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Things To Consider When Buying an Acreage or Rural Property

When many people think of buying an acreage property, what comes to mind is an idealized vision of rural life that may not reflect reality. Some people may rush into a decision to buy without taking the time to fully research issues related to rural living. Similar to buying a property in the city, you need to research the neighbourhood, assess how the property meets your needs and explore future options for developing or selling the property.

Why Should You Be Concerned?

Life in the country is different than in the city. Life in rural Alberta involves a much closer relationship with the natural environment, which can include viewing wildlife and enjoying the peacefulness and tranquility of the Alberta countryside. However, it also means that the natural environment has a much more direct impact on you and your property. If you understand the differences between an urban and rural property, you can make informed decisions about what to expect from your rural property and what issues to consider. Life in a rural area brings many unique responsibilities. As a landowner, you often are responsible for securing safe drinking water, maintaining a septic system, maintaining private access roads, pest management, garbage disposal and certain aspects of flood and fire risk management.

Regulations

Your ability to modify and manage your property is affected by municipal regulations, zoning, easements, water rights and more. Provincial and federal regulations, bylaws, policies and laws may also affect your property. Other chapters in this workbook address specific regulations on water, weeds, wildlife and species habitat.

✓ Municipal regulations

In general, the most common rules that affect rural property owners are municipal regulations. They may take the form of bylaws, policies and requirements under Municipal Development Plans. It is your responsibility to be aware of any relevant legislation that affects you or your property.

› Environmental and Municipal Reserves

When a parcel of land is initially subdivided, the municipality may require the developer to create an environmental reserve on land that is swampy or a natural drainage course, land that is subject to flooding, land that is unstable like steeply sloped areas, or a strip of land at least 6 m in width along the bed and shore of any lake, river, stream or other body of water. Environmental reserves help protect sensitive or unstable land from pollution and degradation. Environmental reserves

also protect landowners by preventing development of potentially unstable land and allow public access to shores along water bodies. Environmental reserve land is not private property; it belongs to the municipality. It cannot be developed or altered by private landowners in any way.

If you have an environmental reserve next to your property, you are not allowed to cut down any trees, clear any vegetation or build any structures on the reserve

land. Keep in mind that this is to protect your property as much as it is to protect sensitive landscapes. Clearing trees and other plants from steep slopes can raise the water table and increase erosion, and the slope may collapse as a result. If that happens, the land can continue to collapse and take part of your property with it. A setback area may be mandated along an environmental reserve. To prevent any damage and erosion issues, planting and development are prohibited in the setback area. Setbacks may also be required along roads to maintain sightlines and along utility lines for accessibility. Keep these considerations in mind when you develop your landscape plan.

› Zoning

The majority of municipal regulations that affect acreage properties relate to zoning and the acceptable uses of a particular piece of land. Most municipalities in Alberta have land use bylaws that designate areas of the municipality that may be developed for residential uses, while designating other areas for agricultural and commercial uses. It is important to know what is permitted or restricted in each area before you build new structures, or renovate or modify existing buildings. It is also important to confirm that legal property lines and fence lines match, and that all structures are fully on the property. It is within a municipality's rights to require landowners to remove structures that do not conform to zoning requirements.

› Bylaws

Bylaws are municipal laws that are enforceable in the courts. They are passed by municipalities and generally address local issues and local application of provincial and federal legislation. Bylaws are the tools municipalities use to set rules regarding the safety, health and welfare of people, and the protection of people and property. Bylaws also outline the fines and penalties for violations. Bylaws may be in place to regulate such things as public utilities, transportation systems like roads, and nuisances including pets and unsightly properties. Check with your municipal office for applicable bylaws.

› Permits

Permits are generally required for most building, development and renovation projects. For a controlled burn, you will also need a fire permit. Contact the planning and development department of your municipal office for the appropriate forms and help in completing the forms. Note that a special case exists with regard to development in and around water bodies. The Government of Canada, or the Province, owns the rights to the beds and shores of all naturally occurring lakes, rivers and streams. Landowners need a permit before altering or modifying the shore or lake bed below the bank in any way. For more information, see the Water and Recreational Properties chapters.

Zoning

	Yes	No	Don't Know	Not Applicable
Are there any special zoning regulations, setbacks, or buffers?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Does all existing development on the property conform to local zoning by-laws?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Are all buildings and associated structures located fully on the property?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have previous and current land-uses of the property and adjacent properties been disclosed?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Purchasing Former Farmland

	Yes	No	Don't Know	Not Applicable
Do you know what kind of ditch/drain system you have on your property and who is responsible for maintaining it?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Are there any municipal, mutual agreement, or private drains?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
If you have fields, are they tile drained?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
If YES: Is the system still functioning?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Do you know where the outlets are?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Do you know what crops are or have been growing in the fields?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Are there noxious or prohibited noxious weeds growing in the fields?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Is the soil either fast or slow draining?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Are there soil sample results?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Water Supply

	Yes	No	Don't Know	Not Applicable
Is the property serviced by a private well?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
If YES: Is the system still functioning?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Are there any water quality problems?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Do you have records of water quality tests?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Do you have well records?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Is the well properly sealed?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Is there an adequate and reliable rate of flow?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Has the well ever run dry?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Does the property obtain its water from a surface supply?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
If YES: Does it have a permanent water line?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Is there a licence for the system?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Is the licence current and will it be transferred with sale of the property?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Is there a water treatment system in place?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Does the property have a cistern?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
If YES: Do you know the capacity of the cistern and how often it will need to be refilled?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>