

Working Across Boundaries

Learning from the RPGA

Development-Plan-Making Experience



Abstract

Jill Collinson
BA, MCP Candidate
and
Jacqueline East,
BA (Hons), MCP,
Dillon Consulting

Inter-municipal planning provides an opportunity to undertake initiatives that extend beyond defined political boundaries. Integrative planning provides opportunity for logical community development and challenges perverse policies. In rural areas, planning shared among multiple municipalities provides the resources required for planners to be engaged where historically they have not been afforded a role. In south central Manitoba, the main planning challenges are complex and include accommodating growth from immigration, respecting heritage-influenced ways of living, and developing the local economy. The RPGA Planning District was established January 2010 and created an administrative area to provide a political space and formalize opportunities for the Rural Municipality of Rhineland and the Towns of Plum Coulee, Gretna, and Altona to work collaboratively.



Background Specifics

The recognized regional planning authority enables integrated and regional long term planning. The RPGA Development Plan is the first planning document prepared by this Planning District. Having created a vision for the region, the RPGA District described three distinct ways in which they live in their communities and how they plan to shape future development: Country Living, Village Living, and Town Living. The language used is meaningful to local decision-makers who use the Plan. It avoids the ‘bureaucratease’ of planners and senior levels of government. As there are different ways in which RPGA residents live and want to use the land (country, village, town) there are different policies applicable to each of these identified areas within the region. The RPGA Development Plan speaks not only to past histories, but also to current realities and future possibilities for this diverse and complex region.

Prior to January 1, 2010 the RM of Rhineland and the Towns of Plum Coulee, Gretna, and Altona, though well connected as a community, worked separately on their own individual development plans. Upon the formalization of the RPGA Planning District, these four separate municipalities began “to capitalize on the strength of working together and across boundaries to solve complex challenges” (RPGA Plan, p.1, 2012). In November 2011 the RPGA Planning District Development Plan was completed and now sits with the Province of Manitoba for consideration of ministerial approval.

Rhineland, Plum Coulee, Gretna and Altona have strong agricultural backgrounds and histories linked to Mennonite settlers. Located in productive farm land, “agriculture underpins the economic strength in this growing region” (RPGA Plan, p.1, 2012). The population will continue to grow in the RPGA District. They need to accommodate history, local economies, and also offer a place that welcomes new residents.

Historical development patterns created a land use fabric that includes many original homes with attached barns on large (40 acres or more) but narrow (250 feet) lots lining a small road in clustered villages. The area offers

ample private green space with the majority of homes having expansive working yardsites.

Overtime, as families grew, many of the larger lots have been repeatedly subdivided to provide a space and place for next generations to live. Local property owners have also used subdivision as mechanism to divide and manage family inheritances through land. Thus there are many long-time local residents and strong family histories in the area.

Strong eastern European roots attract a rapidly growing newcomer population. The region has become a popular destination to Canada for countries around the world. A community gathering in Altona can have 38 countries represented! The physical form of housing and business keep a rural small town scale. They ‘fit’ with each other as they reflect a local composition, weaving together the local urban and rural fabrics. As the region continues to evolve and grow, it is important to the community to respect past histories and manage possible futures for a diversifying region. The RPGA Development Plan incorporates historical influences, addresses present-day opportunities, and provides future directions for Rhineland, Plum Coulee, Gretna and Altona.

Why was this done?

By working together as the RPGA Planning District, rather than four separate planning districts, the municipalities capitalize and collaborate to solve complex cross-boundary challenges of growth, development, infrastructure, environment, heritage, and local culture. A single long-range integrated plan offers a cooperative regional approach where diverse problems and solutions can be collectively discussed, addressed, and achieved. The multi-municipality development plan improves regional planning and presents opportunities for standardizing fees, embracing a common planning approach, and strengthening local partnerships.

Historically the four participating municipalities have not always worked well together. They have experienced conflict and competition about the location of development, particularly on land adjacent to town boundaries. The RPGA communities also face a myriad of challenges

individually addressing their unique local issues: committing to ongoing community planning without local professional resources and diminishing volunteer energy; sorting through complex development issues and finding common ground among diverse stakeholders; and, integrating government silos with local silos while negotiating respect for local solutions with the provincial government. The Development Plan was one tool the RPGA communities used to come together and genuinely collaborate. To be representative and inclusive of the four municipalities, each needed to participate as equal project stakeholders – and they did.

This Plan could have been written with minimal community consultation but project stakeholders recognized that the process needed to be open, engage residents, and create dialogue among the participating municipalities. Three main action phases helped



to complete the RPGA Development Plan: 1) the background review, so everyone started on the same page; 2) building the Plan, so everyone owned the pieces; and 3) adopting the Plan, to formalize the authority contained within. The background review section occurred from June 2010 to September 2010. The building of the Plan occurred from September 2010 until mid 2011. Presently the RPGA Development Plan sits with the Province of Manitoba awaiting ministerial approval.

The RPGA District will be inclusive, economically diverse, and environmentally responsible region. RPGA will thrive with a vibrant rural culture and economy and a shared philosophy of family and community.

RPGA Development Plan, 2011, p.1



How did the plan develop?

It was imperative to genuinely engage local residents in the planning process in order to write a plan reflective of residents and local knowledge and circumstance. A community visioning exercise with residents of Rhineland, Plum Coulee, Gretna and Altona laid the foundation of the RPGA Plan.

Community Visioning

The planning process began with a broad and holistic community visioning process facilitated by Manitoba Agriculture, Food and Rural Initiatives (MAFRI). Two public workshops were offered and facilitators encouraged all sectors and interests – youth, seniors, women, local business people – to participate in the process.

The entirety of the visioning process attempted to engage a cross-section of residents – though not at the same time or using the same methods. Different tools were used to solicit input including print media, radio interviews, and work-shopping techniques. The visioning process was new to many residents of the RPGA area so it began with education surrounding what a vision was and why it is useful for community development.

The vision created reaffirmed the need for a cooperative regional approach. The RPGA vision statement set the direction and laid the foundation for working towards a collaborative, consensus-driven Development Plan.

Public Workshops & Government Engagement

The RPGA planning process moved forward with a series of workshops held over six months in the different communities. The earlier identified priorities turned into written policy options and then written policies in a draft Plan. Distilling local ideas, under the influence of provincial land use policies, about how and where to develop in order to achieve the vision was the most challenging part of the planning process.

Planners, residents and elected representatives came together to work through the policy direc-

tions. Together they deemed it important to engage government department and agency representatives at two key milestones and long before the RPGA Plan would be submitted to the Province for official review and ministerial approval. The Province heard early in the process about the emerging local issues, solutions, and suggestions about their application with respect to provincial policy. The RPGA Board benefited from early feedback from inter-departmental government representatives about the difficulties some bureaucrats would face in finding a fit for local circumstance vis-à-vis provincial regulation. The discussion was remarkably open and honest. The process was time consuming and undertaken in good faith in anticipation of a streamlined and positive provincial approval process.

All and all there were three formal public workshops and two more for interdepartmental representatives from the province of Manitoba. All of these activities included media releases, as well as local media coverage in the newspaper and radio station. It was all recorded and communicated through a project website (www.rpgaplanningdistrict.com) and information distribution to a stakeholder email list.

What came out of all this work?

Country Living

There were three distinct ways the communities wanted to “use”, or live on, the land. They evolved from original European settlement patterns where some live in the country, others in villages, and most who found their home in towns. One of the critical questions that came out of the public consultation process was “where should new development go?” The Board identified the need to address rural development but how could this be done? The RPGA Plan categorizes future development into three realms that both reflect the European / Mennonite heritage of the region and align with different standards of infrastructure and servicing. These categories of ‘living’ were simply named **country**, **village** and **town** to give genuine meaning as local authorities administer and implement the Plan.

Country living provides a space for agriculture as a priority. Agricultural roots are historic; they define local culture and are well documented and embraced throughout the RPGA area. It celebrates a rural way of being while also protecting the ability of agricultural producers to adapt and grow their operations. It provides space to allow for newcomers – to Canada and the community – to live-on, respect the agricultural land and engage in agricultural activities. Country living is identified by its potential for larger parcel sizes, limited servicing (there will not be municipal support for levels beyond what exist now), and its full immersion in agricultural life. This land use designation allows for flexibility and changing agricultural trends, as well as accommodates for smaller-scale agriculture production. Within areas identified as country living space, future residential has to be clustered with limited land removed from agricultural uses. It is **not** typical rural residential as imagined from an urban-centric perspective. Land remains zoned agriculture, **not** residential, and respecting the natural features of the land is a priority.





Village Living

Manitoba is known for harsh winters; the people are known for being able to survive them. The culture of interdependence among farmers was a critical success factor for newcomers to the Canadian Prairies. Early settlement patterns of Mennonite communities saw the emergence tiny unorganized communities where people lived close together and farmed adjacent lands. This traditional village lifestyle, where homes and accessory agricultural operations coexist, embraces farm life in the midst of close family and neighbours. It provides a space for horticulture and small scale animal husbandry. Under the *village living* land use designation rural standards of infrastructure (like the provision of some form of wastewater service) may be supported. New residential development could fill in the unused land within the villages. The village living land designation is a little bit country and a little bit town as it provides a rural, quasi-agricultural dependent lifestyle option.

Town Living

A town is typically somewhere in which rural residents go to have meet their needs – its where you go to get milk, see the doctor and get a hair cut. The town is a much easier urban-style planning concept for planners to comprehend. The town living land use designation is the most urban-like development pattern one will observe in the RPGA region. In areas designated this way there is support for the development of diverse living options that have the convenience of urban centres, such as streets and lights, pipes and pavements, community gathering places, non-farm workplaces, and shopping options. *Town living* designated areas are to act as service centres for the rest of the region. In the town living areas many municipal services already exist and the local government provides water, sewer, paved streets, drainage, garbage collection and snow clearing. As these places resemble smaller urban environments, there are development standards in place and large-scale development is to be

guided by a secondary plan. The secondary plan puts future development on the RPGA Board's radar and serves as a tool for inter-municipal negotiations about land use, infrastructure, service sharing, and tax sharing.

“Our municipalities recognize the benefits of regional cooperation”

*Don Wiebe,
RPGA Board Chair*

Outcomes: where is it now?

The RPGA approach brought together the Rural Municipality (RM) of Rhineland and the Towns of Plum Coulee, Gretna and Altona. The Plan recognizes each community as unique – in way of their settlement histories, local economies and land use patterns – but facilitated a process and offered a place for these four communities to collaborate and direct their collective futures.

An early goal of this plan was to address a more forward-thinking and relevant approach to rural development in south central Manitoba. This was achieved through the development of country, village, and town land use designations. A critical point of contention at the beginning was how to manage the pressure for development at the edge of town boundaries. A “fringe area” land use designation was devised

to map policies and process for inter-municipal cooperation to intelligently accommodate development regardless of political boundaries. There was also a desire to have a practical and community-based development plan and this was achieved through the lengthy and involved consultation process that included provincial departments.

The RPGA Development Plan was nominated for a 2012 Manitoba Planning Excellence Award. While not winning its category it was highlighted for its work that reflected unique local circumstances and culture. At present, this Plan is being forwarded to the Province of Manitoba for approval by the Minister of Local Government. Only time will tell whether or not there was any merit granted to efforts of municipal-provincial collaboration.



Lessons Learned

Local leadership is critical to resolve complex planning issues in a meaningful way

The RPGA Plan would not have progressed without the patient, forward-thinking, and conciliatory involvement of the Board Chairperson who listened and accommodated diverse ideas and opinions from his own municipal council as well other Mayors and Councilors, and staff of the Province of Manitoba. The RPGA Board tackled difficult issues and maneuvered complex ideological forces ranging from agriculture to infrastructure to environment.



The gap between provincial policy and respect for local circumstances remains

The RPGA planning process represents the good intention of four municipalities to come together and collaborate with genuine openness with provincial government departments in negotiating how the Provincial Planning Regulation will be interpreted for their communities' physical, economic, and social circumstances and future aspirations. The process was made possible by the initiative, understanding and involvement of the local Manager of Community Planning Services of the Department of Local Government. Even then, the Board was faced with 29 pages of individual comments from several provincial departments three days prior to their final public hearing. The lesson? Less time and attention to collaboration with the Province until such time as provincial departments have a process in place to get their own 'inter-departmental' house in order and begin to genuinely work with municipalities.

Municipal council ownership is an essential ingredient

Public communication and an open invitation to participation throughout the planning process is essential but genuine engagement of, and ownership by, municipal officials is the most critical ingredient to a meaningful Development Plan. The planners role was as much one of an educator as a planner as planning concepts, language and tools were "taken over" by municipal councils.

A good plan costs time and money

Planning through the complexities of multi-jurisdictional realities while respecting the local environment and adopting different approaches take the time and patience of municipal officials. No one finds urgency in the completion of a set of planning policies respecting the long-term future of a rural region of Manitoba. For municipalities without their own dedicated planning professional, a planning consultant costs money and this is often out of reach for many individual municipalities. It is further problematic as the municipalities are left to find local resources and leadership to ensure the Plan is implemented.

Authors

Jill Collinson

BA, MCP Candidate,
is in the process of
finishing her Master
Degree in City Planning at
the University of Manitoba

Jacqueline East

BA (Hons), MCP,
Dillon Consulting,
is a practicing professional
planner with 20 years
experience in various
sectors across Manitoba

References and Resources

Dillon Consulting (January 2011). *RPGA Planning District Report on Consultation*.

Dillon Consulting (March 2011). *RPGA Planning District Background Report and Engineering Study Report*.

Dillon Consulting (November 2011). *RPGA Development Plan, Working Across Boundaries 2011-2040*.

Manitoba Intergovernmental Affairs and Trade. *Land Use Planning in Your Community*. Retrieved from http://gov.mb.ca/ia/programs/land_use_dev/pdf/129268_planning.pdf

Manitoba Intergovernmental Affairs and Trade. *The Planning Act Handbook: A Guide for Municipalities and Planning Districts*. Retrieved from http://gov.mb.ca/ia/programs/land_use_dev/pdf/planning_act_handbook.pdf

RPGA Planning District (2012). *Planning Resources*. Retrieved from <http://www.rpgaplaningdistrict.com/planning-resources/>

US Environmental Protection Agency (2012). *Putting Smart Growth to Work in Rural Communities*. Retrieved from http://icma.org/en/icma/knowledge_network/documents/kn/Document/301483/Putting_Smart_Growth_to_Work_in_Rural_Communities

Images

All imagery provided by

