

Alberta Electoral Boundaries Commission

Submitted via web form

**Re: Rural Municipalities of Alberta input on Alberta Electoral Boundaries Commission interim report**

Dear Chair Miller and AEBC Commissioners,

RMA advocates on behalf of Alberta's 63 municipal districts and counties, five specialized municipalities, and the Special Areas Board. Collectively, RMA members provide municipal governance and services to 85% of Alberta's landmass. RMA members represent Albertans living in areas far from major population centres, services, and in many cases, those already facing barriers in accessing provincial elected officials due to their location in geographically large ridings with sparse populations and long travel distances between communities.

It is in this context that RMA is submitting input on behalf of members. We greatly respect the Alberta Electoral Boundaries Commission's ("the Commission's") complex and impactful responsibility in redrawing Alberta's provincial electoral boundaries in a period of rapid population growth and demographic changes. We also appreciate the sincere manner in which the Commission has discussed the challenges of properly addressing rural representation while confronting the reality of an urbanizing population, all within specific and strict legislative guardrails in terms of factors to consider and the attributes of each individual electoral division.

Unfortunately, the recommendations and proposed electoral boundaries in the interim report do not reflect the Commission's commentary related to the importance of recognizing unique challenges in rural communities and developing a map that mitigates them to the extent possible.

As RMA represents rural municipalities across the province, we have encouraged individual member municipalities to provide feedback with a focus on electoral divisions that intersect with their boundaries. As such, the input below will primarily focus on high-level themes, with specific examples used as needed.

Population variance

The *Electoral Boundaries Commission Act* requires that all electoral divisions be within 25% above or below the average riding population (with the exception of "s. 15(2) electoral divisions). In the interim report, the Commission provides detailed and helpful context as to the complexity of utilizing the average electoral division population as a baseline, but recognizing that proximity to that average amount is not necessarily ideal in terms of effective representation, or in some cases, even possible.

From there, the Commission described complex and sometimes conflicting input, in which some stakeholders and members of the public urged the Commission to aim for the greatest possible population parity across electoral districts, while others encouraged the Commission to approach their assignment through the lens that rural ridings should, by default, have a population near the lower end of the variance threshold to account for their unique representation challenges.

While the Commission does not appear to state a consistent approach or philosophy as to how they approach this challenge, the results of the re-drawing process appear to suggest a shift (in comparison to the previous map) towards emphasizing voter parity and reducing the range of individual riding populations. One indication that the Commission views closeness to the average as ideal is reflected in the following statement on page 29 of the interim report:

We note why variances from the provincial average population can be justified, but this is out of an abundance of caution, given that we are not close to offending constitutional or statutory limits on permitted population variance.

It is unclear why the Commission appears to be celebrating their avoidance of “closeness” to statutory limits. To RMA’s knowledge, there is no expectation that the Commission avoid variances of +/- 24% (for example) as long as local conditions justify such a variance. In RMA’s view, many in rural areas likely do. From RMA’s perspective, having only three of 41 non-Edmonton/Calgary ridings with a variance in excess of 15% below the provincial average suggests that unique rural barriers are not adequately reflected in the boundaries, and many rural electoral districts are either excessively large, or blended with urban centres to an extent that increases the population near the provincial average but undermines the rural voice within electoral district boundaries.

Given that the Commission indicates that in general, rural Albertans have less access to their MLA than urban elected officials, and that rural barriers associated with distance, etc. are more difficult to overcome, the apparent avoidance of electoral districts that more closely approach the 25% variance limit is disappointing, and should be re-evaluated by the Commission.

#### Use of s. 14 factors to consider

While the Commission references the various factors that they may consider under section 14 of the Act multiple times throughout the interim report, their use and weighting appear inconsistent across the various electoral divisions. For example, the Commission emphasizes community connections in their justification for many urban electoral boundaries, and to a lesser extent in reference to rural electoral boundaries. However, the Commission appears to have not properly considered the risks to community cohesion associated with their significant changes to northern ridings, which divides communities that are distant geographically but aligned in terms of shared economies, services and cultures.

RMA understands that the Commission has significant discretion as to if and how they incorporate the various section 14 factors into their decision-making process. However, in the interest of fairness and transparency, RMA recommends that the Commission assess how each riding addresses (or does not address) each of the factors to assist stakeholders and the public in better understanding the benefits and drawbacks of the recommended boundaries.

#### Use of s. 15(2) exceptions

The complexity of applying s. 15(2) exceptions is significant. However, given the Commission’s acknowledgement that rapid urban population growth is driving the addition of electoral divisions in large cities, it is surprising that the Commission chose to reduce the number of s. 15(2) exceptions from two to one based on the proposed changes. RMA particularly is concerned with the Commission’s comments on page 37 of the interim report, which state that

the electoral division of Peace River-Notley represents the Peace River corridor with a population significantly below the provincial average but not approaching 50% below the provincial average. The communities in common in the area will lead to effective representation.

This is followed a few paragraphs later on page 38 with the following:

We acknowledge that three electoral divisions in the far northwest of the province have essentially been reduced to two-and-a-third. Slave Lake-Westlock-Athabasca and West Yellowhead becoming more northern in their orientation only partially compensate for this. The

Commission's view is that this is an imperfect solution to an impossible problem. But we consider this the best way to divide Alberta into 89 electoral divisions to achieve effective representation for all Albertans.

While RMA lacks access to the data and technical resources to propose specific alternative boundaries in this region, an examination of Peace River-Notley (as an example) reveals a truly massive geographic area, with a population only 11% below the provincial average. Given that there are electoral divisions in Edmonton and Calgary that are within 3% of the population of Peace River-Notley, and only a fraction of the geographic area, it is reasonable to question the Commission's comment that Peace River-Notley's population is "significantly below" the provincial average. The reference in the same paragraph to a 50% variance suggests to readers that the electoral division is already a "s. 15(2) exception," when in reality it is not remotely close to the standard variance threshold.

While the Commission's framing of this electoral division is misleading, the main point is that the northwest of the province could and should have an additional riding, even if it would require the use of one or more additional s. 15(2) exceptions. RMA acknowledges that doing so would require removing an electoral division from Edmonton or Calgary (or allocating one or both new electoral divisions differently), but given that a significant portion of electoral divisions in those cities are also below the provincial average, this is absolutely feasible. As the Commission notes, no solution is perfect to this issue, but it is unfortunate that the Commission has chosen to not utilize powers they have available to them to ensure effective representation for those living in the most isolated areas of the province.

#### Hybrid ridings

The Commission pointed out that the expanded use of hybrid ridings, especially in combination with Edmonton and Calgary, was a very contentious issue in the initial round of engagement. The Commission also stated that given the significant population growth and requirement for only 89 electoral divisions, hybrid ridings were a preferred method of maintaining a rural voice, at least compared to the other option of simply replacing rural ridings with urban ridings. The Commission summarized this rationale on page 29 when they stated that "the trend towards urbanization continues. If we are to avoid eliminating rural electoral divisions, thereby making them unreasonably large, more hybrid electoral divisions must be considered. This is the way of the future."

While this may be true in theory, from RMA's perspective it is unclear as to whether hybrid ridings were required to the extent that they are used in the interim report. Given the representation risks that such an approach presents (as acknowledged by the Commission), the Commission would be better suited to maintain the status quo in more rural ridings and accept that the outcomes of rapid population growth in urban centres may have to be urban electoral districts that are more consistently and significantly above the provincial average (but still within the 25% variance). Given that there is not a single riding in the entire province more than 13% above the average population, it appears that hybrid ridings were less a necessity and more a conscious decision made by the Commission to avoid expanding urban electoral division populations to the higher end of the variance range.

In other words, RMA would dispute the Commission's argument that they are currently facing a scenario in which they **must** choose between the three options identified by the Alberta Court of Appeal in 1994, listed on page 27 as:

- ◆ Increase the size of the legislature such that, even though the number of rural MLAs is decreasing as a percentage of the legislature, the absolute numbers remain the same;
- ◆ Move seats from rural Alberta to Calgary and/or Edmonton; or
- ◆ Create hybrid electoral divisions that are partially rural and partially urban

It appears that in actuality, the Commission has chosen an interpretation of “effective representation” that prioritizes consistency in electoral division populations over recognition of the unique barriers in rural areas of the province that would justify a larger range in urban versus rural variances. Hybrid ridings allow greater consistency, but erode the rural (and in some cases also the urban) perspective in the hybrid ridings, especially those involving Alberta’s largest cities.

It is important to consider that in many of the hybrid ridings proposed to involve Edmonton and Calgary, the ridings will combine the cities with surrounding rural municipalities that have distinct characters, planning and development priorities, service levels, and in some cases, contentious relationships with their large urban neighbour. While certainly Edmonton/Calgary and its surrounding rural municipalities also collaborate in many areas, it is tremendously important for rural municipalities bordering Edmonton/Calgary to have provincial representatives that are not in any way beholden to representing the interests of the large cities. In a municipal context, this could pose significant risks to the continued autonomy of large city-adjacent rural municipalities.

### Conclusion

The Commission has an extremely difficult assignment. As mentioned, much of their job is to decide among imperfect solutions to an impossible problem. While RMA is in agreement that no solution will be perfect, and any boundary decisions will impact individual Albertans in countless ways, the cumulative decisions made by the Commission appear to prioritize a concept of “effective representation” that values voter parity over accommodation of Alberta’s diverse landscapes and significant rural landscapes and communities. RMA recognizes that it is infeasible (and likely unnecessary) to redevelop the entire map at this point in the process, re-evaluating significant and contentious decisions to eliminate multiple rural ridings, barely or inconsistently utilize factors to inform boundaries, and prioritize close adherence to the average population.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me for more information or clarification.

Sincerely,



Kara Westerlund  
President