



AIRDRIE, AB

an overview of development trends

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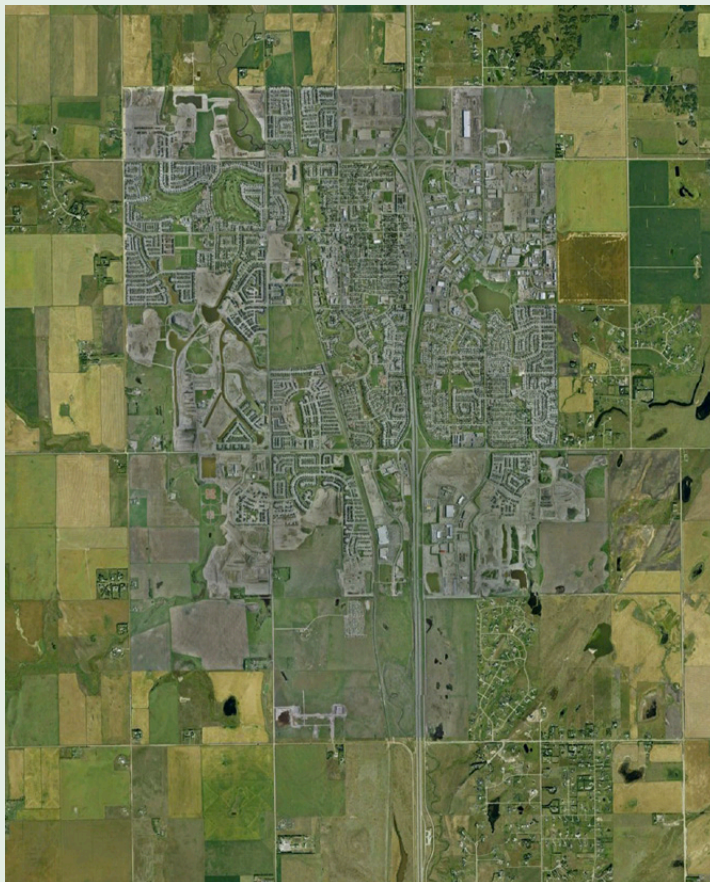


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Airdrie, Alberta: An Overview of Development Trends

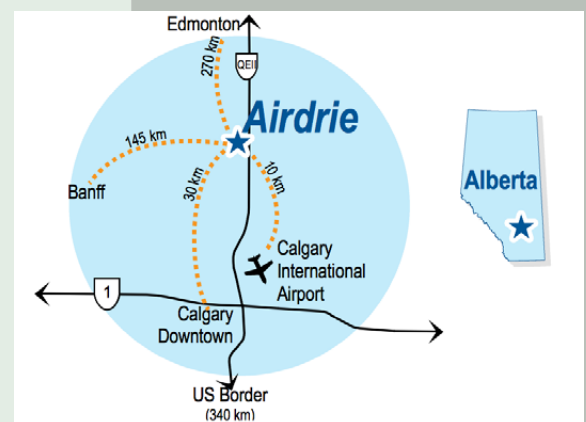
Airdrie is among the fastest growing municipalities in Canada. Driven by strong economic growth in Alberta and the Calgary area, the rapid increase in population can be seen in the numerous new developments occurring along almost every edge of the city. While most residential development has been low-density and conventional in form, newer developments are increasingly incorporating varied housing types and higher densities. Rapid growth has created a high demand for residential, commercial and industrial development which will be planned to be accommodated through annexing lands outside of the present city limits. The city is in the process of annexing land from the neighbouring Municipal District of Rocky View to roughly double its physical size. In addition, the city is preparing a new municipal development plan that will emphasize sustainability, smart growth and sustainable development.



Map 2: Satellite view of Airdrie showing areas of development. (Google, 2010).

The Suburbs Project at Dalhousie University is a long-term research project that is investigating development trends in Canadian suburbs. In the spring and summer of 2010 project members conducted interviews with planners, elected officials, developers and residents in Airdrie, AB, Barrie, ON, and Langley, BC. During field visits to the communities, researchers made visual observations of current development trends. This report presents the preliminary results of this research for Airdrie.

Research findings are available at:
<http://suburbs.planning.dal.ca/>



Map 1: The City of Airdrie is located only 3 kms from the Calgary city limits and 30km to downtown Calgary. (City of Airdrie, 2010c).

Development History

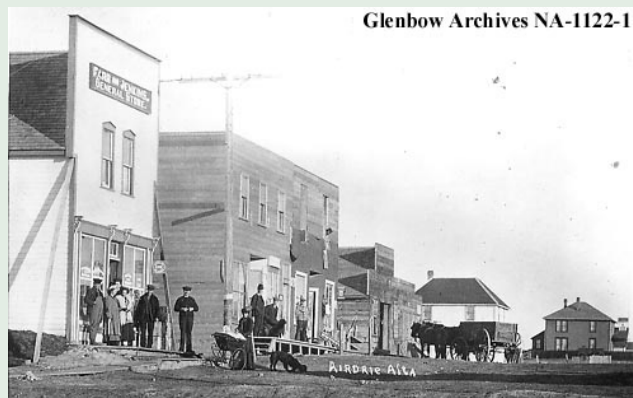
Airdrie's early history is tied to the establishment of the railway linking Calgary to Edmonton in 1891. The proximity of Nose Creek made the site an ideal place for trains operating between the two cities to stop and take on water to run their steam engines. As such, some of the earliest buildings in Airdrie were constructed to support the operations and upkeep of the railway. These included a rail station, a section house, a windmill and a water tank. Unsurprisingly, many of the first inhabitants were railway maintenance workers. The railway sustained the early community, transporting people, grain, cattle, coal and other supplies (City of Airdrie, 2010a).

On September 10, 1909 Airdrie became a village and by this time included not only rail facilities but also a greater number of people, homes and shops. According to provincial records, the village of Airdrie had a population of 135 in 1913 (Government of Alberta, 2010).



Airdrie business block ca. 1912.
(Glenbow archives NA-2547-10)

In its early years, Airdrie grew modestly, sustained by its rail connection and agricultural base; however, the village experienced periods of rapid growth in the 1960s and then an explosion in population in the late 1970s that pushed its population to almost 6000. The city has since grown substantially due to strength in the resource sector in the Calgary area, a factor that has been a particularly influential in attracting new residents to the city.



Airdrie street scene ca. 1914-1917
(Glenbow archives NA-1122-1)

... It was a small town. And really fundamentally, Airdrie developed 100 years ago to be the first water stop for the trains between Calgary and Edmonton. And it was also a day's ride north. So if you were riding north, this was the first stop overnight on the back of your horse. And it did provide provisions but it was an agricultural background. And then over time, as it started to flourish and grow as a community, which was really the '70s, '80s that it started putting some growth this way, it just started filling in with residential.

Elected official



Airdrie ca. 1900-1903.
(Glenbow archives NA-1231-1)

Census Snapshot

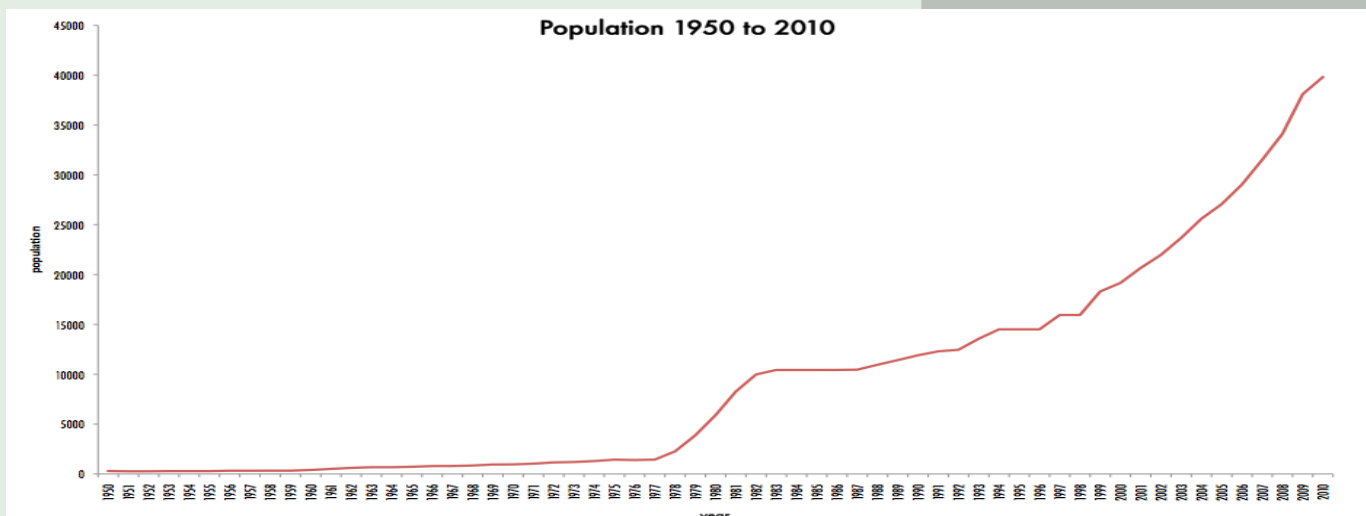
In recent years the city of Airdrie has experienced extremely rapid growth. Its close proximity to Calgary and regional transportation networks including the Calgary international airport has made it an attractive place for people to locate. Of those living in the city less than a year, 38.25% lived previously in Calgary and 11.09% in other provinces. It has been among the fastest growing municipalities in Canada, posting a population growth of 41.8% from 2001 to 2006 according to the federal census. This compares with a growth rate of 12.4% for the City of Calgary and 10.6% for Alberta for the same period (Statistics Canada, 2006). Although the 2009 municipal census reported an exceptionally high growth rate of 11.6% for the 2008 to 2009 period, the recently collected 2010 municipal census indicates that growth has since leveled off to 4.54%. The current population of Airdrie is 39,882 and is forecast to rise to over 47,000 by 2013 (City of Airdrie, 2010b).

Airdrie has a young population with a median age of 32.6 as of 2006. This is slightly lower than both Calgary (35.7) and Alberta (36.0). The city also has a much lower percentage of its population who are single (28.87%) and a higher percentage that are married (57.54%) compared to Calgary (35.7% single and 49.3% married) and Alberta (34.0% single and 50.7% married). The 2006 federal census shows that Airdrie had on average slightly more people per census family (3.1) than Calgary and Alberta, both at 3.0 (Statistics Canada, 2006). This supports the view of Airdrie as a friendly and inviting community for young families.

Q: How would you describe the rate of growth here compared to other parts of Canada or Alberta that you are familiar with?

Huge. Just huge. When I moved here in 1973 there were 900 people. By about 1980 it went to around 12,000 and then the crunch hit it and it went back down to about 7000. And then say in the mid-90s it started growing and then since 2000 it has more than doubled its size. Like now there are just about 40,000 people so that's quite a lot of people.

Airdrie Resident



Airdrie's population has increased dramatically over the last 50 years.
Source: Government of Alberta Municipal Affairs, 2010

Census Snapshot

The median household earning in 2006 in Airdrie was \$83,271, which was higher than that of the larger Calgary CMA (\$77,658) and Alberta (\$73,823). Earnings are comparable to other small centres surrounding Calgary such as Okotoks (\$81,896) but less than that of nearby Cochrane (\$91,575)(Statistics Canada, 2006).

Airdrie has been characterized as a commuter suburb of Calgary. According to the 2009 municipal census 47.9% of the population commute to Calgary for work or school while 36.4% remain within the city (City of Airdrie, 2009). The primary means of getting to and from Calgary is via the Queen Elizabeth II Highway that bisects the city north-south, a drive of 30 minutes.

Residential built form in Airdrie is predominantly single-detached housing. In 2008 the city had a total of 13,375 dwellings. Of these 69.21% were single-detached houses, 0.51% suites, 4.60% duplexes, 0.43% tri-fourplexes, 16.58% Townhouse/condos, 5.03% Apartments, 3.14% and 0.50% other private dwelling types (City of Airdrie, 2009).

This community is primarily young families. So this is really about growing your families here.

Elected official

I mean out here, it really is that American dream feeling. Everyone wants the single family house with the attached garage and the yard, and that. I don't think it's really any different.

Planner

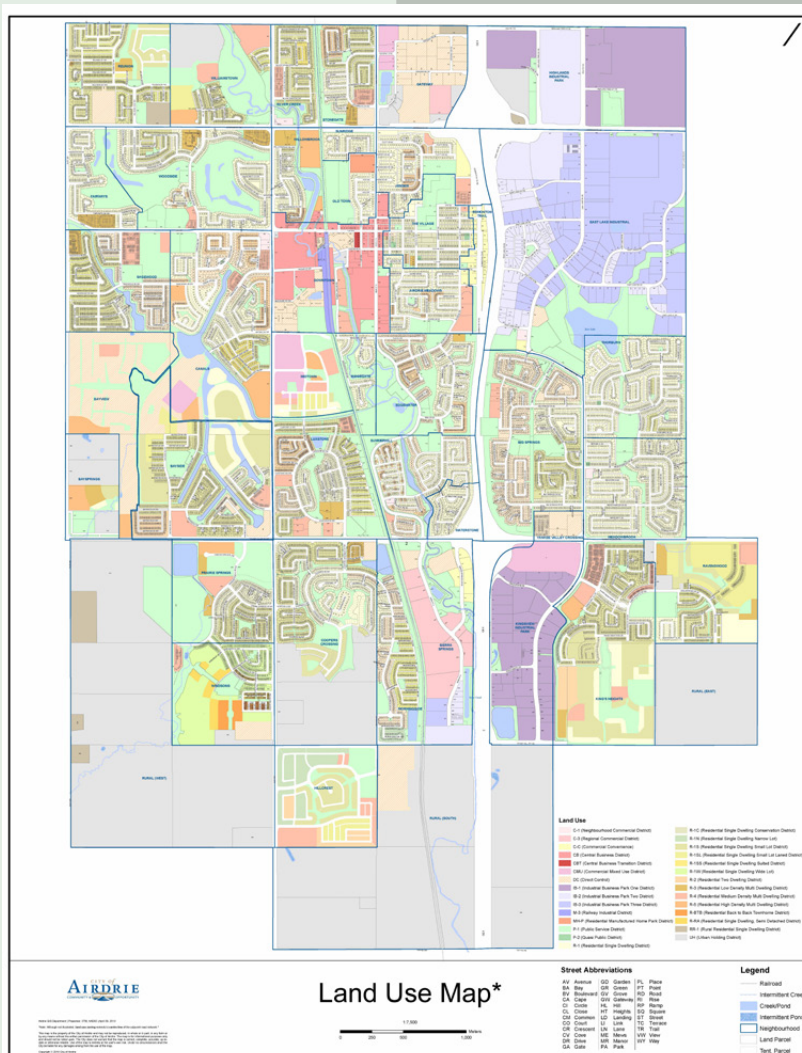


Examples of housing types in Airdrie suburbs

Planning Structure & Development Environment

Airdrie's Municipal Development Plan (MDP), *The Airdrie City Plan*, is the primary policy document guiding planning and development. The plan fulfills the requirements set out in the Alberta Municipal Government Act and provides policy direction for future land uses within the city. It sets out a growth management strategy that emphasizes three overarching policy areas: social well-being, environmental responsibility and fiscal accountability. Important policies outlined in the plan include promoting higher densities, liveable and healthy communities, compact urban form, alternative modes of transportation, community design, pedestrian friendly communities, attractive public spaces and business areas.

Other local documents that influence municipal planning decisions in Airdrie include: Comprehensive Growth Strategy, Ecological Inventory and Environmental Best Practices Report, Interim Integrated Community Sustainability Plan, Airdrie-MD of Rocky View Intermunicipal Development Plan, Transportation Master Plan, Great Places Plan, Area Structure Plans, Neighbourhood Structure Plans, and Redevelopment Plans.



Airdrie Land Use Map
(City of Airdrie, 2010d)

Results of Field Research

During the summer of 2010 we conducted interviews with elected officials, planners, developers and residents to gain a better understanding of planning and development trends in Airdrie. This was complemented by visual surveys of new subdivision developments in the city. The surveys focused on urban form characteristics. Some trends observed included increasing residential densities, diversity of housing form, and innovative stormwater management facilities.

Planning and Development Trends

The city of Airdrie has recently focused policy attention on promoting smart growth, new urbanism and sustainability. Interviews with an elected official and several municipal planners revealed a strong commitment on the part of the municipality to increasing densities, promoting a mix of uses and housing types, and improving local and regional transit links. Unlike nearby Calgary, however, which boasts several new urbanist communities including McKenzie Towne and Garrison Woods, most developments in Airdrie follow conventional suburban patterns typical of Calgary suburbs. This includes curvilinear street patterns, cul-de-sacs, wide streets, and a focus on single-detached housing. Despite their conventional suburban form, many newer developments in Airdrie incorporate innovative storm water management systems as well as elements of low-impact development. These development strategies seek to manage storm water run-off and improve water quality through natural water retention and management features.



We've seen change in 40 years from 5 and half UPA [units per acre] suburbs, which were suburbs. They are almost all now inner city, 5 and a half. And we're up to 9 or maybe we're averaging 7 and a half or something now. So there's been change. That is not a huge change. There has been change though.

Developer



Higher density townhouses like this one are becoming more common in Airdrie.

Suburban Neighbourhood Characteristics

Newer developments in Airdrie are incorporating increasingly higher residential densities than older suburbs. The city has recently amended the MDP to not only increase minimum densities in new residential developments but also to remove the 9 units per acre maximum that previously existed. Coupled with rising land values and the costs of bringing land to development, residential densities in Airdrie are likely to continue to rise for the foreseeable future.

While single-detached homes remain the most common type of housing, many new developments include a mix of housing types including apartments, townhouses, semi-detached homes and secondary suites. Some higher end communities such as Cooper's Crossing, however, are predominantly single-detached housing.

Municipal officials frequently spoke of their desire to include mixed-use areas in newly developed communities in Airdrie. While many area structure plans call for incorporating mixed use areas, to date no such areas have been built. Commonly cited barriers to mixed-use were current economic conditions and the difficulty of attracting commercial businesses. In the summer of 2009 a new mega mall, Cross Iron Mills, opened just south of Airdrie in the Municipal District of Rocky View. The mall, which has 17 large-format anchor stores and over 200 shops, has created a challenge for attracting new businesses to Airdrie.



Estate home in Cooper's Crossing, Airdrie's 'premier' community



Townhouse projects offer affordable options for first time home-buyers.

I think Airdrie is pushing densities probably a little harder than you see in Calgary. Airdrie now has only a minimum density that must be achieved. There's no maximum. So developers have the opportunity to go higher density but they have to meet a number of community design guidelines. There are some guidelines that go along with that. It is not density just for density's sake. It's density as long as you can provide a quality community.

Developer

Suburban Neighbourhood Characteristics

Streets

Curvilinear streets and cul-de-sacs are the dominant street pattern in most new developments in Airdrie. In interviews, elected officials and municipal planners described the residential development pattern as 'developer driven' and expressed a desire to promote more grid street patterns such as those of Airdrie's downtown. Developers and residents who were interviewed, however, stated their preference for cul-de-sacs which they say minimize through traffic.



Cul-de-sac in Bayside



Typical street

The traditional development was the grid system. And I really love that. And so I think a lot of the issues that we have with, whether it's in Calgary or whether it's here, is with the way subdivisions have been developed over time. So that is one of the things that we want to work on, is getting back to some level of grid system. Because I think in some ways it is better for traffic flow, better for people, better for pedestrian development and that sort of thing.

Elected Official

Well, there is definitely a place for grid pattern. It doesn't have to be in the whole community though...I mean you can't take away cul-du-sacs. The reality is that people love cul-du-sacs. I love cul-du-sacs. They are quiet, safe environments. They are great. And if you have a grid pattern, there are no cul-du-sacs. That is not a good trait to the buyer.

Developer

Suburban Neighbourhood Characteristics

Backlanes

Back lanes are common in residential developments in Airdrie. In contrast to Calgary, where lanes are typically gravel, back lanes in most new developments in Airdrie are paved. Back lanes in Airdrie exhibit a diversity of appearances as garages and carports are not usually standardized between houses. Some developments have secondary suites on their back lanes while others are a mixture of fenced properties, carports and garages. Back lanes are also a common feature in many early suburbs in Airdrie and the Calgary area.



Backlanes often demonstrate varied architectural styles



Secondary suites located above garages on backlane



Unpaved backlanes like this one are common in Calgary.

Airdrie has come a long way in the last 10 or 15 years in allowing a little bit more flexibility in land use. They are allowing some innovation and creativity. The idea of allowing secondary suites is, from an affordable housing standpoint, an interesting thing. But to a certain extent, you have to build what the market will take. And in Airdrie, some of that is...or the majority of it, a large part of the pie is single family residences.

Developer

Suburban Neighbourhood Characteristics

Transportation

Development in Airdrie is auto-oriented. Road standards follow those set by Calgary and much of the commercial development takes the form of large format retail centres. Interviews with residents indicated that the private automobile was the primary means of transportation and that given the size of the city, everything was, “only seven minutes drive away.”

Airdrie has a limited bus service that includes three routes. It offers scheduled service during the day and in the evening operates as a dial-a-bus service. Starting in the fall of 2010 Airdrie will also have an intercity transit service that will offer service to downtown Calgary during peak periods. Municipal officials expressed optimism that the new service could serve as a catalyst to promoting greater transportation options in Airdrie in the future. They also suggested that such a move would potentially incorporate transit-oriented developments.



Most residential roads have large right-of-ways that facilitate automobiles.

We are not going to get Albertans out of their cars entirely but we have to provide some alternatives. So we've got 83 km of pathways in our community. So hopefully everyone has the ability to walk and/or ride bikes, or whatever means of alternate transportation you want to use. People powered, if you like. And then the second thing is that we are really focusing on developing local and then regional transit. And the local transit is struggling, absolutely struggling. And then the regional transit we will be launching in the fall. So that is to start on a scheduled manner, and we'll develop it over time, have buses that will connect between Airdrie and Calgary. It will start off peak hour morning and evening service, and we are hoping to fill it in throughout the day, plus weekends. And it's so that we can start giving people alternate ways to move around.

Elected official

Suburban Neighbourhood Characteristics

Community Branding

Similar to developments in Calgary, developers and builders in Airdrie use various forms of branding to create 'distinct' communities. Branding features usually include large entrance signs bearing the name of the community and the developer. Some developments such as Williamstown and Reunion have specialized street signs emphasizing the uniqueness and character of the community. Street light banners along boulevards with the community and/or developer's logo are also common.



Large stone facades are common entrance features in new communities as shown in these examples. (Clockwise from top: King's Heights, Ravenswood and Sagewood).



Some developments have unique street signs like these in Reunion (top) and Williamstown (above).

Suburban Neighbourhood Characteristics

Water Features & Stormwater Management

Developers in Airdrie are eager to incorporate water features into new developments. These features take various forms depending on the development from elaborate canal systems to large stormwater retention ponds. The developments of Bayside and the Canals, for example, have an interconnected canal system that drains into Nose Creek. This system is navigable by non-motorized boat and many houses adjacent to it have small boat docks. In winter residents can skate on it. Similarly, a stormwater retention pond in the development of Sagewood is sized to function as a hockey rink in the winter. Other stormwater ponds are more naturalized and seek to replicate wetlands. Developers frequently market retention ponds and water features as community amenities that contribute to creating a unique community image. At one development, for example, the developer has designated a large area adjacent to Nose Creek as environmental reserve. This natural feature factors heavily in advertising for the development.



Examples of stormwater retention ponds

And we've done, again in this area, some really creative storm water management ...And it's not a design I think you'll see in very many other places. It's integrated storm water management and water features throughout the entire community. So a lot of these lots front onto water amenities or water features. And in doing so, you are creating a walkable community with linear park systems within that community.

Developer

We do have the large environmental reserve. And I keep coming back to that. I mean it's a benefit for us to be able to market that as a part of the community. There's obviously the inherent environmental benefits. There's wildlife. We've done a biological impact assessment in there, and we know that there's species in there that nest, and we know there are some rare plant species and that. So protecting those is a real... I mean it's the right thing to do. But we could also market that. We can market that.

Developer

Suburban Neighbourhood Characteristics

Private Communities

While Airdrie has no gated communities, private condo developments are common in many areas. These vary from townhouses to larger apartment condo complexes. While all have private roads or drives within them, there is variation between those that have only a single entrance/exit point and those that can be accessed at multiple points. Many condo developments have signage advertising the development's name. In interviews respondents were generally supportive of private condo developments and saw them as promoting smart growth objectives, in particular increasing densities. At the same time, however, many cited exclusiveness as a problem.

None of those interviewed saw exclusive or gated communities as a part of Airdrie's immediate future. Developers indicated that the appropriate market didn't exist in Airdrie while planners and elected officials stated that they would oppose such developments.



Some private developments like this one have only one entrance/exit point.



Other private developments have multiple entrance and exit points and do not typically have perimeter fences.

I think if someone came in with an application to do a gated community, I think it would really be a question of why do you want the gate? It's not a safety issue. And I think we would view it as almost creating that stigma of unsafety. Because that is almost what the gate brings, is oh, I'm safe on this side but I'm not safe on the other side. So I don't think there would really be support for it.

Planner

Well, it's a function of the demographic. It's already here all over places where that age cohort is going to retire. They just not retiring in Airdrie in numbers. They retire to Vancouver Island, they retire to Kelowna, they retire to the lower mainland. If you go to those places, you'll see them all over the place. Because typically those kind of gated communities are lifestyle oriented. They are adult oriented type. So the demographic is here but it's just that the people of age in Airdrie, they are not going to retire in Airdrie as much as they are looking to retire somewhere else climate wise.

Developer

Conclusion

Airdrie is making a concerted effort to incorporate smart growth, new urbanism and sustainability principles into municipal planning policy with the goal of making the city a more livable and sustainable place. As the suburban landscape attests, recent developments in Airdrie still separate land uses and depend on the automobile. Despite this, increasing densities and a greater variety of housing types in many new communities are changing the face of Airdrie suburbs. As municipal officials continue to push developers to create 'smarter' communities, rising costs of development are forcing developers to be more innovative in the housing that they offer. Private communities are likely to become more popular as both the municipality and developers seek to increase overall densities.

Closer integration with Calgary on matters of inter-municipal transit, will mean that residents in Airdrie may soon have more options when it comes to their transportation choices. Whether this will result in a more sustainable city or one that further advances sprawl in the greater metropolitan region remains to be seen.

In sum, Airdrie faces both challenges and opportunities in the future. It is a rapidly growing city that is trying to avoid the fate of a dormitory suburb and develop responsibly. The planning department and council expressed optimism about changing Airdrie's future for the better and implementing smarter growth strategies. In the words of one elected official:

I think in the city, we've had tremendous growth but at the same time, we're still small enough that we can turn this ship around more easily than say if Calgary hadn't been making some of its own changes and it was just trying to now... Our whole city is half the size of one ward in Calgary. So you know, we've been working pretty diligently on trying to make things happen.



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All other images from The Suburbs Project.

Interviews were conducted between June 15-26, 2010 and included 20 individuals in 11 interviews. Most interviews were recorded and transcribed.