

Planning Ahead for Communities and Landscapes

An upcoming workshop in Frontier, Saskatchewan will tackle the topic of community planning for local rural municipalities and their stakeholders. Organized by the South of the Divide Conservation Action Program Inc. (SODCAP), this free workshop will be held on January 20 and is open to everyone. People who live and work in the area, and share landscapes with producers, lease holders, industry as well as wildlife, are invited to join and learn about what an Official Community Plan may offer their rural communities.

Balancing sustainable land use practices is critical to the continued viability of the economy, the health of the land, and the wellbeing of all individuals in the South of the Divide. Shirley Bartz, a wildlife biologist with SODCAP, says an Official Community Plan can identify and protect future growth, land use and development in communities and rural municipalities. "A community plan can be as specific or as generalized as the community likes," says Bartz, who is organizing the event.

Planning ahead is key according to Dana Schmalz, the Director of Community Planning Services with the Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities. Schmalz, who is scheduled to present at the event, says "Official Community Plans are an important planning tool that guides growth and development in a municipality." Schmalz adds that groups of municipalities may also collaborate across a region to create a plan.

The plans include an environment section, which is what Bartz hopes will be of value for the people and species who share common ground in the South of the Divide. "There are twenty-one federally listed species at risk in the South of the Divide and an estimated one million hectares of land critical to thirteen of these species. These species survive here because of the presence of native grassland and because many of the people living and working in the area implement land use practices that support these species' breeding grounds, dens, nests and overwintering habitat," explains Bartz.

While individual stewardship actions are important for ensuring species at risk survival, communities and groups that are part of the larger landscape, such as the South of the Divide, can outline practices that support wildlife as well. "Municipalities can adopt policies within an official community plan to protect special lands that have been identified as habitat protection," Schmalz explains, adding that council may choose to guide development so that certain areas remain in their natural state. "Overall, it's important to have planning documents in place to provide direction and a framework for decisions that will shape the future and character of the municipality or region," says Schmalz.

The workshop will include presentations from Environment Canada, the Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities, the Ministry of Government Relations, the Ministry of Agriculture, the Saskatchewan Water Security Agency, and others. For more information or to register, contact Shirley Bartz at (306) 450-1216 or email her at sbartz@hotmail.com.

Suggested caption for attached photo series: These Google Earth images demonstrate how quickly a natural area can transform in less than a decade.

Attached photos: Stoon 2004, Stoon 2006, Stoon 2012, Stoon 2013