Planning for Residential Urban Reserves: Evaluating First Nation-Municipal Relationships and Opportunities for Reconciliation

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Reasons for Research

The First Nation population in Canada is higher than ever, totalling more than one million. As First Nation communities across Turtle Island continue to build planning capacity, it is essential for planners to become familiar with working in cross-cultural contexts. Since its introduction in 1972, the Government of Canada's Additions to Reserve policy has provided First Nations an avenue for economic growth through satellite urban reserves. This policy has come with its challenges; yet, new reserves have been created under the model for over 30 years, beginning with Asimakaniseekan Askiy (of Muskeg Lake First Nation) in Saskatoon in 1988. More recently, the inclusion of residential components on urban reserves has been explored. With this shift in uses, planners will play a significant role in ensuring that First Nation urban reserve developments are successful, fit within the greater context of a municipality, and provide places within the urban fabric that are truly Indigenous. All of this will require robust, resilient, and healthy First Nation-municipal relationships.

Research Questions

1.
What are the defining characteristics of First Nation-municipal relationships regarding residential urban reserves in Canadian municipalities?

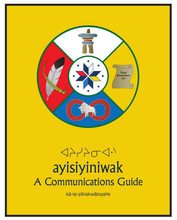
2.
What strategies are being implemented by municipalities regarding urban reserves?

3.
How do these characteristics and strategies support or hinder efforts toward reconciliation?

Methods

Document Analysis
Four municipal documents were analyzed for strategies being implemented regarding urban reserve development from the District of North Vancouver / Tsleil-Waututh Nation, the City of Edmonton, the City of Saskatoon, and the City of Winnipeg.

Semi-Structured Interviews
Eleven interviews were conducted with planners from Squamish First Nation, Westbank First Nation, Treaty One Development Corporation, the City of Vancouver, the City of Calgary, the City of Saskatoon, the City of Winnipeg, and the City of Fredericton.



Document Analysis Findings

The document analysis found several strategies being implemented by municipalities regarding urban reserve development. Some of the repeating strategies included:
- Promoting public and cultural awareness
- Reviewing relevant sources (e.g. the TRC's Calls to Action)
- Displaying respect
- A commitment to learning
- Having a good team (e.g. hiring a mediator or consultant)
- Working together (e.g. Council-to-Council meetings)
- Formal recognition of First Nations in planning documents
- Observing best practices from other municipalities
- Proactive support of urban reserves
- Working to understand one another

Interview Findings

Above all, the interviews outlined that each First Nation-municipal relationship is unique. Contextual knowledge is required to understand the nuances of every relationship. Some common Differences (areas of tension) included municipalities not understanding First Nations / unsure how to engage, ignorance from the general 'settler' public, bounded recognition, compatability between developments vs. making urban reserve boundaries clear, existing fragile relationships, misunderstandings of the role of the municipal government and the reality of urban development, and context. The seven most common Similarities (characteristics that define a healthy First Nation-municipal relationship) were establishing trust, open communication, working together, establishing procedures and protocols, having 'frank discussions,' having a great team, and mutual respect and understanding.

Opportunities for Reconciliation

For the successful development of residential urban reserves moving forward, the following five opportunities should be invested in by municipalities:

Education
Misunderstandings and negative stereotypes still exist among the public and municipal employees.

Meeting in Comfortable Spaces
Municipalities facilitating and partnering with First Nations to create neutral meeting spaces.

Working on the First Nation's Timeline
Municipalities being open to more organic development models.

Economic Reconciliation
Well-structured urban reserves allow First Nations to put money back into their communities.

Co-Creation
Viewing the First Nation-municipal relationship as a partnership rather than a negotiation.