

ATHABASCA COUNTY



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Pelican

ATHABASCA

At the cen

A young boy with brown hair, wearing a bright blue life vest and dark shorts, is seated in a pink canoe. He is holding a wooden paddle and appears to be in the middle of a stroke. The canoe is on a calm body of water, likely a lake or a wide river. The background is filled with dense green foliage, including tall reeds and various trees, suggesting a natural, wooded area. The water is still, reflecting the surrounding greenery and the boy in the canoe. The overall scene is peaceful and scenic.

A COUNTY

tre of it all



With several major transportation routes and the Athabasca River winding throughout the municipality, Athabasca County has the best of both worlds: prime corridors for business growth and space to enjoy an affordable rural lifestyle.

THIS IS WHY the area was first settled in the late 1800s – the Hudson Bay Company saw the advantages that a water route afforded. Athabasca Landing (known today as the Town of Athabasca) was a key stopping place for prospectors heading north and a trading and shipping centre for those in the fur trade. Over the years, travellers began

homesteading throughout the region which developed the strong agricultural sector and communities the County still enjoys today.

Connection to the Oilsands

Northeastern Alberta's oilsands is providing benefits to the communities that lie along commuter routes that lead to them. The two largest communities within Athabasca County are The Town of Athabasca and the Village of Boyle. Athabasca has 3,000 residents and lies only 90 minutes north of the capital region along Highway 2 and boasts a trading area of more than 10,000



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people. Boyle has 916 residents, is the same distance from Edmonton along Highway 63 and has a trading area similar to that of Athabasca.

Northeast of these two communities are the hamlets of Wandering River and Grassland. They are also experiencing growth due to the increased need for commuter and commercial trucking services along Highway 63. The numbers don't lie: according to Alberta Transportation numbers, Wandering River, a community of approximately 100 people, has weekly traffic flows of 35,000 plus vehicles. Two franchise restaurants have recently established a presence in Wandering River, while the hamlet of Grassland will soon see a new hotel to complement the variety of traveller services already

available in the community. Not only do they offer more services to the travelling public, but they provide local people with more employment opportunities and dining options.

"We are very happy to report this growth," says Tourism/Economic Development Officer Laura Barfoot. "It shows the business sector has confidence in the future."

The potential for growth in Athabasca County lies in its location. With proximity to the Athabasca Oilsands area and Fort McMurray, logistical and warehousing support businesses are a great possibility. Services offered in communities are anticipated to grow along with the business sector.

"We know it's not going to happen overnight, but the hope is that we will see the number of residents grow in our hamlets as well," says Athabasca County Reeve Doris Splane. "These communities are already established and have the necessary infrastructure in place to see investment in terms of commercial and residential developments."

Growth statistics in Athabasca County remain positive: the County has approved 162 development permits up to the end of July 2015 at a value of \$57,210,620. This compares to 2014, when 262 permits were approved over the course of the year valued at \$91,250,823.

Industry

The Athabasca region is fortunate to have the advantage of a relatively diverse local economy. While the oil sector does have a positive impact,

agriculture remains a key component. In the 2011 Census of Agriculture, Athabasca County's gross farm receipts were estimated at nearly \$84.5 million and the County ranks second in north central Alberta for total crop acreage.

Forestry is also a key industry; Alberta-Pacific Forest Industries is the region's largest employer and operates Canada's newest and North-America's largest, single-line bleached kraft pulp mill. Millar Western Forest Products, located in Boyle, also operate lumber and pulp facilities to support the industry.

Post-secondary institutions like Athabasca University provide opportunities to many who wish to further their education. The university is the largest employer in the Town of Athabasca, with the employees contributing an estimated \$30 million to the local economy annually. Portage College has opened an innovative Heavy Equipment Operator and Pipeline Training campus outside of Boyle that provides both simulated and practical experience for those looking for work in oil and gas, construction, or road building industries. Northern Lakes College also has a local campus, which offers popular programs in administration, trades, and human services along with continuing education and corporate training courses.

Transportation

While the days of transporting goods along the Athabasca River are now gone, Highway 55, Highway 2, and Highway 63 provide access to all regions of Athabasca County and neighbouring

municipalities. They also connect the County to the capital region and are part of a vital network of highways for industry, business and residents to interact with each other. With 55% of Highway 63 between Grassland and Fort McMurray now twinned, and the rest slated to open in 2016 – road transportation has become safer and more reliable. A well-maintained network of secondary highways is used on a daily basis to access services and amenities.

The Athabasca Regional Airport is another important piece of the transportation puzzle. It has seen many improvements in recent years and continues to be a valued resource within the County. The well-maintained 4,000-foot runway, new pilots' lounge, and 24/7 self-serve Avgas system are a few key benefits. An LED Precision Approach Path Indicator (PAPI) light system, Wide Area Augmentation System (WAAS), Aircraft Radio Control Aerodrome Lighting (ARCAL), and Runway End Identifier Lights System (REILS) are critical safety features, particularly for STARS Air Ambulance and many provincial bodies who use the airport on a regular basis.

"Pilot safety is our number one priority," says Norm De Wet, Airport Administrator. "We also want to offer a facility that provides good customer service, which is why we are willing to accommodate pilot needs whenever possible." One of the needs identified is lease lots for private or commercial development. The County responded by developing six lots in 2015, one of which has already been leased.



Partnerships

Athabasca County sees the benefits of strong partnerships, and seeks opportunities to work with other organizations to support development in the region. A prime example of this is cooperation with the Town of Athabasca to build a new pool adjacent to the jointly funded Athabasca Regional Multiplex. Plans are also underway for an expansion to the fitness centre at the Multiplex to better serve the community and provide new opportunities for the region.

“Partnerships like these are key to the growth of our region,” says County Manager

Ryan Maier. “We can see the long-term benefits to providing services to our communities, and we continue to find ways to make partnerships like this happen.”

Athabasca County’s Tourism/Economic Development Committee is another example of the two communities working together. Earlier this year, the committee launched a new regional tourism website – visitathabasca.ca – which helps connect tourism to local business.

“The new website is becoming an important source of information,” explains Barfoot. “The Athabasca region has a lot to offer and we see





this as an opportunity to showcase the variety of recreation amenities, events and businesses that we have to offer – not just to visitors, but to the local community as well.”

This cooperation is also evident in the regional water system. The project involved the Town of Athabasca and the Village of Boyle working with the County to support water infrastructure development in the hamlets of Colinton, Rochester, Grassland, and Wandering River. The award-winning initiative now serves residents and businesses along the route.

Recreation

One of the region’s strengths is its proximity to the capital region and its abundance of lakes and campgrounds, with over 750 camping sites available. A short drive out of the city and you could be in nature’s playground, with trails, fishing and boating, snowmobiling, and riding ATVs at your doorstep. Three golf courses, an active snowmobile club that maintains over 240km of trails, and many more summer trails provide a wide range of activities for the whole family.

Residents of the region enjoy a variety of urban




amenities to accompany the charms of rural living. Two hospitals, many health care professionals, four grocery stores, two RCMP detachments, two school boards, various social services, three post-secondary institutions, and hundreds of businesses adds to the spectrum of services one would expect to find in larger centres.

Residential and Business Growth

For those seeking primary residences, there are many choices to meet your quality of life expectations, including single family homes; country residential acreages; farm properties; and year round lake living at any one of the eight Summer Villages or country residential subdivisions located on various County lakes.

Business owners interested in relocating to Athabasca County have the same diversity of options to choose from. New and established industrial parks are currently available in the region, providing business owners with lots of varying sizes. A brand new commercial

development is currently underway in the Town of Athabasca, which will be home to local businesses who have expanded and a number of new additions to the region. Business owners also have the opportunity to purchase suitable parcels of land in the County, or in one of our Hamlets, to provide them with room to expand outside of town limits.

The Athabasca region has largely avoided the boom-bust cycle that plagues many communities in Alberta. "Growth in the region has mostly been quite sustainable, which is advantageous," Barfoot continues. "It's a manageable pace that balances continued commercial development with the preservation of a peaceful lifestyle. That's why we see people continue to start lives and businesses here. It really is the best of both worlds." **CBJ** 

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**GEORGE MEDIA
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AS SEEN IN THE SEPTEMBER 2015 ISSUE OF THE CANADIAN BUSINESS JOURNAL

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