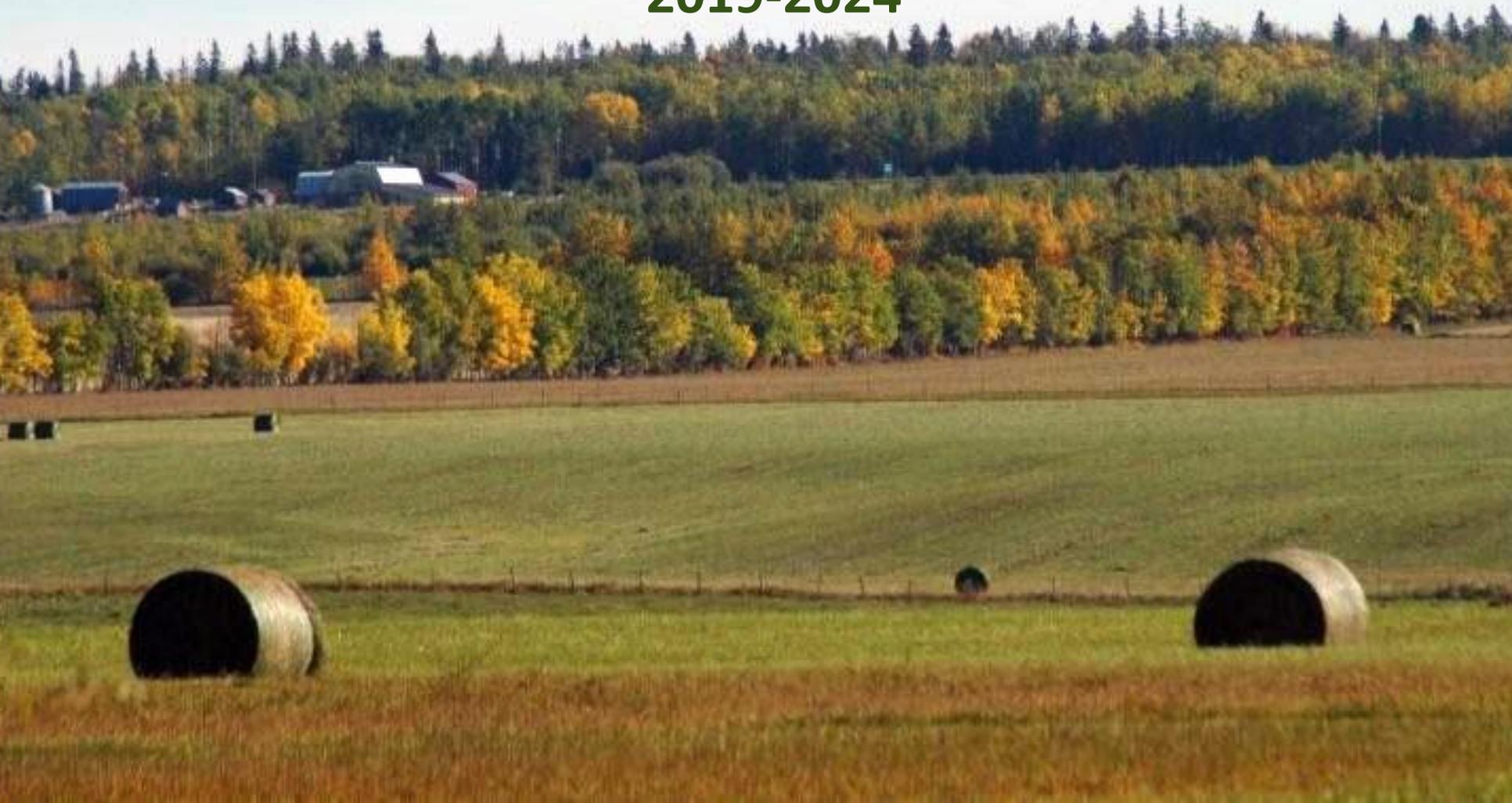


# **Growing Opportunity**

## **Westlock County Strategic Plan**

### **2019-2024**



# Message from the Reeve

*Growing Opportunity* identifies County Council's strategic priorities for the next five years. It reflects the values and priorities of the people of Westlock County and the financial realities we face as a rural municipality in a rapidly changing economy.

It identifies improved communication with citizens and stakeholders, financial resiliency, results-based investment in our transportation network, and increased support for quality of life initiatives as the areas County Council intends to focus on over the remainder of our term in office and into the future.

While our plan doesn't include big, bold new initiatives or major infrastructure investments, it signals an important shift in the way Westlock County does business. As we move forward, the County will work in partnership with residents and ensure that decision-making processes are transparent and reflective of the needs of all residents. We will keep our eyes firmly on the bottom-line and live within our means. Investments in our programs, services and infrastructure will be based on evidence rather than politics. Your councillors will focus on developing policy and approving budgets instead of being involved in day-to-day operational decisions.

We only have to look back a couple of years to the *Westlock County Municipal Inspection Report* to fully appreciate the necessity of changing the way we govern the municipality and deliver programs and services. We have spent the last two years successfully addressing many of the concerns identified in the inspection report. Now is the time to begin to look forward.

Our Strategic Plan is intended to inspire everyone in Westlock County to consider how we can work together to achieve our vision for the future. While our priorities won't be reached overnight, we will monitor our progress and report to residents regularly on how we are doing.

On behalf of my fellow Councillors and our dedicated staff, I invite you to read our Strategic Plan and get involved in ***growing opportunity*** in Westlock County.

Reeve Lou Hall



# County Council Commitments

**We are committed to the residents of Westlock County.** We appreciate that our role is to serve people and we will carefully consider the needs and expectations of all residents when establishing policy and making decisions.

**We are committed to good governance.** We are a team and will adhere to our Code of Conduct at all times. We act in the public interest and commit to open and transparent decision-making.

**We are committed to the financial sustainability of the municipality.** We will strive to ensure the efficient delivery of our programs and services. The decisions we make today will enhance the long-term financial stability of Westlock County.

**We are committed to working with others.** We will collaborate with residents, community groups and stakeholders across the County, our municipal neighbours, Rural Municipalities of Alberta, and the provincial and federal governments to achieve our strategic priorities.

**We are committed to supporting organizational excellence.** We recognize the crucial role staff play in providing programs and services and will support initiatives to improve the overall capacity of our organization.



Councillor Victor Julyan  
Division 1



Councillor Jared Stitsen  
Division 2



Reeve Lou Hall  
Division 3



Deputy Reeve Brian Coleman  
Division 4



Councillor Isaac Skuban  
Division 5



Councillor Fred Slobodian  
Division 6



Councillor Dennis Primeau  
Division 7

# Our Legislated Mandate

Alberta's *Municipal Government Act* legislates the broad purpose of the County:

- Provide good government
- Foster the well-being of the environment
- Provide services, facilities or other things that, in the opinion of council, are necessary or desirable for all or a part of the municipality
- Develop and maintain safe and viable communities
- Work collaboratively with neighbouring municipalities to plan, deliver, and fund inter-municipal services

There are many other Provincial and Federal Acts that also govern and provide other legislated frameworks for the County, they include, but certainly are not limited to: The Local Authorities Election Act, the Water Act, the Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act, the Species at Risk Act, the Safety Codes Act, Labour Standards Code, Occupational Health and Safety Act, the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act, the Weed Act.

# Our Vision

**What we want Westlock County to look like in the future**

A prosperous rural community focusing on people, quality of life and diverse economic opportunities.

# Our Mission

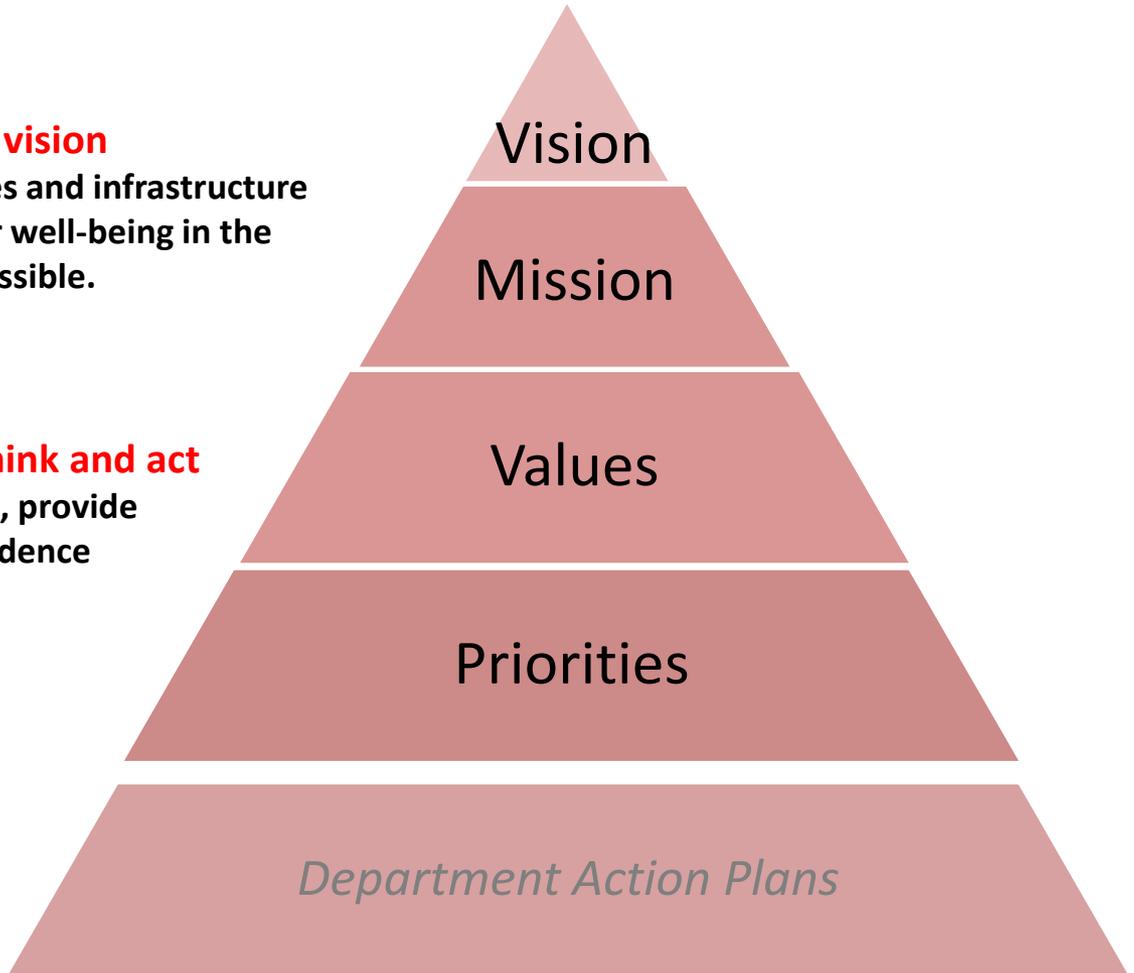
**The County's role in achieving the vision**

To provide municipal programs, services and infrastructure our citizens depend on to support their well-being in the most efficient and effective manner possible.

# Our Values

**The values which guide how we think and act**

We listen with respect and open minds, provide well-intended honest input, rely on evidence and expertise, support continuous improvement, and are accountable for our decisions.



# Our Planning Framework

Westlock County uses an established municipal planning framework.

Our **Municipal Development Plan** outlines long-term goals and objectives.

Our **Strategic Plan** identifies County Council's priorities.

Our annual operating and capital **budgets** define what we can accomplish in a given year with the resources we have available.

Finally, our **service levels** describe how we will deliver programs, services and infrastructure.

**Progress reports** measure how well we are doing towards meeting our strategic priorities, goals and objectives.



# Strategic Planning Challenges

Westlock County is facing a wide range of issues which affect its capacity to achieve its strategic priorities, goals and objectives. While the County may be able to influence some of these issues, others are beyond its control.

**Fiscal Constraint.** The County is facing significant financial challenges which limit its operational and administrative capacity. It struggles to maintain core infrastructure and to achieve current service levels. Responding to provincial funding reductions and downloading of responsibilities and costs will present additional fiscal challenges over the next few years.

**Municipal Assessment Base.** Westlock County does not enjoy a strong assessment base. The assessment base is declining, particularly linear and M&E assessments, and consequently its property tax rates are not competitive in a regional or provincial context. As a result, the Municipality struggles to attract new businesses and people. There are very few opportunities for alternative sources of revenue, creating quite a challenge for the County.

**Inter-municipal Collaboration.** Municipalities across Alberta are required to take a more robust approach to inter-municipal land use planning and service delivery. The development of Inter-Municipal Collaboration Frameworks and Inter-Municipal Development Plans will require significant effort by County Council and Administration and may result in increased funding challenges.

**Changing Demands for Service.** Residents are demanding a broader range of programs and services and elevated levels of existing services. They expect the County to invest in community development, recreation and culture, and health and safety initiatives. Current staffing levels are already below comparable Counties in Alberta and existing service level delivery is already a challenge.

**Legacy of the Municipal Inspection Report.** While the County has worked diligently over the past two years to respond to the comprehensive 2017 Municipal Inspection Report, it is still working in “catch up” mode due to the consequences of political and administrative decisions made in the past. The Municipality finds itself in the position of having to provide additional programs and required services with fewer staff.

**Population Changes.** Westlock County’s population is not growing and is aging. Statistics Canada reports that the County’s population dropped by 5.5% between 2011 and 2016, a loss of over 400 people or almost 200 households. Over 17% residents are over 65 years old, significantly higher than the provincial average. Westlock County may face growing pressure to accommodate the service needs of older residents.

# County Council's Strategic Priorities



Fiscal Responsibility and  
Reality



Maintaining and Improving  
Our Transportation Network



Investing in Your Quality of  
Life



Improving How We  
Communicate With You

## Our First Strategic Priority

# Fiscal Responsibility and Reality

### What We Know

While the 2017 Municipal Inspection Report indicated that the municipality was in fairly good financial condition prior to 2016, Westlock County faces major financial challenges as the reality of the cumulative effects of continued assessment base loss and rising costs takes hold.

Unlike many other rural municipalities in the province, the County has a very limited (and shrinking) non-residential assessment base. Its tax rates compromise the County's ability to attract commercial and industrial development. As a result, the municipality is over-reliant on residential taxes and grant funding.

The County is facing a significant infrastructure deficit and does not have the financial capacity to respond appropriately in the near future. Provincial funding cuts and a continued economic downturn will further compromise the County's financial capacity.

Based on a Capacity Review, staffing levels are well below those in comparable Counties in the province.

### Intended Outcome

Westlock County continues to be an autonomous, financially-viable municipality, accountable, responsible and transparent local government.

### What We Intend to Do

County Council will undertake a structured review of service levels through the Budget Process for all programs and services. This process will consider the value ratepayers receive for taxes paid; analysis of alternative and innovative ways of delivering services; and seeking out the very limited alternatives of new sources of revenue to take the pressure off existing taxpayers.

We will work with other municipalities to identify opportunities to deliver services more efficiently and effectively.

The County will continue to respond to the financial recommendations in the 2017 Municipal Inspection Report, including the further development and refinement of a long-term financial plan (subject to Provincial funding stability).

### How We'll Measure Progress

Administration will track and report to County Council annually on key financial viability measures and achievements of service level expectations.

# Our Second Strategic Priority

## Maintaining and Improving Our Transportation Network

### What We Know

Westlock County is responsible for the maintenance of over 2,300 kilometres of roads and streets. It invests more than \$8 million every year (over 40% of its operating budget) on a variety of programs, including: construction, maintenance, gravelling, snow removal, dust control, flood control, bridge maintenance/replacement, ditch maintenance and signage.

The County's transportation network is critically important to residents and businesses across the County. Most residents identify roads as their highest municipal infrastructure priority.

Over 95% of the County's roads are gravel. Its grading and gravelling programs are the life blood of the network. County policy sets out the standards and priorities for road grading, gravelling and maintenance within the County.

### Intended Outcomes

The County's transportation network is in good condition and meets the functional needs of residents and businesses.

Investments in the transportation network are based on sound internal planning.

### What We Intend to Do

We will strive to implement the recommendations of the 2018 Road Study and establish an evidence-based transportation network management program within our means. We will:

- focus our investments on the priority upgrades identified in the Road Study;
- utilize available funding to finance projected maintenance costs for the next decade; and
- consider identified alternative road maintenance methods for gravel and paved roads.
- provide education and enforcement to the transportation industry for the protection of our transportation network.

We will review all of our transportation-related policies with the objective of confirming or redefining current service levels.

We will continue to maximize County investment in our transportation infrastructure.

We will continue developing an Asset Management System.

### How We'll Measure Progress

Administration will monitor network Condition Ratings on an ongoing basis and will report findings to County Council on an annual basis.

We will monitor and report on: (i) Customer Service Request (CSR) levels and types; (ii) number of enforcement infractions; and (iii) achievements of service level expectations.

## Our Third Strategic Priority

# Investing in Your Quality of Life

### What We Know

While people in Westlock County have always valued their quality of life, their expectations with respect to the Municipality's role in recreation, public safety and community development are evolving. Residents are increasingly demanding that the Municipality invest in a higher level of programs and services.

The County is committed to continuing its support of agriculture and maintaining its rural character, but recognizes that it may need to provide a broader range of municipal services to attract and retain families, encourage economic development, promote vibrant communities, and preserve its natural environment.

Westlock County is investing in recreation; emergency response and enforcement services; water, wastewater and solid waste management services; FCSS programs; and community development.

### Intended Outcomes

The citizens of Westlock County enjoy the benefits of physical, mental, emotional, and social health.

County programs and services help support the quality of life available in Westlock County

### What We Intend to Do

We will continue to evaluate and support:

- our volunteer fire departments;
- a community peace officer program;
- parks and campgrounds across the County;
- the Tawatinaw Valley Recreation Facility;
- community organizations that promote and encourage cultural programs, facilities and events across the County;
- Westlock Municipal and Yellowhead Regional libraries;
- operations at the Westlock Municipal Regional Airport;
- the Westlock Regional Waste Management Commission and the Westlock Regional Water Services Commission; and
- waste transfer/recycling stations;

We will collaborate with other municipalities to support County residents' access to recreation facilities.

### How We'll Measure Progress

Administration will develop and monitor statistical data on our facilities where possible.

Utilize and report on user response surveys and comments.

## Our Fourth Strategic Priority

# Improving How We Communicate With You

### What We Know

While we have been working hard over the past two years to be more open and transparent, the Communications Survey undertaken in 2019 clearly indicated that we have to do much better.

A vast number of respondents are looking for new and expanded communication methods from the County.

### What We Intend to Do

We will implement attainable, affordable recommendations from the Communications Survey Report by:

- making communications an organizational priority;
- reviewing the County's public engagement policy;
- addressing new ways of communicating with younger residents;
- issuing a regular Westlock County newsletter that will include Council Meeting briefing reports;
- implementing Facebook as a communications tool;
- investigate the feasibility of making audio recordings of Council meetings and posting them online;
- issuing a trial period of media releases on key County initiatives.

### Intended Outcome

Westlock County residents and stakeholders are well informed. They make regular use of the County's various communication channels and report that they are receiving the information they expect from Council and Administration.

### How We'll Measure Progress

Administration will bring progress reports to Regular Council meetings on a quarterly basis. These reports will be shared with residents and stakeholders. Gather statistical information on electronic media platforms. Conduct an annual survey on communication effectiveness.



Please visit our website or contact us for more information



[www.westlockcounty.com](http://www.westlockcounty.com)



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Reeve Lou Hall

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Councillor Victor Julyan

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Councillor Jared Stitsen

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Councillor Isaac Skuban

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Councillor Fred Slobodian

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Councillor Dennis Primeau

*Original signed by Westlock County Council and on file*

Westlock County 2019 – 2024 Strategic Plan signed this 25<sup>th</sup> day of February, 2020 in Westlock, Alberta.