

4

Context + Existing Conditions

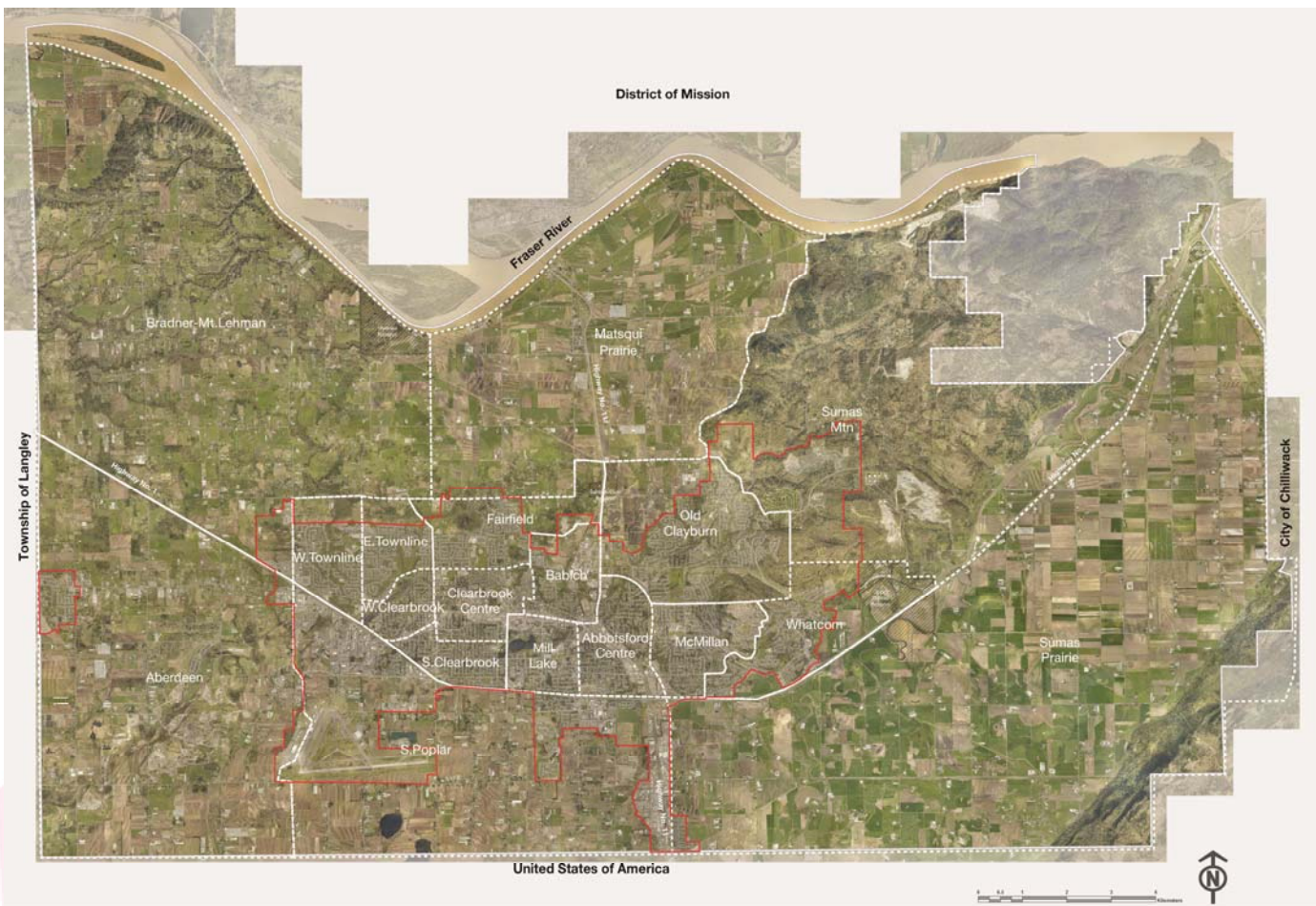


Context

The Fraser Valley is a growing region, and at the heart of the region is the City of Abbotsford with approximately half of the region's population.

With an estimated 140,000 residents in 2015 and the largest city by area in all of British Columbia, Abbotsford is characterized by both urban and rural qualities. A large portion of the city's land area is agricultural, with the majority of these lands falling within the Agricultural Land Reserve. Yet Abbotsford also has a highly populated urban core with 80% of the population contained within the designated Urban Development Boundary.

Figure 1.3: City of Abbotsford with the Urban Development Boundary and Community Areas



History

Long before Canada was established as a country, the Stó:lo (people of the river) occupied the land on which Abbotsford is located. They lived in the Fraser Valley and lower Fraser Canyon of British Columbia, and they spoke Halq'eméylem, also known as the upriver dialect. The Fraser River, its tributaries, and fertile lands were essential to the Stó:lo way of life.

The Districts of Abbotsford and Matsqui amalgamated in 1995 to form the present day boundary of Abbotsford. However, the community's history goes back much further. In 1858, the first gold rush in British Columbia's interior occurred, bringing a flood of miners through the area, establishing trails to the gold fields that later formed elements of the city's transportation network still visible today. Old Yale Road, built by the Royal

Engineers in the 1870s, is a key arterial through the city’s urban core. Commercial and residential centres eventually emerged at the transportation crossroads of Abbotsford and Clearbrook.

The Districts of Matsqui and Sumas were established in 1892. The Village of Abbotsford was established as a provincial town site in the early 1900s, and was incorporated in 1924. The Village remained a separate entity until 1972 when it merged with the District of Sumas to become the District of Abbotsford.

Although logging was the initial economic driver in the area, by the early 1900s agriculture was dominant. This shift in economic activity was initiated by the Canadian National Railway spur line, built between Mission and Huntingdon in 1891 and the construction of permanent dykes along the Fraser River. The transition was further enhanced by the construction of the BC Electric Inter-Urban rail line between Chilliwack and Vancouver in 1910, which allowed easy movement of farm produce to growing urban markets in Vancouver and New Westminster.

First settled in 1905, Clayburn Village was the first company town established in British Columbia. The Vancouver Fireclay Company built a brickmaking plant just to the west of Sumas Mountain, convenient to deposits of high grade fireclay in the Straiton area on the southwest slopes of the mountain. The town site was laid out south of the brick plant where the company built homes for its managers and workers.

Even in its early days, the Abbotsford area supported a diverse population, including First Nations, Europeans, Japanese, Chinese and South Asian families. One of the first Sikh temples in Canada was built in 1911 and is now designated a National Historic Site. Increased demand for farmland and flooding problems on Sumas Lake led the farming community to petition the government to reclaim the lake bottom lands for agriculture. Although controversial in nature, the Sumas Lake reclamation project was undertaken between 1919 and 1924, making 22,000 acres (8,900 ha) of land available for long-term agricultural development. Today, approximately 75% of land area is devoted to agriculture.

Construction of the Trans Canada Highway through the Fraser Valley in the 1960’s signaled the beginning of a time of rapid growth. Population increased by almost 109,000 persons between 1966 and 2001 alone, and has continued growing to the current 140,000 residents.

Existing Conditions

The background research, analysis, and community engagement resulted in many observations about existing conditions in Abbotsford. One of the overarching takeaways was that Abbotsford is a complete city with incomplete neighbourhoods. This means residents can live, work, play, shop and study without leaving the city; however, the same cannot be said for most of their neighbourhoods.

Several other assets, challenges, and opportunities were identified, which tell a story about existing conditions in Abbotsford.

Demographics – Abbotsford is young, prosperous, and culturally diverse.

Age

The median age in Abbotsford increased from 35.1 years old in 2001 to 36.7 years old in 2006, to 37.8 years old in 2011. Although Abbotsford is aging just like most cities, it has a younger population than in the Fraser Valley Regional District (FVRD) overall at 39.6 years old. Median ages in communities range from 32.7 years in West Townline to 48.1 years in Mill Lake.

Income

The average household income in Abbotsford increased by \$25,268 from 2001 and 2011, rising to \$81,462 in 2011. While average household incomes in Abbotsford are lower than Metro Vancouver's (\$89,693), they are higher than the FVRD's (\$69,150). Within individual Abbotsford communities, average household incomes range from \$52,983 in Clearbrook to \$125,708 in Bradner-Mt. Lehman.

Household Size

With an average of 2.8 persons per household, households are larger in Abbotsford than elsewhere in the FVRD (2.5 persons per household) and in Metro Vancouver (2.5 persons per household). In 2011, Clearbrook Centre had the smallest average household size at 2.0 persons, while East Townline had the largest average household size at 4.1 persons. In Abbotsford, household size is often a reflection of cultural norms and multi-generational households.

Immigration

In Abbotsford, 27% of residents are immigrants, with approximately 16% of Abbotsford's immigrants arriving after 2006. The majority of immigrants were born in South Asia, with the highest concentration of immigrants living in East Townline and West Townline.

Jobs and Neighbourhoods – There are lots of jobs, but few are near where employees live, play, and go about other daily activities.

Abbotsford has a diverse, local workforce, with most residents living and working in the city. In fact, Abbotsford has the most diverse economy among mid sized cities in Canada. Most workers are employed in retail trade, construction, health care, and manufacturing industries.

Like many other cities, jobs are concentrated in the centre of Abbotsford, however these employment areas are not complete neighbourhoods because they have low concentrations of housing and other amenities. This leaves few employees living within walking distance of home, and in places that are not dynamic and lively.

Shops and Services – There are many places to shop, but few of them are near home.

There are many shopping areas in Abbotsford, most of which are focused along major transportation corridors. However, many of these shops – which range from grocery stores and cafes to merchandise retailers – are not near where people live. For example, fewer than 25% of homes are within a 10 minute walk of a grocery store, which is one of the most important neighbourhood stores and a significant reason for people's daily or weekly trips.

Transit Friendliness – Many residents live near a frequent transit stop, however, the design of many areas make using transit inconvenient and do not support higher frequency transit.

In Abbotsford, nearly half of residents live within a 5 to 10 minute walk of a transit stop with bus service every 15 minutes during the morning and evening peak periods, and every 30 minutes throughout the day. However, by not having enough residents in an area to support more frequent transit, neighbourhoods are not designed in a manner that makes transit a more attractive option.

Getting Around by Foot and Bicycle – There are many opportunities for walking and biking for recreation, but not many for daily life.

Abbotsford has a cherished network of recreational biking and trail routes, including in green and natural areas around the urban area. On the other hand, many areas inside the city are not designed in a way that encourages people to safely or conveniently get around on foot or by bike as a means of transportation in daily life. This is evidenced by the fact that over 90% of trips are taken by the personal vehicle in Abbotsford.

Private Life and Public Life – Residents have many semi-public places to formally gather indoors, however there are few informal people mixing places and little street life.

Abbotsford has many formal amenities, ranging from places of worship and galleries to recreation centres and libraries. However there are few informal gathering places that attract street life and encourage people mixing in a more informal, public way. Related to this, there is a low mix of destinations in neighbourhoods, and often the relationships between buildings and public spaces cater more to vehicles than people travelling on foot and lingering in public space.

City Centre – Abbotsford is the hub of the Fraser Valley, yet it has no obvious central hub or neighbourhood hubs within.

With its university, regionally-serving businesses, hospital, diverse employment base, airport, and half of the region's population, Abbotsford is the major hub of activity in the Fraser Valley. However once inside Abbotsford, there are few visual cues that point to a distinguishable central hub in which there is an obvious sense of arrival, setting individual places apart from each other.

Housing – While most homes are single detached houses and housing has been relatively affordable in Abbotsford, there is growing pressure for more affordable and diverse options.

Tenure and Cost

Home ownership has risen in recent years, with 72% of households living in homes they own, which is slightly higher than in British Columbia overall. The average price of a newly constructed single detached house is lower than Metro Vancouver, and the percentage of residents spending more than 30% of their income on housing was lower than both provincial and national rates. Abbotsford's rental vacancy rate has varied widely over the last several years, experiencing rates up to 6% and as low as 1%, and overall has lower rental costs than elsewhere in British Columbia.

Housing Type and Age

Over 60% of housing units in Abbotsford are single detached houses, however, new home starts in recent years has shown a significant increase in apartments (200% between 2010 and 2013), and a decline in single detached (-22%). An increase in semi-detached dwellings (i.e. duplexes, rowhouses) is also forecasted. And 95% of all housing in Abbotsford was constructed after 1960, with almost half being built between 1981 and 2000.

Limits to Growth – Abbotsford has a growing population but also has physical constraints to outward expansion.

Abbotsford is a city that has consistently grown throughout its history. The estimated population in 2015 is approximately 140,000 people, and a future population of 200,000 people is estimated by approximately 2040 under a medium growth scenario of 1.5% per year. At a lower growth rate of 1.0% per year, this population would not be reached until 2050, and at a higher growth rate of 2.3% per year, this population threshold would be reached by about 2030.

Physical constraints to outward expansion include the Agricultural Land Reserve, natural areas and streams, steep slopes, and peripheral areas that are costly to service with infrastructure, transit, and amenities.

