

Report to Minister: Northern Development



Northern Alberta Development Council

March 31, 2025

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Note: this document is advice from the Northern Alberta Development Council (NADC) to the Government of Alberta. This advice considered stakeholders' perspectives, existing Government of Alberta policies and information provided by Government of Alberta staff. The Government of Alberta's views and intentions may not necessarily coincide with the recommendations of the Northern Alberta Development Council.

Executive Summary

The Northern Alberta Development Council (NADC or the council) is a public agency established under the *Northern Alberta Development Council Act* with a mandate to investigate, monitor, evaluate, plan and promote measures to foster and advance development in northern Alberta and to advise the government accordingly.

In spring 2024, the council was tasked with conducting outreach with key stakeholders to inform the advice and recommendations to the Minister of Jobs, Economy and Trade (JET) on northern economic development. Discussions with stakeholders focused on the following topics:

- defining northern Alberta;
- challenges and opportunities for northern economic development;
- supports needed from the Government of Alberta;
- awareness of current programs; and collaboration between industry, municipalities and non-profit organizations.

In-person and virtual meetings were held with approximately 170 attendees, including representatives from First Nations, Métis communities and organizations, municipalities, chambers of commerce, economic development organizations, small businesses, post-secondary institutions and business organizations.

This report considers what the council heard from northern stakeholders and recommends actions the NADC and Government of Alberta can take to advance northern development.

Stakeholders identified opportunities for advancing northern development that included aspects such as:

- Natural resources (including agriculture);
- Tourism and recreation;
- Nuclear energy development;
- Expertise in the energy sector, which can support energy transition and create long-term employment prospects; and
- The potential for NADC to be a unifying voice for northern Alberta and collect data from around the region that helps inform decision-making.

Stakeholders also raised key challenges such as:

- Attraction and retention of population and a skilled workforce;
- Municipal fiscal challenges and economic development capacity;
- Transportation;
- Housing and Affordability; and
- Connectivity;

The NADC recognizes the ongoing work of the Government of Alberta to support northern economic development, including through the following programs and services:

- The Northern Alberta Development Bursary program, which has awarded approximately \$41 million in bursaries to more than 10,000 recipients over 50 years to retain skilled labour through bursaries in exchange for completion of a return of service commitment in the north.

- The Northern and Regional Economic Development Program which provides project funding to support community-driven projects. In 2023-24, over 20 recipients were from the NADC region.

As of the time of writing, the Government of Alberta had also announced major investments in northern Alberta as part of Budget 2025, including the following:

- Investing \$311 million over three years to increase emergency route capacity for residents in northern Alberta.
- \$15 million in funding for recruitment and retention of physicians who practice in underserved areas and a \$12 million increase for the Rural Remote Northern Program.
- Health care projects and provisions, including Beaverlodge Health Centre replacement, La Crete Maternity and Community Health Centre, and Rural Health Facilities Revitalization Program.
- Skilled trades expansion at Northwestern Polytechnic and expansion and upgrades of Keyano College to provide enhanced learning environments for in-demand programs like nursing and paramedicine.

The report recommends that the Government of Alberta and NADC act to address:

Redefining the boundary of northern Alberta

- Redefine the boundary of northern Alberta by considering characteristics typical of northern communities.

Workforce development

- Enhance marketing and advocacy opportunities to attract skilled workers and investment.
- Increase access to high-quality education and training, particularly for Indigenous learners and youth.
- Conduct or support research to better understand challenges and opportunities in key areas of northern economic development (in particular workforce) and inform future action by the Government of Alberta.
- Streamline and better support the Rural Renewal Stream under the Alberta Advantage Immigration Program and immigration programs in general.

Northern recognition and investment

- Ensure an organizational unit in the Government of Alberta is responsible for creating a comprehensive strategy, monitoring, measuring, and evaluating the work of the Government of Alberta in the north to advance northern development.
- The Government of Alberta is recommended to maintain NADC as an advisory body, mainly focused in the coming year on defining the boundaries of the region and informing and supporting development of a northern strategy.

Program design and ensuring knowledge of government supports

- Enhance the presence of Government of Alberta staff and improve communication on pathfinding, economic development, municipal and small business funding opportunities in the north.

Economic corridors, infrastructure, connectivity, transportation and utilities

- Continue to invest in transportation infrastructure and connectivity, and address affordability challenges, including electricity distribution and transmission costs.

The council is confident that these actions and recommendations will build on ongoing commitments and set the stage for how the Government of Alberta could make a strong commitment to the social and economic development of northern Alberta, both for present and future generations.

Background

The Northern Alberta Development Council (NADC) is a public agency established in 1963 under the *Northern Alberta Development Council Act* with a mandate to investigate, monitor, evaluate, plan and promote measures to foster and advance development in northern Alberta and to advise the government accordingly. NADC (the council) has undergone a variety of organizational changes throughout its history.

The current chair (the chair) was designated on March 27, 2024, with six new council members appointed on May 23, 2024. The council was tasked with conducting outreach with key stakeholders that informs the advice and recommendations to the Minister of Jobs, Economy and Trade (JET) on northern economic development contained within this report.

Defining Alberta's north

Northern economic development shares several similarities with regional and rural approaches to economic development; however, it has a combination of unique characteristics influenced by geography. The characteristics of northern Alberta include: a large land base with a small, scattered population; limited and underdeveloped infrastructure, especially in transportation and telecommunications (as compared to other similar jurisdictions); immense proven and yet-to-be delineated natural resources; a proportionally large Indigenous population; and challenges related to labour market planning, community development and provision of people services across a remote area with a resource-based economy subject to international commodity pricing and economic conditions.¹ For the purposes of stakeholder outreach in 2024 and in this report, “northern Alberta” refers to all areas north of Highway 16 (including the Highway 16 corridor itself but excluding Edmonton, St. Albert, Fort Saskatchewan, Strathcona County, Sturgeon County and Parkland County). When referring to a more specific area within the region, other terminology may be used.

Economic development is the process of developing and maintaining suitable, economic, social and political environments, in which balanced growth may be realized, increasing the wealth of a community.

Northern development refers to measures to foster and advance social and economic development in northern Alberta. It involves development of government, business, community services and programs.

Various organizations use different characteristics to delineate the north. Over the years, the council has restricted the mandate to a particular region which follows certain municipal, First Nations and Metis Settlement boundaries to define northern Alberta.²

Other definitions used by government to delineate northern Alberta include:

- Statistics Canada and JET economic data refer to the Athabasca-Grande Prairie-Peace River and Wood Buffalo-Cold Lake economic regions. These Statistics Canada regions extend farther south than the NADC region.
- The northwest and northeast regional health corridors are within the NADC region, but a substantial portion of the region is included in the Edmonton corridor, along with much of central Alberta.
- Government of Alberta and some other public sector northern allowance benefits only apply north of the 55th parallel; different incentives are in place for the region between the 55th and 57th parallels, as well as north of 57th parallel and Wood Buffalo.
- The Geographic Grant from the Ministry of Education provides additional funding to school jurisdictions based, in part, on a northern location factor (the proportion of students/schools in the jurisdiction north of the 55th parallel).³
- Alberta's Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation (AGI) includes agricultural areas of northern Alberta as part of three Agricultural Service Board regions. The Peace Region is within the NADC boundaries, while the North West and North East regions include areas south of Edmonton such as Leduc County.⁴
- The Government of Canada does not have a specific boundary for northern allowances paid to employees south of the 60th parallel.⁵

Many organizations play a role in northern economic development, including municipalities, Indigenous communities, economic development organizations, Chambers of Commerce, industry organizations and provincial government departments and agencies.

The NADC region is bounded on the west by the Alberta-British Columbia border, on the north by the Alberta-Northwest Territories border, on the east by the Alberta-Saskatchewan border and on the south by the southern boundaries of the Municipal District of Greenview No. 16, Woodlands County, Municipal District of Lesser Slave River No. 124, Athabasca County, Lac La Biche County, County of St. Paul No. 19, the Métis Settlements of Buffalo Lake, Kikino and Fishing Lake, and the Whitefish #128, Saddle Lake #125 and Unipouheos #121 First Nation Reserves (NADC Area Profile, May 2016).

The NADC region covers approximately 60 per cent of Alberta's landmass and is home to over 374,572 residents across 150 communities and 52 municipal authorities. The region includes parts of Treaty 6, 8, and 10 territories, with 32 First Nations and 112 First Nation Reserves. All eight Métis Settlements in the province are also located within this region. Some of the largest municipalities in the NADC region by population are the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (including the Fort McMurray Urban Service Area), Mackenzie County, Grande Prairie, Peace River, Bonnyville, Whitecourt, Slave Lake, Lac La Biche County, Cold Lake, Municipal District of Greenview and Athabasca.

The landscape is dominated by boreal forests, wetlands, farmland, and significant river systems, including the Peace and Athabasca Rivers. Major population centres in the broader northern Alberta region outside the NADC area include Jasper, Hinton, Edson, Vermilion and Lloydminster.

The economy of northern Alberta is driven by natural resource extraction, with the Athabasca Oil Sands near Fort McMurray representing one of the largest oil reserves in the world. Natural gas, forestry, agriculture, agri-food and tourism are also key industries. Cold Lake houses CFB Cold Lake, one of Canada's largest air force bases and a major centre for fighter jet training and defense operations. Indigenous communities are also playing an increasing role in the region's cultural and economic development. Tourism is another industry with potential throughout the region. The expansive natural landscape, rich cultural heritage, national parks and wildlife present northern Alberta with many opportunities for all-season outdoor recreation in diverse landscapes, agrotourism and Indigenous tourism.

Northern Alberta Development Council Area



Source: nadc.ca

Unlike other provinces with northern regions, the council observed that there are a limited number of Government of Alberta programs and initiatives that are solely focused on northern Alberta. Northern-specific provincial programs do exist in the areas of skilled workforce retention and attraction, capacity building and health workforce.⁶ Economic development support tends to be more tied to broad-based outcomes across Alberta or in certain types of communities (e.g., rural or remote communities) rather than targeted support for a particular region. However, as noted in the Key Findings section, many province-wide programs and services benefit the north to a major degree (or could do so with greater awareness).

Intent

The Northern Alberta Development Council's mandate in conducting stakeholder outreach and developing this report is to put forward recommendations for the Minister's consideration that speak to:

- recruitment and retention of critical professions in the north, including health professions;
- northern economic advancement and infrastructure;
- the challenges small businesses and entrepreneurs are facing and gaps in existing supports, including ways to enhance pathfinding services to help businesses connect with resources and ways to support immigrant, newcomer and Indigenous entrepreneurs;
- the role of the NADC and its effectiveness in providing the northern perspective to government; and
- consideration of expanding the NADC boundary.

As of March 2025, council members included:

- Tany Yao, MLA for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo (Chair)
- Melonie Doucette (Vice-chair)
- Craig Copeland
- Conroy Sewepagaham
- Tony Shmyruk
- Terry Ungarian

Janet MacEachern also served as a member from May to September 2024 and participated in the initial stakeholder outreach.

The council is confident that the Minister will consider the recommendations, consult with other ministers and provide a response signaling a commitment to driving growth in northern Alberta.

The council also wants to ensure that the Minister understands the needs of the north so that they can be addressed proactively and in a timely manner. This can avoid unintended consequences if these needs are not addressed.

Stakeholder outreach

Between June and July 2024, the council met with organizations across northern Alberta to gather insights on the opportunities and challenges of northern economic development.

This outreach was focused on the following objectives:

- gathering feedback about the NADC, its functions and effectiveness;
- understanding what mechanisms may be needed to gather input from northern Alberta communities, stakeholders and partners to efficiently inform policy and program decisions;

- building on previous discussions regarding the challenges faced by rural and northern small businesses;
- facilitating a shared understanding on regional issues and priorities; and
- identifying strategic opportunities to support economic development in northern Alberta.

In-person meetings were held with stakeholders in 12 locations (Hinton, Grande Cache, Grande Prairie, High Level, Peace River, Slave Lake, Westlock, Vegreville, Vermilion, Bonnyville, Lac La Biche and Fort McMurray). Eight virtual meetings were also held to identify strategic opportunities to support economic development in northern Alberta.

The council invited over 300 stakeholders from these communities and surrounding areas to participate in either in-person or virtual sessions. Approximately 170 attendees participated in sessions, including representatives from First Nations, Métis communities and organizations, municipalities, chambers of commerce, economic development organizations, small businesses, post-secondary institutions and business organizations. Participants also sent 13 written submissions, which have been considered as well.

Through the meetings with various stakeholders, deliberations, written feedback and information from Government of Alberta departments, key priorities emerged that are represented in the recommendations the council have put forward.

What we heard

During these outreach sessions, the council obtained valuable insights into the opportunities and challenges facing the various regions of northern Alberta and small businesses in the area.

Opportunities

Stakeholders identified the following advantages and potential opportunities as unique to northern Alberta:

- Collaboration on investment attraction;
- Natural resources (including agriculture);
- Agri-food, manufacturing and processing;
- Tourism and recreation (e.g., opportunities for more recreational development, campgrounds, fishing and Indigenous tourism);
- Youthful and resourceful northern Albertans;
- Geographic location of some parts of the region with respect to proximity to other jurisdictions and major economic corridors (for example, communities located on major rail lines and/or highways are well placed for industrial development);
- Nuclear energy development (e.g., opportunities in Small Modular Reactors (SMR), natural gas, geothermal, other renewable energy and CANDU (Canada Deuterium Uranium) nuclear reactor development);
- Expertise in the energy sector, which can support energy transition and create long-term employment prospects, including opportunities in carbon capture and storage as well as Small Modular Reactors; and
- The potential for NADC to be a unifying voice for northern Alberta and to collect data from around the region that helps inform decision-making.

It was noted that Northern Lakes College (NLC) has seen significant enrolment growth, and several stakeholders identified the Northern Alberta Medical Program (NAMP), which will train medical students in Grande Prairie, as a model for educating and training northern residents. More information on the NLC and NAMP can be found on page 12 of this report.

Many provincial programs and projects give special consideration to the needs of northern, rural or remote areas, with programs and projects that could help address the needs of the north if they were better known. Some Government of Alberta programs and projects the council has heard about while developing this report include:

- Work to extend Highway 686, which will add an east-west connector between Fort McMurray and Peace River.
- The Northern Alberta Development Bursary program, which has awarded approximately \$41 million in bursaries to more than 10,000 recipients over 50 years to retain skilled labour through the provision of bursaries in exchange for completion of a return of service commitment in the north.
- The Alberta Broadband Strategy, prioritizing expanding high-speed internet access in rural, remote and Indigenous communities.
- The Northern and Regional Economic Development Program provides project funding of up to \$300,000 to support community-driven projects that promote regional and northern

economic development and prosperity. In 2023-24, over 20 recipients were from the NADC region.

- Workforce Partnership Grants provide funding to employers, industry and sector associations, regional organizations and Indigenous organizations to support labour market adjustment strategies and workforce development, including initiatives to attract and retain workers through partnerships.
- Regional Economic Development Specialists provide advice and expertise to municipal and regional stakeholders across the province, including northern Alberta.
- Workforce Consultants are available across the province (including northern Alberta) to provide businesses/employers with information and resources to help them recruit, retain and strengthen their workforce.
- Supports to small businesses, including grants and business supports, that are delivered through Alberta public agencies (such as Alberta Innovates) and by not-for-profit organizations such as Business Link.
- Indigenous grants provide funding and other financial supports to First Nations, Métis communities and Indigenous-serving organizations to improve social and economic outcomes for Indigenous Peoples across the province.
- The Economic Development in Rural Alberta Plan outlines key strategies and measurable actions to ensure rural Albertans have economic opportunities where they live.
- The Rural Renewal Stream and Rural Entrepreneur Stream under the Alberta Advantage Immigration Program helps attract workforce and entrepreneurs to rural Alberta.
- The Strategic Transportation Infrastructure Program provides funding for projects to develop and maintain local transportation infrastructure.
- The Small Community Opportunity Program provides grants for non-profits, Indigenous and small communities to help build capacity in agriculture, small business and local economic development. In 2023-24, over 15 grant recipients were from the NADC region.
- The Local Government Fiscal Framework provides funding to local governments to develop, improve, and maintain infrastructure assets in local communities.
- The Rural Health Professions Action Plan supports efforts to attract rural health professionals.
- The Indigenous Employment Training Partnerships Program provides grants to eligible Indigenous organizations to assist the unemployed or under-employed with skills training and work experience.
- The funding model for Kindergarten through Grade 12 education provides additional funds to recognize the challenges of rural and northern school authorities. For example, the Geographic Grant considers factors including rurality, sparsity of population, distance to major centres and the number of students north of the 55th parallel.

Other important work is also being undertaken by government, industry, post-secondary institutions and other northern organizations that is helping to advance the potential of northern Alberta.

Northern Alberta Medical Program (NAMP) in Grande Prairie

The NAMP is a partnership between the University of Alberta and Northwestern Polytechnic in Grande Prairie where students attend their first two years of the program in person or virtually at Northwestern Polytechnic and the adjoining Grande Prairie Regional Hospital. The next two years are mainly hands-on, practical experience under the supervision of teaching doctors at hospitals and clinics across northern Alberta. The leading-edge facility at the Health Education Centre (HEC), co-located within the Grande Prairie Regional Hospital, offers 40,000 square feet of teaching, learning, research and administration space. The goal of NAMP is to fully prepare graduates for family medicine and general practitioner positions to address primary care needs in rural, regional and Indigenous communities across Alberta.

Sources: [Northern Alberta Medical Program | Faculty of Medicine & Dentistry](#), [Calling all future doctors in northern Alberta | Faculty of Medicine & Dentistry](#)

Northern Lakes College (NLC) Enrolment Growth and Delivery model

The NLC serves a 164,000 km² [region](#). According to recent media reports, enrolment at NLC has grown by 32 per cent since 2019 and is based on domestic student enrolment. NLC uses a model it calls Supported Distance Learning, where students can attend live distance learning classes or watch the recording later and are provided with additional supports, including in-person learning at an NLC campus. Students can take any course that does not require a practical component either online or at one of NLC's campuses across northern Alberta. President Glenn Mitchell describes NLC's approach as a response to a "housing crisis" in northern Alberta, as it is challenging for students to move to another location and find housing while pursuing post-secondary study. NLC partners with a variety of other institutions, including Athabasca University on a post-Licensed Practical Nursing Bachelor of Nursing program. Stakeholders generally expressed a positive opinion of NLC during NADC outreach.

Source: [Northern Lakes College grew by 32 per cent in five years | Lakeside Leader](#)

Challenges

Outreach participants highlighted challenges hindering the economic and social development of northern Alberta. Major themes related to common challenges identified by stakeholders from all regions of northern Alberta included:

- attraction and retention of population and workforce;
- municipal fiscal challenges/economic development capacity (limited financial capacity and staff to deliver municipal services);
- transportation (challenges with road, rail and air transportation, along with limited infrastructure for moving goods in and out of the region);
- housing (lack of rental, affordable and appropriate housing);
- electricity and water infrastructure (lack of sufficient electricity supply and access to drinking water);
- connectivity (inadequate cell phone service and internet connectivity);
- affordability (high cost of living and doing business);
- public perception of the potential for agriculture and agri-food;

- vitality of rural communities; and
- government funding challenges due to the low population and large geographic distribution.

While stakeholders in the north central and northeast⁷ regions identified banking, access to capital and insurance and the shadow population as common challenges, stakeholders in northwest Alberta⁸ also identified the decrease in NADC activity over time as an issue.

Case studies have been included by the council throughout this report to further illustrate the challenges, successes and potential of the north. The Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo is one example that presents both historical challenges and the efforts of northerners to plan for future economic opportunities. While it is unique in its location and history, Wood Buffalo has also experienced challenges that are common to other areas across the north, including managing a large temporary workforce, fluctuations in employment levels within a major local industry and the impact of wildfires and other disasters.

Shadow population in Northern Alberta

The Municipal Census Regulation defines the “shadow population” as the temporary residents of a municipal authority who are employed by an industrial or commercial establishment in the region, and who have worked 120 hours for that employer in the three-month period immediately preceding the municipal census day.

This “shadow population” resides within the municipality temporarily while using the local services, much like the local population, but is not captured in municipal taxation.

In the resource-rich regions of northern Alberta, there exists a gap between the municipal services that are essential and the permanent population that pays for them through taxation. This creates uncertainty for resource planning and allocation, which then creates strain on local infrastructure, housing, social services and health. Including a shadow population count with a municipal census allows municipalities to temporarily adjust their population counts to reflect the additional demand on utilities, roads and other essential services.

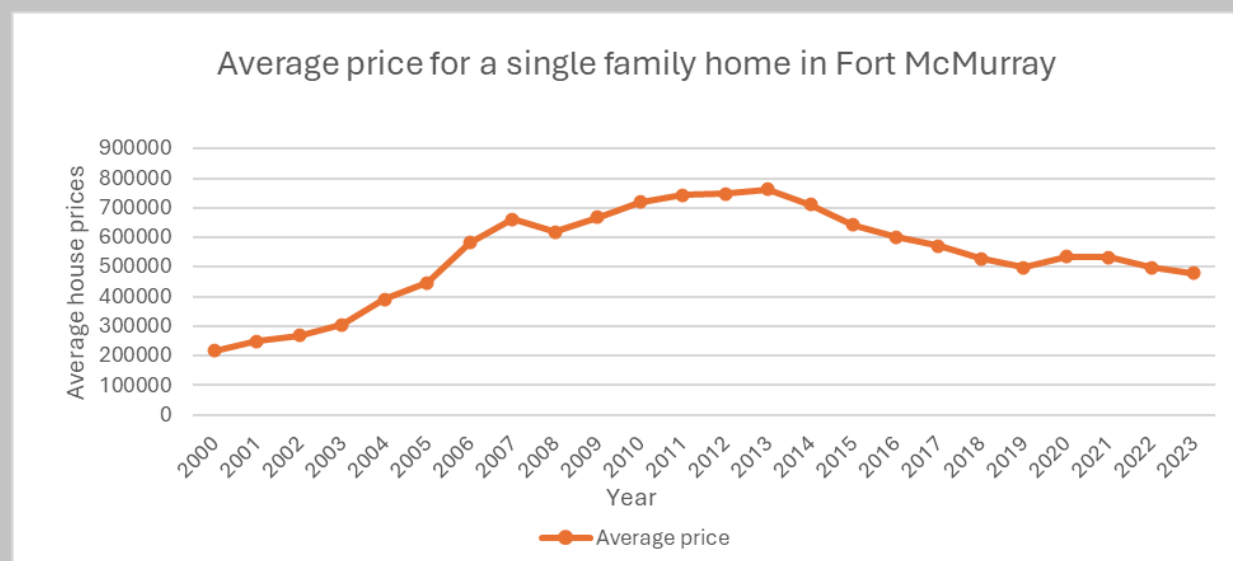
Source: [Municipal Census Manual, 2022](#)

Planning challenges in the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (RMWB)

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, insufficient Crown land was available to meet the needs of the Wood Buffalo region for housing development. While action was taken in later years to release the needed land, by that time a model consisting of work camps and fly-in/fly-out workers (often using private airstrips) had already developed in the region, which persists to this day.

The experience of Fort McMurray and the broader Wood Buffalo region highlights the importance of cooperation and planning between municipalities and the Government of Alberta. Historically, investment in the oil sands has created population growth, with resulting challenges in planning for the housing and infrastructure needs of the region. Economic indicators including the housing market reflect this situation. During past boom periods (from the early 2000s until 2010s), the population surged as large numbers of workers moved to the region and insufficient land was available for housing development. This resulted in a housing shortage, leading to rapid increase in house prices, and the development of work camps and aerodromes. Median home prices climbed from around \$300,000 in 2003 to approximately \$750,000 by 2013, doubling in certain areas. The sharp decline in oil prices in 2015 followed by the wildfire in 2016, resulted in layoffs and workers leaving the area. This is evidenced by the volatility in average retail prices for single family homes in the region from 2000 to 2024, with peaks in 2007 and 2013 followed by a declining trend. Based on the 2021 Municipal Census, over 30,000 people in the Wood Buffalo region are non-permanent residents (also known as shadow population).

Proactive planning can help regions weather economic fluctuations and adapt to demographic shifts. This approach is reflected in the 2024 RMWB Municipal Development Plan, which states that the municipality is prepared for various growth scenarios.



Sources: [Cold market: Real estate prices continue to decline in Fort McMurray](#); [RMWB Municipal Development Plan \(July 2024\)](#), [Municipal Census - Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo](#). Price data from RE/MAX Fort McMurray.

Recommendations

The council highlighted five focus areas with accompanying recommendations and action items.

The recommendations below represent actions which, if adopted by the Government of Alberta, could help to encourage regional growth and support the social and economic development of northern Alberta. Potential actions are recommended to the Minister of Jobs, Economy and Trade unless otherwise specified.

Focus area 1: Redefining the boundary of northern Alberta (NADC boundary)

Recommendation 1.1: Redefine northern Alberta by considering the characteristics typical of northern communities.

Potential Actions:

Medium-term (6 to 12 months)

- NADC will complete additional analysis on the factors that should be considered in defining northern Alberta (industry composition, remoteness and others).
- Following the mapping exercise in Recommendation 3.2, NADC will develop final recommendations for a definition of northern Alberta with respect to the Council's advisory role, which could include:
 - Highway 16 and areas to the north (excluding the Edmonton Census Metropolitan Area and surrounding regions which are approximately within one hour's drive from Edmonton);
 - status quo (existing NADC boundaries); and
 - other boundaries based on factors described above.
- NADC will consult with other ministries that have programs with a rural/regional focus to get their perspectives. In particular, NADC could engage with Agriculture and Irrigation, Health and Jobs, Economy and Trade (with relation to the Investment and Growth Fund and Film and Television Tax Credit) on a potential new definition which could inform program delivery.
- The Council will increase awareness of any changes to NADC's definition of northern Alberta and encourage government and stakeholders to consider the NADC region with relation to the needs of the north.
- The Government of Alberta is recommended to consider adjusting selected government programs serving northern Alberta to align with the new boundary.

Rationale:

- The current NADC region is based on municipal, First Nations and Metis Settlements boundaries, which can be confusing. Redefining the NADC boundary could simplify the explanation of northern Alberta, especially if the boundary is defined by a major economic corridor like Highway 16 or other geographic features.

- There is no consensus among stakeholders on how to define northern Alberta.
- Stakeholders see northern Alberta as a resource-based region, unique from central and southern Alberta, which should be defined according to characteristics of what is “northern.” (For example, an economy dominated by non-renewable resource industries and an environment with significant outdoor recreational opportunities).
- Some areas outside the NADC boundary such as those around Hinton and Edson face similar challenges as areas in the current NADC region.
- The current NADC boundaries are not consistently used across the Government of Alberta or by external stakeholders.
 - Programs and organizations which refer to the NADC boundaries include the NADB program, Rural Development Network and University of Alberta (eligibility for northern research funding).
 - Northern allowances and related incentives for public sector workers apply north of the 55th parallel, which is north of the NADC boundaries.
- The NADC boundaries are not defined in legislation and have historically been set by the Council; however, there is a need to consider the impact of any change on stakeholders and programs which reference the boundary.

Focus area 2: Workforce development

Recommendation 2.1: Enhance marketing and advocacy opportunities to attract skilled workers and investment.

Potential Actions:

Medium-term (6 to 12 months)

- Recommend the Government of Alberta develop a “Northern Alberta is Calling” or similar campaign to attract skilled workers to the north.
- NADC re-establish relationships with and engage with northern and other key stakeholders (Invest NW Alberta, Invest Alberta Corporation and others) on opportunities for enhancing marketing to investors.
- NADC will engage with municipalities, economic development organizations, post-secondary institutions (PSI) and other stakeholders to ensure that a new marketing campaign complements existing regional marketing efforts.

Rationale:

- Existing government workforce attraction marketing campaigns focus on Alberta as a whole and not on the opportunities in the north.
- Enhanced marketing would inform potential investors about opportunities in the region and attract the needed workforce.

Recommendation 2.2: Increase access to high-quality education and training, particularly for Indigenous learners and youth.

Potential Actions:

Medium-term (6 to 12 months)

- Recommend the Government of Alberta expand funding for the NADB program, particularly the First Nations, Métis and Inuit Bursary stream.
- Recommend the Government of Alberta look to expand the NADB program to include trades.

Long-term (1 to 2 years)

- Advanced Education is recommended to expand PSI capacity to enhance career-based training and entrepreneurship and support programming for needed skills.

- Advanced Education is recommended to support PSIs in implementing fast-track programs (e.g., teacher training programs) to address labour needs.
- Advanced Education is recommended to implement programs like the Northern Alberta Medical Program in Grande Prairie or the Bachelor of Nursing – Rural Community (offered in Bonnyville) and replicate them for other occupations and locations.
- Advanced Education is recommended to work with northern PSIs to tailor programs to suit needs of the local economy.
- Advanced Education is recommended to work with PSIs to explore opportunities for PSIs from outside northern Alberta to open campuses in the region or expand existing partnerships with northern PSIs.
- Jobs, Economy and Trade and Advanced Education are recommended to explore additional programs to support academic upgrading, micro-credentials or other upskilling, particularly among Indigenous learners.
- The Government of Alberta is recommended to expand support for the development of entrepreneurship skills among Indigenous youth.
- As part of existing work underway through the Northern Development Ministers' Forum, the Government of Alberta is recommended to explore a new youth leadership development model which could be piloted in a northern Alberta Indigenous community.
- The Government of Alberta is recommended to engage with major employers and PSIs to better understand the barriers individuals face in obtaining apprenticeship and co-op placements and potential solutions.
- The Government of Alberta is recommended to increase marketing for and consider expanding the Bursary Partnership Program and Workforce Partnership grants to encourage attraction and retention of workers.
- The Government of Alberta is recommended to increase access to essential services to attract and retain workers.
- The Government of Alberta is recommended to explore opportunities to better support youth and new graduates, for example:
 - a program to provide incentives (for example, tax credits or grants) to employers or students/apprentices in order to encourage employers to take on apprentices or co-op students; or
 - a regionally focused program similar to the former Summer Temporary Employment Program, or northern-focused internship/work experience programs in Ontario and B.C., could serve as a model that can be adapted to provide experiential or work-integrated learning opportunities for northern students and trainees.

Rationale:

- Some northern PSIs report that Government of Alberta funding is insufficient to meet the demand for trades programs.
- Students who access their preferred post-secondary programs in northern Alberta may be more likely to stay in the region after graduation.
- Youth unemployment is currently a major challenge in northern Alberta and across Canada.
- Stakeholders have suggested that training northern residents (who already have an attachment to the north and may be more likely to stay in the region afterwards) is a more

feasible way to develop the northern workforce than attracting workers from other regions, although workforce attraction is also important.

- New programs for Indigenous youth would enable them to develop skills needed for the workforce and gain greater exposure to diverse entrepreneurship, career and apprenticeship opportunities.
- Stakeholders have reported that in some regions, apprentices/students find it difficult to get co-op and apprenticeship placements. This challenge may be a barrier to further developing the northern workforce in trades and other fields.

Recommendation 2.3: Conduct or support research to better understand challenges and opportunities in key areas of northern economic development (in particular, workforce) and inform future action by the Government of Alberta.

Potential Actions:

Short-term (3 to 6 months)

- The Government of Alberta is recommended to provide NADC with access to a research budget to investigate labour market and other issues in northern Alberta which are not currently being addressed by the provincial government or Government of Alberta-funded research.

Medium-term (6 to 12 months)

- NADC (with support from Secretariat) to identify priority areas for future research.

Long-term (1 to 2 years)

- The Government of Alberta is recommended to highlight research through NADC and JET channels and stakeholder events to increase awareness of the work of NADC and ensure that northern communities have the information needed to promote economic development.
- Jobs, Economy and Trade is recommended to engage with relevant departments to encourage them to consider NADC research when developing policy with an impact on northern Alberta.

Rationale:

- Stakeholders have indicated they valued the research reports previously produced under the NADC brand, such as the 2019 Northern Alberta Geothermal Potential Mapping Report and the 2009 Evaluation of Fatty Acid Composition and Lignan Content of Peace Country Flax.
- The last NADC research reports were published in early 2020.
- Existing research may not include the level of detail required by northern communities (for example, a focus on northern Alberta or certain regions or occupations in the north).
- NADC members have indicated that on some issues (such as understanding the impact of work camps in northern Alberta on population and labour markets or challenges with

apprenticeship/co-op positions), more focused research may be helpful in validating key issues brought forward by stakeholders.

- More focused research could improve the quality of NADC's advice to the Minister by providing more relevant information on northern challenges and opportunities.

Recommendation 2.4: Streamline and better support the Rural Renewal Stream (RRS) under the Alberta Advantage Immigration Program and immigration programs in general.

Potential Actions:

Short-term (3 to 6 months)

- Immigration and Multiculturalism (IM) is recommended to identify potential opportunities to streamline the Designated Community responsibilities under the RRS and improve communication between IM and municipalities.
- Jobs, Economy and Trade with Immigration and Multiculturalism is recommended to explore opportunities to better support northern municipalities in attracting and retaining newcomers.

Medium-term (6 to 12 months)

- Immigration and Multiculturalism is recommended to advocate to the Government of Canada to give greater consideration for the workforce impact of federal work permit programs on the workforce of northern Alberta and Alberta as a whole.

Rationale:

- Northern municipalities recognize the value of the RRS but they report that the activities that communities must complete under the RRS program (such as program integrity actions) can be onerous, and municipalities often struggle to carry them out.
- There is a need for improved communication on application outcomes between IM, municipalities and employers.
- Some stakeholders have also identified challenges in immigration settlement in northern communities and concerns about employers using the federal International Mobility Program or Temporary Foreign Worker program rather than recruiting local workers.
- There are existing Government of Alberta grants to support the capacity of small centres and rural areas to attract, welcome and retain newcomers. However, we believe there is a need for additional capacity building in this area.

Focus area 3: Northern recognition and investment

Recommendation 3.1: Ensure an organizational unit in the Government of Alberta is responsible for creating a comprehensive strategy, monitoring, measuring and evaluating the work of the Government of Alberta in the north to advance northern development.

Potential Actions:

Medium-term (6 to 12 months)

- Jobs, Economy and Trade is recommended to lead engagement with key ministries (AGI, Indigenous Relations, Transportation and Economic Corridors (TEC) and other ministries as needed) to explore opportunities to improve collaboration and coordination between ministries operating in northern Alberta. This work could include exploring opportunities to ensure improved coordination and evaluation of government funding programs in the region.

Long-term (1 to 2 years)

- Jobs, Economy and Trade is recommended to develop a cross-ministry strategy or policy to guide the design and delivery of Government of Alberta programs and services to support development in northern Alberta.
 - The strategy could also consider social development as an enabler of economic development and workforce attraction (for example, child care, recreational facilities, health facilities).
 - It is recommended that the Government of Alberta align the strategy with the definition of northern Alberta established through Recommendation 1.1.
 - The strategy should include a framework for measuring the success of the strategy.
 - It is recommended that the strategy also identify opportunities to reduce red tape and improve collaboration and coordination between economic development actors in northern Alberta.
- Jobs, Economy and Trade is recommended to finalize the strategy and develop an action plan based on the strategy.
- The Government of Alberta is recommended to implement any actions resulting from the strategy, with NADC promoting the strategy and providing advice to government on any needed adjustments.

Rationale:

- The council has observed that “northern issues get lost” in the current Government of Alberta structure and we believe a renewed focus and structure within government is needed to ensure economic development and community sustainability for the north.
- A northern development strategy could lead to enhanced planning and monitoring of government actions for the north, ensure clearer direction and facilitate a consistent approach across the Government of Alberta on northern issues.
- Several other provinces (including British Columbia, Ontario and Manitoba) have strategies specifically devoted to northern development.
- There is currently no overall policy or strategy with a specifically northern focus except for regional plans under the Land-Use Planning Framework (the Upper Peace, Lower Peace and Lower Athabasca Regional Plans, as well as part of the Upper Athabasca Regional Plan).⁹ Other policies guide the work of the Government of Alberta in relevant areas in the north and across Alberta (e.g., Economic Development in Rural Alberta Plan).
 - Government of Alberta programs may not always have a northern focus, and programs targeted at rural areas often do not have consistent definitions of “rural.”
- There is also no consistent definition of northern Alberta or the needs of the region across the Government of Alberta (as outlined in Recommendation 1.1).
- Efforts to improve coordination and evaluation of government funding programs in the region could also inform improvements across ministries and in other regions of Alberta.

Recommendation 3.2: The Government of Alberta is recommended to maintain NADC as an advisory body, mainly focused in the coming year on redefining the boundaries of the region (Recommendation 1.1) and informing and supporting development of a northern strategy (Recommendation 3.1).

Short-term (3 to 6 months)

- The Government of Alberta is recommended to ensure continuity of Council membership past the expiry of current member terms in May 2025, while also ensuring balanced representation from northwestern, northeastern and north central Alberta, as well as Indigenous representation.
- NADC (with support from the Secretariat) will implement actions to improve the effectiveness of NADC in its advisory role, such as designating portfolios for each member (e.g., transportation, connectivity) and developing annual accountability document such as a business plan.
 - Improving the effectiveness of NADC could include an expanded role in engaging with regional stakeholders such as Northern Alberta Elected Leaders.

Medium-term (6 to 12 months)

- NADC will lead a mapping exercise to outline existing government actors in northern development and their roles and validate the results with stakeholders (results would inform future recommendations to the Minister on the NADC boundary, Recommendation 1.1 and the role of NADC).

Long-term (1 to 2 years)

- NADC will work with the Secretariat to incorporate reporting on this area in future NADC annual reports.
- Based on the strategy recommendations and mapping exercise, Government of Alberta to consider amendments to the NADC Act if changes to the mandate, membership or powers of NADC are required to more effectively deliver on its advisory role.

Rationale:

- NADC has successfully carried out stakeholder outreach and provided recommendations to the Minister.
- Stakeholders have recognized the value of NADC in advocating for the north as a whole and encouraging regional collaboration.
- In the past government has considered changes to the role, structure and funding allocated to NADC, including a proposal in the early 1970s to establish a Northern Development Commission with expanded powers.

Focus area 4: Program design and ensuring knowledge of government supports

Recommendation 4.1: Enhance the presence of Government of Alberta staff and improve communication on pathfinding, economic development, municipal and small business funding opportunities in the north.

Potential Actions:

Note: Any actions in this area would likely not be restricted to northern Alberta but could benefit stakeholders across the province.

Short-term (3 to 6 months)

- NADC members will build awareness of existing supports when attending stakeholder meetings and informally engaging in their communities.
- NADC will use the Council's website to link to and highlight government programs and resources that benefit the north.
- (Short-term and ongoing): The Government of Alberta is recommended to increase awareness and presence of northern staff at events and through marketing campaigns (Recommendation 2.1), staff based outside the north should travel to the region more frequently and align any northern incentives with the definition of northern Alberta established via Recommendation 1.1.
- (Short-term and ongoing): NADC will consider opportunities for collecting feedback on improved program design when engaging with stakeholders and providing advice to government.

Medium-term (6 to 12 months)

- The Government of Alberta is recommended to build on existing work and enhance and communicate an inventory of funding opportunities, existing marketing and economic development tools.
- The Government of Alberta is recommended to explore the possibility of a combined application portal for multiple programs.
- The Government of Alberta is recommended to reallocate existing JET funding or obtain additional funding to expand the number of Regional Economic Development Specialists and Workforce Consultants in the north.
- The Government of Alberta is recommended to explore increasing the number of Alberta Public Service staff in northern Alberta.

Rationale:

- Many key economic development supports are already listed on the alberta.ca website, but some stakeholders have limited awareness of these supports.

- Although Jobs, Economy and Trade and the Government of Alberta have a substantial presence in northern Alberta, stakeholders expressed a desire to have more staff available in the north to:
 - increase the regional diversity of all Government of Alberta staff and give a better perspective from the entire province, when making policy and decisions.
 - connect with stakeholders directly and demonstrate a commitment to the region.

Focus area 5: Economic corridors, infrastructure, connectivity, transportation, and utilities

Recommendation 5.1: Continue to invest in transportation infrastructure and connectivity, and address affordability challenges, including electricity distribution and transmission costs.

Potential Actions:

Short-term (3 to 6 months)

- The Government of Alberta is recommended to increase awareness among municipalities and residents of the existing work of the government to support regional airports and air access to Edmonton (which may have an impact on tourism development in the north).
- The Government of Alberta is recommended to continue to engage with Canadian National Railways (CN) and other potential providers of rail service regarding opportunities for expanding infrastructure, particularly in northwestern Alberta.
- Transportation and Economic Corridors is recommended to consider additional factors when allocating highway funding (for example, to explore the potential of giving greater weight to northern economic contributions). We understand that this is already the case to some degree—e.g., the role of a highway as a trade corridor is part of the criteria.
- Affordability and Utilities is recommended to ensure that the needs of the north are considered, and costs are more equally distributed throughout Alberta in any potential policy shifts related to distribution/transmission costs and with relation to any future projects that may have an impact (e.g., interties with British Columbia).
- Transportation and Economic Corridors and Technology and Innovation are recommended to engage with telecommunications providers to identify barriers and facilitate improved service in northern Alberta, particularly along key highway corridors.

Medium-term (6 to 12 months)

- The Government of Alberta is recommended to explore an expanded role for NADC in providing feedback to the government on prioritization of northern infrastructure projects.
- Transportation and Economic Corridors and Tourism and Sport are recommended to continue to work with Travel Alberta and explore potential actions to incentivize improved passenger air service in northern Alberta, such as grants, and guaranteed passenger loads for flights.
- The Government of Alberta is recommended to engage with the Government of Canada on any regulatory requirements which may be serving as a barrier to improved rail service (e.g., hours of service for train crews).
- The Government of Alberta is recommended to explore options to explore opportunities for improved intercity/regional bus service in northern Alberta.

Long-term (1 to 2 years)

- The Government of Alberta is recommended to advocate to the Government of Canada for changes to any regulatory requirements that may be a barrier to improved connectivity or transportation.

Rationale:

- Northern airports have seen passenger service reduced or cancelled in the last few years, forcing people in the north to travel long distances by road to access services and air travel to Edmonton (if available) often requires a connection in Calgary.
- Stakeholders indicated that the absence of local and regional bus systems affects access to jobs, the justice system, health care and other services.
- The Passenger Rail Master Plan led by TEC includes consideration of northern passenger rail (to Fort McMurray and Grande Prairie); however, this is a potential long-term solution for some areas and stakeholders did not see passenger rail as a major priority.
- Stakeholders expressed concern that a lack of reliable freight rail service (or a lack of service) impacts the ability to attract industries that are dependent on rail service.
- CN is the only rail carrier in northern Alberta and is federally regulated.
- Regardless of the economic contribution from northern Alberta to the province and the country, some northern Albertans have the perception that the region is being underserved for having a low population.
 - Stakeholders view the current funding system as overly reliant on population and traffic counts, without accounting for the economic contribution of rural and northern Alberta.
- There is inequity in electricity distribution costs compared to the rest of the province.
 - The high transmission and distribution costs paid by northern residents and businesses serve as a disincentive for investment and hinder the growth and retention of small businesses.
- Connectivity issues pose significant safety risks and challenges for northern residents.
 - Broadband connectivity in general has been identified as a major concern by stakeholders; however, stakeholders have indicated that more progress is underway in that area under the Alberta Broadband Strategy.
 - There is limited or no cell service along key areas in the region, including major transportation routes, and there is a need for greater investment from telecommunications providers to address this issue.

Budget 2025

As we completed the report, we were pleased to see the recent announcements and commitments made by the Government of Alberta in the 2025 Budget on the following items:

- Investing \$311 million over three years to increase emergency route capacity for residents in northern Alberta.
- \$15 million in funding for recruitment and retention of physicians who practice full-time in underserved areas and a \$12 million increase for the existing Rural Remote Northern Program.
- Health care projects and provisions, including Beaverlodge Health Centre replacement, La Crete Maternity and Community Health Centre, and the Rural Health Facilities Revitalization Program.
- The 2025-26 Capital Plan includes skilled trades expansion at the Northwestern Polytechnic and \$2 million for the expansion and upgrades of Keyano College to provide an enhanced learning environment for in-demand programs like nursing and paramedicine.
- An increase in the First Nations Colleges Grant by \$0.5 million starting in 2025-26, to \$4 million per year.
- Provision of \$3.5 million to the Bridging Classrooms to Communities grant pilot program to build and strengthen programming for Indigenous students.
- Allocation of \$3 million and \$500 thousand to the Northern and Regional Economic Development Program and Northern Alberta Development Bursary Program respectively.
- Designation of \$6.4 million for the Rural Utilities Grant Programs.
- Allocation of \$106.2 million to fund the ongoing Broadband Strategy projects.
- Investing \$43.8 million in 2025-26 for the Physician Training Expansion Program through rural training centres in Lethbridge and Grande Prairie.
- \$3 million set aside to attract and retain midwives in rural and remote areas in alignment with the Alberta Health Workforce Strategy.
- Provision of approximately \$4.5 million to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities and organizations through the Indigenous Primary Health Care Innovation Fund and the Indigenous Patient Navigator Grant Program.

The council is confident that these actions and recommendations will build on the ongoing work of the Government of Alberta and recent announcements, setting the stage for how the Government of Alberta could make a strong commitment to the social and economic development of northern Alberta, both for the present and future generations.

Notes

¹ Government of Alberta, [The Need for a Northern Alberta Development Strategy](#), 2013.

² The NADC boundary is not defined in legislation and past Councils have changed the boundary at various times, although the rationale for the current boundary is unclear. The 1958 [Alberta Royal Commission](#) which led to the establishment of NADC was directed to focus on “that part of Alberta lying generally to the north of the 55th parallel of latitude” and the 55th parallel appeared to be the NADC boundary until the early 1970s. During the mid-1970s, some NADC annual reports also show the region divided into several zones extending as far south as Highway 16 but by [1979-80](#) the region appears to have its current shape. ³ Alberta Education, *Funding Manual for School Authorities 2024-25 School Year*, open.alberta.ca/publications/1485-5542

⁴ [Agriculture Service Board Regions](#) This report uses the same spelling for the names of the regions as the AGI website (North East, North West).

⁵ National Joint Council, *Isolated Posts and Government Housing Directive*, www.njc-cnmc.gc.ca/directive/d4/en. Locations south of the 60th parallel, such as northern Alberta, may be considered if the community has a population of less than 10,000; and www.njc-cnmc.gc.ca/directive/d4/en. Wabasca, High Level and some First Nations in northern Alberta are considered “isolated posts.” Locations south of the 60th parallel may be considered isolated posts if the community has a population of less than 10,000 and it is not accessible by means of an all-weather road; or meets select other criteria relating to climate, population and access.

⁶ Major northern-focused programs delivered by the Government of Alberta or Alberta public agencies include the Northern Alberta Development Bursary, northern allowances for Alberta Public Service staff and health professionals, the Remote Rural Northern program for physician compensation, and the Northern HIV program.

⁷ North central and northeast includes feedback from the Westlock, Vegreville, Vermilion, Bonnyville, Lac La Biche and Fort McMurray outreach sessions.

⁸ Northwest Alberta includes feedback from the Hinton, Grande Cache, Grande Prairie, High Level, Peace River and Slave Lake outreach sessions.

⁹ As of December 2024, the Lower Athabasca Regional Plan has been approved and the other northern regional plans have not been started. See: landuse.alberta.ca/RegionalPlans/Pages/default.aspx