

# **AAMDC Submission to the Alberta Electoral Boundaries Commission – *Interim Report***

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Partners in Advocacy & Business

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Alberta Association of Municipal District and Counties (AAMDC) is a provincial association that represents Alberta's rural municipalities which include 64 municipal districts, four specialized municipalities, and the Special Areas Board. Together, AAMDC members cover approximately 85% of Alberta's land mass and 18% of Alberta's population.

The Alberta Electoral Boundaries Commission (AEBC), tasked with reviewing Alberta's electoral boundaries for provincial elections, released their *Interim Report* in May 2017. The report proposes several significant changes to current electoral boundaries that will have an adverse impact on rural municipalities and rural residents. Specifically, the consolidation of:

- Four electoral divisions into three in the central northeast area of the province. Those current four electoral divisions are Lac La Biche-St. Paul-Two Hills, Athabasca-Sturgeon-Redwater, Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville, and Bonnyville-Cold Lake.
- Five electoral divisions into four in the central west area of the province. Those current five electoral divisions are Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre, West Yellowhead, Drayton Valley-Devon, Whitecourt-Ste. Anne, and Stony Plain.
- Seven electoral divisions into six in the eastern side of the province. Those current seven electoral divisions are Battle River-Wainwright, Drumheller-Stettler, Strathmore-Brooks, Little Bow, Cardston-Taber-Warner, Cypress-Medicine Hat, and Vermilion-Lloydminster.

An additional significant change is the creation of a new electoral division to the immediate north and west of Calgary, to account for the significant increase in the populations of Airdrie and Cochrane.

The AAMDC is concerned that the consolidation of these ridings, and the resulting loss of legislative seats in rural Alberta, will impact the ability of rural Albertans to be effectively represented in Alberta's legislature.

In response to the *Interim Report*, the AAMDC would like to reiterate the importance of ensuring that Alberta's democratic institutions effectively represent Albertans from all walks of life and areas of the province. Achieving this representation by balancing population and demographics, community interest and characteristics, existing municipal and natural boundaries, and other relevant criteria is a difficult but necessary task. Over-reliance on absolute voter parity may inhibit the ability of Albertans to be effectively represented.

The AAMDC submission featured below speaks to several important points for consideration by the AEBC as they form their final recommendations.

1. *Balance Blended Constituencies* – blended constituencies can be a viable option when required and in those instances, the AEBC should attempt to balance both urban and rural populations to ensure that the elected representative has an incentive to work with both rural and urban communities.
2. *Support for the AEBC's Minority Report* – the AAMDC asks that the AEBC consider the important perspectives raised in the *Interim Report's* minority report that speaks to concerns with the erosion of rural ridings
3. *Consideration of Geographical Distances* – constituencies in rural Alberta are very large geographically. This can impede the ability of both constituents and elected MLAs from connecting and sharing local, regional, and provincial concerns.

4. *Avoid Fracturing Municipalities into Multiple Electoral Districts* – municipal boundaries often reflect natural and community barriers. Where appropriate, municipal boundaries should act as a guide for electoral boundaries and the AEBC should avoid fracturing municipalities into multiple electoral boundaries unless the population of that municipality dictates multiple electoral districts.
5. *Consider Unique and Special Circumstances for Deviance from the 25% Variance* – the *Alberta Electoral Boundaries Commission Act* allows for deviations from the 25% variance for unique considerations such as low population density. The current areas where deviations exist should continue to receive such an exemption to ensure such areas are effectively represented.
6. *Protecting Common Community Interests* – electoral boundaries should reflect communities. Therefore, it is important that their boundaries reflect community interests. Although rural constituencies often incorporate more than one community, there are often unique interests and attributes that link these communities together.

## INTRODUCTION

The Alberta Association of Municipal District and Counties (AAMDC) is a provincial association that represents Alberta's rural municipalities which include 64 municipal districts, four specialized municipalities, and the Special Areas Board. Together, AAMDC members cover approximately 85% of Alberta's land mass and 18% of Alberta's population. Through proactive leadership, strategic partnerships and effective advocacy, the AAMDC works to build strong, vibrant, and resilient communities.

As a voice for Alberta's rural communities, the AAMDC is well-positioned to provide a unique and necessary perspective to the Alberta Electoral Boundaries Commission (AEBC) during the 2016/17 review of Alberta's electoral boundaries. The submission below outlines the AAMDC's input to the AEBC's *Interim Report* released in May 2017. As a provincial association, the AAMDC will not provide comments specific to individual constituencies, but instead will provide comments more general in nature.

## SUMMARY OF AEBC'S INTERIM REPORT

The AEBC's *Interim Report* released in May 2017 makes several significant changes that will have an adverse impact on rural municipalities and rural residents. Specifically, the consolidation of:

- Four electoral divisions into three in the central northeast area of the province. Those current four electoral divisions are Lac La Biche-St. Paul-Two Hills, Athabasca-Sturgeon-Redwater, Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville, and Bonnyville-Cold Lake.
- Five electoral divisions into four in the central west area of the province. Those current five electoral divisions are Rimbey-Rocky Mountain House-Sundre, West Yellowhead, Drayton Valley-Devon, Whitecourt-Ste. Anne, and Stony Plain.
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An additional change is the creation of a new electoral division to the immediate north and west of Calgary, to account for the significant increase in the populations of Airdrie and Cochrane.

As will be outlined below in further detail, the consolidation of these electoral constituencies raises several concerns for rural municipalities and rural residents.

## DEMOGRAPHICS IN ALBERTA

In the past decade, Alberta has seen considerable population growth which has only recently been slowed by the downturn in Alberta's economy. Much of this growth has been to Alberta's largest urban centres but Alberta's rural and small communities have also seen a net-increase in population – a trend unique in Alberta in comparison to the rest of Canada.

The AEBC acknowledges these trends in the *Interim Report* and Alberta's rural municipalities recognize these shifting demographics and the potential outcomes they may produce. The AAMDC and its members, however, want to emphasize the importance of maintaining adequate and equitable representation for Alberta's rural residents and communities despite these shifting demographics. It is problematic that even though rural areas are growing (though not at the same pace as some urban areas), they will ultimately lose representation should the *Interim Report*

recommendations be adopted. Higher rural populations being represented by fewer MLAs results in a cumulative disadvantage for rural Alberta that is not necessarily warranted based on its demographic trends.

## **EFFECTIVE REPRESENTATION**

As outlined in the AAMDC's initial submission to the AEBC and recognized in the AEBC's *Interim Report*, effective representation is the cornerstone of our representative democracy. This has been outlined in Section 3 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and the 1991 *Supreme Court of Canada's Decision Reference Re Provincial Electoral Boundaries (Sask)*, that stated that the purpose of the right to vote is not pure equality of voting power but the right to "effective representation." Therefore, factors in addition to population such as geography, community history, community interests, and community identity need to be considered to ensure that Alberta's legislative assembly effectively represents the diversity of Albertans.

In 2010, the Alberta Electoral Boundary Commission's report outlined the following principles of effective representation:

1. Relative parity of voting power.
2. The tradition in Canada of "effective representation," not absolute parity as in the U.S.
3. Recognition that the process of achieving effective representation may involve altering the political power of some votes – but not unduly and not without reason.
4. The balancing of these interests which involves an examination of the social history, geography and demography of communities.

The AAMDC would like to reiterate its support for these principles for consideration in the 2016/2017 Alberta's Electoral Boundaries Commission's review.

## **ACHIEVING EFFECTIVE RURAL REPRESENTATION IN ALBERTA**

Alberta's rural municipalities and the residents they represent were concerned that the 2016/17 AEBC recommendations would result in fewer rural seats and by extension, a reduction in the ability of Alberta's legislature to effectively represent the interests of rural Albertans and rural communities. These concerns are realized in the *Interim Report* which has seen a reduction of rural seats. The following concerns and recommendations are provided by the AAMDC for consideration by the 2016/17 AEBC in the context of the *Interim Report*.

### **General Concerns**

As a necessary step to improve Alberta's democratic process, the review of electoral boundaries is designed to ensure that different factors including population, community interest, existing municipal and natural boundaries, and effective representation are used in determining Alberta's electoral boundaries. The AAMDC is concerned that voter parity has taken precedence over these other priorities. The use of these different factors is essential to ensuring that Alberta's democratic process is both fair and equitable for all Albertans.

The AAMDC does not believe that the *Interim Report* reflects the best effort to achieve 'effective representation' and instead, agrees with the Minority Report featured in Appendix A which reads,

*“As new ridings are added to the cities, electoral divisions must be taken from the ‘Rest of Alberta’. This results in ongoing erosion of ridings in rural Alberta and is not sustainable if all Albertans are to be effectively represented.”*

As stated in the *Electoral Boundary Commission’s Act* (“the Act”, hereafter), there is an allowable variance of the population within boundaries to account for non-population variables and the AAMDC agrees with position outlined in Appendix A that states that the changes to the electoral boundaries featured in the *Interim Report* are unnecessary given the provision for variances within the Act.

### ***Balance Blended Constituencies***

The *Interim Report* has sought to minimize the creation of blended constituencies that combine a large urban area with a non-urban area. Where this was unavoidable, the AAMDC recommended, as a general principle, that the AEBC balance the rural and urban populations as closely as possible. This would ensure that the elected MLAs have an incentive to work with both rural and urban constituents and understand their issues and concerns.

The AAMDC also supports AEBC’s efforts, where blended constituencies were unavoidable, to combine areas where residents are likely to have common concerns such as in a suburban community surrounding a large city whose residents work and/or commute frequently to that city. The same is true for smaller urban centres within a larger rural community.

The AAMDC is encouraged that those that made submissions to the AEBC in blended constituencies indicated that this model was working well.

### ***Consideration of Geographical Distances***

It has been the AAMDC’s position that the current electoral boundaries are at their maximum size and that expanding the boundaries of Alberta’s largest electoral constituencies will only exacerbate the existing challenges facing those constituents and their elected representatives. The AAMDC is disappointed that the consolidation of rural ridings presented in the *Interim Report* will only grow the geographical size of several electoral constituencies. With this comes additional challenges for elected MLAs as they would have to travel additional distances to attend community events and listen to constituent concerns.

Though advances in technology may ease this burden of distance, it is also important to remember that many rural and remote communities do not have access to high-speed broadband internet which can inhibit the use of streaming or video/audio conferencing services which MLAs may use to connect with their constituents. In addition to improving high-speed internet in rural and remote communities, the Government of Alberta should seek to ensure the Alberta Legislature is properly equipped with the technology to connect MLAs with those constituents who have the access to high-speed internet.

### ***Avoid Fracturing Municipalities into Multiple Electoral Districts***

Unlike most provinces in Canada, municipalities govern Alberta’s entire landmass with the exception of national and provincial parks. This expansive system of governance reflects the communities Albertans live in and can make for logical boundaries for Alberta’s provincial electoral boundaries – especially outside of Alberta’s large cities and towns.

The AAMDC is encouraged by the AEBC’s efforts in the *Interim Report* to align constituencies with municipal boundaries where possible, even going so far to reflect inter-municipal partnerships that exist in regions of the province.

As dividing municipalities, particularly geographically large rural municipalities, into multiple electoral divisions can create unnecessarily complex governance arrangements when municipal and provincial elected officials work collaboratively, the AAMDC recommends that the AEBC continue to use municipal boundaries as a guiding tool for establishing electoral boundaries.

### ***Consider Unique and Special Circumstances for Deviance from the 25% Variance***

As noted above, the *Electoral Boundaries Commission Act* requires the population of a proposed electoral division to not vary by more than 25% from the provincial average with the exception of unique or special cases. In the 2010 boundary adjustment, special and unique circumstances were used to justify the creation of two electoral districts in Dunvegan-Central Peace and Lesser Slave Lake. The 2010 ABEC noted the scarcity of population as justification for the deviance from the 25% threshold.

The *Interim Report* reinforces the support for the two electoral boundaries that exceed this variance, Central Peace-Notley (renamed) and Lesser Slave Lake. In these instances, the AAMDC feels the deviations are appropriate given the geographic expanse that these two constituencies cover. Requiring adherence to the 25% variance target would be unreasonable and exacerbate further the challenges of large electoral constituencies.

The *Interim Report* states that, in the context of factors that determine whether the variance of above or below 25% is justifiable, “Preservation of the rural voice is not one of those factors” (p.27). The AAMDC would like to provide a more global perspective, which is that preserving traditionally “rural constituencies” and the “rural voice” is a means to preserving common community interests.

### ***Protecting Common Community Interests***

The AEBC’s comments regarding “common community interests” do acknowledge that this is indeed a consideration for the determination of electoral boundaries and although, as the AEBC *Interim Report* states, “most current electoral divisions outside of Edmonton and Calgary do not contain a single common community”, it is fair to say that creating larger geographical ridings into already diverse electoral constituencies only further moves away from the recognition of common community characteristics that do exist. The expansion of electoral boundaries that are already large is, more often than not, at odds the preservation of “common community interests.”

## **CONCLUSION**

The AAMDC appreciates the opportunity to provide input and comment to the 2016/17 Alberta Electoral Boundaries Commission and the important questions it has been tasked with. To conclude the points above, the AAMDC would like to reiterate that much of what the Alberta Electoral Boundaries Commission must address is a question of means and ends in that, the core outcome and end goal for the Alberta Legislative Assembly is the ability to effectively represent Albertans from all walks of life and areas of the province. Achieving this representation by balancing population and demographics, community interest and characteristics, existing municipal and natural boundaries, and other relevant criteria is not an easy task. Over-reliance on absolute voter parity may not achieve the desired outcome and may inhibit the ability of Albertans to be effectively represented – effectively weakening Alberta’s democratic institutions.

The AAMDC is pleased to provide input to the Alberta Electoral Boundaries Commission on this important task and will continue to provide comment where appropriate.