclusionary planning. Incoporating feedback from the community is an essential part of the development of this plan. The website created for this project is also serves as a tool for community engagement, allowing residents to stay informed about the project's progress and provide timely feedback on its development. This project further taught me that it is our responsibility as a planner to engage as many people as possible in the plan and explore ways to invite their involvement.

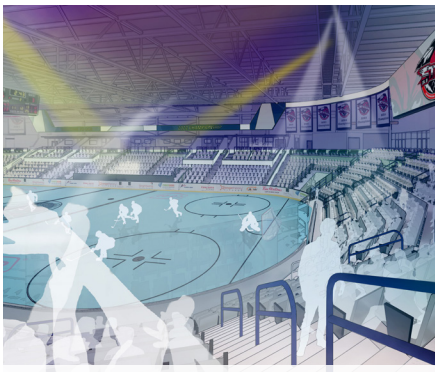

Figure 10: Regional Multiplex Perspective

5.0 FINAL THOUGHTS

Gaining an understanding of the planning and community engagement processes involved in creating the OCN Community Vision Master Plan offers valuable insight into how these processes function in tandem. By involving diverse stakeholders, the collaboration between planning and engagement ensures the project's success. This project clearly demonstrated that a successful initiative does not solely rely on efficient planning ideologies or technical considerations but also hinges on the diverse perspectives of the community. It is essential for a project to have transparent, robust, rigorous, and inclusive processes, as well as the capacity to complete the development task. One of the lesson I learned from this project is that planning does not follow a straight forward written pathway, so planner must be ready to address challenging situations and improvise to the best of their abilities. In this case, community engagement at the time of pandemic. It is also important to recognize that no two communities are similar. Therefore, every project requires a tailored approach for its succesful completion. As a planner, it is our responsibility to understand the dynamics of a community, its political stance, and how the community engages within the

A plan can only truly belong to the community if it reflects their voices. Without meaningful involvement, the final outcome risks feeling disconnected from their input.

Adam Kroeker, 2025

process. Achieving meaningful engagement within a diverse community, overcoming barriers and interacting with different departments and stakeholders is no easy task, however, the success of this project highlights the effectiveness of its planning processes.

Another aspect of this project was the enlightenment of various elements, such as ecological and nature-based development solutions, derived from the embedded Indigenous Knowledge. My collaborator in this research noted that the feedback from the Indigenous community is rich in environmental wisdom, which greatly benefits the plan. Incorporating this knowledge into a project paves the way for success.

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FIGURES

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