WHERE WE LIVE, WHY WE PLAN

The NWT Community Planning Framework

AUGUST | 2025

SAFE. RESILIENT. SUSTAINABLE. HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

Government of Northwest Territories

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Foreword

Community planning in the Northwest Territories (NWT) takes place within a broader Canadian planning environment and is supported by Registered Professional Planners (RPPs) accredited through the Canadian Institute of Planners and the Provincial and Territorial Institutes and Associations (PTIAs) across Canada. While there are many similarities to community planning in other Canadian regions, the NWT presents unique considerations for planners and the community governments they work with.

The *NWT Community Planning Framework* aims to raise awareness of the value of community planning and the role of community governments who are responsible for community planning. The framework illustrates how community plans and development goals shape land management and emphasizes how these plans can support other strategic initiatives within the community.

The *NWT Community Planning Framework* has been developed with the support of the NWT Association of Communities (NWTAC) in collaboration with RPPs that work with community governments. **It reflects MACA's commitment to supporting capable, accountable, resilient, and self-directed community governments that provide safe, sustainable, and healthy communities for residents.**

The illustrations in the *NWT Community Planning Framework* and guides were all created by Alison McCreesh, a graphic artist, cartoonist, and illustrator who has been working in Yellowknife since 2009.

In March 2024, Muncipal and Community Affairs (MACA) hosted a Community Planners Forum with NWTAC and invited RPPs who practice in the NWT. Forum discussions helped shape the development of the *NWT Community Planning Framework*. The results of the forum are captured in the What We Heard Report.

A series of guides and other tools and resources are being developed in phases to complement the framework. These resources will offer detailed guidance on community planning and processes relevant to NWT community governments and the RPPs who support them.

Guide topics include:

1. Accessibility and Age-Friendly Design Considerations
2. Archaeological Site Management and Protection
3. Best Practices for Municipal Public Engagement
4. Understanding the GNWT's Duty to Consult
5. Community Civic Addressing
6. Climate Change and Land Use Planning
7. Land Development and Capital Planning

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English

Si vous voulez ces informations dans une autre langue officielle, contactez-nous.
French

Kīspin ki nitawihtīn ē nīhīyawihk ōma ācimōwin, tipwāsinān.
Cree

Tłı chǪ yatı k'ęè. Dı wegodı newǪ dè, gots'o gonede.
Tłįchǫ

ʔerıhtł'ís Dëne Sųłıné yatı t'a huts'elkër xa beyáyatı theɔą ɔat'e, nuwe ts'ën yółtı.
Chipewyan

Edı gondı dehgáh got'ı e zhatié k'ęé edatł'éh enahddhę nıde naxets'ę edahłí. South Slavey
K'áhshó got'ı ne xədə k'é hederı ɔedıhtl'é yerınıwę ní dé dúle.
North Slavey

Jii gwandak izhii ginjìk vat'atr'ijąhch'uu zhit yinohthan jì', diits'àt ginohkhìi.
Gwich'in

Uvanittuaq ilitchurisukupku Inuvialuktun, ququaqluta.
Inuvialuktun

ᑖᒃᑯᐊ ᑎᑎᖅᑲᐃᑦ ᐱᓕᒍᐃᖅᑎᑦ ᐃᓄᒃᑎᑐᓕᖅᓯᒪᓂᑎᒃ, ᐅᕐᓂᑎᓐᓄᑦ ᐅᖃᐅᓕᕆᓐᓇᖅᑐᑎᑦ.
Inuktitut

Hapkua titiqqat pijumagupkit Inuinnaqtun, uvaptinnut hivajarlutit.
Inuinnaqtun

Indigenous Languages Secretariat: 867-767-9346 ext. 71037
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Part 1 – Introduction

This Framework is organized in four parts:

Introduction
Describes the benefits of community planning, and the principles and purpose of this framework.

Where We Live
Introduces communities and conditions in the NWT and highlights related planning considerations.

Why We Plan
Identifies the value of land use planning. Describes how the process is supported by principles, best practices, and resources.

Looking Ahead
Discusses the role of planning in future community growth and emerging practices.

What is community planning?

Community planning provides the foundation for how land is managed within a community to achieve specific goals. The planning process is supported by professional planners who help organize and guide the use and development of land within community boundaries. It involves the ***review, administration, and implementation*** of land use planning tools through high-level strategic documents, such as a community plan. A community plan outlines a community's vision, goals, opportunities, constraints, and actions for future development.

All communities in the NWT have a similar basic need to make land use decisions. Each community plan will be unique, reflecting variations in population size and composition, cultural values, economy, location, and governance systems.

Professional planners work collaboratively with local leadership and community administration using community engagement to gather interests and ideas from residents, businesses, other levels of government and interest groups. This inclusive and participatory approach ensures that residents play an active role in shaping how their communities will look, feel and function.

In the NWT, community governments are responsible for initiating and funding their community plan bylaws or community land use plans and for retaining a professional planner to guide the review and development process.

In this document, the terms "community plan" and "community land use plan" are sometimes used interchangeably.

All communities in the NWT either have a community plan or are actively developing a community land use plan to shape decision-making within their boundaries. Communities have adopted community plan bylaws and zoning bylaws, or community land use plans, and are building their capacity to administer and implement their development goals and objectives. Others are recognizing that their existing plans no longer reflect community needs, particularly as current

leadership and administration were not involved in the earlier planning process. In communities that are facing challenges related to climate change and housing, plan reviews are being initiated to guide discussions, build awareness, develop strategies to manage impacts and prepare for new opportunities.

What is a community plan?

The planning process results in a specific product – a community plan – a document that is integrated with other community plans and strategies. It serves as a foundational and functional tool for decision-making by the community government. A community plan is a policy document made up of text and maps, that provides a framework of goals, objectives and policies to guide the physical development of a municipality. It also considers sustainability, the environment, and the economic, social and cultural development of the community.

> **"The purpose of a community plan is to provide a policy framework to guide the physical development of a municipality, having regard to sustainability, the environment, and the economic, social and cultural development of the community."**
>
> – Community Planning and Development Act (CPDA), s. 3(1)

In the NWT, community planning is governed by the *Community Planning and Development Act* (CPDA) and Regulations. The Act requires that a community plan, which a community council adopts by bylaw, be approved by the Minister of Municipal and Community Affairs (MACA).

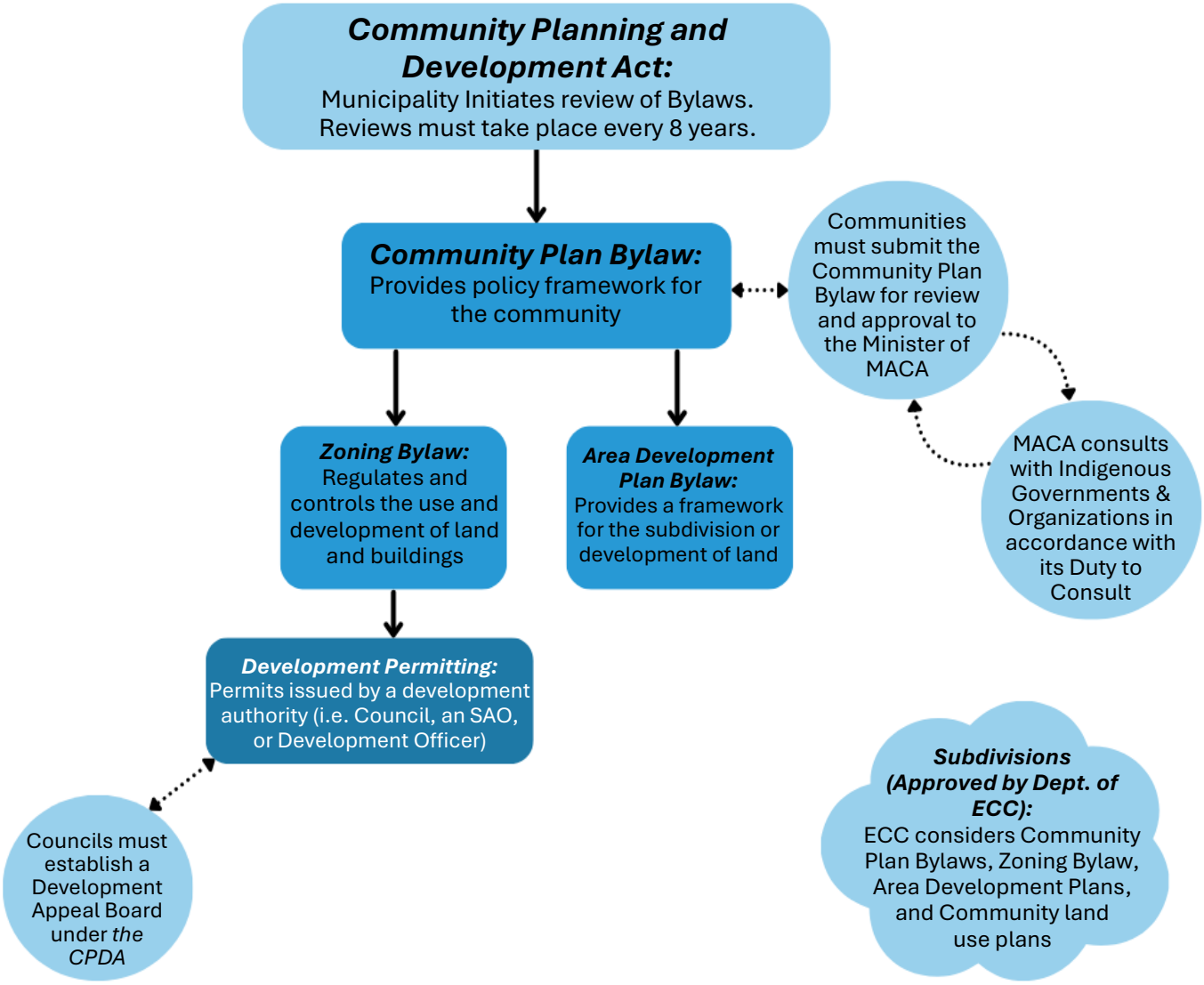
Community development is a collaborative, multidisciplinary process that brings people together to explore not only how land is used, but how land use connects us to priorities such as reconciliation, climate change, housing, and healthy communities. A clear understanding of the plan's purpose is essential to successfully implementing the goals and objectives of the community plan.

> **"A community plan must be prepared in consultation with a professional community planner" and a review must be initiated 8 years after adoption. Reviews can be initiated before 8 years for greater certainty.**
>
> – CPDA, s. 3(b) and 6

A community plan is a governance tool for use by local officials, other levels of government, and private citizens to make informed decisions about land use, housing, economic development, environmental protection, community revitalization, conservation of natural, historic and cultural landscapes, infrastructure and service provision, transportation and other related subjects.

Community planning system in the NWT

The graphic below illustrates the community planning system in the NWT under the CPDA. The process begins when a municipality initiates planning activities. The CPDA also provides the legislative framework for the planning tools and development processes including appeals, enforcement, penalties and subdivision of land.



What other governance tools accompany a community plan?

A community plan does not guide the physical development of a community on its own. It is complemented by a suite of governance tools that help turn the plan's vision and policies into reality. These tools include:

- **Zoning bylaw:** This bylaw puts the community plan into action by outlining how land can be used and developed. It includes detailed provisions where buildings and other structures

can be located; the types of buildings that are permitted and how they may be used; the lot sizes and dimensions, parking requirements, building heights and occupancy densities; and setbacks from the street. A zoning bylaw enables a community government to regulate new development by requiring development permits. Under the CPDA, a zoning bylaw must not conflict with the community plan (CPDA s.12(4)). A zoning bylaw does not need to be approved by the Minister of MACA.

- **Community land use plan:** Land use plans are not governed by the CPDA and are not subject to approval by MACA. A land use plan will contain the larger vision and policies for future growth, like those set out in a community plan, and may also include more detailed regulations and procedures for land use and development like those found in zoning bylaws. It is developed in the spirit and intent of the CPDA and serves as an advisory tool to guide land administration and development, as it is not backed by legislation.

- **Area development plan**: An area development plan provides a framework for the subdivision or development of an area of land within a community government. It is approved as a bylaw following the adoption of the community plan. An area development plan outlines how land may be developed or redeveloped over time and details how services and facilities will be provided in the area.

- **Subdivision plan:** A subdivision plan divides a larger parcel of land into smaller lots, establishing precise boundaries, lot dimensions, road layouts, and other key details needed for development. The CPDA regulates land subdivisions. Subdivision applications are approved by the Department of Environment and Climate Change, and registered plans of survey are filed at the Department of Justice, GNWT Land Titles Office.

What are the benefits of community planning?

Community planning takes time, work and resources and can involve making difficult decisions about controversial matters. However, it also has many benefits:

- Community planning strives to make local decision-making more transparent.
- It educates the public and engages residents in discussions about land use and development, the economy, conservation, shared services, and spaces.
- It addresses concerns over contentious issues such as the location of less-desirable land uses, rezoning, or boundary disputes.
- It preserves community features that are important to residents, such as natural, historic and cultural landscapes.
- It promotes predictability in future development and consistency and fairness for those involved in the development review process by providing a strong basis for local decision-making.
- It encourages the efficient use of local services and infrastructure and can reduce development costs by coordinating land use decisions.
- It protects private property rights by minimizing negative impacts associated with new development, such as incompatible or nuisance land uses.
- It can contribute to the process of reconciliation by supporting meaningful dialogue through engagement about culturally important matters or divisive issues.

Why a community planning framework for the NWT?

The *NWT Community Planning Framework* (Framework) is intended to support discussions, build awareness, and create a shared understanding of the community planning process in the NWT. It also encourages stronger collaboration and shows how planning tools and processes can help meet a wide range of community needs and interests. The Framework supports MACA's broader goal of helping community governments strengthen their planning practices by offering clear guidance and practical tools to better manage land and meet local needs.

The Framework was developed for community governments, community planning consultants MACA, NWTAC, Local Government Administrators of the Northwest Territories (LGANT) and other GNWT departments that have an interest in the community planning process. However, it is anticipated the content and associated guides will also be of interest to a broader audience.

What is the Department of Municipal and Community Affairs (MACA) role in community planning?

MACA supports community governments by providing resources, guidance, and the legislative framework needed for effective community planning. MACA provides communities with community public infrastructure (CPI) funding that can be allocated through the capital planning process to fund the review of a community plan, zoning bylaw or a community land use plan.

Community Planning Framework Principles

Proactive and responsive	Effective planning and decision-making recognize the unique needs and challenges of communities, draws on the best available traditional and local knowledge, science, and emerging best practices, and remains flexible to adapt as circumstances evolve.
Informed and innovative	Effective planning and decision-making are based on relevant information, meaningful consultation and engagement with community members, levels of government, and identifying creative approaches to manage planning challenges.
Efficient and effective	Orderly land use planning benefits the economic, environmental, social and cultural well-being of communities, supporting public safety to meet needs of the community.
Balanced and sustainable	Current and future generations will benefit from land planning and management decisions that consider environmental, social and economic values and make responsible and effective use of public funds.
Inclusive	Planning must consider the needs, and perspectives of all community residents regardless of culture, age, and physical or cognitive abilities or limitations.
Respectful and culturally sensitive	Planning and decision-making in the spirit of reconciliation must recognize Aboriginal and Treaty rights, and the fundamental relationships that connect land to where people live, work, and play.
Transparent and accountable	Planning and decision-making should be consistent and clearly communicated to residents and levels of government.
Coordinated and collaborative	Working together towards a common vision maximizes the use of available resources and integrate processes that build mutual understanding.
Strategic	Planning should support long-term goals, including actionable steps that improve residents' health, well-being, and sustainability.

Ulukhaktok community photo

Part 2 – Where We Live

The NWT is home to 33 communities, each served by a community government[1] responsible for delivering municipal-like services to its residents.

Governance structures vary across the territory, which affects how the CPDA is applied and how planning is carried out in each community. Community planning is led by local governments and should reflect the culture and values of the people who live there.

The total land area of the NWT is approximately 1.5 million km^2. The total population in 2023 was more than 44,000. Each community has its own distinct character, shaped by its people, environment, and local circumstances, resulting in unique community planning needs. This section is split into four parts to describe where we live:

People	Natural environment	Built environment	Governance and administration
• Population • Economy • Culture and traditions	• Climate change • Landscape and ecosystems	• Transportation • Public utilities • Housing • Buildings • Healthy Communities	• Requirements under the Land Claim Agreement • Responsibility • Land Authority and Tenure

People

Communities are shaped by the people within them. To engage meaningfully in land use discussions, it is essential to understand your residents' - their identities, values and priorities. In

[1] In this document the term "community government" refers collectively to municipal governments and designated authorities. The difference between the two is explained under Governance and Administration.

smaller communities, the engagement process may differ from larger, more urban, communities, often requiring tailored communication approaches that reflect local realities. While not everyone agrees on every issue, residents often share common values that can serve as a foundation for constructive dialogue and effective planning.

Population

Community populations range from 38 people in the smallest community to 21,000 in the largest. Over the past decade most regional and community populations have remained stable; however, several small communities have experienced high growth rates during the same period. Household sizes are decreasing in almost every community.

> **"A community plan must be prepared on the basis of surveys and studies of land use, population growth, the economic base of the municipality and its needs relation to transportation, communication, public services and social services."**
>
> – CPDA, **s**. 3(a)

Economy

The NWT economy is mostly based on resource extraction and government spending. There is a mix of wage-based and traditional economies in most communities. Jobs in public administration, education, health and construction dominate. The small business sector in most communities includes groceries, arts and crafts, construction, accommodation, tourism and transportation services. Average household incomes are highest in the larger communities, while the cost of living is highest in small communities.

Culture and traditions

People who identify as First Nations, Inuit or Metis, represent 50% of the total population in the NWT, and over 90% of the population in most of the communities. Land is central to the spiritual and cultural identity of many residents: traditional lifestyles are grounded in respect for the natural world. The sense of belonging is strong in all communities. Traditional knowledge plays an important role in the planning process in the NWT. The use of Indigenous language names is important to placemaking as part of the planning process.

Natural environment

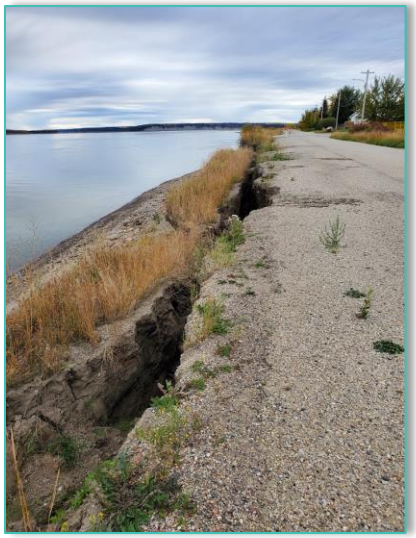
The natural setting of NWT communities varies widely: mountains in the west, the Canadian shield in the east, a broad flat sedimentary basin in the centre, the Arctic Ocean to the north, the Mackenzie River Valley, and two Great Lakes. The impacts of climate change on the natural environment are increasingly evident. Changes to seasonal air temperatures and precipitation are also influencing changes to the landscape and ecosystems.

Climate change

The impacts of climate change have been a reality in past decades in the NWT: the North has been warming up to four times faster than the rest of the world. This creates, and will continue to create rapid, significant and irreversible impacts on NWT ecosystems and landscapes, as well as on communities and residents.[2] With a normally cold climate, NWT communities have recently been experiencing unprecedented periods of extreme heat in summer. The impacts of climate change, including wildfires, flooding, coastal and riverbank erosion and permafrost melt, have directly affected communities. Community planning addresses climate change and considers the risks

[2] NWT Climate Change Risks and Opportunities Assessment October (2024) in the NWT. https://www.gov.nt.ca/ecc/sites/ecc/files/resources/4414_-_gnwt_ecc_-_ccroa_plainlang_report_online_revmar5.pdf

posed by natural hazards to the built environment. There is growing awareness of these risks, and discussions about planned or managed retreat of buildings and people from vulnerable areas is an emerging practice in the NWT. Community land use planning is an effective way to support climate action, including adaptation, to mitigate the negative impacts of climate change, and assist communities to become more resilient to weather-related events.



Fort Simpson

Tuktoyaktuk

Ulukhaktok

Landscape and ecosystems

Much of the territory is underlain by permafrost, though not all of it is continuous. The loss of permafrost causes slumping, which threatens the foundations of homes, community public infrastructure, and requires costly repair of all-season roadways. The shortened winter season has cut down the length of time that winter ice roads are available for use, causing increases in shipping costs for building materials.

Large areas of the NWT are above the treeline, but most communities are located below the treeline. The boreal forest makes many NWT communities susceptible to wildfires. Meanwhile, riverbank and coastal erosion is threatening other communities. For example, Tuktoyaktuk is affected by coastal erosion and is engaged in a community planning project considering a planned retreat (relocation) of the entire community to a safer area.

CLIMATE CHANGE TRENDS & IMPACTS IN THE NWT

THESE HAZARDS ARE DISPROPORTIONATELY AFFECTING SMALL NORTHERN COMMUNITIES.

THEY WILL IMPACT HEALTH AND WELL-BEING FOOD SECURITY, INFRASTRUCTURE

IT ISN'T EQUITABLE

INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES ARE 25% MORE LIKELY TO BE AFFECTED BY THESE DISASTERS.

RECONCILIATION!
CLIMATE JUSTICE!

GRAPHIC RECORDING © ALISON MCCREESH 05/2024

THIS ISN'T JUST THE NEW NORMAL, IT'S GOING TO GET WORSE. WE MUST PLAN FOR THIS!

COMMUNITY PLANNERS FORUM • WHERE WE LIVE, WHY WE PLAN • MARCH 26-28, 2024 • YELLOWKNIFE, NWT

Built environment

Like many communities across Canada, NWT communities are facing challenges related to aging infrastructure and housing needs. To address these issues, community governments are developing asset management plans to maintain and extend the life of existing infrastructure and to plan for future replacements. They can use their capital planning process to identify and allocate funding for land development activities, such as costs associated with building a new subdivision: engineering and geotechnical investigations, road construction, water and sewer, power poles, culverts for drainage, and legal survey of lots —an essential step in ensuring that serviced lots are available at the right time and place for various land uses. Community land use planning can facilitate the identification of land requirements for future community public infrastructure and growth areas.

Transportation

The NWT transportation system includes airports in most communities, and all-weather roads to many. Four communities do not have road access and another twelve only have ice road access in winter. Marine transportation is important to communities located along the Deh Cho (Mackenzie River) and provides an important resupply route for food, supplies and building materials. Roads within community boundaries are the responsibility of community governments. Access to the land for traditional activities is important in all communities.

> **"A community plan must address the provision of required transportation systems, public utilities and municipal services and facilities, and address any requirements for land for municipal and public purposes."**
>
> – CPDA, s.*4 (1)(d)*

Tulita Sewage Lagoon

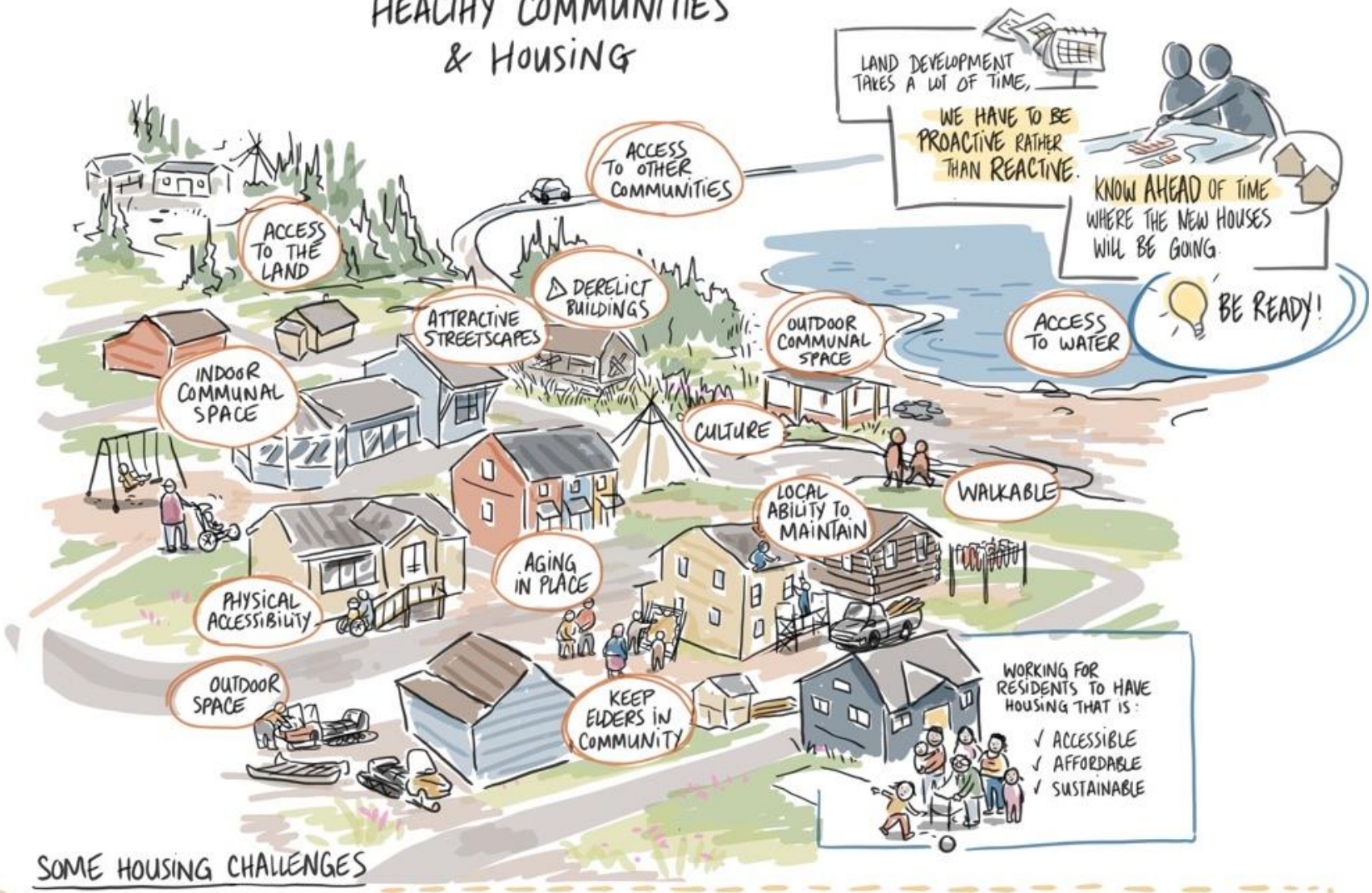
Public utilities

Because of their remote locations, all NWT communities require their own basic water and waste infrastructure. Trucked water and sewer services are common, though some larger communities have piped systems, both above and below ground. Power, generated by hydro or diesel, is provided by the NWT Power Corporation and Naka Power (formerly Northland Utilities).

Housing

The provision of suitable, adequate and affordable housing remains a significant challenge in the NWT. While NWT communities are not responsible for providing housing, community governments can use community planning to enable housing development by governments and the private sector by ensuring sufficient land is available and designated to support a variety of housing types. Housing challenges, along with the ability of a community council to finance and undertake land development, are key considerations in community plan implementation, particularly in smaller and more remote communities.

HEALTHY COMMUNITIES & HOUSING



SOME HOUSING CHALLENGES

- COST OVER TIME
- CAPACITY
- SHORT CONSTRUCTION SEASON
- MAINTENANCE
- CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE HOUSING
- EACH COMMUNITY'S NEEDS ARE UNIQUE
- HOUSING TIED TO COLONIALISM
- LACK OF SKILLED LABOUR
- AVAILIBILITY OF MATERIALS
- ACCESSING FUNDING
- LOTS! (AVAILABLE AT THE RIGHT TIME)
- SENSE OF PRIDE & OWNERSHIP.

Tulita Fire Hall

Buildings

The *Fire Prevention Act* (FPA) and Regulations adopts the National Building Code (NBC) and National Fire Code (NFC) where building and life safety, as well as fire-fighting capacity, are key considerations for building design. Safety, accessibility and design considerations should remain central to the community planning process when planning for building construction.

When planning any construction in NWT communities—whether it's a new building or a renovation—it's important to know that the FPA requires developers submit plans to the Office of the Fire Marshal for a building code compliance review. If you are changing the use of an already constructed space (i.e.: business to warming shelter), this is considered an alteration and notice to the OFM is required to ensure life safety needs are met for the intended use of the space. Single-family residential dwellings are considered exempt from this filing requirement; however, it is recommended you contact the OFM directly if you have questions or are unsure of the exemption.

Healthy communities

In the NWT, where communities are often small, remote, and closely tied to the land, healthy communities are those where residents have access to safe housing, clean water, reliable energy, affordable food, and culturally appropriate services. There should be places that promote physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. When grounded in local needs and values, community planning gives community governments a powerful tool in shaping an environment that fosters the health and well-being of current and future generations in the NWT.

Tulita Community Garden

Governance and Administration

The Governance structure in the NWT is complex and includes multiple types and layers of governments, all who have a role or key piece of legislation that relates to community land use planning. These levels of government include:

Designated Authorities (First Nations/Reserve)
Colville Lake, Dettah, Jean Marie River, Kakisa, Kátł'odeeche First Nation (reserve), Łutsel K'e, Nahanni Butte, Sambaa K'e, Wrigley.

Enabling Legislation

Municipalities
Charter Communities Act
Fort Good Hope

Hamlets Act
Aklavik, Enterprise, Fort Liard, Fort McPherson, Fort Providence, Fort Resolution, Paulatuk, Sachs Harbour, Tsiigehtchic, Tuktoyaktuk, Tulita, Ulukhaktok

Cities, Towns and Villages Act
Fort Simpson, Fort Smith, Hay River, Inuvik, Norman Wells, Yellowknife

Tłı̨chǫ Community Government Act
Behchokǫ̀, Gamètì, Wekweètì, Whatì

Self-governments
Déljnę Final Self-government Agreement
Délı̨nę Got'ı̨nę Government

- 23 municipalities: There are six different types of municipalities, including: charter communities, cities, towns, villages, hamlets, Tłı̨chǫ Community Governments.
- 9 communities are administered by First Nation Band Councils. In these communities, Band Councils operate as "*designated authorities*", providing municipal-like services to residents through a contractual funding relationship with MACA.
- 2 First Nation Reserves: Kátł'odeeche First Nation (Hay River) and Salt River First Nation (Fort Smith).
- 1 Self-Government (Délı̨nę Got'ı̨nę Government). They are responsible for land management, community land use planning, and settlement land management under the Délı̨nę *Final Self-government Agreement*.

For designated authorities, First Nation Bands are established and governed by federal legislation under the *Indian Act*. Their community land use plans are not subject to the CPDA and are not approved by MACA. However, designated authorities are encouraged to undertake community land use planning in alignment with the spirit and intent of the CPDA. These plans can help guide their own land use and development decisions and inform land administration decisions made by the Department of Environment and Climate Change (ECC).

Part 3 – Why We Plan

Community plans or community land use plans are considered operationally important and foundational preparedness tools. They help community governments think about the future and consider what land uses should be encouraged or discouraged, recognize opportunities and constraints, and manage potential conflicts and risks. A good community plan anticipates future community needs and guides community governments to make informed and consistent land-related decisions.

The minimum requirements of a community plan are set out in the CPDA and are based on the principle that community governments, through their legislative authorities, should manage the land within municipal boundaries for the benefit of current and future generations.

The Community Planning Cycle in the NWT

Community planning is an ongoing cycle made up of three interconnected phases: **Review**, **Administer**, and **Implement**. Together, these phases ensure that a community plan remains relevant, effective, and reflective of local needs and conditions.

Review: Community plans are living documents that must evolve alongside the community they serve. While the CPDA requires a formal review at least once every eight years, communities are encouraged to use their plans as active tools for everyday land use decision-making. Regular review helps ensure the plan continues to align with community goals, responds to changing circumstances, and supports long-term resilience.

Administer: Effective administration of a community plan involves ongoing tasks that keep it current and relevant. This includes responding to planning comments by the Department of Environment and Climate Change (ECC) on land applications, following legislative procedures for amending planning tools, updating planning maps and relevant policies, processing development permits, and delivering annual reports to council on community plan monitoring. Proper administration ensures the community plan serves not only as a vision for the future but also as a tool for making informed decisions today.

Implement: Implementation is where plans become action. This phase includes developing more detailed planning tools, such as area development plans or subdivision plans and applying the community plan's guidance to key decisions about land use and development. Implementation brings the community's vision to life by shaping growth in a way that supports local priorities and values.

This section is organized into four topics to describe why we plan:

Preparing for change
Community land uses, needs, and management capacity change over time. Community planning allows us to manage land use change in a fair and informed manner.

Land interests
Many people and organizations have an interest in land in communities and some of their goals and objectives may conflict. Planning can strike a balance between competing interests.

Community engagement
Engaging community residents through the planning process and land use decisions is an important part of ensuring the plan reflects the needs, values and aspirations of the community.

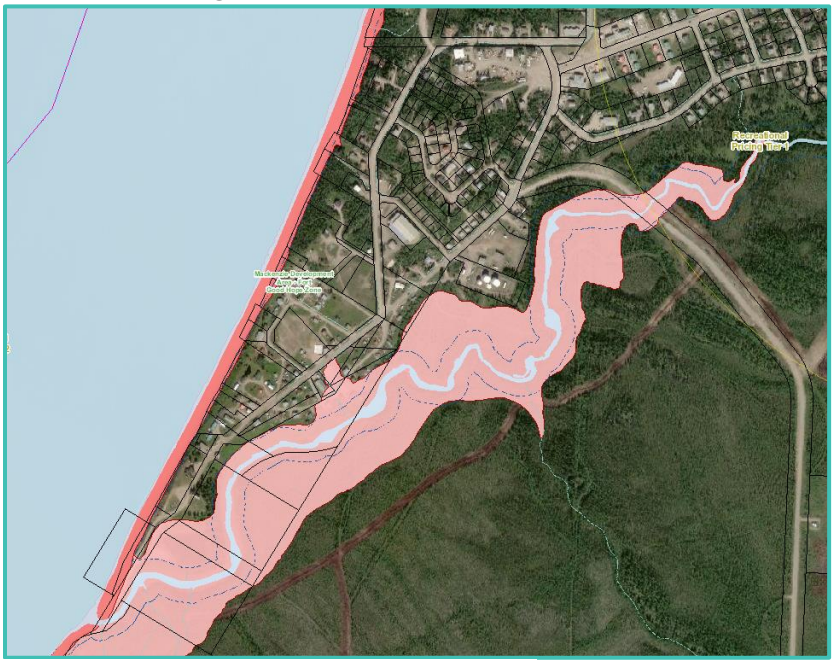
Strategic coordination
Community planning builds relationships & coordination, which improves strategic decision-making.

Preparing for Change

Community planning is about preparing for changes to land conditions and land use needs. It promotes fair and informed decision-making about land uses over time.

Land conditions

The suitability of land for new and existing development can change because of changes to the natural environment.



Fort Good Hope – Flood Mapping

Risk management
Land development risks and impacts in a community may include natural hazards such as:

- permafrost degradation
- coastal and riverbank erosion
- flooding
- wildfire
- seasonal ice instability/transportation route interruptions

Management strategies may include:

- avoiding new development in areas of high risk
- adapting existing developments
- adopting requirements for new construction to reduce risks (i.e. NISI* standards, risk assessments, floodproofing, fire smart and geotechnical investigations)

*NISI: Northern Infrastructure Standardization Initiative: https://scc-ccn.ca/areas-work/climate-and-sustainability/northern-infrastructure-standardization-initiative

Land use needs

Changes to population, resident expectations, local economy and investment circumstances, or building and infrastructure conditions can all influence land needs.

Fair and informed decision-making

Change is constant. When communities respond to change in an ad hoc way, decisions can become inconsistent, especially as leadership and staff change over time. A well-developed community plan provides a stable, objective foundation for longer term decision-making, helping ensure that choices remain consistent, transparent, and rooted in community priorities.

Land Interests

Residents, governments, and organizations have an interest in lands in NWT communities. Planning supports the consideration of multiple viewpoints and can strike a balance between competing interests. *Community plans must describe future land uses in the municipality* - CPDA s. *4(1a)*.

Public interest

The GNWT and community governments have a common interest in the well-being of communities. Interests related to land use include investment in facilities providing education and health services, transportation, housing, protection of areas of cultural and environmental significance, effective management of water, waste and natural resources, and reducing impacts of flood, erosion and wildfire events.

> **"A Community plan must include a schedule of the sequence in which specified areas of land may be developed or redeveloped, and the manner in which the services and facilities referred to in paragraph (d) will be provided in specified areas."**
>
> — CPDA, s. 4(1e)

Private interests

Property rights allow owners or tenants to alter and improve land. Individual residents also have rights and expectations that a community plan may affect. Zoning bylaws set out specific requirements for developments, and processes for permitting and appealing permit decisions.

Aboriginal and Treaty rights

Aboriginal and Treaty rights prevail over the CPDA and any other legislation. Provisions for community land use planning are included in some land claim agreements. The transfer of land from the GNWT to communities, as well as the Ministerial approval of community plans, both require consultation with Indigenous governments to ensure Aboriginal and/or Treaty rights are meaningfully considered, and where appropriate, accommodated.

To help communities protect the public interest, uphold Aboriginal and/or Treaty rights, respect private interests, and balance competing interests, a community plan:

- guides the physical development of a municipality regardless of authority or tenure;
- designates land to be protected for environmental reasons and land needed for public purposes;
- must meet requirements for public review as set out in enabling legislation; and
- is subject to Aboriginal rights consultation, arising from section 35 of the *Constitution Act, 1982*, which recognizes and affirms existing and asserted Aboriginal and Treaty rights.

The GNWT has a constitutional duty to consult with Indigenous governments and organizations when a proposed government action may adversely affect asserted or established Aboriginal and/or Treaty rights. As such, the Minister of MACA must ensure the duty to consult has been fulfilled before approving a community plan. MACA uses a parallel process during the municipal review to conduct consultation on community plan approvals. This means that the Minister relies, to the greatest extent appropriate, on the municipal engagement record, including engagement with Indigenous governments to inform any decisions made regarding consultation and accommodation, while still maintaining responsibility for meeting the duty to consult.

Community Engagement

Engaging community residents in the plan review process and land use decisions is a fundamental component of the planning process. It ensures the plan reflects the needs, values and aspirations of the community, builds awareness and support, and facilitates effective administration and implementation once approved and adopted.

A community plan helps bring people together around a shared vision and provides a clear, transparent way to document and communicate land use decisions. It serves as a foundational tool for community governments by:

> **"If there is a conflict or an inconsistency between a provision of this Act or the regulations and a provision of a land claims agreement or legislation approving…a land claims agreement, the provision of the land claims agreement or legislation prevails to the extent of the conflict or inconsistency."**
>
> — CPDA, s. 1.1(3)

- Reflecting the priorities of residents through a meaningful public engagement process;
- Establishing a vision and setting land use goals and objectives to guide council decisions;
- Mapping out future land uses and supporting them with clear policies;
- Being implemented through a zoning bylaw that outlines what types of development are permitted and where; and
- Remaining publicly accessible to ensure transparency and community awareness.

Strategic coordination

A community plan is one of many plans and initiatives by a community government. Land use planning is connected, in ways that may not always be obvious, to other issues important to community well-being. Regional or territorial strategies, frameworks, and plans, together with other community government strategic plans, are often relevant to planning at the community level. Having an up-to-date community plan helps communities access funding for development projects and studies and ensures the community plan aligns with other strategic plans.

To help communities make strategic development decisions, a community plan:

- Is usually accompanied by a background report that assembles all data, studies, plans and projections used to formulate policies;
- Identifies territorial and municipal projects and initiatives that could help to achieve the community vision;
- Incorporates community government priorities expressed in other strategic plans (e.g. capital plan, housing plan, asset management, community wildland fire protection plans or emergency plans); and
- Demonstrates community capacity to take on development projects and support land transfers.

> **"A community plan must be prepared (a) on the basis of surveys and studies of land use, population growth, the economic base of the municipality and its needs relating to transportation, communication, public services and social services; and (b) in consultation with a professional community planner."**
>
> – CPDA, **s.** 4 (3a,b)

Connecting Community Planning to Key NWT Priorities

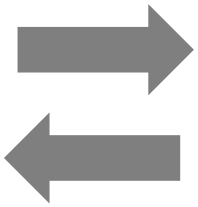
Community planning, public safety and emergency planning

In the NWT, community planning is increasingly interconnected with public safety and climate resilience northern communities face rising risks from flooding, permafrost thaw, and other climate-driven hazards. Integrating available hazard mapping plays a crucial role in supporting community land use plan reviews by identifying areas that are vulnerable to natural hazards such as floods, coastal or river erosion, permafrost degradation and wildfires. Hazard maps covering flood risk, land development suitability, and wildland fire protection assist with visualizing the risk.

Nahanni Butte civic addressing

Communities can make informed decisions about where to develop housing, infrastructure, and other land uses while avoiding high-risk zones. This proactive approach helps reduce potential damage and protects lives and property. Furthermore, **hazard maps** can be used to develop emergency response plans and educate residents about local risks, fostering greater community resilience and preparedness. Review of civic addressing and establishing an orderly system of numbering for buildings and naming of roads has been an emerging practice by community governments through plan reviews.

> **"A community plan must contain statements of policy respecting the management of any environmentally sensitive lands or lands subject to natural hazards such as flood or slope instability."**
>
> – CPDA, *s.4 (1)(c)*



> **"A community plan must include a map or series of maps showing the land that is affected by the plan and indicating (a) future land use; and (b) any land in respect of which policy statements (1)(c)."**
>
> – CPDA, s. 4 (2)

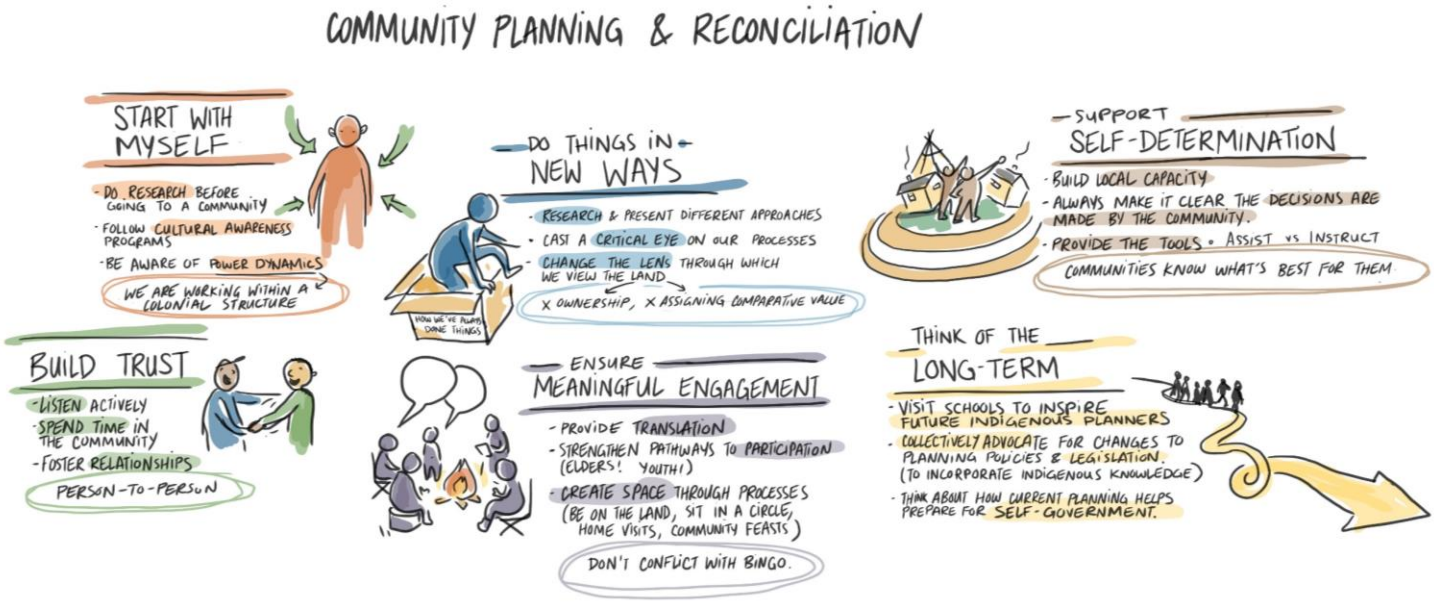
Hazard map integration in community plans

You have to consider SAFETY FIRST for fire & flooding.
BUILD DIFFERENTLY
BUILD IN DIFFERENT LOCATIONS
HAVE EVACUATION PLANS
IF X, THEN Y.
?
HAVE EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT PLANS.
DISASTERS WON'T STOP, WE NEED TO BE BETTER PREPARED

Community planning and reconciliation

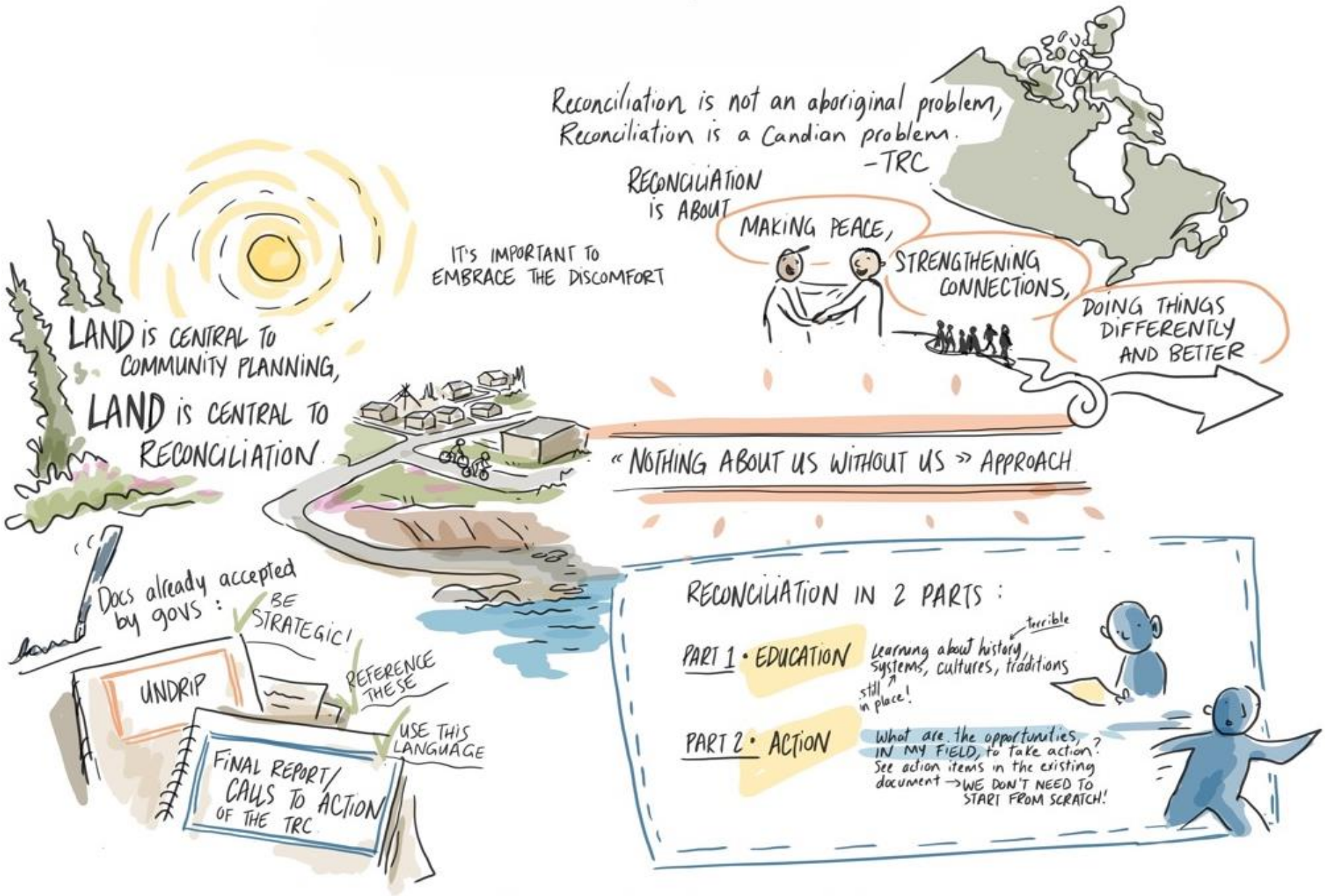
Reconciliation in the NWT is a long-term, evolving process of relationship building, rooted in respect, trust, and shared understanding. Community planning provides an important opportunity to support reconciliation by creating space for meaningful dialogue, collaboration, and shared decision-making between municipal governments and Indigenous governments.

Land is central to both community planning and reconciliation. How land is discussed, valued, and planned for reflects our relationships with one another and with the land itself. In the NWT, community land use planning and the plan review process have already helped build and deepen relationships between municipal leaders, administrators, and Indigenous governments. These evolving relationships demonstrate the powerful role that community planning can play in reconciliation, through both education and action. As municipalities consider broader reconciliation processes, plans, and goals, UNDRIP (United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People) would be part of this. Considerations for UNDRIP adoption and implementation is interconnected with reconciliation.



Nahanni Butte Community

RECONCILIATION IN THE CONTEXT OF COMMUNITY PLANNING



HOW CAN WE, AS PLANNERS, SUPPORT INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN SELF DETERMINATION AND LAND USE?

Community planning and housing

As described in Part 2, access to safe, adequate, and affordable housing is a growing challenge across the NWT, shaped by local needs, land availability, funding opportunities, and community priorities. In response, many communities are taking active steps to assess their housing needs and plan for the future. Community planning plays a central role in this work and finding solutions.

Tulita residential area

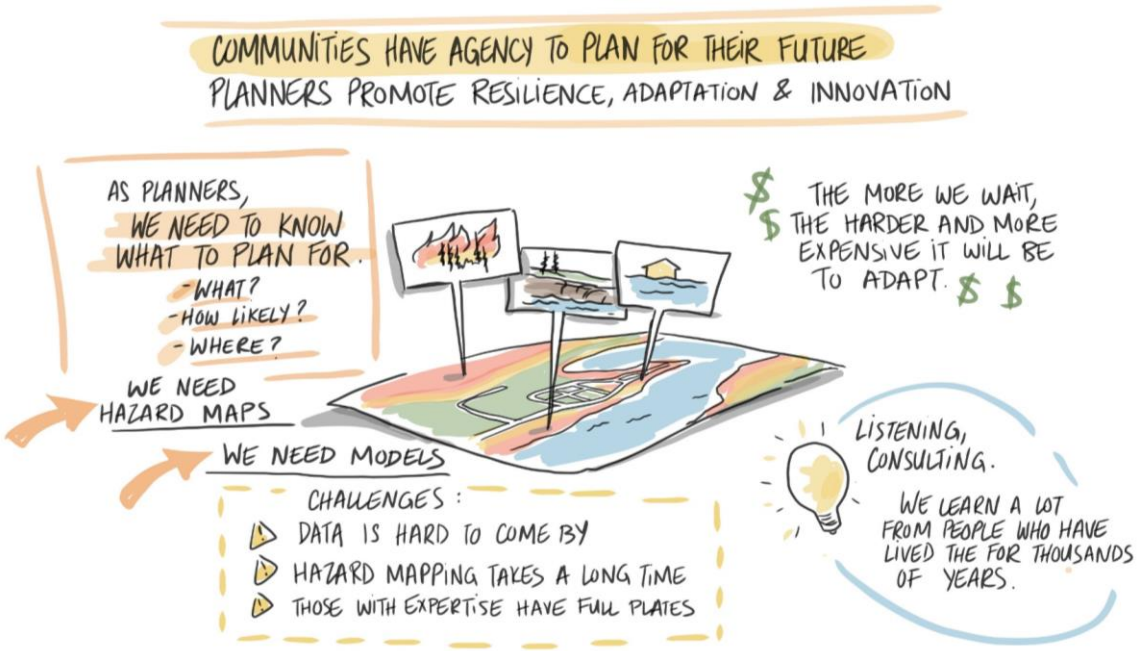
The community plan review cycle in the NWT is increasingly being used as an opportunity to align land use decisions with local housing priorities. Recently in the NWT, community plans and zoning by-laws include support for infill development, multi-unit housing, and the reuse or removal of derelict buildings.

Community planning and climate change

Climate change is already having significant impacts across the territory, from thawing permafrost, coastal and riverbank erosion, wildfires, water levels, and weather extremes. These changes affect the land, infrastructure, local economies, and cultural practices, especially in northern and Indigenous communities where connection to the land is central to everyday life.

Community planning is a key tool for climate resilience. Through community planning, residents, leaders, and governments can work together to assess risks, prepare for future conditions, and identify adaptation strategies that reflect local knowledge, values, and priorities.

Good planning helps ensure that infrastructure is located safely, that land use policies support environmental stewardship, and that development decisions take into account both current and future climate realities. By integrating climate considerations into land use plans, zoning bylaws, and development decisions, communities are better equipped to respond to change, not just react.



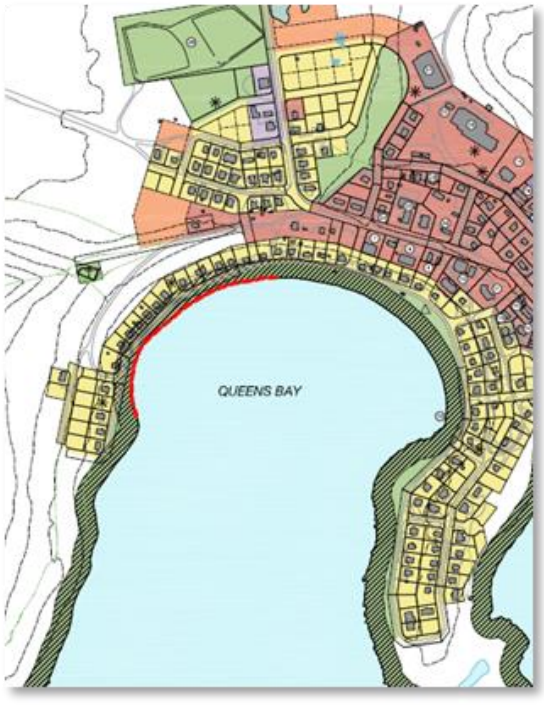
Part 4 – Looking Ahead

Community Plans and the Planning Process

Community planning is a valuable tool for community governments across the territory. While it can't predict the future, it helps communities prepare for change, manage growth, and adapt to both challenges and opportunities. The planning process brings people together to think not only about how land is used, but how land use connects to broader community priorities, such as housing, health, culture, infrastructure, and economic development. This process is just as important as the plan itself.

Where We Live, Why We Plan

The Framework reinforces this theme and is intended to support and guide ***strategic*** discussions about community planning at the local and territorial levels. Communities plan because where they live matters. Why we plan - helps protect people, property, and the environment by guiding how land is used and how infrastructure is built. Ultimately, planning helps communities make informed decisions about their future—because where we live shapes how we live. The Framework is a platform aimed at generating greater awareness about the community planning system.



Ulukhaktok Community Plan (2021)

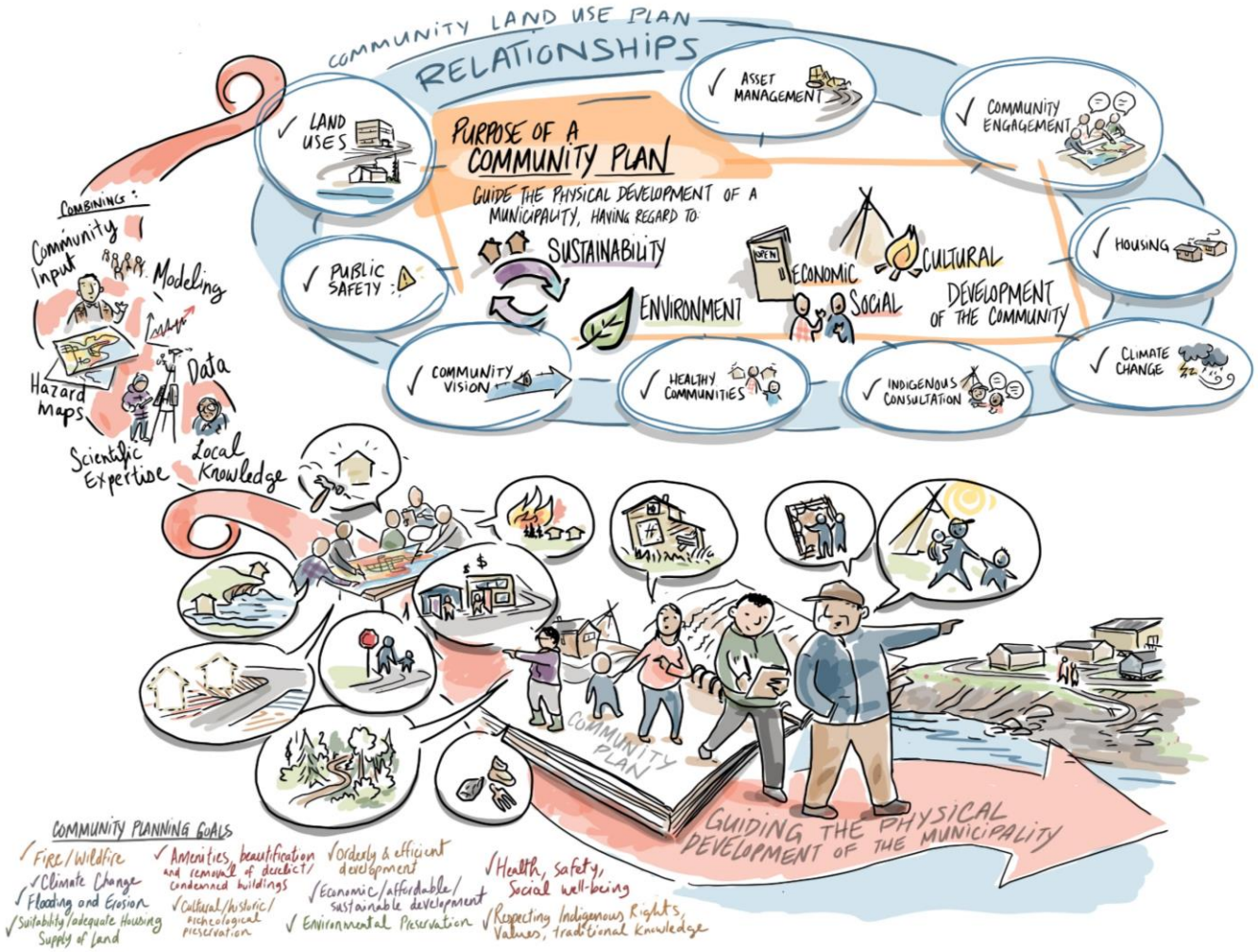
The Framework is intended to promote a shared understanding of the importance and value that community planning has in managing the physical development of communities supporting growth, development or redevelopment, resilience, and well-being throughout the territory. While every community in the NWT is unique, the Framework outlines the planning tools and principles that can be adapted for all communities to use.

Professional community planners, with their expertise and experience in the NWT, are well-positioned to guide community governments through the planning cycle. Several communities are currently working with professional community planners on the **Review**, **Administration** and **Implementation** of their community planning tools.

As communities continue to build on their governance responsibilities, including self-determination through self-governance, they are taking on a greater level of service in land management and building capacity through community planning. This helps community governments achieve their goals and desired outcomes, fostering **safe, resilient, sustainable and healthy communities**.

▷ COMMUNITY LAND USE PLANNING IN THE NWT ◁

BASED ON A PRESENTATION BY CHRIS HEWITT



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