

## **Rebuilding Fort McMurray: A snapshot of the role planners can play in the rebuilding efforts**

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### **Introduction**

On May 1, 2016, a wildfire began approximately 15 kilometers southwest of Fort McMurray, Alberta, the urban service centre of the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (RMWB). By May 3, the wildfire was responsible for destroying more than 2,400 homes and buildings, causing the largest wildfire evacuation in Alberta's history.

This research contributes to a broader effort by the principal investigator (PI) to consider two general topics: (1) what are the infrastructural needs of people living in a resource based community that will provide them with high satisfaction and encourage the resiliency of the community?; (2) How do answers to this question provide insight into how to address the problematic relationship(s) between resource extraction, values and knowledge, community well-being, and resiliency?

Over the previous 18 months, the PI had completed 15 case-studies of communities from Alberta and British Columbia, interviewing a total of 121 individuals including residents, politicians, decision-makers and other stakeholders. Thirty-three of the 121 were located in Fort McMurray.

### **Research Questions**

The primary research question for this project is: Given the economic importance of Fort McMurray as the administrative centre for the Athabasca Oil Sands development and as the home of over 85,000 people, what role can planners have in preparing Fort McMurray and how can its residents utilize the events of the recent wildfire and the subsequent destruction as an opportunity to redevelop their community into a stronger and more resilient place for the future? This research question was addressed by considering three objectives:

1. Theoretical: to investigate how Fort McMurray and its residents respond to the experience of the fire and evacuation.
2. Practical: to work with municipal spokespersons and local residents/community groups during the immediate redevelopment process to identify areas of concern about the long-term sustainability and resiliency of the region.
3. Empirical: to gain experience and understanding of community response. In particular, how community planning can be utilized to best manage the opportunities for community redevelopment.

### **Methods**

Methods and organization of the research fall into three main areas:

**Qualitative Semi-Structured Interviews & Focus Groups:** A series of qualitative interviews (N=9) were conducted to provide a snapshot of resident experiences. Semi-structured interviews were deemed to be appropriate because (a) their narrative nature allows participants to voice their own perspectives in their own words (Denzin & Lincoln 2000), (b) they provide flexibility to probe for details on a range of topics related to each of the objectives, (c) they are viewed by participants as less intrusive as they choose their interview location, (d) they enable indigenous participants to contextual their experiences within their own space, place, environment, and resources.

**Participant selection:** Participants were chosen using purposive sampling until a level of saturation occurred. While originally, five participant pools were going to be sought, upon the initial visit to Fort McMurray it became more apparent that only municipal planners would be sought for interviews. Because the stated goal of the project was to determine what role planners in particular could play in the rebuild effort it was important to gain as much insight from this particular group. For this snapshot project, nine planners from the RMWB were interviewed.

**Data Analysis & Analytical Approach Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA):** Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed for emergent themes with the aid of the qualitative software package NVivo 10. An in-depth critical discourse analysis of the data set was completed. CDA is a flexible, inductive process that requires adaptation as themes emerge. For this project discourses [in particular expressions of power] were viewed as frameworks that are able to limit not only the meaning of what is experienced but also the experiences themselves; that is, how an issue is framed (Grosz 1995).

### **Preliminary Findings**

While the principal investigator asked interviewees a total of 22 questions, the central question became “what role do you think planners can play in the rebuilding effort after the recent wildfires?” This central question, according to the PI, “proved to be critical” as it addressed whether municipal planners believed they could have a significant impact on the rebuilding effort.

The PI noted that “What made this question even more interesting was that every participant responded virtually the same way ‘that depends’. Each participant went on to note that in reality, insurance companies, not the municipality, have the majority of control over the rebuilding effort.”

### **Conclusion**

The researcher expressed surprise at interviewee responses that placed great emphasis on the role of insurers in the rebuilding of Fort McMurray and noted “There is a feeling from participants that planners are largely at the mercy of insurance companies.”

Given what he considered to be a surprise finding of the role that insurance companies play in the rebuilding, the PI noted that the final research will be broken into three themes: 1) What participant planners thought their role would be in the rebuild, 2) What role building codes played and will play in the rebuild and; 3) What participants think the newly rebuilt neighbourhoods will look like when everything is settled.