

GVI Adds Value to Urban Planning

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One would imagine that with a name like 'Grassland Vegetation Inventory' the applicability of GVI would be constrained to rangeland management and rural landscapes. But **Mitchell Comb**, a Senior Community Planner for the City of Lethbridge, is already setting plans in motion to use GVI in the upcoming Integrated Growth Management Strategy (IGMS), set to be released this fall.

Mitchell happened upon GVI almost by accident. Through the cities' association with the Oldman Watershed Council, Mitchell learned that the Prairie Conservation Forum was holding a discussion with watershed groups on a new GIS based planning tool, and he decided to see what it was all about. It didn't take him long to appreciate the value of the tool and to realize that it would be useful for the development of the IGMS.

The Integrated Growth Management Strategy is a comprehensive, physical plan for the projected growth of the City. It considers the surface and subsurface

characteristics of the land, and the man-made constraints on growth within the existing city boundaries over the 5, 20, 50 and 100 year timeframe. The complete IGMS will support other city planning applications including policy discussions on the Inter-Municipal Development Plan, future Area Structure Plans, and Outline Plans. The citizens of Lethbridge have identified their vision for growth through the Integrated Community Sustainability Plan / Municipal Development Plan, the IGMS provides the physical considerations to enable that growth. The strategy will present options and IGMS recommendations to council on which areas to develop and which areas to avoid or protect from development.

There are two unique aspects about the IGMS that make it different from past physical planning efforts. Normally such physical planning does not consider the environment, but focuses on the location of important infrastructure, such as transportation routes or the location for water and wastewater

pipes. But Mitchell notes there has been a shift in approach over the last ten years in regards to planning. This shift recognizes the need to work with the landscape and environment rather than against it. Excluding the environmental characteristics of the landscape can prove to be more costly than initially anticipated. Efforts to level and grade land for development can quickly be undermined by subsurface flows that weren't anticipated. The tendency to find the shortest, most direct route is often met with challenges that may impact the sustainability of the infrastructure and disrupt important ecosystems. This is the first time that the natural landscape has become an important feature in a plan of this type.

The IGMS is also unique in that it is the first time the City of Lethbridge and the County of Lethbridge are working together on a proactive regional approach. This is not to say they haven't worked together in the past on policy alignment, but the IGMS goes farther to consider each municipality's growth

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Oldman Watershed Council

plans to ensure a good interface along municipal boundaries. For example, as part of the IGMS the two municipalities intend to work together to understand how the new Canamex Highway may impact development decisions for both parties.

Mitchell sees the opportunities for the Grassland Vegetation Inventory to support the work of the IGMS. After all, there is no need to reinvent the wheel. The inventory can provide useful information about the geophysical characteristics of the landscape within, and along, the city boundaries. It can help to identify important wetland and drainage areas, wildlife corridors, or the location of important grasslands and habitats that should be avoided. In some instances this knowledge could result in establishing an environmental reserve, or it could simply facilitate improved decisions for greater sustainability of infrastructure. The fact is, water likes to flow in a certain direction and sometimes no matter how much leveling and grading occurs all that work is undermined by the characteristics of geomorphology.

The City has hired a consultant who has extensive experience with GVI, and has seen its usefulness in planning for the Land Use Framework and the South Saskatchewan Regional Plan. The

City believes it is important to work within this provincial direction and to be compatible with the regional plan. While Mitchell sees the value of GVI, he looks to the consultant to provide the expertise in accessing and utilizing GVI data to achieve the best results in the IGMS. The compatibility of GVI with other GIS information is important to its utility in this application. The City is in the process of obtaining other data sharing agreements so they can make use of GIS compatible information from AGRISID, AGRISOIL, as well as the County and City's own GIS layers. Combined, this information should enable strong analysis and options for growth, as well as provide a useful communication tool for City Council.

Until a few weeks ago Mitchell did not know that GVI existed. When he happened upon it he thought it was just a rural application, but having learned more he sees that it also has value in urban planning. He appreciates the Prairie Conservation Forum's presentation but suggests that there may better forums for Alberta Sustainable Resource Development to reach municipal, and in particular, urban audiences. He isn't aware of other municipalities using GVI but he anticipates that it would be useful for urban municipalities across southern Alberta. He suggests that

presentations to the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association or the Alberta Association of Municipal Districts and Counties could be beneficial to enhancing the use of GVI. If GVI is successful integrating with IGMS, Mitchell would gladly share this experience with other municipalities to demonstrate how GVI has applications as a tool to facilitate integrated planning in urban areas.

Not all land is created equal. There are some areas where you shouldn't develop and others where development is feasible. The Integrated Growth Management Strategy aims to provide a physical plan for development that takes into consideration landscape and environmental influences, and to work with the neighboring County to develop a proactive, regional approach for improved growth management decisions. Mitchell sees opportunities for GVI will help facilitate this process.

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