

A HISTORY OF PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT IN PRINCE ALBERT, SASKATCHEWAN

Prepared July, 2006

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As its inhabitants never ceased to point out, the Prince Albert of 1880 was not a mere boom town but a solid creation, destined “always [to] hold first place amongst the various settlements of the country.” (Abrams, 1976. p. 22)

The Beginning

In 1912, town planners E.A. James and T. Aird Murray called for a traffic bridge in Prince Albert at Sixth Ave. E. and 86-foot highways “...radiating from the business centre to the suburban peripheries.” (Ibid., p. 183). The Toronto consultants also recommended widening the streets to install a street railway system (Ibid.).

More than 93 years later, the City still wants a bridge at 6th Ave E. However, the issues have changed and local government, community organizations, developers, elected officials and citizens throughout Prince Albert focus today on economic development, a declining downtown and social problems. In 2001, the population was 34,291 – a decline of 1.4% from 1996 according to Statistics Canada Census data. However, the number of housing starts and building permits issued as well as the Saskatchewan Health covered population of 39,737 in 2001 all indicate steady growth (City of Prince Albert, 2004).

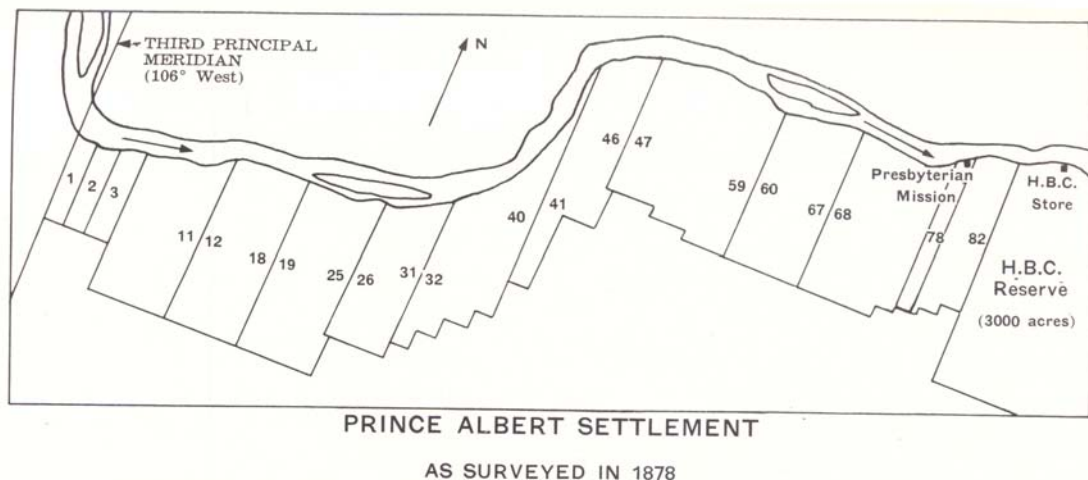


Figure 1. (Abrams, 1976)

On October 8, 1885, Prince Albert was proclaimed the fourth town in the Territories (Abrams, 1976, p. 82). Prince Albert was eventually incorporated as a city on October 8, 1904 (Ibid., p. 125). It was Reverend James Nisbet, who founded the missionary settlement of Prince Albert in the 1860s, which became a centre of trade activity with the Hudson’s Bay Company’s presence (Ibid.). Nisbet arrived at what is now Central Avenue on July 26, 1866 (p. 7). Nisbet set to work preaching to the natives, educating them and founded a settlement with houses, a school and a Mission farm. Surveyed by 1878, (see Figure 1) the river lot system came to form the basis of much of the older subdivisions in the city today. Prince Albert has many desirable features—its river and natural areas, its location as a gateway to the north, its resource and agricultural industry. All these features have influenced its growth.

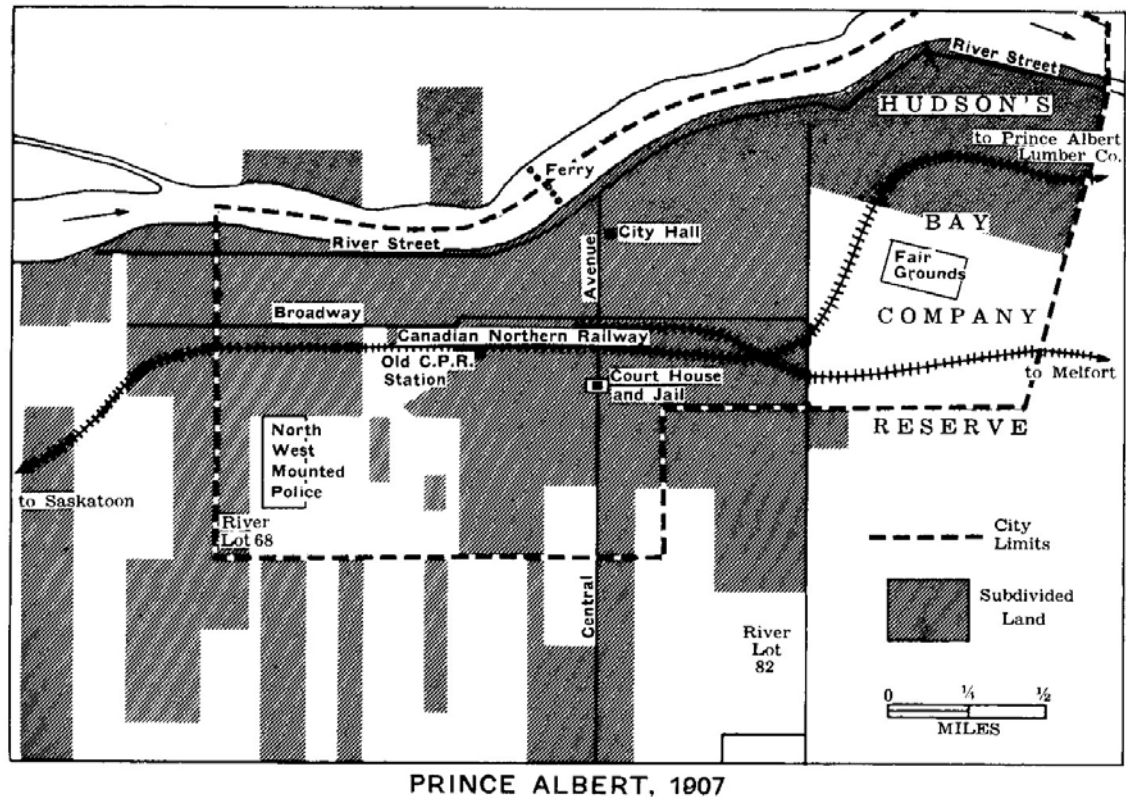


Figure 2 (Abrams, 1976, p. 146)

The Boom Era

As the oldest settlement in Saskatchewan, Prince Albert's history provides an insight into local planning initiatives. During the early boom years of the 20th century the city focused its planning efforts on issues such as fire protection; waterworks and sewerage; and electric light. Overall town planning was not much of a concern (Ibid.). Around the beginning of the century one citizen remarked that "because of a lack of planning," the city was rapidly creating sidewalks where they would not be needed for some time, while in the city centre many streets did not have any sidewalks (Ibid., p. 161). It was only in 1910 that curbing and road construction took place on Central Ave from River St. to the railway tracks (Ibid., p. 162). The City finally devised a numbering system for avenues from Central and streets from River in the east end by 1910 (Ibid., p. 162).

Increased railway and hydro power prospects, farming and lumber around 1910 provided the impetus for the boom era (Ibid., p. 177). Population increased by 65 % in less than two years (1910-1911) (Ibid., p. 178). Central Avenue became a busy main street with stores and shops. Many grand homes appeared on the west hill, making it into one of the attractive areas it is still considered today (Ibid., p. 178).

By 1911, the city engulfed 7,500 acres of land, including the area south of the river and about two square miles on the north bank (Ibid., p. 178). In 1912, the city added two sections of land east and on both sides of the Little Red River (except the area around the airport (Ibid., p. 178)). By 1912, Prince Albert had grown to be 10,559 acres. By 1913, land up to and even beyond these City limits was subdivided (Ibid., p. 180). Two sections

along and east of the Little Red River were intended to become the City's higher-end district. Six subdivisions east of the Hudson Bay Reserve included Windsor Park, Industrial Heights, Crescentwood, and Princeton. Three small subdivisions lay beyond the south end of the river lots. One mile west of the city limits and west of the penitentiary was a reportedly luxury strip called Kensington Heights. (Abrams, 1966, p. 180). The Federal Penitentiary, located one kilometer west of Prince Albert, opened in 1911 and continues to this day to be a major employer in the city.

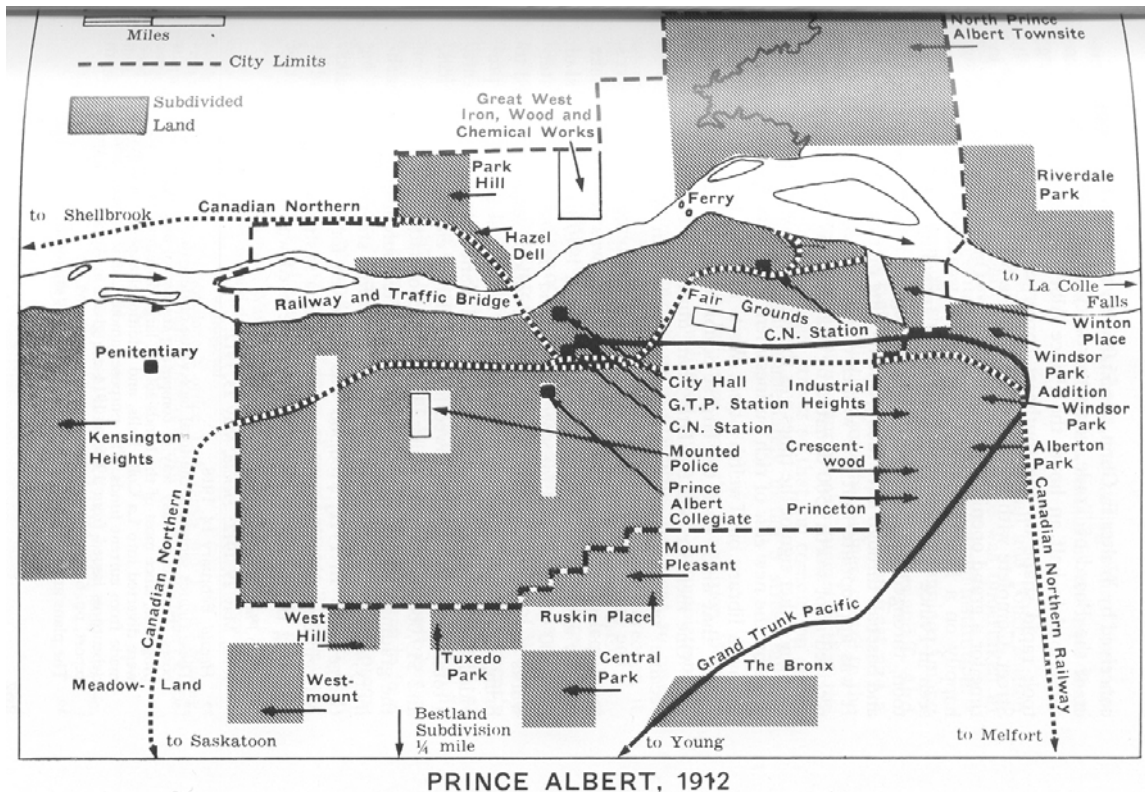


Figure 3 (Abrams, 1976, p. 181)

Around 1913, the best lots on Central Ave were selling at \$1,000 a foot (Ibid., p. 180). Many landowners had made large profits (50-100 % in a year) and owned entire blocks. The spirit of civic grandeur compelled local government to embark upon a program of municipal improvements from 1910-1913 (Ibid., p. 183). Water mains, sewers, grading were upgraded and streets were boulevarded and lighted (Ibid., p. 182). The municipality also established a parks system and restored trees to streets in need of them. These improvements were to last for the next 50 years (Ibid., p. 183).

The boom was what really brought the beginnings of town planning in Prince Albert (Ibid., p. 183). Toronto consultants E.A. James and T. Aird Murray in 1912 called for a traffic bridge at Sixth Ave. E. and a system of 86-foot highways "...radiating from the business centre to the suburban peripheries." (Ibid., p. 183). The town planners also recommended widening and opening the streets to install a street railway system when the hydro plant was finished (Ibid., p. 183). Off course, all of these improvements rested on the success of the hydro development (Ibid., p. 183), which as we know today, never came to fruition.

The Bust Era

The City incurred great debt through the failure of the La Colle Falls hydroelectric project preventing adequate provision of municipal and community services. This debt also impeded any significant civic improvements for many years to come (Ibid.). The following quote demonstrates the general atmosphere after the boom had ended: "...at the close of five years of intense striving for civic greatness... The city had failed to become an industrial centre. In 1914 there were no iron works, pulp mills, or factories of any kind...." (p. 215) By 1914, Prince Albert had become the terminus of four railway branch lines. However, neither the Hudson Bay and Pacific or the Canadian Northern had started any line to the north. In all, the city had not become the great gateway to north as it had planned (Ibid., p. 216).

The value of urban building suffered during the war (Ibid., p. 228). By 1917, land values had fallen steeply and real estate was abandoned. Between 1913 and 1916, the population had decreased by half. Many houses and business were vacant and were taken off the tax roll (Ibid., p. 228). As a result, the City could not collect enough taxes to cover its operations. The low level of rent in the city at the time speaks to the financial crisis: "In a sample of rented houses, it was found that the owners received an average in rent of less than half the amount of taxes." (Ibid., p. 229). On July 1st, 1918 Prince Albert became the first city in Saskatchewan to default on its debt (Ibid., p. 236).¹

Early Town Planning in Prince Albert

Thankfully, in 1919 building values began to rise again to a healthy level (Ibid., p. 246). Substantial growth took place in 1928 when the value of building reached \$1,333,000 (this included the provincial sanitarium and a new court house on Victoria Square) (Ibid., p. 271). This era brought about a new City land sale practice (Ibid., p. 272). Starting in 1923, the City sold land individually at approximately two thirds of the assessed value. These prices were so high that barely any land sold. In response, the City began to sell at fixed prices and a sales policy was drafted. In 1928 council set up a permanent board of real estate dealers to sell city land which included all land except for Central Avenue and agricultural land on the outskirts (Ibid., p. 274).

The growth of the city in the 1920s resurrected council's interest in town planning once again (Ibid., p. 274). By 1921 a town-planning by-law was drafted, but was never passed (Ibid., p. 274). In February 1928, city council reserved several lots for parking, a public library and playgrounds (Ibid., p. 274). Council also approved a "set-back" by-law requiring the set backs of seven feet on three downtown streets (Ibid., p. 275). It was too late though to widen Central Avenue by any other means other than narrowing the sidewalks. Consequently, Prince Albert ended up with a 42-foot main street with traffic congestion.

¹ The City was able to renegotiate its default on the debt and it was discharged around 1968 (Personal Communication, May 2006).

The arrival of the C.P.R., the expansion of the C.N.R. and the growth of the city in the early 1930s marked the beginning of formal planning efforts in the city (Ibid., p. 280). Council hired A.E.K. Bunnell of Toronto to report on town planning in Prince Albert. The City accepted Bunnell's suggestion to establish a town planning commission and requested that he undertake a study to develop a zoning scheme (Ibid., p. 280). Prince Albert became the fourth city in Western Canada to pass a comprehensive town planning bylaw scheme in September 1930 (Ibid., p. 280).

Bunnell proposed dividing Prince Albert into seven districts (Ibid., p. 280). The agricultural district was the largest with more than 8,500 acres. A light industrial zone was created along the C.N.R. tracks from Fourth Ave East to the western city limits (Ibid., p. 280). Land along the tracks from Fourth to Sixth Ave E. and a substantial area around the fair grounds were reserved for "heavy industry," such as packing plants, oil refineries and large flour mills (Ibid., p. 280). This zoning bylaw was the foundation of planning in P.A. for thirty-five years. Bunnell then began studying the need for major thoroughfares and parks in the city. In December of 1930, the town planning commission presented a list of recommended projects. No sudden changes (demolition of buildings or conversions) were made through the zoning bylaw or the commission's projects (Ibid., p. 281).

The zoning bylaw was upheld in several cases. For example, when the Massey-Harris building on 8th St. burned down, the company requested to rebuild on the same site. However, under the zoning bylaw this land was considered part of the business district Council did not make an exception. Unfortunately, the company decided not rebuild anywhere else in the city and the business was lost (Ibid., p. 281).

Post-War Growth

The city's rapid growth during World War II led to the need for a permanent official for government management (Ibid., p. 357). As a result, in 1953 Joseph W. Oliver became a permanent City Commissioner with Mayor Cuelenaere as an ex officio (Ibid., p. 357). Oliver had previously been the city treasurer and was interested in town planning (Ibid., p. 357). In addition, by 1955, residents came to see *regional planning* as also important and the decision-makers established the Prince Albert District Planning Commission with the City of Prince Albert being a member (City of Prince Albert, 1988, p. ii).

By 1961, the population of Prince Albert had grown to reach 24,168 (Ibid., p. 366). Building had averaged \$3.1 million annually since 1946 and in 1961 had reached over \$5.5 million (Ibid., p. 366). Many stately homes were built on the west hill during this period and others equally as grand appeared throughout the city, filling in the gaps in residential development (Ibid., p. 366). A subdivision in the east end called Goshen Place appeared in 1961 (Ibid., p. 366).

Despite this rapid postwar growth, Prince Albert still managed to fall behind Saskatoon in population and rate of growth (Ibid., p. 366). It became evident that the city had not become the industrial centre it had once hoped for. The city was too far from major centres in the west and lacked services. As a result, people migrated to the bigger cities. The decline of the railway industry and the use of transport trucks further disadvantaged

Prince Albert (Ibid., p. 367). One individual in 1963 expressed the general impressions of those visiting Prince Albert at that time.

He "...found the city resting under "a bit of a cloud...without any exciting prospects of industrial development." It looks," he concluded, "as if our favorite small city will continue to grow imperceptibly, basking in the pleasant northern climate, [and] inhabited by a contented populace." (p. 368).

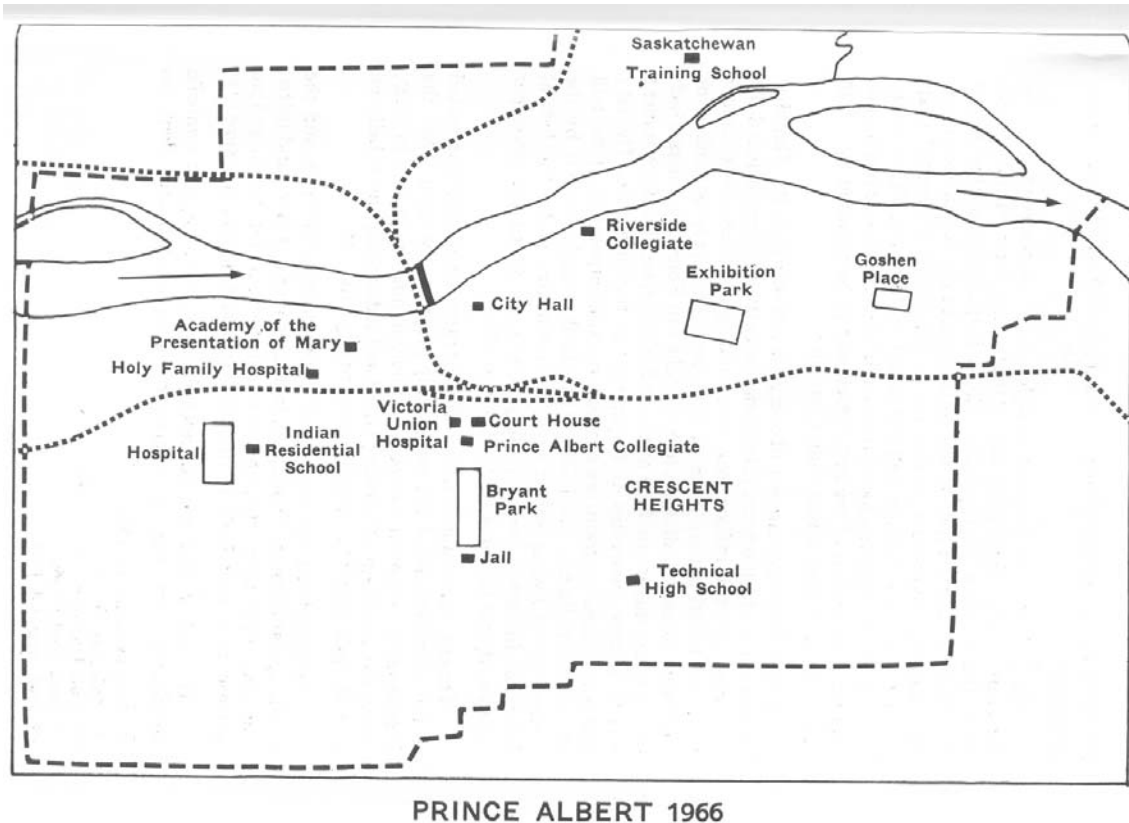


Figure 4 (Abrams, 1976, p. 371)

In the 1960s, the highway improvement and bridge in Prince Albert attracted a considerable level of traffic and development.² The City also became involved with the Province of Saskatchewan in assembling and servicing land for residential development (City of Prince Albert, 1988, p. 16). In 1967, City assumed ownership of the provincial former Jail Farm land and developed it into several residential suburbs – Crescent Heights, Carlton Park and Crescent Acres (Ibid., p. 17). In the southeast of the city, Crescent Heights became the first new subdivision since 1913 (Adams, p. 366). The City installed an extensive trunk storm sewer system, financed in part by a loan from the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation to service Crescent Heights and other areas including the South Industrial area. The Saskatchewan Housing Corporation also drafted a Land Assembly and Development Agreement, in which the City was able to pay back the loan through future lot sales. Carlton Park, Crescent Acres stage I and Riverview Stage III were all developed under this arrangement (City of Prince Albert, 1988, p. 17).

² The Diefenbaker Bridge was opened officially in 1960, but was not actually completed until 1961 (Personal Communication, May 2006).

The early 1960s also saw the construction of the Prince Albert Pulp Mill, which created many jobs and restored economic development interest. The Pulp Mill was announced in 1965 and formally opened on October 10, 1968 (Personal Communication, May 2006). The Mill had a big impact on the city; it was the main reason for the Goschen area and; resulted in the extension of the City Limits to take in the Mill site. One City official observed that the mill was well sited far away from the city from a planning perspective because this mitigated the negative effects such as the smell (personal communication, September, 2005).

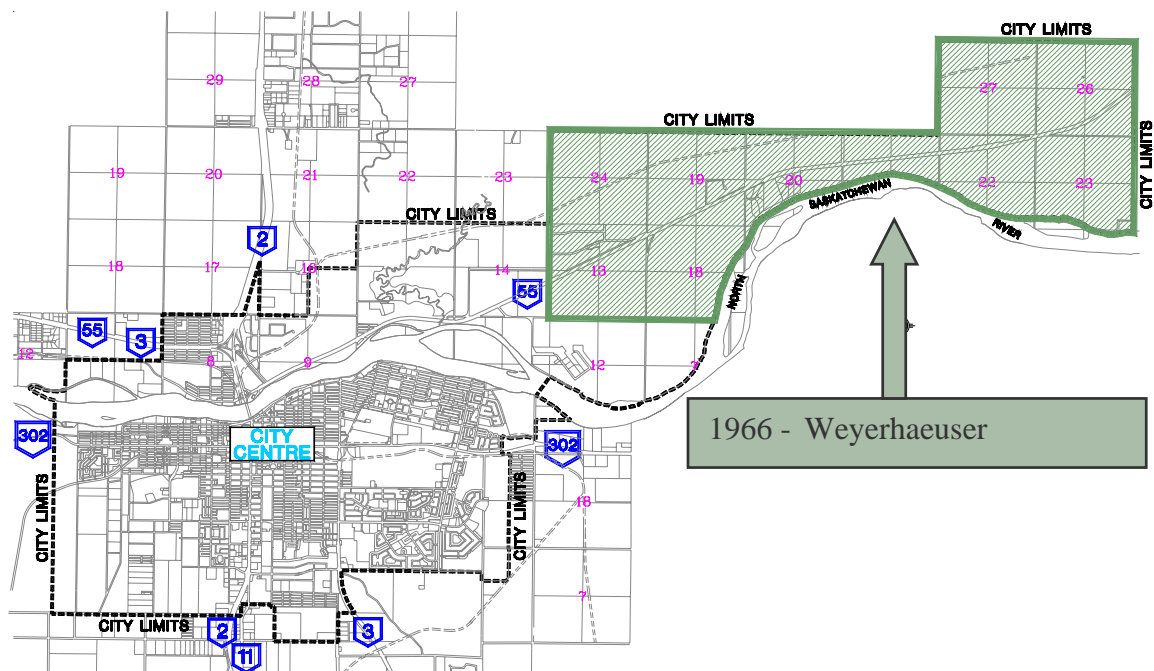


Figure 5. Annexation of the Pulp Mill site - 1966

The growth of suburbs in Canada eventually led to the urban design concept of the “neighbourhood unit.” Crescent Heights, Carlton Park and Crescent Acres subdivisions are examples of the neighbourhood unit. A neighbourhood unit suburb is designed to protect residents from traffic and to connect the needs of families to their environments (Hodges, 1998). This neighbourhood concept creates the critical mass to support a school, which along with the surrounding parks, becomes the focal point of the neighbourhood. The design involves developing residential areas in neighbourhood units and defining them by arterial streets.

The Prince Albert Development Plan of 1967, although never officially adopted, guided most of the city’s modern planning. However, planning throughout the 1970s was also influenced by several other informal policies from different sources. By and large, the urban planning pattern in Prince Albert during the post war growth period was set by a

series of Council decisions and technical studies that looked at urban renewal, sewer and water servicing, land assembly and development, and transportation (City of Prince Albert, 1982, p. 6).

Planning in the Modern Era

In the early 1970s, City Council instituted the Planning and Development Department of the City of Prince Albert in response to increased private and public development. The Department was charged with the responsibility of developing and implementing long-range plans through zoning, subdivision and development permits (City of Prince Albert, 1988, p. 1). This unprecedented growth and development activity called for a more coordinated approach to managing growth in the city (Ibid., p. 1). The Department examined issues related to upgrading the City's infrastructure system, including water and sewer services and the arterial street system (Ibid., p. 5). In the early '70s, the development of South Hill Shoppers Mall and the City's increasing involvement in industrial development through the creation of industrial parks in the North Industrial area and Marquis road area shifted land use patterns in the city (Ibid.). For instance, South Hill Shoppers Mall caused commercial activity to migrate to the Second Avenue West corridor.

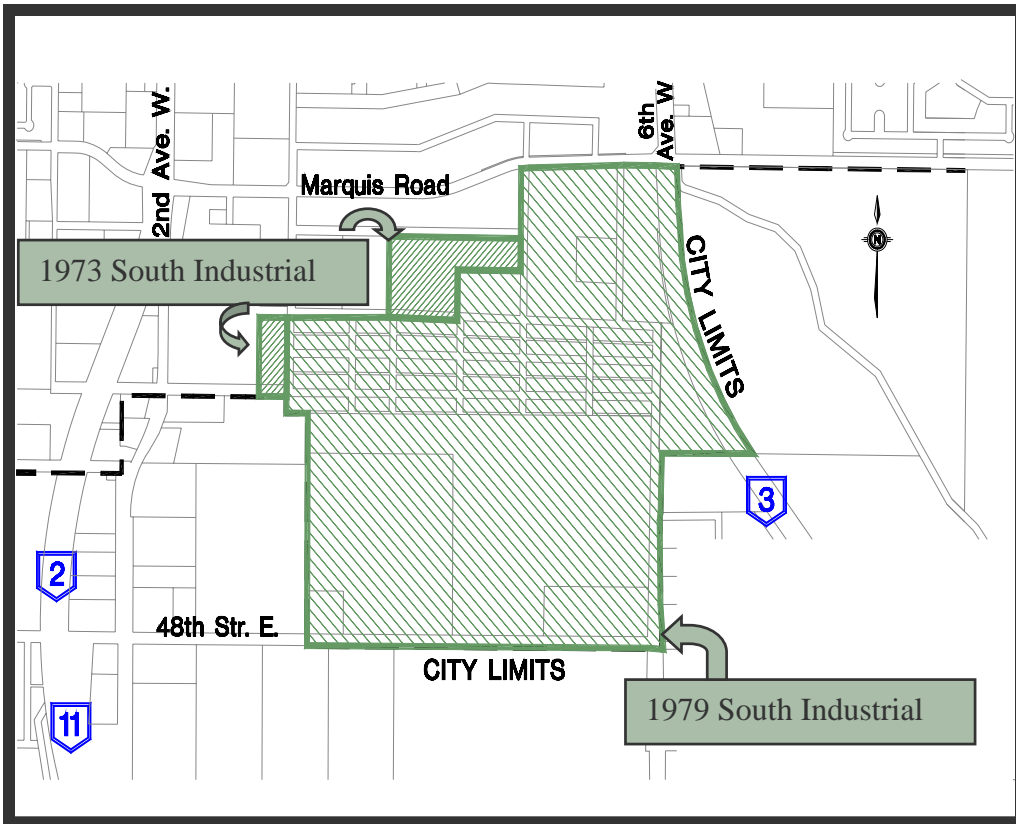


Figure 6. South Industrial Annexations in the 1970s

In all, residential construction experienced record highs during the 1970s and the City increasingly became involved in developing residential areas in the City. In fact, it has been estimated that over 90 per cent of all new residential and industrial development since the 1970s occurred in City subdivisions. The rationale for the City's involvement in land development is to provide serviced land at cost. Any profits go towards the Land Development Capital Fund for acquisition of future land (City of Prince Albert, 1988, p. 8).

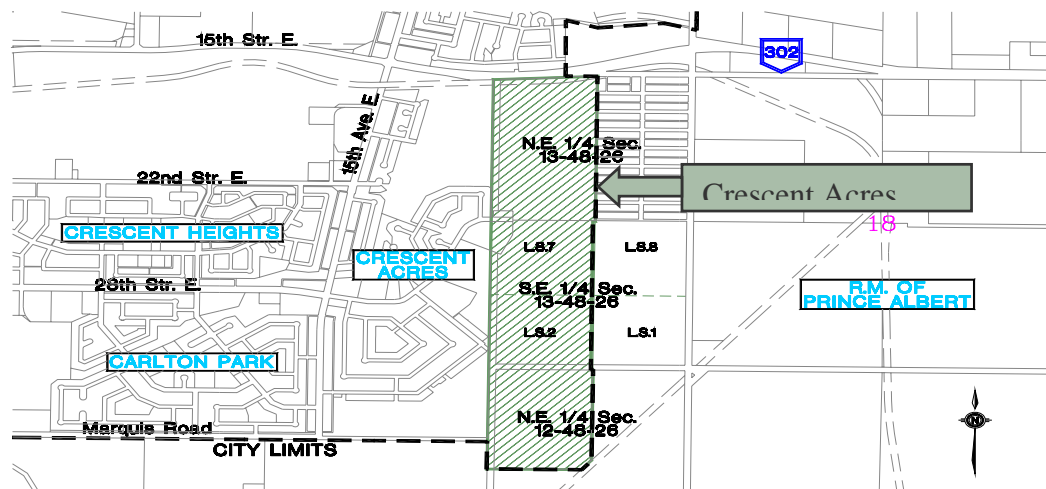


Figure 7. Crescent Acres Annexation

In the 1980s, the addition of Gateway Mall and Macintosh Mall and a new City Hall to the downtown changed the dynamics of commercial development in Prince Albert and led to an interest in downtown regeneration. Soon, the City drafted a set of Urban Design Guidelines for the downtown (Personal Communication, December, 2004).

In 1982, Council formally adopted The Municipal Development Plan (MDP) by Bylaw No. 50 of 1982. It contained a Background Statement, Policy Plan, Zoning Bylaw and Capital Works Program. The Plan compiled all of the previous policies into a decision framework (City of Prince Albert, 1988, p. 8).

The Background Statement was a collection of all the previous policies and studies. In essence, it contained the analysis of historical growth patterns and community issues. The Policy Plan amalgamated City policies related to residential, commercial and industrial land use, public parks, urban renewal and urban servicing. The Plan also contained a Conceptual Land Use Plan to direct growth until the Target Population of 50,000 (Ibid., p. 6).³ The Zoning Bylaw, considered a progressive new approach to development control, it incorporated into the Development Permit process “permitted” and “discretionary” uses. Discretionary uses provided much more flexibility and allowed for site-by-site consideration of landscaping, circulation, parking and architectural design (Ibid., p. 7). Council also adopted a five-year Capital Works Program at this time. The target year population of 50,000 was important because it was used to establish major infrastructure guidelines (i.e. water and sewage treatment facility sizing) (Personal Communication, September 2005).

³ The Target Population is the population which can be accommodated south of the Saskatchewan River within the limits of serviceability of the infrastructure present at the time of adoption of the plan and its extension. It is also the population to which the 1977 Transportation Plan was oriented. At a 2% annual growth rate, the city was projected to reach the Target Population by about 2001.

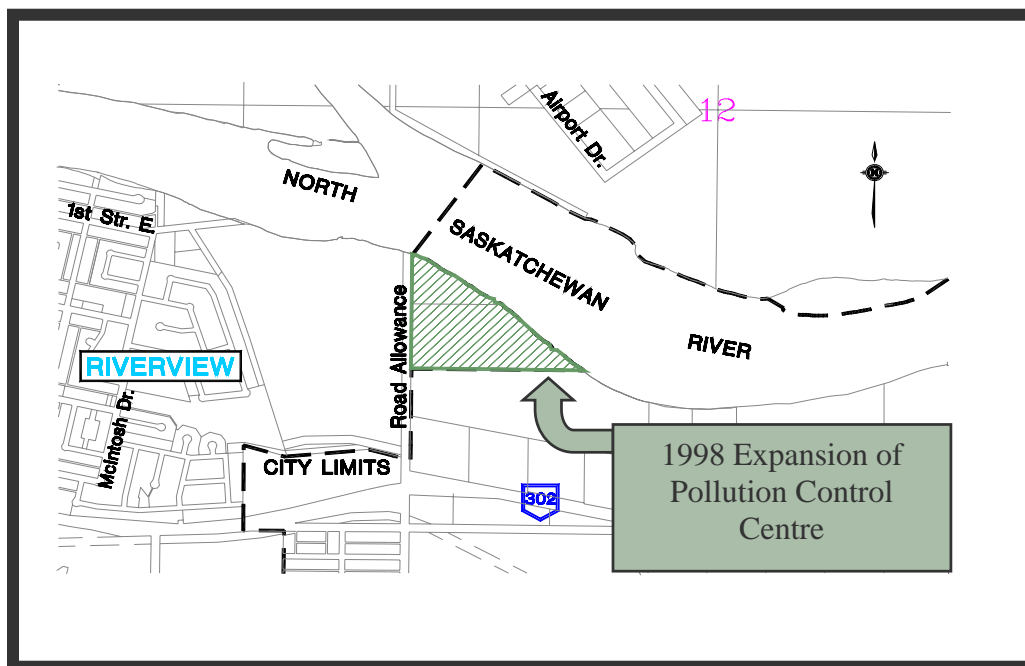


Figure 8. 1998 Annexation – Pollution Control Centre

However, in 1983, the Planning and Development Act, 1983 came into being and no longer required a Background Statement or Capital Works Program as part of a Development Plan (City of Prince Albert, 1988, p. 8). On March 16th, 1987, Council approved the updated City of Prince Albert Policy Plan (Development Plan) Bylaw No. 2 of 1987, with the central policies remaining the same. As per the Planning and Development Act, 1983, the Development Plan became a statutory document and any departure from the policies had to be done through an amendment bylaw. Growth remained fairly constant throughout the 1980s, but never surpassed the levels of the 1970s. By this time, the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation had pulled out of the Land Assembly and Development Agreements and the City was left to develop Crescent Acres Stage II on its own (Ibid., p. 18).

A development that has had a major positive impact on Prince Albert's economy in recent times has been Cornerstone—a regional retail centre built in the late 1990s. According to the Prince Albert Market Area Analysis (2003) there were more people shopping at the Cornerstone Shopping Center from locations outside of Prince Albert than at any other shopping location in the city. This can be attributed to the stores being big-box, one-stop stores, ideal for the many shoppers who travel to the city to buy their supplies. The study recorded the highest percentage of shoppers having originated from outside of Prince Albert city limits. This is significant because it further emphasizes the broad market that this center can draw on, and the enormous retail potential of the development (p. 3).

This development involved the extensive clean up of contaminated land, which was a major undertaking in the city (Figure 1). Two wood preservation plants owned by Saskatchewan Forest Products (SFP) and Domtar, operated in the former Prince Albert industrial park from the early 1920's until the mid 1970's. This industrial park was located east of 6th Avenue east. The operations were located on the south side of what is now 15th street between 6th Avenue east and what is now 10th Avenue east, and on the north side of 15th Street, between what is now 10th Avenue east and what would be 13th

Avenue east. Chemicals used in treating the lumber (mainly telephone poles and railway ties) were primarily Creosote, with some PCP (Pentachlorophenol).



Figure 9. Prince Albert Former Industrial Sites

A partnership was developed between the Province of Saskatchewan through Crown Investments Corporation (the successor of SFP), CN Railways, and the City of Prince Albert in 1994 to remediate the SFP site and re-install a storm sewer so that releases to the North Saskatchewan River would be stopped.

Work progressed and focused on the removal and replacement of the storm sewer lines within clean soils adjacent to the original position, with impacted soils on the site being removed and hauled away to be treated in a biological reaction unit built north of the river (Personal Communication, March 2006 A). This clean up allowed for the construction of the Cornerstone Shopping district shortly after. This is one of the most prominent examples of commercial-sector growth in recent years in Prince Albert, attracting several successful new retailers to the city. The increasingly popular trend in North America of “power centres,” in commercial development has had, and will continue to have, a strong influence on development patterns in the city.



Figure 10. Cornerstone

Another positive development has been the establishment of urban reserve land in the city in 1982 (Garcea, Joseph and F. Barron, 1999). Land in a municipality is owned by First Nations and is exempt from the municipality's regulations. Urban reserves provide opportunities for economic and community development initiatives.

The Opawikoscikan Reserve (Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation) was created by Federal Order in the city of Prince Albert on August 9, 1982. This was a significant event in the planning history of Prince Albert because this 17 hectare – parcel of land was the first urban reserve to be created in the province. The land was a former site of the RCMP headquarters and had also been used for educational purposes since end of World War II as Indian Student Residence.⁴ In 1992 a large office complex was constructed for the administration of Prince Albert Grand Council and Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation. This was also when the 1992 Saskatchewan Treaty Land Entitlement Framework Agreement was signed between the Federal, Provincial Governments and the Entitlement Bands.

The process of establishing an Urban Reserve was challenging because several issues related to servicing and taxes had to be addressed. In response, an agreement for the provision for the loss of taxes with a servicing agreement was signed. Compatible band and municipal bylaws were also established using a dispute resolution mechanism. This

⁴ The NW/RC Mounted Police were headquartered on this land for Saskatchewan until about 1935. The area was next used for a training unit for the Army during World War II, and then became a student residence. The large building that houses the gymnasium is the only building left from the Army days (Personal Communication, May, 2006).

reserve set the bar for several other urban reserve lands in Prince Albert (and the province) and helped to build a foundation for the positive relationship between Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation and the municipality of Prince Albert today (Personal Communication, March 2006 B).



Figure 11. Opawikoscikan Reserve

With changing demographics, social issues have assumed a new importance. Today Prince Albert's Planning Department must address matters such as affordable housing; crime prevention through environmental design; sustainable development, and youth unemployment, in addition to the traditional arenas of land use and downtown redevelopment. An example of one of the City's recent initiatives is that of the New Beginnings Housing Co-op Program, which led to the province wide Neighbourhood Home Ownership Program. Throughout 1998, the City worked with local housing organizations to develop the New Beginnings Housing Co-op Inc. – a new and innovative approach to affordable housing. To overcome financial obstacles to homeownership, and at the same time work to improve the housing stock in certain neighbourhoods, the Co-op would purchase homes that required extensive renovations and use sweat equity to form the majority of down payment. In 1997, a housing co-operative of 20-units was established, providing 20 families with the opportunity for homeownership and giving 20 homes in disrepair a much-needed face-lift. This project gained countrywide attention, and became the basis of the Province's affordable housing strategy entitled Neighbourhood Home Ownership Program (City of Prince Albert, 2003)

Prince Albert has gained a reputation for having a high rate of in-migration from First Nation reserves. Although this presents new challenges, it also presents many opportunities. The economy, employment opportunities, population growth and the northern lifestyle have contributed to the city's urban design, the architectural character of the neighbourhoods and prosperity of the land base. Prince Albert's relatively isolated northern location has created economic challenges for both the public and private sectors. Successful planning initiatives include the construction of the 2nd Avenue bridge, Gateway Mall, City residential and industrial subdivisions in the 70s, urban reserves and the development of Cornerstone.

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