

# Town of Okotoks Commercial Developer/Realtor Roundtable Report

## An Introduction

The Town of Okotoks, within its Economic Development Strategic Plan, has set business retention and expansion (BRE) as a priority. A BRE program helps to ensure that the existing businesses in Okotoks continue to survive and grow, resulting in a healthy economic environment which will attract future investment. Traditional BRE activities include surveys of the business community, either online or as individual interviews. The strategic plan identified specific target sectors with the most optimal opportunity for growth; Commercial Developers/Realtors, Health Care Businesses, Home Based businesses, Professional, Scientific and Tech Services, Retail and Construction Businesses. The Economic Development Business Center decided to hold roundtable discussions for each sector, allowing for discussion of issues, challenges and solutions relevant to each participant.

The roundtable structure provides an opportunity for the Town of Okotoks to build relationships with businesses to determine what is working and not working within their business sector, provide potential solutions and learn their future plans for expansion. This information validates activities and priorities for the Town of Okotoks, while taking into account the Economic Strategic Plan, and helps foster improved communication between the Town and the business community.

Forty Commercial Developers and Commercial Realtors were invited to the first roundtable held in the Town Municipal office on July 10, 2019. Fourteen people attended the in-person event and 3 businesses contributed to the conversation at a later date with Economic Development staff.

This report does four things:

1. Provides a summary of ideas, challenges and potential solutions to ensure the town maintains a supportive small business climate.
2. Provides the transcribed notes from the roundtable session.
3. Provides feedback to the Town of Okotoks as to how they can assist and partner with industry sectors to achieve success and reduce “red tape”.
4. Provides an action plan for Economic Development for Business Retention and Expansion projects.

**A note to readers:** Thank you to all that participated in these conversations. We are grateful to those who shared experiences, ideas and solutions in this process and helped deepen our understanding of the complexities.

### What We Asked

There were several key topic areas that we wanted feedback:

1. Development and building permit process
2. Land use bylaw
3. Infrastructure
4. Costs
5. Training and Workforce
6. Innovation and Change

Within these topic areas we aimed to understand what is working, what is not, what barriers exist and gather feedback on possible solutions.

We also asked participants to tell us the kind of support they need from the Economic Development team to grow their business.

Finally, participants were encouraged to share their experiences of best practices when working in other municipalities and detail how their processes differ from Okotoks.



## What We Heard

Participants were asked to share their experiences, ideas and challenges regarding the key topic areas. The following section details what we heard, the themes that emerged and analysis of the feedback provided. The transcribed notes from the session can be found in **Appendix A**.

A followup questionnaire was sent to participants to expand on general comments that were made at the roundtable, as an action plan cannot be built on broad statements. These can be found in **Appendix B**.

## Question 1

### **Development/Building Permit Process**

Development Services is investigating a one-stop shop for permits and licensing. We want to know more about your suggestions for making the process as seamless as possible. What are the issues you have encountered, and what are your solutions to make it better?

### **Timelines**

One of the main themes that emerged from participant feedback involved timelines. Seven participants provided comments that centred on timelines including lengthy processes for tenants, permits and responses from the Town. Suggestions for timeline improvements included:

- Adopting a team approach to approvals
- Offering more than one meeting per month
- Conducting fewer studies that take up too much time and resources. Only if absolutely necessary versus “nice to have” (discretionary versus absolute)
- Simplifying processes
- Making decisions faster
- Mandatory timelines for administration to respond
- Scaling the process to the size of the Town versus similar processes to big cities like Calgary
- Giving staff the authority to make decision within certain parameters
- Empower staff to make quicker decisions
- A shift in mindset to “making things happen” versus preventing them from happening

### **Communications**

There were a number of comments that related to communications and accuracy of information. Participants shared that they have received inconsistent messages. To improve communications and messaging consistency, participants suggested:

- Training staff to deliver consistent and accurate information
- Assign a point person that works with developers

Within this same theme, participants shared the importance of external communications in order to clarify the Town’s strategic direction. One participant stated, “Be clear on the Town’s direction – small town versus growth oriented.” We heard a number of participants comment that the Town needs to improve their approach and reputation for truly being “open for business.”

### **Process**

In terms of development and building processes, participants shared general comments such as, “cut the red tape” and “excessive red tape,” and were asked to be more specific in their response. Participants who provided this information felt the Town’s processes are too

complicated resulting in delays and lengthy timelines. Suggestions for improving processes overall included:

- Asking for assistance from larger cities such as Calgary, Cochrane, Airdrie, High River
- Looking at other municipalities to figure out how to streamline the system (for more detailed information on this suggestion please see page 12)
- Implementing an online portal system for updates and one location to view documentation
- Simplifying the tenant versus developer process
- Creating a short list for application processes (simplify steps, visually appealing, plain language)
- Pre-application process (informal/initial “gut feel”), clarifying timing during pre-application
- Clarifying roles of Town staff
- Building flexibility into processes
- Employing a more dynamic review process
- Identify processes that aren’t working and update them
- Develop a tracking path for approvals/rejection

## Signage

Participants also shared that there are improvements to be made on signage bylaws. One participant noted there are discrepancies with certain business signage. Visibility was another issue identified. Participants offered these ideas to improve the issues around signage:

- Building and signage need to be visible
- Standardize the size of signs
- Loosen restrictions on for sale/for lease signage
- Allow more signage for advertising even if some is temporary

## Other Comments

A number of participants also shared other feedback that included:

- Excessive landscaping requirements
- Considerations for economic demand
- Competition with Calgary
- Make criteria for letter of credit easier and more flexible
- More trust with developers
- Consistent decisions from lawmakers

## Question 2

### **Land Use Bylaw**

Do you have ideas on new zoning considerations as the Land Use Bylaw is being reviewed?

### **Number of Zones**

*“When you start regulating you kill innovation” ~ Roundtable participant*

Participants cited issues with the number of zone categories and suggested fewer zones as a way to stimulate economic development in the Town. One participant shared this idea: shift from restrictions to incentives in order to achieve Municipal Development Plan vision.

### **Language and Understanding**

Participants want the Town to consider simplifying bylaw language in order to build understanding. For example, one participant said, “I-3 is ambiguous and restrictive” and another commentator said, “I-1S is very restrictive.”

### **Process**

Participants expressed frustration about processes while citing the following examples:

- Limitations/restrictions on land use bylaw makes minimum difficult to achieve
- Municipal Planning Commission needs to be more responsive

Several solutions were discussed among participants. They included:

- Working together and providing incentives to reach the Town’s vision
- Developing a basic template
- Allowing less discretionary uses as this process takes longer than permitted use
- Increasing permitted uses
- Amending to a permitted use if a discretionary use is approved
- Revising the list of permitted and discretionary users
- Reviewing the development permit process in line with tenants
- Revising the process of discretionary use going to Council
- Having easy discussions with bylaw officers versus an onerous process
- Loosening the restrictions
- Giving the power to staff to approve bay and use of already approved use/space (internal)
- Empowering staff to be more flexible

## Parking

Parking was another strong theme that emerged from the discussions. One participant stated that parking restrictions are too complicated. Additionally, we heard that parking is an issue on small parcels. Another comment centred on the aesthetics of parking lots and suggested adding trees. Several participants shared suggestions for improvement including:

- Review parking strategies
- Remove parking restrictions
- Increase parking lots
- Allow businesses to determine what they need for parking rather than the Town mandating parking
- Trust business owner to determine parking needs

## Appeal Board

Participants also shared feedback about the Development Appeal Board and one participant stated that the appeal process is cumbersome. Suggestions for improvement are:

- Change the Development Appeal Board by ensuring people are qualified and have met criteria
- Restrictions as to who can appeal (people who are directly affected) and increasing appeal fee

## Address Vacancies

Some participants felt strongly about addressing existing vacancies as opposed to developing more land. One participant shared that there are several lots sitting empty and the Town should focus efforts on expanding the tax base by filling what is already there. “Stop new development and use what’s here,” was one comment we heard in support of this view. Question 5, page 10 details information about use restrictions specifically not allowing retail in industrial areas.



### Question 3

#### **Infrastructure**

What considerations need to be taken by the town to ensure infrastructure is meeting the needs of business requests?

#### **Water**

The major theme that emerged from the discussions about infrastructure centred on water. The participants think there is a perception that a water shortage exists in the Town of Okotoks. One participant noted that residential water conservation also contributes to the water shortage perception. Another participant shared that the stigma attached to water in Okotoks slows commercial development. Participants offered the following suggestions to help mitigate this issue:

- Put a hard deadline on resolving the water issue (will change perception)
- Education and awareness on actual water situation. Create a page on website specifically for water (commercial)
- Define water capacity versus permits for water

#### **Development**

Participants shared their ideas about development and infrastructure and it was noted that development should be focused where services already exist. We also heard that proper sewage and drainage are needed on existing properties. One participant suggested that more commercial is needed in residential areas.

#### **Bylaw**

One participant shared that in their experience bylaw is not responding to concerns. Another comment heard suggested a bylaw for businesses is needed to keep property maintained and streets clear.

#### **Other comments**

Additional comments included:

- Better snow removal/dumping process locations reviewed
- Underground services need to be sized for ultimate growth
- Communication for retrofitting. For example, Telus. No notice given that installation was beginning and it happened too fast and errors were made.



#### Question 4

##### **Costs**

How does the cost of doing business in the Town of Okotoks compare to other municipalities?

Participants had suggestions to streamline the process and lower costs:

- One fee/flat fee for building permits and development permits and signage
- Eliminate additional fees such as permits, signage, historical documents and data, etc.
- Consistent fee schedule
- Lower development cost regarding infrastructure in order to keep lease rates lower
- Not charging tax on bays that are empty
- Lower property taxes for tenants

Timeframes were another theme that emerged when discussing costs. One participant would like to see multi year budgeting for the Town while another participant suggested focusing on shorter terms goals in order to keep costs competitive with other municipalities.

Other comments from the cost discussion included:

- Commercial tax assessments
- Margin compression
- Transparency and accountability on levies
- Over engineering subdivisions. For example, less water usage should equal smaller pipes

*“Accountability and transparency on offsite levies and where money is being spent. Reinvest back into the community.” ~ Roundtable participant*

## Question 5

### **Commercial Property Requests**

Are there requests for commercial property that cannot be met? What are those requests?

The discussion about requests for commercial property that are not being met centred on use restrictions. One participant proposed that use restrictions be removed while another suggested that uses need to be updated. It was also suggested that retail be allowed in industrial areas. One participant provided retail examples such as, “butcher, small welding, trailer sales and maintenance/repair, retail with yard use.” Another participant noted that businesses including cannabis retail, hot tub retail, a bike shop and shared workspace were not successful in approval due to use restrictions.

Discretionary use was another theme that arose from this discussion. Participants suggested discretionary use of existing zoning and simplifying discretionary use of tenant space. A specific request was brought forward to, “Allow/provide small commercial lots (15,000 square feet and under) for sale.”

## Question 6

### **Support from Economic Development**

How can we help? What role should the Town have in assisting with selling/developing commercial property?

### **Marketing and promotion**

One of the main themes emerging from this discussion focused on marketing and Economic Development providing marketing support. One participant noted that other than the downtown core, there is not a lot of promotion and support provided by the Town. Other areas to provide marketing support included:

- The message that water is here and we’re open for business
- Cost sharing for joint marketing initiatives

- Help to sell out of town businesses to the “Okotoks advantage” and highlight developments
- Drone footage of communities and commercial districts for promotional purposes and made available for businesses to use
- Capitalize further on sports by additional promotion and allowing indoor uses in commercial spaces
- Educate owners on Economic Development’s value proposition and service offerings
- Create a graphic representation for the steps to opening a business in Okotoks
- Physical changes such as addresses more visible for new businesses

### Business directories and inventories

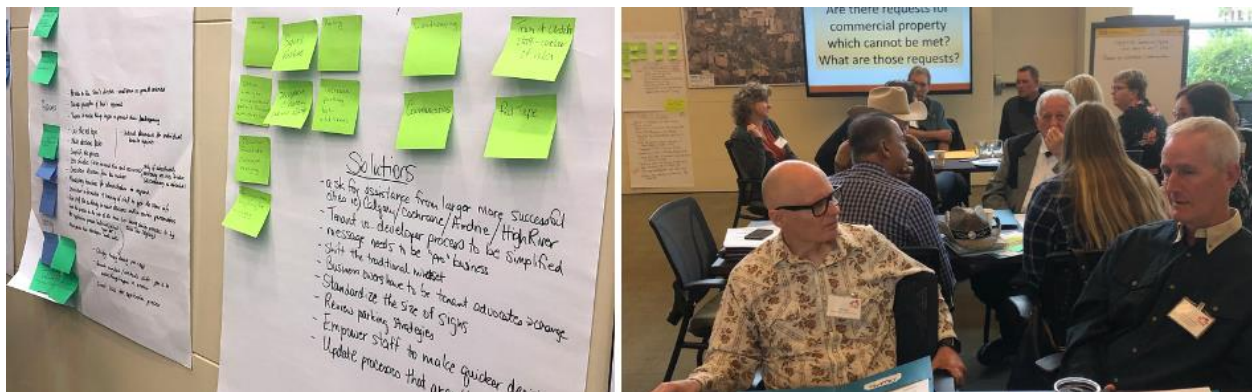
Participants told us that a business directory and inventory of lease vacancies would support the business community. One commentator suggested the Town help to bring awareness to the lease vacancy report. Another recommendation was brought forth to use a marketing platform that is easily accessible to post vacancies.

### Engagement and Support

One of the themes that emerged when discussing the role of Economic Development supporting businesses was engagement. One participant suggested roundtable discussions for hot button issues such as I-15 communities. Participants also want to see improvement in closing the loop with stakeholders who were involved in the engagement process. Please see page 15 Considerations for Future Engagement for more information.

It was also noted that one participant would like to see a team in place to support tenants. Others suggested a need to support developers on who and how to refer their potential tenants to open their business. Better communication support was another suggestion heard; sharing intel, sending prospects to business community and level the playing field by sending information out via email to everyone.

*“Are there ways we can work together?” ~ Roundtable participant*



## Question 7

### **Innovation and Change**

What suggestions do you have as innovation continues to change society and workplace? Co-working, business incubation, autonomous vehicles, working from home, are just some of the trends in the future. How will these trends affect commercial space, and how can the Town of Okotoks prepare for these changes?

### **Workspaces**

A strong theme related to physical workspaces emerged when participants were asked to give suggestions about innovation and the future of workplaces. One participant shared that they would like to see collaborative spaces versus competitive spaces. It was suggested that the Town create and allow for more co-working spaces as well as space for satellite offices. One solution brought forth for shared workspaces was to allow for mixed-use zoning.

### **Infrastructure**

One participant stated that infrastructure for new technology is absolutely necessary. The example given included charging stations.

### **Change the perception of Okotoks**

This theme emerged in other discussions, but in relation to innovation and future workspaces participants felt that in order to be forward thinking and innovative the Town must remove the stigma they are not “pro business.” The majority of comments to support change included zoning for the future by reducing the amount of restrictions to show support for developers.

## Question 8

### **Increase hiring of local sub-trades**

What steps can be taken to increase the hiring of local sub-trades in commercial construction projects?

Participants suggested several ideas to increase the hiring of local sub-trades. These included:

- Creating a list of local trades on the Town website – a business directory, everyone who has a business license should be listed through Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software
- Updating the list to keep it current and share with developers so potential tenants can refer to it
- Training for sub-contractors and being prepared for larger contracts
- Networking opportunities to communicate what and who are available
- Include it as part of the business license process to show qualifications

## Additional Questions

### **Are there other municipalities that have provided easier processes to develop? What's the difference?**

Participants suggested several municipalities the Town could review in order to compare and learn about their development processes.

Cochrane	Transparent with hitting timelines and business involvement, online portal. Have a Cochrane Development Liaison Group – town communicates monthly with CAO/Mayor involvement
Edmonton	Land use changes, 15 minutes and invited to specific time instead of entire Council meeting.
Grande Prairie	A mirror to Okotoks in terms of population (70K) demographic, farm history, small downtown, big industrial and residential. Big stores are there (Costco). The whole process is easier.
High River	Development permits and Occupancy permit much easier to obtain
Kelowna	Mayor phoned with personal thank you for a job well done.
Red Deer County	
Saskatoon	No development permits.
Red Deer	Developers are allowed a relationship with the CAO. Any issue in the development process could be addressed.

*“Most municipalities lay out the red carpet to attract business to expand the tax base.” ~ Roundtable participant*

### **What are the barriers that have limited growth of your business in Okotoks?**

Although not directly asked in the other roundtable questions, many of the existing barriers that have limited business growth were discussed and have been recorded in this report. Those that answered this final question listed the following barriers:

- The need for more retail
- Allowing more signage for advertising even if temporary
- Too many zones
- Discretionary uses are too subjective
- Restrictions in land use bylaws
- Lack of collaboration with Administration

Some participants suggested solutions such as:

- Combine zoning and add permitted uses/discretionary uses
- Administration needs to shift from putting up barriers to helping find solutions
- Need more flexibility overall
- Better communication
- Move decisions and reviews forward much more quickly (specifically regarding land use bylaw changes)

*“Why develop more land with the same level of restrictions?” ~ Roundtable participant*

### **Other Comments**

A few commentators spoke about the uncertainty and risk that developers are facing. It should be noted that while these comments do not fit into a specific theme, they provide important context for the Town. These comments included:

- Too much risk for developers – need to share with Town, pilot certain areas, partnership
- Uncertainty is what is affecting business success

Overall, there was a desire for the Town to work with each business and be cognizant of their individual needs.

## Considerations for Future Engagement

In order to adjust and adapt our engagement processes going forward, we wanted to understand how participants would like to be engaged in the future.

Participants told us that closing the feedback loop is important. Stakeholders want to see a connection between input and actions. When asking stakeholders for input, provide rationale as to the feedback used and considered. This will demonstrate how engagement influenced decision making.

### **What does this look like in action?**

Participants have an opportunity to review draft report before it goes to Council.

Clearly define the decision making process and where the public/stakeholders have an opportunity for input.

## Feedback on the Roundtable Process

From the feedback we received from the session survey, 100% of respondents answered “yes” when asked, “Did today’s agenda clearly articulate the outcome expected?”

In addition, participants provided the following comments:

***Thanks for making the attempt at change!***

*Look forward to actual follow up and positive changes to see both the Town and business flourish.*

***Well done.***

*Great format and structure.*

***If we can better understand Economic Development’s value proposition we can leverage that and work together.***

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## APPENDIX A

### Transcribed Notes

#### Question 1

##### **Development/Building Permit Process**

The Economic Development business center is working towards a one-stop shop for permits and licensing. We want to know more about your suggestions for making the process as seamless as possible. What are the issues you have encountered, and what are your solutions to make it better?

##### **Issues**

Effect timing to move parts of permit forward when they can

Quicker response, delayed replying

Process too lengthy for tenants

Timely response

Takes too long

Time frame for permits

Team approach to approvals – meetings only 1/month

Signage problems

Discrepancies with certain business signage

Increase parking lot

Add trees

Rules to land zoning

Excessive landscaping requirements

Depending who you talk to you get different information

Inconsistent messages from development

Excessive red tape – asking for more information than worthwhile

Complicated

Town of Okotoks staff – unclear of roles

Red tape

Economic demand

Competition with Calgary

Signage visibility

Limitations/restrictions on land use by-law makes min far difficult to achieve

Tracking path to approval/rejection

Criteria for letter of credit refund

Land Use by laws

Large developments warrant attention – there are differences between a \$3000 project vs. 25 million

Response on phone calls – sometimes can be up to 4-5 days before a call is returned

Why is the town involved in development?

### **Solutions**

Ask for assistance from larger, more successful cities. For example, Calgary, Cochrane, Airdrie, High River

Look at other municipalities to figure out how to streamline the system

Tenant versus developer process to be simplified

Message needs to be “pro” business

Shift the traditional mindset

Business owners have to be tenant advocates – change

Standardize the size of signs

Review parking strategies

Empower staff to make quicker decisions

Update processes that aren't working

Online portal for updates

Online portal- one location to see everything

Digital documents versus archives

Build flexibility into processes

More dynamic review process

More trust with developers

Already working with guidelines provided

Building and signage need to be visible

“Open for business” need to know they are there

Delayed process takes years

Make criteria for letter of credit easier/more flexible

Be clear on the Town's direction – small town versus growth oriented

Change perception of Town's approach

Purpose to make things happen versus prevent them from happening

Cut the red tape

Make decisions faster

Simplify the process

Less studies (takes too much time and resources) – only if absolutely necessary versus nice to have (discretionary versus absolute)

Consistent decisions from lawmakers

Mandatory timelines for administration to respond

Consistent information – training staff to get the same info

Give staff the authority to make decision within certain parameters

Scale the process to the size of the Town – versus similar processes to big cities like Calgary

Pre-application process (informal/initial “gut feel”), clarifying timing during pre-app

Point person that developers work with

Growth mindset/attitude shift – job is to make things happen versus prevent

Short lists for application process

Certainty needed that staff will be held to set timelines – more time means more money to a developer

Have 2 streams for development – one for large commercial developments and the other for smaller projects

Develop culture of change; staff success is dependent on client success

Allow conversation with management

Staff members must have more authority and Council has to be strong enough to support it.

## Question 2

### **Land Use Bylaw**

Do you have ideas on new zoning considerations for land acquired by the town?

Limit number of categories

Fewer zones

Regulation kills innovation – less regulation

Working together – incentives for each vision

Give basic template and allow developers room

Too much risk for developers – need to share with Town, pilot certain areas, partnership

Shift from restrictions to incentives in order to achieve MDP visions

### **Issues**

Bylaw KISS

Bylaw – not easy language

Bylaw informal engagement

Bylaw open forum

Less discretionary uses – process takes longer versus permitted use

Bylaw – curb Development Appeal Board

I1S – very restrictive

I-3 use is ambiguous and restrictive

Retail versus warehouse/office

Bylaw MPC – more responsive

Dart board method

Parking too complicated

Leave parking requirements open for discussion between the developer and the town. Town is saying what is needed according to bylaw, but this may not reflect the needs of the development.

### **Solutions**

Keep language simple

Increase permitted uses

If a discretionary use is approved, amend to a permitted use

Have easy discussions with bylaw officers versus onerous process

Restrictions as to who can appeal (people who are directly affected) and increasing appeal fee  
Change quality of appeal board (make sure they are qualified/have to meet criteria)

Loosen restrictions

Cochrane is transparent with hitting timelines and business involvement

Revise the list of permitted and discretionary users

Review the DP process in line with tenants

Why does the discretionary use have to go to Council?

Give the power to approve bay and use of already approved use/space (internal)

Empower staff to be more flexible

Uncertainty is what is affecting business success

Longest municipality to determine rules/regulations with cannabis business

Rent out what is already built before more land is developed – lots of empty lots

Stop new development – use what's here

Address tax vacancy considerations – more substantial

Open houses are “socials” – good for the public but not the developer

Make fee higher for appeal (\$5000-\$10000) – shouldn't be the place to get approval – get it done at the town level

2-3 commercial zones – allow development and planning staff the ability to fit the business into the appropriate zone. The onus is on the developer to provide a good case for development.

### Question 3

#### **Infrastructure**

What considerations need to be taken by the town to ensure infrastructure is meeting the needs of business requests?

Resolve water issue

Return flow credits UPC

Perception – capacity versus permits for water

Roads are expensive

Underground services sized for ultimate growth

Put a hard deadline on resolving the water issue (will change perception)

Education and awareness on actual water situation – make page on website specifically for water (commercial)

Get return flow credits with this government

More commercial in residential areas

Set shorter term goals (vs 60 year goals) and keep costs competitive with other municipalities

Push development to where services exist

Build roads once

Realistic in your timeframes

Stigma of lack of water slows development down (commercial side)

Communication for retrofitting – for example, Telus. Happened too fast, errors made

Parking for smaller parcels is an issue. Trust the business to know what they need

Proper sewage/drainage on existing properties

No notice of Telus putting in fibre

Southbank Blvd and connect to Highway 7  
Bylaw for business to keep property maintained and streets clear  
Bylaw isn't responding to concerns  
Better snow removal/dumping process locations reviewed  
Remove parking restrictions/leave to discuss with developer and tenant  
Look at every business and work towards individualized needs  
Marketing money to assist businesses  
Collective marketing processes

#### Question 4

##### **Costs**

How does the Town of Okotoks compare to other municipalities as far as fees needed to begin and continue and business in Okotoks?

Lower development cost regarding infrastructure in order to keep lease rates lower  
One fee/flat fee (BP/DP)  
Consistent set/fee schedule, not based on opinion (based on paperwork)  
Get rid of additional fees such as for pulling permits, signage, historical documents/data, etc.  
One fee for DP/signage/extra charging  
Commercial tax assessments  
No taxes on empty bays  
Margin compression  
Transparency and accountability on levy's  
Over engineering subdivisions. For example, less water usage = smaller pipes  
Lessen property taxes for tenants, looks at cost base  
Multi year budgeting  
Time is more important than money  
One fee to cover all that is required to prevent constant returns.  
Review of Performance Security Agreements – exists in other municipalities but could be a way to differentiate Okotoks

#### Question 5

##### **Commercial Property Requests**

Are there requests for commercial property that cannot be met? What are those requests?

Discretionary use of existing zoning  
Cannabis retail, hot tub, bike, shared work spaces  
Cumbersome appeal process  
How do we change rules? Process?  
Allow retail uses in industrial areas. For example, butcher, small welding, trailer sales and maintenance/repair, retail with yard use, etc.  
Bring uses up to date

Allow/provide small commercial lots (15,000 sqft and under) for sale  
Remove use restrictions  
Simplify discretionary use of tenant space

## Question 6

### **Support from Economic Development**

How can we help? What role should the Town have in assisting with selling/developing commercial property?

Help sell value of business community beyond taxes  
Inventory of lease vacancies  
Bring awareness to the lease vacancy report  
Summary of steps required – reduce list  
Addresses clearer for new business – on website multiple addresses  
EDC/MPC rowing in same direction  
Loosen restrictions on for sale/for lease signage  
Drone footage of communities and commercial districts to be used by anyone to promote Okotoks  
Allow landlords and businesses to decide where they want to be versus arbitrary decisions by Town staff (one zoning: commercial)  
Parking- business decision, not town  
Roundtables for “hot issues” (such as I15) for commercial communities  
Business directory  
Marketing platforms to post vacancies  
Upload business space and use on a website that is easily accessible (ie. Cochrane)  
Team to strictly support tenants versus developers  
Support to developers on who/how to refer their potential tenants to open business  
Help sell out of town businesses to “Okotoks advantage” and highlight our development  
Joint marketing initiatives? Grant money to attract businesses?  
Educate owners on ED value proposition/service offering  
Economic development should be a major contributor to the new bylaw  
Need to see formal proposal going to Council for first reading in July  
Communication – share intel, sending prospects our way, even playing field (send info via email blast)  
Are there ways we can work together?  
Cost sharing joint marketing?  
List of property for sale/lease  
Business directory once/year  
Engagement from Economic Development on a consistent basis so they become a conduit to senior leadership.

## Question 7

### **Innovation and Change**

What suggestions do you have as innovation continues to change society and workplace?  
How will these trends affect commercial space, and how can the Town of Okotoks prepare for these changes?

Infrastructure for new technology. Get ready for it now. For example, charging stations, super chargers

Shared workplaces – impact bylaws, zoning for this, should be addressed by mixed use zoning

Remove the stigma that Okotoks is hard to open business

Reputation is “not” pro business

Reduce/lessen the amount of zone restrictions to show there is support for developers

Zoning is obsolete. Making them reflective for the future

Create/allow co-working spaces (more of them)

Elevated work stations

Create collaborative spaces versus competitive spaces

Space for satellite offices

Biggest employer in Okotoks is Education as per past census – on the right track with the campus

Capitalize further on the sports – brag more about it, allow indoor uses in commercial spaces

Communities are being structures with more commercial nodes so their needs are met where they live. Rules tell developers what can go there, rather than a developer finding out what people need.

## Question 8

### **Increase hiring of local sub-trades**

What steps can be taken to increase the hiring of local sub-trades in commercial construction projects?

Create a list of local trades on website – again a business directory, everyone who has a business license should be listed through CRM

Training for sub-contractors and being prepared for larger contracts

Make it part of business license process to show what qualifications they have (optional for information only)

Qualified

Quality workmanship

Communication on what/who is available – networking

Scale – larger projects

Given a list of local trades?

Developers know about local sub-trades and can refer potential tenants

Share these lists and keep them current

## Additional Questions

### **Are there other municipalities which have provided easier processes to develop? What's the difference?**

Saskatoon – no DP

Edmonton – land use changes (15 mins, invited to specific time instead of entire Council meeting)

Kelowna – Mayor phoned with personal thank you for a job well done.

Grande Prairie – a mirror to Okotoks in terms of population (70K) store, etc, demographic (young), farm history, Costco, big stores are there, small downtown, big industrial and residential, whole process is easier

ED goes to ICSC Whistler every year!

Yes, most municipalities lay out the red carpet to attract business to expand the tax base

Love what you've done in High River. Confident you can get past all of Okotoks' red tape and be open for business

High River – DP and OP much easier to obtain!

Red Deer County

### **What are the barriers that have limited growth of your business in Okotoks?**

Need retail in our area

Need to allow more signage for advertising even if some temporary

Southbank Blvd

Zoning – too many

Discretionary uses too subjective

Administration – not collaborative, put up barriers instead of looking for solutions

Combine zoning, add permitted uses/discretionary uses

Think outside the box – make businesses wanting to lease space an easier process than currently in place

Restrictions in land use bylaws

### **General comments:**

Just need more flexibility overall. Better communication.

Move decisions/reviews forward much more quickly (specifically regarding land use bylaw changes)

### **Define success:**

Close the loop. Why or why NOT. For example, bylaw review came back and it's more restrictive  
Presentation of findings after there has been engagement – need to close the gap with the people who came to give their input

Want to see draft report or recommendations

Decision making process and where the public/stakeholders have an opportunity for input

Council is final decision maker

**Post workshop survey:**

Did today's agenda clearly articulate the outcome expected?

Yes

Yes

Yes

Thanks for making the attempt at change!

Look forward to actual follow up and positive changes to see both the Town and business flourish

Well done

## APPENDIX B

### **Development/Building Permit Process**

1. Offering more than one meeting per month (for what purpose and how many?)
  - Jurisdictions that have a number of applications within their system should be more accommodating in having a regularly scheduled meeting every two weeks.
  - One meeting a month is plenty - one a quarter would be ideal.
  - Burnswest has had limited experience in the DP/BP approvals process with the Town. We can confirm that our most recent experience (this Spring) was positive. Timely responses from the file manager and target schedule was maintained.
  
2. Simplifying processes (how can it be simplified?)
  - One stop shop for all permits/uses/parking/development/signage
  - Reduce the number of land use categories. Broader uses in each category. Invite all City departments to one meeting to outline all their concerns or suggestions. What hurts is when time frames are extended because new items are introduced after the first iteration of the plans have been reviewed and amendments have been made and resubmitted.
  - Clarifying what/if there are different processes for each type of application and outlining clearly milestone expectations throughout the application process (ie. Outline complete application process and schedule – clarify who the Approving Authority is per application (ie sometimes it's Administration, sometimes it's the MPC and sometimes its Council)
  
3. Making decisions faster (what is a reasonable time frame?)
  - The question arises when a planner has to go to other parties in order to verify a decision; that is when it falls off the rail. A reasonable timeframe to make decisions is generally within the week that is asked, or at the very worst, within 2 weeks.
  - Less than 30 days total for all permits, etc.
  - As more of an investor than a “hands on” developer I attended to support the local business/development community as I am constantly being told how difficult it is to go through the development process in the Town of Okotoks. It

doesn't matter whether it is an existing building owner trying to change a use for a new tenant or a brand new development in town – the applicant is almost always frustrated by the cumbersome process of multiple permits and personnel that they must deal with. In fact I was reminded of this again recently by a local Okotoks building owner who built a large new building in Warner Business Park and appreciated dealing with the MD. I would think 30-60days for initial review.

- I would think 30-60days for initial review.
  - Timing of decisions should somewhat be based on permit type. For larger more complex applications (perhaps multi unit buildings) its 60 days from application acceptance to approval and for more straightforward (streamlined?) applications such as single family homes or tenant improvements its 15 or 30 days from acceptance to decision
4. Simplifying the tenant versus developer process (what is the difference?)
- Developing a block of land is very different process than a tenant wanting to use a space for their business. Time frames should be adjusted to reflect that. Shorter for tenants.
  - I suspect that what is being referred to is the higher frequency, short term tenant deals in a leased building and the tighter timeframes that go with these deals. If a tenant is put through a lengthy process they will go elsewhere and the deal will not occur. I don't have experience what this process is like in Okotoks however.
5. Giving staff the authority to make decision within certain parameters (what parameters are reasonable?)
- The parameters are fairly simple – there is a development control by-law and also the parameters are essentially within the by-law given the fact that most jurisdictions have a fair amount of leeway given to their staff.
  - More permitted uses vs Discretionary could solve this one.
  - Planners should have discretion as to use and where variances are permitted where the bylaw states “should and not shall” and an appeal process also needs to apply.
  - I think staff should be given some leeway to override rules and uses if the intent and vision for the district remains intact or is improved. Maybe have a committee of informed Councillors that can give consent to override a rule without it having to go to council?

6. Clarifying roles of Town staff (For what staff? How does this improve the process?)
- Jurisdictions generally have a set of rules within which the staff can work. As long as they understand those and present those properly to the applicants/public, then the roles are clear.  
It is assumed people know who to call for what. The average person doesn't know what the difference is in Economic Development, planning and development and zoning by law. These are real estate terms. I think an easy solution for this is to have definitions on the website.  
\*Also – there are multiple address for the TOWN of OKOTOKS on the website with ambiguous meeting places/labels (such as CHAMBERS... where is this? Don't assume people know). It isn't obvious.
  - Publish an org chart and outline each City officials authority and responsibility.
7. Building flexibility into processes (How much flexibility do you expect? Under what conditions?)
- Each development has its own unique characteristics, and if the staff can understand what these characteristics are, then they can make their own determination that some flexibility is allowed.
  - I think this is a problem as then it depends on who you talk to, so consistently is more imp't than flexibility to me in leasing. However, if someone calls in for a Pre approval of use and gets a verbal ok, a lot of times they start renovations before approvals are given... so this needs to be addressed.
  - Commercial development is a dynamic process and the City's bylaws and regulations should also be dynamic and continually reviewed and updated.
8. Employing a more dynamic review process (Define dynamic)
- Dynamic means get off your butt and do it.
  - Probably more time expedient and communicative I'm guessing.
9. Identify processes that aren't working and update them (Who should identify? How do we know what isn't working?)
- Obviously within the system there are processes that just don't work and it has been known for a period of time that they don't work. This is the fodder for a revised development control by-law.

10. Revise the list of permitted and discretionary users (Revise how? Where are the issues? Keep in mind the Land Use Bylaw is being reviewed in the future)

- Permitted uses are fairly simple to handle and there should be more of them in order to save a lot of effort on what we would consider general applications. The discretionary uses require more time and more effort and, as a result, the more permitted uses you allow, the more time you have to satisfy the discretionary uses.
- More permitted. If a discretionary use is approved, amend to reflect it as a permitted use. OR relax all uses to reflect the discretion of a business owner to decide on use and location for his business. .. unless it is detrimental.. Such as impact to environmental \*auto, etc.
- I think they are doing this.

11. Review the development permit process in line with tenants (Please explain)

- Don't assume business owners know or understand the steps. I deal with a lot of businesses moving into Okotoks. Even within Alberta (let alone coming from other provinces), the definition of what is needed or required is different depending where you live.
- Define what each step is, what is needed for what and have a very clear flow sheet on the website. Does the landlord pull the development permit? Does the Tenant need one if the Landlord has one? Does the tenant assume the Tenant work is covered in the Landlord permits? Why do a Tenant need a development permit if Landlord has one. Does a Tenant need a permit if the landlord is putting in elec box and tenant is just running wires? etc...

12. Revise the process of discretionary use going to Council (What solutions do you have to revise the process?)

- Not all discretionary uses should go to Council. Some are fairly straightforward, it is just that they need a Development Permit, where others that are a bit more contentious require a little more explanation and should be taken to the level of Council; it is just not all discretionary uses should be headed in that direction.
- SO confusing for tenants as it is usually a verbal yes or no depending on who you talk to. Tenants call in and make a case for discretionary use, the person gives a verbal. The Tenant signs the lease and applies, only to be turned down. Need to change this.

- Why is Council even dealing with making decisions regarding discretionary uses? Planners should be able to make the call unless it is appealed.
- Discretionary use can be made by administration. Rather than simply having uses, no matter how big or small the use itself is, being the defining guideline of going to Council, perhaps a particular threshold has to be further applied within that use category – for example having a minimum square footage for a use (a small footprint may not have much of a community impact that requires Council input vs a much larger building).

13. Improvements to be made on signage bylaws. (What improvements, other than standardizing size of signage and temporary signage?)

- Allow for lease signs to be placed where needed – The Town is very restrictive.
- Allow for signage on buildings where Landlord and Tenants request.
- Relax the restrictions.
- Signage size and amount is too restricted. Landscaping is too intensive on major streets and is in constantly in conflict with pylon signage.
- I know a problem discussed around our table is that landscaping affected signage visibility. Otherwise not sure what this is about.

## Land Use Bylaw

14. Shift from restrictions to incentives in order to achieve Municipal Development Plan vision. (How do you define incentives?)

- If you do a good job with your application, a quick approval would be the incentive.
- Offers that entice a business owner? Too many to list.
- Incentives can include density bonuses, relaxation of parking requirements etc..

15. Limitations/restrictions on land use bylaw makes minimum difficult to achieve (Any Solutions?)

- Yes, reduce limits and restrictions. More permitted uses.

16. Bylaw Municipal Planning Commission needs to be more responsive (How do you define more responsive?)

- By more responsive it means quicker decisions, clearly stated, whether it is an approval or refusal, so that the applicant has the understanding of what is missing in the application.

- Generally, returning phone call/emails in a timely manner has been fine for me. Usually I can get a hold of someone. No issues with me here.
- Meeting more and downloading some decisions to planning will help.

17. Suggestion of fewer zones as a way to stimulate economic development in the Town. (How can the town reduce the number of zones? Ideas?)

- -Residential,  
-Any Commercial (Retail, Office, medical, Light industrial, sales lots, storage) and  
-Heavy Industrial (Auto and heavy duty, environmental impacted)
- Easy to do; combine two or three that are close in terms of use.
- Assuming this comment is referring to minimizing the number of land use districts within the Town. Rather than being perhaps overly prescriptive on uses in certain areas the Town defaults more to the free market and lets market conditions somewhat insert its will.

## Infrastructure

18. More commercial is needed in residential areas. (What kind of commercial? What do you feel is the barrier?)

- If the need is there, it should be addressed.
- As more neighbourhoods develop, the trend is to support your neighbourhood and create a smaller community in it. To have more business opportunity in a smaller neighbourhood, would allow for permeance. More Office, retail, medical for sure per new development. The allotment for commercial space should be greater than just a single strip mall with the standard convenience store, liquor store and pizza take out.
- I would presume they mean retail uses closer to home for ease of convenience. Not sure if current residential bylaws restrict amount of commercial? Or perhaps there is only a limited number uses allowed in residential.

Other comments from the cost discussion included: (are there specific ideas/solutions related to the following topics?)

- Commercial tax assessments
- Margin compression

Timely approvals is critical; missing a bldg. season due to slow approvals can put a project profitability offside.

- Transparency and accountability on levies
  - Over engineering subdivisions. For example, less water usage should equal smaller pipes
- “Allow/provide small commercial lots (15,000 square feet and under) for sale.” (If you made this comment, please elaborate – not sure what is meant?)

Zero- scaping, car charges, less concrete sidewalks internally all help.

- The assumption is the town releases land for tender to developers. Then the developer is responsible to sell/develop pieces of land. SO a commercial piece is sold to an investor, who will build a retail strip mall and lease it out.

I get inquiries from business owners who would like to buy a building for their smaller business. Right now there are only industrial bays for sale.

I am seeing a need/desire for smaller parcels of land for a retail, office, medical buildings.

## **Engagement and Support**

Specific ideas on the engagement process – what would be your expectations in the future?

- More pre-app meetings with written commentary.
- Continue the conversation and take an example of a recent land use or DP application and follow it thru the process to see where efficiencies can be realized.
- Would be great to understand what Economic Development offers developers/businesses? Better understanding your value proposition from a developers perspective would be beneficial. Specifically, is there partnership/joint marketing opportunities to collectively bring new business to Town? What calls are you taking from interested businesses looking at Okotoks to relocate?