

Learn About Municipal Government

Municipalities in Alberta



Types of municipalities and other local authorities

Types of Municipal Governments in Alberta

Alberta is governed through three general types of municipalities: urban, rural and specialized. Urban municipalities are summer villages, villages, towns, and cities. Rural municipalities include counties and municipal districts. Specialized municipalities can include both rural and urban communities.

Key Terms

Mayor: the title given to the person elected as the head or chair of the municipal council. Also called the chief elected official. Generally used in urban municipalities, but is used by some rural municipalities.

Reeve: the title given to the person elected as the head or chair of the municipal council. Also called the chief elected official. Used in rural municipalities. Generally the reeve is elected from among all elected rural councillors, but the reeve can be elected by voters at large (all voters in the municipality).

Cities

There are 19 municipalities in Alberta that have city status. To qualify as a city, a population base of 10,000 or more is required. For the purposes of elections and representing residents, cities may establish ward systems within the authority and options outlined in the *Municipal Government Act* (MGA). The chief elected official for a city is the mayor.

Towns

A town can be formed with a minimum population of 1,000 people and may exceed 10,000 people unless a request to change to city status is made. Under the MGA, a town is governed by a seven-member council. However, a local bylaw can change the number of council members to be higher or lower, as long as that number is no lower than three and remains at an odd number. The chief elected official for a town is the mayor.

Villages

A village may be formed in an area where the majority of buildings are on parcels of land smaller than 1,850 square meters and there is a population of at least 300 people. A village may apply for town status when the population reaches 1,000; it does not lose its village status if the population declines below 300. The council of a village consists of three councillors, one of whom is the mayor, unless this number is increased to a higher odd number by local bylaw. The chief elected official for a village is the mayor.

Summer Villages

Generally, the provisions relating to a village also apply to a summer village. However, in summer villages, elections and annual meetings are held in the summer. A summer village is the only type of municipality that allows people to vote twice in municipal elections: once in the summer village and once in the municipality where their permanent residence is located. Summer villages can no longer be created in Alberta. The chief elected official for a summer village is the mayor.

Hamlets

A hamlet is a small community within a municipal district. A hamlet can be formed if the area has five or more dwellings, boundaries, a name, and contains land that is non-residential (for example, a gas station). A hamlet is governed by the municipal district or county where it is located, therefore it does not have its own elected council. The largest hamlet in Alberta is Sherwood Park. It is located in the specialized municipality of Strathcona County and has a population over 70,000.

Specialized Municipalities

Specialized municipalities are unique municipal structures that can be formed under the MGA. Specialized municipalities are created when one of a special set of circumstances has been met and other forms of municipality do not suitably address. The Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, Strathcona County, and the Municipality of Jasper are examples of specialized municipalities in Alberta. The title of the chief elected official depends on the type of specialized municipality formed.

Municipal Districts and Counties

Municipal districts (MD), which are also called counties, can encompass a variety of land types, including rural areas and farmland, unincorporated communities such as hamlets, and rural residential sub-divisions. MD councils consist of representatives from wards, or regions, within in the MD. The municipality determines the number of wards. The number of wards varies from four to eleven, with the most common being seven. The chief elected official of an MD or county is the reeve, though the municipality can choose to use the title of mayor.

Improvement Districts

The provincial government, through Alberta Municipal Affairs, is responsible for all functions of municipal government in improvement districts (IDs), including the levy and collection of taxes. Education is managed through regional school divisions. The formal power of a council rests with the Minister of Municipal Affairs, but most power and

responsibility is delegated to the ID council, where a local council is in place.

There are eight improvement districts in Alberta:

- Improvement District No. 4 (Waterton): residents elect their own representatives;
- Improvement District No. 9 (Banff): representatives are appointed by the Minister of Municipal Affairs;
- Improvement District No. 12 (Jasper); Improvement District No. 13 (Elk Island); Improvement No. 24 (Wood Buffalo); and Improvement District No. 25 (Willmore Wilderness): directly represented by the Minister of Municipal Affairs.
- Kananaskis Improvement District is directly represented by the Minister of Environment and Parks (40 provincial parks, provincial wildland areas, provincial recreation areas, and natural areas in Kananaskis Country).

Special Areas

The Special Areas Board is a unique government structure used in a rural area covering approximately 2.1 million hectares in south-eastern Alberta. The board is responsible for the administration of the area and provision of all municipal services, as well as the leasing public lands and operation of five community pastures. Sixty percent of all lands in the special areas are public lands and are leased for grazing, cultivation, or irrigation. The Board reports directly to the Assistant Deputy Minister of the Municipal Services Division of Alberta Municipal Affairs.

Other Local Authorities

Métis Settlements

Métis settlements are incorporated under the *Métis Settlements Act*. There are eight Métis settlements in Alberta, covering an area of approximately 1.25 million acres. About 5,000 Métis reside in these settlements. These are the only Métis settlements in

Canada recognized as a local form of government within a designated boundary.

Local Boards and Associations

“Local government” is usually associated with elected officials on municipal councils, but appointed and elected boards and associations in communities also play an important local governance role. Local boards and associations have mandates to provide public services. Some or all of their members are elected by local residents in the same or similar fashion as municipal officials, usually at the same election. Examples of other forms of local government bodies include regional health authorities and school divisions.

Regional Services Commissions

A Regional Services Commission (RSC) is a corporate entity which provides services regionally to its member municipalities. These commissions consist of at least two municipal entities and can include First Nations reserves, Métis Settlements, and armed forces bases. RSCs provide services such as water and wastewater management, waste management, emergency services, airport management, land-use planning, and assessment. Economies of scale may facilitate a RSC’s recruitment of skilled staff and may improve service delivery in a region.

The MGA outlines the powers of government related to RSC, including governance, finance, and operations. It also outlines the commission’s decision-making powers, financial responsibilities, and other powers such as expropriation.

Each RSC is established by an individual regulation outlining the services it will provide to meet the needs of its members. Each regulation is approved through an Order in Council (a Cabinet Order). The Province appoints a RSC’s first board of directors, fixes their term, and designates the board’s chair.

Growth Management Boards

Ongoing growth in Alberta’s metropolitan regions generates increased demand for services and infrastructure, puts pressure on natural and built environments, and creates opportunities for economic prosperity. To address this, the province has established growth management boards (GMB) for the Calgary and Edmonton metropolitan regions to help ensure regional collaboration and coordinated decision-making.

The GMBs are made up of the core municipality (Calgary or Edmonton), all adjacent rural municipalities, and all urban municipalities with more than 5,000 population.

The mandate of growth management boards is to:

- Promote the long-term sustainability of the region;
- Ensure environmentally responsible land-use planning, growth management and efficient use of land;
- Develop policies regarding the coordination of regional infrastructure investment and service delivery;
- Promote the economic well-being and competitiveness of the regions; and
- Develop policies outlining how the Board shall engage the public on the Growth Plan and Servicing Plan.

GMBs will develop a regional Growth Plan and Servicing Plan that will guide integrated planning and service delivery throughout the region. GMBs have created a Regional Evaluation Framework they will use to ensure municipal statutory plans align with goals and principles agreed to in the Growth Management Plan.