



Municipal Planning Commission Roundtable
May 16, 2017
2:00 pm - 3:30 pm
St. Albert Inn & Suites

Synopsis

On May 16th, 2017 at the St. Albert Inn & Suites, the St. Albert and District Chamber of Commerce held a roundtable discussion in response to Councillor Bob Russell's motion to City Council to reinstate the Municipal Planning Commission (MPC) which had been officially dispersed in 2008 and had not met since 2005.

The Roundtable was well attended with representation from city council, city administration, economic development, chamber board of directors, chamber government affairs committee members, chamber staff, developers and other interested parties.

Topic Introduction and History:

Mayor Nolan Crouse gave a brief history around the dispersed MPC. In many of the 2004 election campaigns, there was discussion around making St. Albert 'business friendly.' An increased focus on economic development, chamber relationships, and development relationships lead council to work on the entire process to make St. Albert business friendly and bring in more non-residential development. When the MPC was officially dissolved strategic plan timelines were reduced 6-8 weeks and development permits 3-4 weeks. While many communities have an MPC, just as many do not – it's approximately a 50/50 split.

Mayor Nolan Crouse noted there was a report that was recently received that did a '360-degree review' from other stakeholders about MPCs in St. Albert. It can be found here. ([Click Here](#))

Councillor Bob Russell also attended the roundtable hoping to identify issues and concerns from developers. He expressed the importance of public opportunity to stand up, ask questions, and see who's giving the answers. He also wanted to make sure that developers get a 'good hearing' in front of council and felt an MPC would give them that opportunity without the five-minute council presentation time restriction.

Panellists:

Two panellists were invited to speak for and against the reinstatement of the MPC. Richard Plain (former Mayor of St. Albert and Economist) spoke for, and Patrick Shaver (President of UDI Alberta) spoke against. The discussion was moderated by Chamber Director Garry Wetsch, QC.

Richard Plain presented that an MPC created a place where senior decision makers were all together, heard reports prepared by city planners, and both businesses and residents had the opportunity to reply. The former MPC was both transparent and accountable, and would provide a type of framework needed to get the best type of planning for St. Albert which faces major challenges besides increases in density and annexation. He suggested that the MPC should become a delegating decision making body that doubles as a resource for councillors.

Patrick Shaver submitted that planning and development has changed over the last fifteen years. He suggested that an MPC would be a duplication in staff and processes; that there is already ample public involvement such as open houses and stakeholder involvement (things that didn't exist fifteen to twenty years ago). He suggested that MPCs used to be important for regional planning – something now covered by the Capital Region Board (soon to be the Capital Growth Board). Patrick said structures are already in place for developers through administration and backed by Council policies and regulations.

Questions and Concerns:

One participant was concerned about the volume and technicality of items that would be presented to the MPC. In response, it was said that the people providing reports would be the technical experts, while another opinion was that nothing frustrates developers more than non-technical people questioning technical reports.

Another participant asked how an MPC can be held accountable since they need to be appointed and have some expertise in the subject. It was agreed that it was a concern; currently Council is held accountable for their decisions and if people aren't happy with them, they don't get re-elected. Those who dealt with the former MPC recalled that the group was made up of good people with a city watching them to ensure their honest commitment.

Another question was raised around how developers (residential or commercial) with a finite amount of time and resources view St. Albert against our neighbours and competitors with MPCs. It was said that nobody was being held up because of a major area structure plan so long as the municipal development plan is used as the approving authority. Another noted that among the questions developers ask – an MPC is a big consideration alongside obstructions because of additional layers.

When asked if the perception of St. Albert being 'business friendly' has improved since the MPC was dispersed, one speaker stated he never saw the MPC hold back any growth, but another said that the growth of the community has gone well beyond the MPC; the last five years of growth have been significant and St. Albert is 'open for business.'

The value an MPC brings was brought up. It was presented that with an MPC you would have a mayor and two councillors that already knew what the project was about and could make better informed decisions on projects. Another belief was that the MPC is just another level and duplication of a task that has evolved and become more streamlined thanks to improvements in technology and communication.

Finally, participants were concerned about protecting the technical integrity of a project in an MPC environment. After extensive planning processes where techs and city experts agree, there is opportunity for the 'popular opinion' by people without technical know-how to vote a project into directions that contradict professional and expert opinion. It was suggested that unless an MPC was going to meet constantly to deal with these kinds of issues upfront, that it could not be effective. An alternate opinion was that St. Albert's former MPC worked well through these issues.

Following the Roundtable, the Chamber did the following:

[St. Albert and District Chamber of Commerce Letter to Council](#) – May 18th, 2017

[Chair Brian Bachynski Presentation to Council](#) – May 23rd, 2017

**** Update: The motion to reinstate the MPC was postponed by Council until the first Standing Committee of the Whole Meeting of the new City Council after the 2017 Municipal Election.**