# WHAT IS A MUNICIPALITY?

Whether we live on a farm, in a town, or in a city, most of us are residents of municipalities. Municipalities provide us with local governance.

The history of local municipalities in the land we now call Saskatchewan dates back to 1883. That is when the territorial government established a handful of local municipalities, as settlers began to occupy the land in greater concentration. However, it was not until 1909 that the Saskatchewan government enacted legislation to begin creating the municipalities we know today.

Saskatchewan has three categories of municipalities: urban, rural, and northern.

In the province's south, there are 454 urban municipalities:

- 16 cities
- 147 towns
- 250 villages
- 41 resort villages

Even though rural Saskatchewan is sparsely populated, it also requires municipal governance. In southern Saskatchewan, there are 296 rural municipalities (RMs). Within these RMs there are small communities called hamlets. Hamlets have five or more occupied homes and ten or more lots administered by the RM. A hamlet can become what is called an organised hamlet by an order of the Minister of Municipal Affairs. Saskatchewan has 145 organised hamlets.

In northern Saskatchewan, there are 25 incorporated municipalities:

- 2 northern towns
- 11 northern villages
- 11 northern hamlets
- the Northern Saskatchewan Administrative District (NSAD)

Northern Saskatchewan also has 11 unincorporated settlements, which are part of the NSAD and administered by the Northern Municipal Services Branch of the Government of Saskatchewan.

## Cities, Towns, and Villages: What's the Difference?

The type of municipality a community can become normally depends on its population:

- City – minimum 5000
- Town – minimum 500
- Northern Village – minimum 250
- Village, Resort Village, Northern Hamlet – minimum 100

There is no minimum population requirement for rural municipalities.

Once a community reaches a minimum population, it can petition the Minister of Municipal Affairs to become an urban municipality. If it grows even more, the local government can make a request to become another type of urban municipality. For example, in 1906 Warman was established. In 1966 it became incorporated as a town. Then in 2012, Warman successfully petitioned the Minister to become a city, after the population grew to 7,084.

But what happens if the population falls? It will not automatically be reclassified. Instead, the council must petition the Minister for reclassification. For example, Scott came into existence in 1908. By 1910 its population hit 600, and it achieved town status. However, as of 2016 the population of Scott was only 73. Because Scott has never petitioned for reclassification, it is now Saskatchewan's smallest "town." However, if the population of any community falls the Minister could reclassify the community if to do so is in the public interest.

# WHAT IS A MUNICIPALITY? ...continued

## Shrinking Saskatchewan: Ghost Towns

Though some municipalities in Saskatchewan date back to the late 1800s, most settlements sprung up in the early twentieth century when rail lines were built. So quick was the flood of settlers that Saskatchewan became the third-biggest province in Canada by 1911.

When Saskatchewan's population shifted from rural to urban, many of these small communities fell into decline. Population loss—often combined with unfortunate circumstances—left places like Girvan, Robsart, and Lemsford as mere shadows of their former selves. Other communities like Estuary, Govenlock, and Expanse became true ghost towns, with mere skeletal remains left.

When a town or village is shrinking out of existence, it is often no longer practical and sometimes impossible to have a local municipal government. When this is the case, the municipality's council can apply to be dissolved into the Rural Municipality in which it exists or the Minister of Municipal Affairs can order the dissolution. For example, in the RM of Usborne there are two former villages, Lockwood and Guernsey. Lockwood was dissolved in 2002 and Guernsey was dissolved in 2005. Both are now hamlets administered by the RM.

Sometimes when a municipality is entirely abandoned the town site may revert to privately-held property. For example, the entire ghost town of Bents—complete with an abandoned grain elevator, houses, and stores—exists entirely on privately-owned land. Former public spaces, like the town's streets, are no longer public spaces. This means you need permission from the land owner to explore these places.

## Growing Saskatchewan: New Cities

There is no standard world-wide definition of "city." In Saskatchewan, a city requires a minimum population of 5000. In Alberta, 10,000 people are required. New Zealand requires at least 50,000.

Other places do not rely on population for a city designation. For example, the United Kingdom defines cities by using such factors as the community's historical status and the presence of an Anglican cathedral.

Meanwhile, some jurisdictions have abolished "city" designations entirely. Quebec has no legal distinction between town and city, and Sweden calls all settlements kommun (Swedish for municipality).

With the population of several Saskatchewan towns recently moving past 5000, a debate has been ignited about what constitutes a "city." Is 5000 residents enough to constitute a city? Or are other characteristics required?

Consider what makes a "city":

- Does a "city" require a central gathering place for work and shopping?
- Does a "city" require cultural institutions, such as theatres and art galleries?
- Does a "city" require transportation hubs, such as public transit and air service?
- Does a "city" require substantial public buildings and public spaces like parks and libraries?

Using your answers above, create your own definition of "city." How would your definition apply to communities in Saskatchewan?