



City of Regina

Underutilized Land Study

External Stakeholder Report

March 2018

Developed by:



Introduction

The City of Regina has undertaken an Underutilized Land Study. This study investigated potential regulatory, construction, environmental, social and economic barriers to private sector redevelopment of various types of underutilized sites throughout the city, including vacant lots and brownfields.

Many stakeholders were involved in the project, and the City acknowledged the importance of face-to-face consultations with key stakeholders. With this, V3 Consulting and Praxis Consulting were engaged to undertake the public engagement portion of the study. The findings derived from these consultations were used to further inform recommendations the City can implement to improve the viability of redeveloping underutilized land.

Engagement Overview

Engagement Objectives

The objectives of the consultations were as follows:

- to gather information regarding current barriers to the development of underutilized land within the defined boundaries. Specifically, within the areas of regulatory, processes/approvals, market, financial, social, construction and environmental; and,
- to determine what current practices are supporting underutilized land development.

Key Stakeholders

The City outlined many key stakeholders. The City wanted to ensure the recommendations were reflective of the opinions of those impacted. When referencing external stakeholders, we are referring to:

- The Regina Downtown Business Improvement District
- The Regina Warehouse Business Improvement District
- The Regina and Region Home Builders’ Association
- Owners of underutilized property
- Other external stakeholders (e.g., Realtors’ Association)

Consultations

To meet the objectives outlined above, Praxis held five consultations, each lasting roughly three hours. The following consultations took place over the course of the project:

Stakeholder Group(s)	Date	Location	Number of Participants
The Regina Downtown Business Improvement District	November 23, 2017	Darlene Hincks Committee Room, City Hall	10

The Regina Warehouse Business Improvement District			
The Regina and Region Home Builders' Association Local Developers	November 30, 2018	St. Paul's Cathedral	12
Owners of underutilized property Other external Stakeholders	January 23, 2018 January 30, 2018 February 6, 2018	Henry Baker Room, City Hall	35 Total

Consultation Findings

To understand stakeholder perspectives relating to underutilized lands, Praxis grouped consultation questions into seven broad categories. These categories included:

- Regulatory
- Approval Processes
- Brownfields
- Financial
- Infrastructure
- Social
- Market

The findings from all consultations have been amalgamated, and further grouped into themes. These themes represent only those comments that surfaced more than once throughout the consultations.



REGULATORY

Regulatory means any zoning regulations, building or servicing standards.

Regulations are not always clear

Stakeholders are generally confused about infill development regulations. It is not widely known where applicants can access information on regulations. Further, stakeholders have found that there is often inconsistencies in the information received. Information can vary from employee to employee and department to department based on the employee's knowledge or opinion.

Regulations can be restrictive

There are many regulations that applicants find restrictive. Participants suggest increased flexibility when dealing with infill sites as no two sites are the same.

"It would be nice to have some sort of reasonableness for working within regulation boundaries. Flexibility and adaptiveness."

Parking requirements are rigid

Many participants have found that parking regulations have no leniency and can cause issues when building on an infill site. A number of participants referenced parking regulations as being inflexible, and in many cases, unreasonable.



APPROVAL PROCESSES

Refers to the time it takes to obtain the necessary development approvals for infill site.

Perception that City departments are not in alignment

Applicants often get conflicting direction from the City. Respondents indicated that City departments seem to operate in silos, which leads to inconsistencies in the information provided. Many participants raised the idea of having a dedicated City file manager for complicated infill sites throughout the approval/building process.

Applicants should be educated on the process

To many, the approval process is not intuitive. Session participants suggested having some sort of roadmap to help applicants understand the overall process and where to enter. Alternatively, a single point of contact, or some kind of file manager, would remove frustration points in the process and ease the process for the stakeholder.

The approval process can be long

Many suggested that their experience with the approval process has involved weeks and in some cases several months of waiting. Timelines can be long, which has the potential to delay or even

"There is so much risk for us with timing. If approvals take too long, we could miss an investment opportunity."

relinquish an investment opportunity. Participants suggested that the City set realistic timelines and expectations and abide by them.



BROWNFIELDS

Relates to any soil contamination.

Lack of knowledge in the marketplace

Currently, few are educated on the remediation requirements associated with brownfield sites. As a result, land purchasers are fearful of the risks. There is a need to educate potential buyers of the risks, liability transfer laws and cleaning costs associated with these sites. Education will help to reduce some of the unknowns, which will assist in making these sites more marketable to potential buyers.

Remediation incentive programs are unknown

Due to soil contamination, brownfield sites are perceived to be an expensive and risky investment. Session participants suggest implementing incentive programs and remediation grants to assist in making these sites more feasible. While some incentive programs may exist, they are not commonly known by interested buyers, thus reducing their effectiveness.

“If a landowner is willing to jump through hoops to get a site cleaned, they should be helped along the way. It can become very costly.”

Lack of awareness of available sites

Many participants were surprised that brownfield sites are available for purchase in Regina. There were suggestions around making people aware of these sites, the site locations and means by which these sites can be purchased. It seems that these sites are not marketed in the same manner as others, which is an added barrier.



FINANCIAL

Financial relates to the various costs that go into pursuing redevelopment of underutilized lands, including land and construction costs, ability to get financing and government taxes and fees.

There are many unknowns associated with infill development

Infill development is expensive. The price of land tends to be high and infrastructure upgrades are often needed. Many builders report less risk building on greenfield sites, where costs are more predictable. Making the land shovel-ready, would help to reduce risk for the developers. Participants also suggested that tax breaks, capital grants and application fee rebates would reduce some of the barriers associated with infill development.

The City should be targeted with their investment

Many participants noted that the current City investment strategy appears to be scattered. The City should target incentives and infrastructure investment to specific areas. This will support land developers and increase intensification.

“Be targeted with investment – identify a high opportunity location and invest in municipal infrastructure one street at a time.”

Stand-alone parking lots are a low-risk alternative to development

Infill parking lots are a favourable alternative to building. They are low cost, low risk and high revenue generating, making them a good return on investment. Further, the recent increase in parking enforcement in downtown Regina has made parking lots increasingly valuable.



INFRASTRUCTURE

Relates to the availability of public infrastructure to support redevelopment (e.g. water, wastewater capacity, road network).

Existing infrastructure is not always known

While existing infrastructure can serve as an advantage, the infrastructure does not always meet the needs of a new build. Hidden costs can be quite expensive and create considerable risk for the developer. Stakeholders suggest that this cost should be shared between the City and the builder.

Upgrading infrastructure will attract new investment

As noted above, upgraded infrastructure in targeted areas would encourage investment. Street improvements, such as sidewalks, bike lanes, and lighting, would make an area more attractive to a builder.

“If your city doesn’t want to invest, why would you as an investor?”



SOCIAL

Social relates to lifestyle advantages and disadvantages and community perceptions of the targeted area.

Existing neighbourhoods offer convenience and character

Participants suggested that mature neighbourhoods are centrally located and are within close proximity to many amenities. Existing bus routes and walkability make for easy transportation and commuting. Further, many enjoy the vibrancy, character and greenery that comes with a complete neighbourhood.

“Interesting neighbourhoods promote vibrancy and successful local business.”

Some mature neighbourhoods are associated with crime

Like any city, Regina has neighbourhoods that are stigmatized. Stigmas can affect property value deterring investors from pursuing an infill opportunity. Participants suggest an increased focus on safety and crime reduction in vulnerable neighbourhoods. If crime is of little concern, investment is likely to follow.



MARKET

Market means the ability to find a purchaser, tenant, lease etc. for newly constructed residential, commercial, office or industrial buildings.

Regina residents do not yet have the desire to live downtown

Many participants raised the concern that Regina is not yet large enough to make downtown living attractive. While Regina has seen substantial growth, residents still see little advantage to moving downtown for close proximity to work, nightlife, etc. Until commuting from new neighbourhoods becomes a barrier, intensification is likely to be slow.

“Either the private sector does not trust the demand, or they do not have the local expertise to pursue infill projects.”

Overbuilding in new neighbourhoods is hindering infill development

Currently, there is an oversupply of rental properties in new Regina neighbourhoods. This is pulling many potential infill renters to new neighbourhoods where a large selection of units is available. Meanwhile, infill rentals remain vacant, which deters further development in these neighbourhoods.