

## Campgrounds

An overview of trends, issues and considerations for municipalities.

As a leading form of outdoor recreation, camping—whether transient, primitive, or lavishly outfitted—comes from a long tradition in southern Alberta. In response to renewed interest in this pastime, coupled with emerging technologies and a need to safeguard long-established land uses and the environment, municipalities are advised to take a proactive approach through thoughtful land use planning.



# Campgrounds

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Campgrounds dot the landscape in southern Alberta across urban and rural municipalities, and exist in various forms of tenancy, accommodation type, and levels of service. Unlike most land uses, campgrounds are operated by a variety of entities, including all levels of government, irrigation districts, service/volunteer organizations and corporations. According to the Alberta Recreational Survey (2017), overnight camping is an activity that 40.6% of Albertan households take part in annually. Facilitating leisure through connection to nature and access to the outdoors, campgrounds provide an important recreational amenity that has enjoyed a recent surge resulting from the global COVID-19 pandemic. Under the border closures of the pandemic that restricted international travel, the public sought safer, socially distant alternatives within their region. The result was increased demand for camping, which left campgrounds and support businesses struggling to keep up. New campground applications increased in attempt to pick up the slack, bringing renewed attention to land use issues for municipalities like servicing, tenure and the environment. This periodical aims to provide an analysis of trends, policies and regulations pertaining to campgrounds, and related land use planning matters.

## What is a campground?

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A campground is certainly an area where people congregate to camp, outfitted with cooking facilities, water and toilets. But the once narrow and well understood definition of a campground doesn't always enjoy the same ease of connotation today. This has much to do with the evolving nature of camping accommodations, their associated physical infrastructure, and prevailing modes of transportation. Tourism in North America had once been synonymous with rail travel, but as the automobile became ubiquitous it brought new meaning to the idea of mobility. In northern Montana, the Swiftcurrent Auto Camp developed in the 1930s is an artifact of this important paradigm shift signalling the rise of the independently mobile "auto tourist." As the years went on, recreational mobility would be further redefined with the development, proliferation and evolution of the recreational vehicle (RV) from its humble post-war beginnings to the massive units available today. Further, more permanent housing products designed for the recreational market, like park models, exist somewhere outside of the housing continuum, and assist in blurring the lines between campground and permanent residential community.

Despite the confusion, some degree of temporariness is accepted within the meaning of campground, and is almost always incorporated into the land use definitions found in most Land Use Bylaws (LUB). Tenancy has two aspects as it relates to campgrounds—season of use for the facility and duration of stay for the user. The southern Alberta climate precludes the year-long use of campgrounds (outside of limited winter

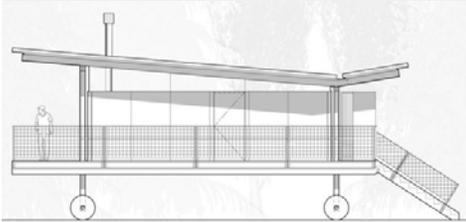
*Respondents to the Alberta Recreation Survey (2017) cited "to relax," "for pleasure/fun," "to be with family" and "to enjoy nature" as the top motivations for camping. Nearly half (46%) of all North American campers either started camping for the first time in 2020 or restarted after having not camped in recent years (KOA).*



Source: [travelalberta.com](http://travelalberta.com)

*Gold Springs Park Campground south of the Town of Milk River in the County of Warner.*

*The sheer number of campgrounds throughout southern Alberta signifies what the South Saskatchewan Regional Plan (SSRP) describes as the strong connection Albertans enjoy to the land. This connection is evidenced by considering the activities that are most prevalent on the landscape: agriculture, conservation and recreation. The need for enhanced land use compatibility within a multiple-use framework is the apex of the SSRP; however, this interrelationship between agriculture, conservation and recreation is explored primarily from a public lands management perspective.*



Source: [olsonkundig.com](http://olsonkundig.com)

Some short-term rental accommodations evade categorization, like the Rolling Huts by Olson Kundig. Imagined as a design response to local zoning regulations that prohibited the development of permanent structures, this redevelopment of a former RV park involved the placement of steel-clad boxes on wheeled platforms, thereby giving the units the perception of being “mobile.” The Rolling Huts are marketed as a low-density guest experience “several steps above camping.” They are also billed as low-impact, since the balance of the 40-acre parcel was slated to be restored to its natural state.

Section 3.7.2.4 of the National Building Code – Alberta Edition stipulates the minimum number of lavatories and water closets for campgrounds based on the number of sites, with partial reductions for self-contained facilities in RVs where served by water and sewer connections.

use for certain facilities) and campgrounds in the region generally operate from May to October. The typical user stay is a matter of less certainty, ranging from weekend type users to medium length users (16 consecutive days is the Alberta Parks maximum) to permanent seasonal users (often annual leaseholders). As modern RV parks begin to look more like the manufactured home parks of prior decades, the principal distinction between traditional campground/RV park and residential neighbourhood is one of servicing and ownership style.

## Relevant provincial regulations

Campgrounds are subject to a variety of regulations given their complexity and large footprint, with many of the rules related to matters like water, highway access, and servicing coming from the provincial level. In short, and as is usually the case, no one piece of legislation comprehensively addresses campgrounds.

The *Recreation Area Regulation* (RAR) provides guideline style rules for recreational campgrounds and similar facilities. Typical primitive style campgrounds will supply non-potable water, which must be posted accordingly pursuant to the RAR. The RAR stipulates that an “adequate amount” of permanent outdoor privies for sewage disposal purposes must be provided. It’s important to note that the National Building Code – Alberta Edition, adopted under the *Safety Codes Act*, goes further to quantify the number of required service buildings in a campground. Minimum standards for access roads (fire department use) can also be found in the Building Code.

Water-related legislation is of particular note, given that water-based amenities are common in campgrounds, where riparian environments, wetlands, navigable waters, and fish bearing watercourses exist, supported by their respective acts and regulations. The installation and operation of deep services simply isn’t financially viable within the business model of a campground. Municipal style services must have sufficient depth of cover (i.e., 2.5 m of soil cover), as the *Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act* (including associated regulations and guidelines) does not differentiate between seasonal and non-seasonal.

Campgrounds sites are typically unsubdivided, giving less rights to the individual user and requiring the benefit of close oversight by the campground operator. Annual lease arrangements have become popular business models, facilitating the “seasonal community” appeal that befits many users. It’s important to note that long-term leases exceeding 3 years must be executed in accordance with s. 95 of the *Land Titles Act*. Leases granting exclusive rights to a portion of a parcel are often seen to constitute subdivision, and must receive subdivision approval to be valid.

## Provincial camping areas

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Within the ORRSC Region dozens of provincial camping areas exist, offering a gamut of services and stays, including over night and day use areas, guided tours, swimming and other attractions. These facilities fall under the *Public Lands Act* (Crown land camping) and the *Provincial Parks Act* (including parks, wildland parks and recreation areas). The Castle Park, for example, provides for a range of experiences including designated (random) camping areas, backcountry camping (within Wildland portion of the Park), regular campgrounds (Beaver Mines Lake, Castle Falls etc.) and comfort camping (cabins). Most Crown Land areas are also available for camping, under the direction of the Guide to Outdoor Recreation on Provincial Crown Land document.

In 2020 the province attempted to shutter over 20 provincial parks and recreation areas, only to renege on the initiative after massive public outcry highlighted by the Defend Alberta Parks campaign. Despite abandoning plans for park closures, the push toward third party ownership of 164 sites brings about memories of the decline of the Alberta Parks system following privatization efforts in the early 1990s. Cloaked in language of fiscal efficiency, the reality is that the delisting of parks means the protections afforded under the *Provincial Parks Act* are removed in favour of the lesser protections under the *Public Lands Act*.

## Trends, issues & impacts

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RVs remain the preferred choice for campers, with most new campgrounds catering to this type of accommodation. RVs are certified under the CSA Z240 RV Series and park models are certified under the CSA Z241 Park Model series. The RV industry is aggressively working to integrate off-grid design solutions like solar systems into their units. Campgrounds themselves are being outfitted with individual solar arrays in support of growing use of technology and amenities with electrical demands. Substantial on-site improvements are one of the reasons that most new campgrounds prefer an annual lease business model. Increased competition for camping spots is a compelling reason for the camper to look to secure their spot through the lease model.

When does a park model or RV go beyond its intended use and at what point should it be considered a permanent residence? Municipalities routinely struggle with this question and the implications for land use planning, application of the Building Code and assessment classification. The fact that these units weren't made for permanent residential use doesn't seem to deter owners from using them as permanent dwelling units, or from outfitting them with improvements (i.e., skirting, decks etc.) that serve to facilitate permanent use.

To quantify the economic impact of campgrounds within a municipality



*Random camping in the Porcupine Hills Public Land Use Zone (MD of Willow Creek).*



*A camp site at Beaver Mines Lake campground within Castle Provincial Park (MD of Pincher Creek).*



*Green Mountain RV Park (Municipality of Crowsnest Pass).*



Source: [camperreport.com](http://camperreport.com)

*Rendering of an RV park where each site is accompanied by a freestanding solar array.*

*The Municipal Development Plan for Parkland County includes a map conveying areas that have high value for tourism and recreation. Corresponding policy is included in the plan encouraging campgrounds, cabins, equestrian facilities and related development to locate in these nodes.*

*Municipalities interested in undertaking this type of mapping exercise could leverage the Municipal Land Use Suitability Tool (MLUST) developed by the Miistakis Institute in conjunction with ORRSC. Taking a baseline inventory of existing campground operations is a useful exercise in beginning to understand the land use in your particular local context.*

one must understand the various service and support businesses related to the land use. Large footprint RV sales outlets typically exist in cities, whereas smaller support businesses like tire shops and camping retailers can be found in mid-size towns. The result is that the economic impact of campgrounds is mostly generated from direct expenditures on camping fees, as well as typical visitor purchases like gas and other incidentals. However, the indirect tourism spin-off has benefits for host municipalities, especially as routine users become accustomed with the place after years of familiarizing themselves.

The opportunity to capitalize on the growing outdoor recreation market finds an audience in farmers and ranchers looking to transition less productive agricultural areas of their holdings for campground purposes. The ready ability to utilize emerging Airbnb-like online platforms (Hipcamp, Campsot, etc.) to monetize unproductive areas for impromptu campgrounds precipitates an increasingly common land use issue. In particular, rural residents are burdened with increasing occurrences of nuisance, trespass and livestock disturbance from developments that didn't receive the benefit of a proper planning process.

## Municipal planning for campgrounds

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Rural municipalities should be prepared for campground applications by establishing a two-tier planning process, with a higher-order policy document and an implementation document. A Municipal Development Plan (MDP) process can be used to establish local values that will inform a municipality's preference for the amount of, and best location for, campgrounds. Historically, campground site selection was governed by the location of the scenic resources that drew people to them. That resource often being water, Stepping Back from the Water is a provincial reference document that can assist municipalities in establishing the appropriate separation distance between campground sites and sensitive riparian areas, and can be echoed in MDP policy. Additional policies may address general land use matters as well as establish a threshold for when a general review of campground policy in the municipality is again necessary.

The LUB is the vehicle for the implementation of the MDP —typically through prescriptive standards of development. Application criteria should account for the many considerations related to campgrounds, including environmental, servicing, emergency response, and access. To this, a variety of studies can be valuable in understanding pre and post-development conditions, including a biophysical assessment to identify and assess sensitive natural features and wildlife in the area. Density is a matter of less certainty, and one that doesn't benefit from a recognized standard, therefore it should be reviewed on a case-by-case basis in the context of the carrying capacity of the lands. Transportation corridors to and from campgrounds are important to municipalities, as the impact to roads and landowners along roads is often significant—sometimes to the point where a development agreement for road

improvements may be warranted. Municipal campground standards will often prescribe minimum site dimensions for individual campsites, road layout and design, parking, garbage disposal, fire protection, separation distance from other uses, and other matters.

Most municipalities utilize a recreational type land use district that will require a rezoning process (including public hearing) prior to application for subdivision (if necessary) and development permit. Campgrounds are typically captured within one or more land use definitions, the wording of which is important in order to distinguish between sub-categories like RV Parks where desired. Importantly, the Court of Appeal has held that the ownership of land is irrelevant and that campgrounds should not be classified based on ownership (*274099 Alberta Ltd. v. Sturgeon (Development Appeal Board)*, 1990 ABCA 30).

The LUB can also be used to address the common scenario where RV usage is overstepping the intended purposes of a residential district. This brings up the question: at what point does the use of land for overnight recreation purposes become a campground? A threshold approach is one way to deal with this matter, and can be used to establish exemptions that allow for reasonable individual use without the need to obtain a development permit. Instead of using nebulous indicators like “profit driven” or “family only,” the LUB may be tooled to utilize impact in determining what constitutes a campground. This can be done through a measure of density (i.e., land area divided by camping units), or by establishing a hard cap on the number of camping units on a parcel in each particular land use district.

For urban municipalities, pop-up type campgrounds can be effective interim land uses to support facilities on an event basis. Rodeos, softball tournaments, summer festivals and other gatherings are examples of events that can benefit from temporary campground sites as permanent campgrounds swell to capacity. To facilitate, the LUB should be equipped with provisions to allow for temporary use of open spaces, urban reserve spaces and other candidate areas for this type of use.

## Concluding remarks

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As a hub for tourism, southern Alberta can expect camping to maintain a strong baseline following a drop-off after the end of the pandemic. Campgrounds will continue to pivot, by offering a variety of user experiences through various accommodation options, highlighted by trends like glamping pods and other “comfort camping” types. The popularity of online platforms provide the ability for ad-hoc micro campgrounds to quickly emerge on the landscape. While these platforms can potentially alleviate some of the pressure on the supply of available camp sites, the infiltration of the share-economy is problematic from a land use management perspective. Accordingly, municipalities should be prepared to deal with increasing pressure for new campgrounds and similar developments that challenge the traditional notion of what a campground is.



Source: [mercurynews.com](http://mercurynews.com)

*Dumbarton Quarry Campground on the Bay was developed on a former industrial site in San Francisco that had been reclaimed.*

*For more information on this topic contact [admin@orrsc.com](mailto:admin@orrsc.com) or visit our website at [orrsc.com](http://orrsc.com).*

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