

# WISDOM GAINED

The Town of Slave Lake shares its reflections on recovery from the 2011 wildfire



# When the unthinkable happens



## Creating the new normal



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# Wisdom gained..... Prepare Recover

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*The areas that were devastated by the 2011 wildfire event include the Town of Slave Lake with a population of 7,031, the Sawridge First Nation with approximately 40 members and the Municipal District of Lesser Slave River No. 124 with a population of 2,082.*

*In the town 333 single family homes and 169 apartment units were destroyed as were three churches, ten businesses and a local radio station. The government centre, including provincial offices, the Town hall and the library, was lost as well. In the Municipal District, 56 homes and a fire hall were destroyed.*

*Collectively, the Lesser Slave wildfires consumed almost 22 thousand hectares or the equivalent of 44 thousand football fields. It was at the time the largest evacuation in Alberta’s history and the second largest insured disaster in Canadian history (the largest was the 1998 ice storm in the Montreal-Ottawa corridor).*

*The Insurance Bureau of Canada reported the Slave Lake wildfire disaster to be a cost of \$700 million. Coupled with the Government of Alberta \$289 million grant money for recovery, it amounts to close to a one billion dollar loss.*



The **Town of Slave Lake** is 2.5 hours northwest of Edmonton on the southeastern tip of Lesser Slave Lake. The town is a vibrant, progressive and friendly community surrounded by many natural ingredients and a solid economic base. Slave Lake is a growing community and functions as a regional service centre with retail, education, health, financial, government and transportation services. Over 30,000 area residents come to Slave Lake for a variety of services. [www.slavelake.ca](http://www.slavelake.ca)



This guide was compiled by the **Northern Alberta Development Council (NADC)** at the request of the Town of Slave Lake. The NADC champions the cause of Alberta's northern economies and communities by exploring and facilitating opportunities for growth. The guide is intended to be of benefit to communities in northern Alberta and elsewhere. [www.nadc.ca](http://www.nadc.ca).



## The fire – a new type of disaster

The Lesser Slave Lake region is well acquainted with wildfires, as fire is a fact of life in northern Alberta. However, the 2011 wildfires hit the Town of Slave Lake to its core. Not only did “wildfire 65” destroy many homes and businesses, it also burnt the Town office, federal/provincial government offices, churches and the library. Many of the community’s ‘helpers’ lost their homes: Town Councillors, Town staff, RCMP members, health care professionals and teachers. So did many of the staff who keep the town’s businesses open. A community which was generally used to dealing with floods now had a new and vastly greater disaster to recover from. When two floods did arrive weeks later, they were minor in comparison to the devastation of the wildfires, but nonetheless added to the workload and stress of a weary Town staff. Considering the difficult circumstances, there is a sense that recovery has gone exceptionally well. Recovery will continue for some years to come.

## The purpose of this guide

The Slave Lake Town Council and administration faced a steep learning curve in the first year of recovery from the 2011 wildfires that destroyed a major portion of the community and surrounding area. They felt that what they learned would be valuable information to help other communities prepare for and successfully recover from a major disaster. The Town asked the Northern Alberta Development Council (NADC) to record and compile the information. Consequently, while this guide refers holistically to emergency and recovery events that impacted a region which includes the MD of Lesser Slave River #124 and the Sawridge First Nation, the recommendations and checklists are usually specific to the experiences and circumstances of the residents, elected officials and staff of the Town of Slave Lake.

This guide captures a range of topics related to recovery up to the summer of 2012, with some updates in 2013. It describes Slave Lake’s experience to provide context, and then offers suggestions on how other communities can prepare in advance for recovery from a major disaster, and what actions to take during recovery. Information is grouped according to the key topics that emerged. Since many elements of recovery are interconnected, some themes are touched on under different topics.

The suggestions on the pages that follow are not to be taken as complete checklists, but rather as a good place to start. Depending on the topic, some suggestions are very specific, while others are broad. Many may seem common-sense now, but in a post-emergency situation when few things are normal, they may feel like sage advice. Circumstances will of course differ and suggestions will need to be adjusted to local situations.

## How we gathered information

The NADC developed questions in collaboration with Town Council. Town administration provided a list of staff and stakeholders. NADC staff met with most interviewees in person at the Town office, though some interviews were completed by phone. Information was then combined to paint the rich picture and provide the wisdom contained in the guide. This does not capture everything that took place in Slave Lake and is limited by the stories we heard.

## Thank you

Sincere thanks to all Town of Slave Lake staff and the many stakeholders who shared their stories. Throughout the interviews it was clear that this has been an emotional journey for many. We appreciate everyone’s willingness to recall the many challenges and successes, and consider what could help others if faced with such a challenge.

*“This is a marathon,  
not a sprint”*



# What is recovery? The new normal



*“Think big – if you can dream it you can make it happen”*



Many Town staff and stakeholders reflected a similar sentiment: Whatever was normal before is gone; the future holds a new normal. There is somewhat of a dichotomy in the community, with two thirds who returned to their own home and the rest who could not. But everyone was affected in some way or other. There is a sense that it will take time and strength to recover. There is a returning sense of optimism. And there have been positive spin-offs, such as the regional collaboration evident in Tri-Council and other committees. The future looks brighter because they are working together.

This sense of a new normal is captured well in the *Lesser Slave Lake Regional Recovery Plan* (p. 13): *Recovery cannot be defined simply by the region’s return to pre-disaster circumstances. Recovery is a success when it overcomes the impacts of disasters, and re-establishes an economic and social base that will enable future regional growth.*

One of the key lessons from the recovery planning process is that true recovery encompasses so much more than the reconstruction of buildings. This came across clearly in the many discussions with staff and stakeholders. This is also reflected in the four elements included in the Regional Recovery Framework (p. 9):

**People:** the physical, social and mental well-being of residents

**Environment:** community amenities, preservation and restoration of natural areas, and management of waste

**Reconstruction:** the rebuilding of homes, offices, infrastructure, and public utilities

**Economy:** individuals, businesses, infrastructure and government can continue to function effectively

*“You will feel overwhelmed and there will be times when you want to give up and quit”*



## Slave Lake's experience

Elected leaders from the Town of Slave Lake, the MD of Lesser Slave River and the Sawridge First Nation played a pivotal role in the ongoing recovery from the 2011 fire. They were the linkage with different levels of government and the public face for the recovery effort. They set the direction for the many facets of recovery. Their many involvements are evident in other sections of this guide. Considering the enormity of the recovery effort, residents were very proud of the leadership shown by their Council, in conjunction with other regional elected officials.

Slave Lake's mayor and members of Council put in countless hours since the fire to guide the town's recovery. Their regular jobs, family, personal and social life were affected in many ways. The three Council members who lost homes also needed to deal with displacement, loss of personal possessions and the rebuild of their homes. Council members have been so busy they have had little time to reflect and relax. They expect it will take three years after the fire to get back to a more regular Council schedule and work load.

There were so many social pressures on every public institution and it was difficult to limit municipal involvement. The Town office staff and Council were asked to help resolve many issues that were not a municipal responsibility. For example, dealing with donations of goods, and gathering owner signatures on insurance forms for co-ordinated demolition and clean-up to commence, were crucial initiatives but put extra pressure on Town staff. Being in the centre of the activity, it sometimes felt to Council that things were not moving fast enough. Others times progress seemed remarkable, yet the public felt nothing was happening.

Councillors were approached daily by residents, either on the street or at home with positive and negative messages. Council members were also approached by media looking for various angles to stories. Public events where Council was available were important and messages from the mayor helped put residents at ease.

*"The reality is that when the state of emergency is lifted, emergency circumstances still continue in the community"*



*"The Mayor provided messaging and let people know their feelings are normal"*

## Prepare

- Build and nurture relationships with key stakeholders in town and the region including:
  - other communities
  - companies and other levels of government
  - community organizations
  - RCMP
- Foster healthy working relationships within Council – you need it in tough times
- Train to be prepared for disasters, both the practical and emotional aspects
- Think regionally
- Ensure that infrastructure and the boards and agencies of the municipality have adequate insurance

*"Do not be afraid to bring in outside consulting expertise to get their perspective on it. They're also not so wrapped up in emotional response"*



*"Be all in"*

## Recover

- Recognize that you may all be victims, including your local emergency personnel, social service providers, staff and Council members
- Assess your own and your fellow Council members' readiness to take on recovery:
  - recognize you are all victims and will face significant stress
  - consider the huge time commitment and impact on family
  - consider the increased public scrutiny that comes with major events
  - delay participation if you need time to deal with personal issues
- Obtain legal advice immediately to understand potential liability
- Phone and read about other communities that have experienced similar disasters
- Start developing the recovery plan and identifying key tasks and required resources before the state of emergency is lifted
- Expect to make many quick decisions initially
- Set boundaries on municipal involvement:
  - recognize the limits of Council and staff time
  - say no to areas that are not critical to Council's work
  - refer issues to others who can take on issues and needs
  - communicate how people can resolve issues
- Learn about emotions typical of disaster recovery situations and how to respond effectively to emotionally distraught residents
- Establish communication practices and protocols:
  - use written information to ensure consistent messages
  - be available at public events to listen and answer questions
  - recognize publicly that people are still hurting
  - be prepared to respond to residents on the street and at your home
  - get to know the media contacts so you know who you are talking to
  - share personal cell phone numbers sparingly
- Take care of personal and family needs:
  - eat well and get enough rest
  - get individual and/or family counselling
  - take breaks and leave town for a short while
  - know personal signs and symptoms of stress
- Recognize that you will lose a sense of time:
  - track and keep a continuous log of efforts related to recovery, especially in the early phases, of key events and activities, meetings and documents
  - stop and rest before exhaustion sets in
- Show appreciation:
  - frequently, publicly and generously
  - be inclusive and ask for nominations of those deserving of recognition
  - appreciate all groups equally, including those working behind the scenes

*"No one signed up for this – Council did a fantastic job"*



*"You can help lobby but you also need to set boundaries"*



## Slave Lake's experience

Communication is of key importance for successful social and physical recovery from a major disaster. Those affected need timely, clear, and relevant information that shows progress is being made.

As is common following major disasters, many Slave Lake residents were traumatized, unhappy and impatient. They wanted to know and understand what was going on. Yet, they weren't always ready to hear. Information needed to be provided in clear and simple language, and repeated regularly. It was important to show what was being done and what progress was being made. The challenge was to provide optimism and yet deliver the message that recovery would take time.

During the emergency period of the Slave Lake fire, external communications were mostly handled through the Government of Alberta. This ended once the Town and MD's States of Local Emergency were lifted. Neither the Town nor the MD or Sawridge First Nation had a staff member dedicated to communication, and staff were immersed in recovery preparations. This left both internal and external information voids. The subsequent arrival of a contracted communications specialist, brought on to handle recovery communications, produced a vastly improved flow of information. A recovery website, information bulletins, follow-up on social media postings, local radio and newspaper spots, housing fairs, and town hall meetings were some of the ways residents were able to access information.

Town hall meetings were well-attended. Residents appreciated the face-to-face update though some used the meetings to vent their anger or impatience. The format was later modified to include an information portion, followed by one-on-one Q and A's. The Chamber of Commerce also facilitated information sharing meetings between Town staff and businesses.

Residents expected Town staff to know the answers to many questions. This was a challenge as information was not yet known or did not always filter down to front line workers. Staff struggling with vastly increased workloads were sometimes frustrated at the time spent in staff meetings when so much work needed to be done. Others wished there were more frequent meetings, even short ones, to share information.

*"Communicate! Imagination runs wild in a vacuum"*

## Prepare

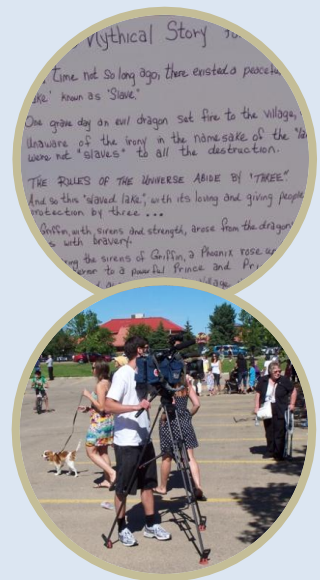
- Develop and/or maintain good **external** communications:
  - a functioning, easily updateable website that multiple staff can update
  - social media
- Develop and/or maintain good **internal** communications that can work in a recovery situation:
  - Council – staff sharing
  - regular staff meetings
  - other internal communications
- Include in your recovery plan an organizational chart that outlines key responsibilities

## Recover

- Immediately hire a communications specialist to get information out on behalf of the Town or region

### Internal communication

- Immediately start planning internal communications to all staff, including:
  - re-entry, roles and immediate work
  - regular debriefings, short all-staff meetings and regular email updates
  - small group meetings and morale boosters
  - feedback loops to solicit staff input/reaction
- Outline the role of the communications consultant and services this person can provide
- Establish ground rules for sharing information amongst staff and recovery workers to avoid media quotes of unofficial spokespersons
- Update your plan to consider the many stages and elements of recovery, such as:
  - workload
  - emotional health
  - celebration







## External communication

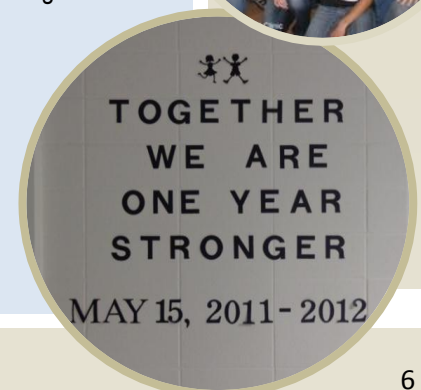
- Immediately start planning external recovery communications to:
  - residents
  - donors (see **Donations**)
  - provincial and federal politicians and staff
  - other stakeholders such as businesses and contractors
- Ensure your communications specialist:
  - connects with Government of Alberta communications to coordinate messaging
  - is aware of varying protocols at the local and provincial level
  - gets to know the media
  - provides communications advice to Council and administration
- Quickly establish the Town as the 'official' information source on recovery:
  - develop a recovery webpage and social media sites
  - have frequent and consistent updates (e.g. weekly newspaper column, twice weekly radio), especially in the early stages
  - immediately and on an ongoing basis take and post aerial and ground level videos
  - monitor other sources and respond/refer to the official sites; be instantaneous, factual, and honest
- Recognize and tailor communications to specific audiences:
  - affected directly
  - affected indirectly
  - not affected at all
- Address emotional responses in communications:
  - use sensitive language that considers the high emotions common to disaster and recovery situations (see **Community wellness**)
  - have the Mayor or Council-designate convey to residents that strong emotions are normal
- Give simple messages that show the progress being made:
  - what we said we would do
  - what we have done
  - what we will do next
- Repeat information; people experiencing trauma may hear but are not taking it in
- Avoid jargon
- Use many different ways to get the information out:
  - radio
  - newspaper
  - billboards
  - website
  - social media
  - posters in grocery stores, campgrounds, gas stations
  - town hall meetings
- Consider additional ways to get information to residents who have not yet returned
- In planning town hall meetings:
  - start having these as soon as residents return
  - have elected officials and key agencies present
  - provide general information in plenary sessions and have opportunities afterwards for individuals to ask questions on a one-on-one basis
  - have it in a venue where everyone can hear well – a poor sound system adds to stress levels
- Have all complaints routed through to a central person so these can be addressed at public meetings and in information materials
- Discourage 'disaster tourism' through communications
- Update your plan to consider the many stages and elements of recovery:
  - residents returning
  - physical needs
  - emotional responses
  - health and education needs
  - clean up
  - rebuild
  - celebration

*"Emergency time flows into recovery time – you need consistent messaging"*

*"You need someone with good communication skills to convey optimism without over-promising"*

*"Recovery communications:  
- Need to be able to put info out  
- People need to be ready to hear"*

*"It is important to provide realistic expectations of the time frame"*



# WELCOMING BACK RESIDENTS



## Slave Lake's experience

Initial projections were that residents could not return for three to four weeks, but all those involved worked to speed this up. Re-entry was purposeful and planned. Safety was a priority, followed by arrangements for essential needs: water, food, power, gas, health care, emotional support. These core services and businesses were then broadened to include day cares, grocery stores and gas stations.

Rumours had placed the water system in question. However, the treatment process continued throughout and after the fire, and positive pressure was maintained throughout the system. Gas, which had been turned off during the fire, had to be made available again. Cleanup was required to make roads, trails and playgrounds passable and free of debris.

Staffing had its challenges. Some staff had no home to return to while others needed to deal with the damage at their home. Some did not come back at all. With early projections of a three to four week evacuation, a lot of people had travelled quite a distance to stay with family or to a vacation spot. Many businesses and agencies brought helpers in from other locations.

A local furniture store rented warehouse space and brought in 1000 fridges and freezers. Grocery stores had to be cleaned and restocked before reopening to the public. Supplies took a few days to arrive and some items were in short supply. Returning residents were advised to bring three days of supplies with them. Due to the shortage of accommodations, most businesses in the service sector faced real capacity issues.

Town staff worked with other agencies to set up a reception centre for returning residents, with representatives from many social agencies. Residents received an information package including colour coded "utility-needed" signs so utility companies knew which houses still needed services. They also received a basket of cleaning and other supplies. Businesses could come to the centre for tax, insurance and financial needs and could post jobs for those seeking work. The reception centre was, in the end, not as busy as expected. Many residents whose houses had not been destroyed returned straight to their home. By mid June, the centre was closed.

Returning residents showed a mix of joy, bitterness and other emotions. Hearing 'what', 'why' and 'when' was of critical importance as they returned. Common questions included: When can I rebuild? Why can't it happen sooner? Why can't I go to my property? Where is my pet? What is the Town doing? As well, residents wondered why their fridges and freezers were ruined and how they were to dispose of them (see **Waste management**). Soon after, residents started asking about payment of utility, tax and other bills.

Limited access to burn areas and security of personal items were points of particular tension for the Town and residents alike. For safety purposes, access to seriously damaged areas was restricted with fencing during demolition and cleanup, and a security service was hired to monitor it. Residents needed to sign a waiver to enter. Residents were frustrated that they could not access and search through the remains of their homes.

*"The plan was that St. Mary's School recovery centre would be open for a while; reality: people don't come to a public place for personal help"*



*"Staff of businesses were affected too and yet they were working to help make basic services available"*



*"The town burnt - what are you going to do to fix it?"*



*"Some apartments burnt and these residents often did not come back. There were no people to work in service industries"*

## WISDOM GAINED

*The Town of Slave Lake shares its reflections on recovery from the 2011 wildfire*

## Prepare

- ❑ Identify the services essential for comfortable and safe re-entry of evacuated residents in the emergency recovery plan including:
  - individuals trained in trauma recovery to support residents and staff
  - clinical counsellors to support front-line workers
  - Town operations and community services
  - utility companies
  - hospital and doctors' clinics
  - social services/mental health support agencies
  - grocery stores
- ❑ Include additional services that residents will need shortly after return:
  - hardware, furniture and clothing stores
  - restaurants
  - gas stations
  - places to share stories and vent
- ❑ Compile key contact information for these services and businesses
- ❑ Include these services and businesses in mock disasters



*“The park was full of kids within hours of return – playing ball, skateboard park, equipment – it helped kids feel normal”*



Disaster victims experience the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance.

## Recover

- ❑ Stage the return of residents to ensure basic needs can be met
- ❑ Bring in:
  - individuals who are trained to work with disaster victims
  - local leaders who know the key community and regional contacts
  - experts to help plan the re-entry of residents
- ❑ Review and update the list of essential services and include those who will support the needs of workers returning such as:
  - day care, grocery stores, gas stations
- ❑ House and feed staff who return first adequately as they work to help others return
- ❑ Make the town safe for residents' return:
  - remove debris
  - fence damaged areas that are dangerous
  - secure personal properties
  - flush all water mains to ensure safe potable water
- ❑ Make the entrances into the community look as normal as possible: mow the grass, sweep the street
- ❑ Have a reception centre that includes:
  - individuals trained in disasters
  - counsellors and private space to support front line staff
  - Victim Services
  - Red Cross and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs)
  - Town office staff
  - RCMP staff
- ❑ Ensure reception centre staff work short shifts – it can be intense
- ❑ Have experts or decision-makers on hand and/or develop clear written information that covers basic questions:
  - When can we go to our property?
  - Where will we be able to live?
  - When can we rebuild?
  - What will insurance cover?
  - My place of work is gone. What do I do now?
  - Where can I go for financial help?
  - What is the Town doing?
  - What is the Province doing?
  - How do I get gas and electricity?
  - When will the schools open?
  - Can I access a doctor?
  - Who can help me clean up?
  - Where do I take all the garbage from cleaning up my property?
  - Where can I get more information?
  - Is there any place in town where I can get a cup of coffee?
- ❑ Ensure packages of materials for returning residents arrive in town pre-assembled
- ❑ Have counsellors go into the community to provide support
- ❑ Coordinate with the private sector for supplies that will be needed
  - fridges and freezers
  - cleaning materials
  - construction materials
- ❑ Work with NGOs to offer support to seniors, residents with handicaps and others who cannot complete their own property clean-up

*“We saw honourable as well as the worst behaviour of people”*  
*“Get in professionals – we’re no different from other communities”*

# REBUILDING TOWN OPERATIONS



## Slave Lake's experience

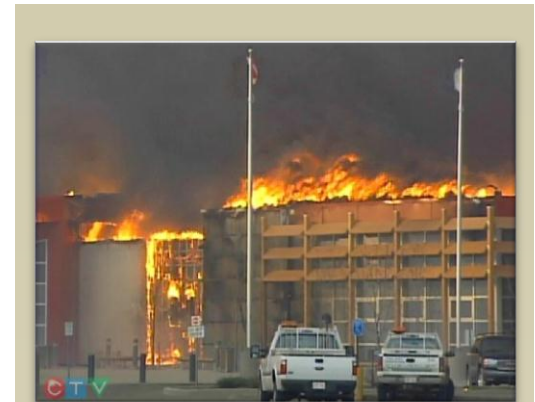
Imagine losing all recent financial and administration information and then having to reorganize quickly to provide services to residents. This is what the Town of Slave Lake experienced. The new Slave Lake Town Office, along with the region's recently completed library and many federal/provincial offices went up in flames during the fire. With these went all of the Town's paper records, its computers and servers. Town staff had removed the computer back-up tapes, however, it was soon discovered that the backup system had stopped working in early April. Six weeks of data had been lost and the paper records to support these were burned. Town Council meeting minutes were fortunately stored on a remote server. Any backups that did exist were locked up in a local bank and could not be accessed quickly.

When residents started returning, Town staff were working from boxes in the college. The provincial government had supplied 25 computers, which were linked to Edmonton servers on a slow internet connection. Staff dealt with a steady stream of residents looking for recovery-related information or wanting to conduct normal business. After some renovations, they were able to move to a temporary location in the Lakeland Centre in August 2011. Reconstruction of the Town Office, government centre and library followed with move-in took place spring 2013, two years after the fire.

Re-creation of missing financial information was a nine-month process and required a degree of detective work through bank statements of cash, debit card numbers and cheques. Municipal Affairs arranged for a contracted accounting firm to help the Town with the countless hours this required. The loss affected all financial records, including accounts receivable and payable, payroll, utilities and taxes, land records, program information, business licenses, etc. Residents were asked to bring in receipts to verify payments over the missing six weeks and to rearrange preauthorized payments. Vendors were contacted for copies of receipts for goods and services. Staff brought in pay stubs and timesheet information if they had it, to recreate files and reconcile payments. Businesses brought in their business license history and completed new applications. The utilities levy was rerun to account for the burned houses and a levy was established for the new temporary housing trailers. Reassessment of properties is being done for each property that is rebuilt.

Rebuilding the Widewater fire hall and replacing damaged equipment were of critical importance. Over the past year, a new service location was set up, the burnt fire hall rebuilt, the fleet of water tankers and equipment expanded, damaged equipment repaired and replaced, and more staff brought on.

Town Council and administration were concerned early in the recovery process about how they would pay for all costs. Information about government funding helped ease some of the concerns. Approval of funding for eight additional staff members came in late July 2011 though they did not receive the funds until later and it took some time to fill the positions. Many purchases were required, ranging from office basics to firefighting equipment. In addition to the time requirement, cash flow was a concern for over a year.



*"iPhone with ear buds was my office"*



*"Long term recovery is only possible once they have done catch-up work"*



## WISDOM GAINED

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## Prepare

- Develop a business continuity plan and review it twice yearly - don't just fill out the form:
  - assess risks
  - make it relevant
  - make sure everyone knows
  - practice it
- Have an "on-the-road support network" for staff from the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association, Alberta Association of Municipal Districts and Counties, Alberta Municipal Services Corporation, Alberta Municipal Affairs and others
- Have a plan for an alternate office that can provide:
  - reception space and offices
  - phone system
  - meeting rooms
  - office machines: faxes, photo copier
  - computers and related networking infrastructure
  - kitchen
- Have a fire door and safe with silica in the wall to protect money and files
- Have the server room easily accessible through an outside door
- Replacing a lost server can take weeks; have a computer backup system that:
  - uses duplicate servers to provide constant online replication
  - allows instantaneous use of backup
  - is housed in a location not likely to be affected by the same major disaster
- Regularly restore data to make sure back-up works
- Be aware of what computer backups need to be saved in case of a quick evacuation
- Scan all essential current and historical documents:
  - agendas, minutes and bylaws
  - land base files, historical planning docs, subdivision files, land titles
  - usernames and passwords
  - group insurance
  - manuals
- Scan all key computer network information:
  - licenses for operating systems, software, and websites
  - contact names of vendors

## Recover

- Establish the backup office
- Ensure payroll is taken care of
- Confirm what government funding is available
- Work closely with the Town insurance representative early in the recovery process
- Keep all staff well-informed of progress, especially those who receive enquiries from the public
- Depending on administrative delays, waive fees and ensure no overdue fines are charged
- Arrange to have one person to:
  - be in charge of the many purchases that will be required
  - track the foregone revenues
- Remind staff to track work expenses such as mileage and cell phone
- If needed, re-establish the financial system:
  - accounts receivable and payable
  - payroll
  - utilities
  - taxes
  - land records
  - program information
  - business licenses
  - preauthorized payments
- Recreate computer system:
  - recreate servers, get backups running
  - set up computers, recover files
- Adjust utility levies:
  - remove lost homes and businesses from the levy, and track the foregone revenues
  - establish new levies for interim housing
- Assess new properties
- Expect stragglers to surface for some time as people start settling in and have time to review their affairs





## Slave Lake's experience

Recovery from a disaster of the magnitude experienced by the Town of Slave Lake, the MD of Lesser Slave River and the Sawridge First Nation involves a tremendous amount of work. Even when the States of Local Emergency were lifted, fire crews were busy dealing with hot spots and flare-ups. People were needed to focus on the many immediate needs: clean up and waste management, rebuilding Town operations, welcoming back residents, dealing with donations, communications, finances, temporary housing. Planning for longer term recovery and neighbourhood rebuilds soon added extra demands. This increased workload was magnified because some Town workers did not return after the evacuation.

Early expectations of a provincial recovery team did not materialize as Town staff had expected. The original vision was to have a team to help with rebuild, finances and other tasks. This was delayed with turnover of project leads.

Valuable help did come from various sources. Funding from Alberta Municipal Affairs provided contract services of accounting and engineering firms and ten additional staff for a two year period. The Alberta Public Works Association brought their own staff, provided a clearinghouse for other municipalities offering support and gathered experts from across the province to help with early cleanup of the burnt areas. Municipalities across the province donated knowledgeable staff who could easily take over many tasks to assist over a four month period. A recovery office focussed on large-scale regional projects through Tri-Council (see **Government support**).

Yet, the amount of work has been overwhelming. Town staff have put in tremendous numbers of hours recreating information and systems, and taking care of additional programs and services, while participating in the additional work required for the rebuild of the town and the region. It has been a challenge to do regular work. Many Town staff anticipate that their work life will not return to normal, or something similar, for two or three years after the fire.

## Prepare

- Facilitate professional networking for staff, such as attendance at conferences and workshops
- Maintain good relations with your municipal neighbours – they are especially valuable in times of need

## Recover

- Contact staff who are evacuated as quickly as possible to update them and see how they are doing
- Call for immediate help from others through:
  - Alberta Municipal Affairs
  - the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association (AUMA)
  - the Alberta Association of Municipal Districts and Counties (AAMDC)
  - professional organizations such as Alberta Public Works Association
- Select knowledgeable helpers and make time to train those who need it – it will pay off in the long run
- Initially open for information only, until the office and systems are properly set up:
  - have an expert in dealing with anger to talk to distraught or abusive residents
  - set appointment times to avoid long waits for residents
  - allow times with no appointments so staff can focus on their work
- Meet with NGOs to identify the staffing support they can provide (see **Working with NGOs**)
- Build a strategic plan for the first two years combining the recovery needs and normal operating needs:
  - the new positions can focus on recovery
  - existing staff can do the day-to-day work
- Arrange for temporary overtime pay for management staff to reflect the countless extra hours required
- Accept that some day-to-day levels of service will suffer for a while

*"It would have been so easy to walk away"*



*"No one signed up for this volume of work"*



*"You need to support another whole layer of administration on top of the current one that is trying to heal"*

*"Demands are equal, but recovery got the attention"*



*"Without resources everything takes ten times as long"*

*"Ask for help, don't be a tough guy.*

*I turned down help. Sometimes things go faster if you do it yourself, but in hindsight, it took longer."*



## Slave Lake's experience

In Slave Lake's tight housing market, accommodation options were limited for residents who had lost their homes. Temporary rent support was available through the Alberta government while they were living in other communities. It was however essential to Slave Lake's survival to arrange interim housing as soon as possible so residents could return to work and be part of the economic and social fabric of the community. Housing was also needed for temporary helpers and the many contractors who came as part of rebuilding efforts. Hotels and campgrounds were filled to capacity. Within nine days of the fire, ATCO brought in a 200 person camp and food centre for contractors, Red Cross and ATCO staff. The work camp was used for about five months.

The Government of Alberta quickly offered to develop housing for 'essential workers' and then, with feedback from Town Council and others, broadened the scope to include all those who had lost their homes. A housing group soon examined options to install mobile homes: they negotiated private properties, considered several parks, and then ultimately selected other Town and Crown land as the most viable options. With bids from private contractors coming in 200% over internal estimates, Alberta Infrastructure took on the project management.

While site selection, rezoning bylaws, and the Request for Proposal process added delays, once started the project was completed with impressive speed. Zoning and regulatory bylaw changes were made. The province expedited processes, and contractors worked very hard. The ground was cleared, fill brought in by a consortium of local businesses, and shallow services installed before the mobile homes moved onto the site. Despite delays from the July flood, move-ins started mid-September, four to six weeks earlier than projected. Priority went to families with school age children, to help stabilize the school system.

It was a challenge pinning down accurate numbers for housing needs. Numbers from Red Cross registrations and the Regional Housing Authority did not match estimates by Municipal Affairs. Reconciliation issues were compounded by Privacy legislation. In the end, some residents did not return, and others, particularly singles who would have been required to share a unit, found alternate accommodations. Affordability of the temporary housing was an issue for some. Ultimately, 350 lots were built in the town, 290 of these serviced, and 190 trailer units installed. Alberta Housing installed an additional 21 on other lots in town and 31 in the MD. Two years later many trailers are still occupied, though removal of all the units is expected in the next year.

*"Cabinet decided that every person who was displaced would have a place to live"*

*"Mid-July we started stripping land – then the floods came"*



*"The shadow population did not return"*

*"We needed to support business needs and offering of basic retail services"*

*"The temporary housing is a real success story"*



*"If this event had happened in winter, accommodation would have been a much greater problem – camping would not have been possible and all the hotels would have been full. A large part of the community would have left and not returned."*

## Prepare

- Identify possible sites for interim housing in the emergency plan, including those slated for future development
- Maintain a list of local contractors

## Recover

- Work with the Government of Alberta to plan interim housing to bridge residents from the return date until their new homes are ready
- Offer input to the Regional Housing Authority or others gathering estimates of those needing housing
- Encourage use of local contractors
- Manage expectations around timing: under-promise and over-deliver



## Slave Lake's experience

The level of destruction following the fire required a huge cleanup effort. Over 550 residences were lost in the region, with 502 of these in Slave Lake: 333 single family homes, various smaller multi-family units, and six apartment buildings totalling 150 units. Three churches, ten businesses, the Government Centre and the library were also destroyed. In some areas entire streets were wiped out, while in others portions of streets or a few homes were lost. Many utilities were also damaged or destroyed by the fire.

The high temperatures of the fire left many properties smouldering for weeks. Security arrangements were set up to keep everyone away from hazardous materials and to tackle any worries about theft. Samples of the ash and soil were tested to ensure contaminants could be managed. The affected areas were stirred to cool the sites and ensure that no hot ash went to the landfill.

Staffing was one of the first issues for cleanup. Some Town operations staff did not return and the workload was great. The Alberta Public Works Association stepped in and gathered members from across the province to help. Alberta Transportation faced a similar challenge to have the staff and resources for the extra road closures and high maintenance needs caused by increased heavy traffic.

A Recovery Operations Committee, with the Recovery Manager (hired by the Town), the Town's CAO, Director & Superintendent of Operations, Director of Planning & Development, Town engineers, demolition contractors, and representatives from utilities and insurance companies met daily at first and then weekly, to coordinate the cleanup. The reconstruction was divided into four zones, based on levels of destruction and work required to bring areas to a ready-to-build state. The many insurance companies involved were encouraged to form a consortium to fast-track decisions on demolition and waste removal, and to facilitate upfront payment. The recovery team successfully facilitated a coordinated cleanup of neighbourhoods rather than a lot-by-lot approach.

This collaborative approach did have some challenges. With property owners spread in many different locations it took some time to get authorization signatures so that insurance companies could give a go-ahead with cleanup. Consortium decisions did not always filter down to assessors which caused some confusion for homeowners. Vehicle insurers were not included in the consortium or authorizations from owners. When sites were cleaned there were still many burnt vehicles that needed to be removed later.

Safety was a first consideration in cleanup, though processes and delays frustrated and angered many returning residents. They wanted to search for personal items and inspect their property. The RCMP had taken pictures of each site and items of obvious value were removed to secure storage before charred basement contents were stirred and removed. A video was developed to show the process and criteria for discarding items. Nonetheless, some residents directed anger towards the Town and RCMP as they felt there were still valuables in the rubble. It remains a sensitive issue for many that they were not allowed onto their home sites to search for and possibly recover valuables. It was also a lost opportunity to get a sense of closure.

*"After seven days there were still fires in basements"*



*"We needed a methodical demolition to allow methodical construction"*



*"The Alberta Public Works Association sent the best from across the province and brought their own staff"*



*"We had daily meetings with the demolition group – work started early June to mid-September"*



*"Cleanup dropped off the radar as an issue, it went so smoothly"*

## WISDOM GAINED

*The Town of Slave Lake shares its reflections on recovery from the 2011 wildfire*



The heavy rains that caused the floods presented a new set of challenges. Open sewer lines on burnt properties had not yet been capped and consequently flooded with debris. This caused overloading of the sewer system and carried excessive amounts of sediment to the town sewage lagoon. This sediment buildup still needed to be dealt with one year after the fire.



## Prepare

- Maintain relations with area utility and insurance company representatives
- Maintain a list of local contractors who can assist in cleanup
- Identify support for disaster cleanup
- Become familiar with what resources are available
- When planning water access to lots:
  - maintain a map of residential water valves
  - keep residential water valves at ground level and in a standard location if possible
  - mark all curb stops

## Recover

- Bring in experts in disaster cleanup
- Clarify legalities before starting the cleanup
- Establish a cleanup operations team that brings together key players:
  - the municipality
  - municipal engineers or engineering contractor
  - Alberta Municipal Affairs
  - the local Alberta Transportation office
  - Alberta Environment
  - utility companies
  - insurance companies
  - regional landfill
- Prepare a communications framework to explain the sequence from planning to execution to completion
- Encourage insurance companies to:
  - work collaboratively to finance and co-ordinate major demolition and waste removal
  - set up a one-stop all-inclusive coordinated office
  - have good information flow to adjusters
- Include vehicle insurance companies in the insurance consortium
  - have the consortium develop a process to deal with non-insured and non-registered vehicles
- Address safety and environmental concerns:
  - fence damaged areas
  - ensure electrical and gas service is disconnected
  - ensure hazardous items are removed
  - test ash and soil for contamination as soon as possible
  - remediate contamination
- Protect water infrastructure
  - close all residential water valves and cap exposed sewer lines
  - close street water valves
- Be aware of the emotional side of loss to residents (see **Welcoming residents back** and **Community wellness**)
- Communicate progress and issues regularly
- Establish an enforcement team

TOWN OF SLAVE LAKE  
DEMOLITION PERMIT  
LANDOWNER AUTHORIZATION FORM

I / We, \_\_\_\_\_  
being the registered owner/s of lands legally described as:

LOT \_\_\_\_\_ BLOCK \_\_\_\_\_ PLAN \_\_\_\_\_

CIVIC ADDRESS: \_\_\_\_\_

do hereby authorize \_\_\_\_\_

to make application for a demolition permit and conduct the required demolition work affecting the above noted property.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

TOWN OF SLAVE LAKE  
LANDOWNER AUTHORIZATION FORM

Date: \_\_\_\_\_, 2011

I/We, \_\_\_\_\_ (Landowner's Name(s)) authorize the Town of Slave Lake and its agents or assigns, to enter onto my land described as Lot \_\_\_\_\_, Block \_\_\_\_\_ Plan \_\_\_\_\_ (City Address), Slave Lake, Alberta, (Roll #: \_\_\_\_\_) (Tax Roll #) for the purpose of removing any and all burned vehicles. Burned vehicles may consist of all terrain vehicles (ATV), cars, trucks, holiday trailers, utility trailers, boats, etc.



## Slave Lake's experience

Imagine six months' worth of waste produced in three days! And this was just the start of the cleanup process. Within six months, three years' worth of waste arrived at the Lesser Slave Lake Regional Landfill.

Managing the overwhelming amount of waste from the fire and floods while minimizing the environmental impact was an enormous task. To be successful it required effective communication, resources, and coordination among all parties involved. Early in the recovery when decisions needed to be made quickly, the waste management team was not always included in discussions that affected them. Their responsibility for both the Town and the MD added to the challenge.

In the Town of Slave Lake, power was off for two weeks which meant everyone's fridge and freezer was affected. Freezers and refrigerators with rotting food become toxic and, as per health standards, had to be disposed of in a safe manner. Local contractors were hired to collect and bring the appliances to the landfill, where they were emptied and then drained of Freon gas and recycled. The Landfill had to deal with about 4,000 freezers and refrigerators full of rotting food.

Soon the landfill was also receiving trees and other debris cleaned from the streets, and waste from homes, buildings and yards, such as concrete from foundations and walkways, vehicles, swing sets and more. On top of this came waste from the floods that followed the fire. Once reconstruction started more waste materials were created.

There was phenomenal success as demolition contractors, individuals, the municipalities, insurance companies and the Lesser Slave Lake Regional Landfill worked together to lessen the amount of waste that went into the landfill. They are proud to have recycled 85-90% of the waste. Assembly lines were created in the recovery zones to chip wood, crush and bale metal and remove concrete to a central storage facility. As a result, a significant amount of debris was diverted from the landfill for reuse elsewhere. The ultimate success is reflected in an Alberta Emerald Foundation award received by the Landfill Manager for minimizing the carbon impact of the waste on the environment.

The cost of cleanup and waste management was huge. The landfill did not have the space for this volume of waste. A temporary site was created, and a place set up to sort through the contaminated goods. A new landfill cell and new equipment added an unexpected \$2 million financial burden. Staffing went up by 500% initially and then as time went by, down to 200%. There was not enough staff to help with the cleanup, which meant many extra-long days.

## Prepare

- Include waste management in the recovery plan and consider:
  - the capacity of the regional landfill to handle large volumes
  - expansion options if more capacity is needed quickly
  - potential sites for contaminated materials
  - options to prepare, sort and accept demolition materials for recycling
  - support for emergency waste management
  - the effect of the heavy transportation traffic on roads in town and leading to the landfill
  - communications needed
- Involve regional partners in the planning
- Stay abreast of and implement new recycling and waste reduction practices
- When the need arises, get involved and offer to help others – they will reciprocate

## Recover

- Involve the waste management team in planning for cleanup
- Draw on people who have experienced large scale disaster waste management
- Develop a waste management and recycling strategy:
  - establish expectations of the waste management team
  - clarify funding available and procurement procedures
  - estimate the volume of waste and, if necessary, create additional capacity
  - gather resources to prepare, sort and accept demolition materials for recycling
  - think outside the box!



*"Crushed cement makes fantastic road base"*

*"We used a log loader to unload refrigerators and freezers"*



*"We probably hauled about 9,000 tonnes of metal, about 60,000 tonnes of concrete and very little went to the landfill"*



## Slave Lake's experience

Once cleanup was completed, lots were prepared and utilities rebuilt. The almost-complete destruction of one area presented an opportunity to fix a long-standing drainage problem. Additional changes in the reconstruction of utilities, plus permissions required from each owner caused some delays, but the change has helped address lot grading issues. In accordance with current construction practices, utilities were also being installed in a single trench.

The first home rebuild within town limits was started in August 2011 and within fourteen months after the fire, 260 development permits had been issued. Most of these were for individual homes. Also under construction during that time: six duplexes, two apartment buildings, the government centre, two churches, and two commercial buildings. With pressure from eager residents to speed up the process, installation of utilities continued through the winter.

This level of construction activity presented many challenges. There was competition for a small pool of resources, such as insurance assessors and builders. Many homeowners found it challenging to get the three quotes required by insurance companies. Once construction started there were issues such as contractors blocking roads with construction materials, extra garbage, and damage to sidewalks, fire hydrants and streets. Significant amounts of debris had washed into the Town's sewer system, and extra controls were put in place to ensure sewer lines were clear before water was turned on.

Contractors felt pressure to finish jobs on time, so that residents could complete insurance claims. They also experienced delays in having utilities located and marked. Some contractors continued the work anyway or, anticipating a delay, did not call to have the utilities marked. This caused frequent damage to newly installed utilities. Information packages, signage, pamphlets and advertising were not enough to address the issue. More enforcement of Occupational Health and Safety was still seen as needed.

This high level of construction activity placed an increased demand on Town planning and operations staff for over a year. With the loss of many paper-based records, maps had to be recreated and all the variances and discretionary use applications reconsidered by the Municipal Planning Commission. Sub-division development appeals greatly increased. Extensive time was spent walking landowners through the building and development process. A high number of permits have been issued along with an information package for residents (see [Helping residents rebuild](#)). Staff were much busier with street sweeping, managing traffic flow in construction zones, reconnecting utilities, checking sewer connections, opening residential water valves, providing water meters, and general trouble shooting. Some regular maintenance is nearly impossible in busy construction zones and takes a back seat to reconstruction activity.

The Town completed its assessment of the damage to roads, sidewalks and utilities caused by the fire and floods as well as the construction activity. The total cost was \$29 million, much of this uninsurable. Additional disaster funding from the province prevented a major financial burden to the town.

*"Through the Recovery Operations Committee meetings everyone knew what the goal was for that week"*



*"When there are blocks of homes affected, what is an acceptable and realistic timeframe?"*

*"Development permits issued: 159 in 2011, 102 up to July 2012. Since then, numbers have returned to normal levels of around 30."*



*"Uninsurable Town infrastructure damage cost \$29 million to replace"*



*"You need a babysitter to make sure the contractors are following the rules, not making messes and staying within their work areas"*

## WISDOM GAINED

*The Town of Slave Lake shares its reflections on recovery from the 2011 wildfire*

*“We have had to shut some contractors down who were not operating safely”*  
*“We had to replace a fire hydrant three times due to damage”*  
*“The time spent on enforcement of standard safety and building practices is unbelievable”*

## Prepare

- Update bylaws for minimum and maximum house sizes, fence heights, lot grading, etc.
- Review bylaws and permits to ensure home builders are responsible for damage to their section of road by contractors
- Ensure planning documents, forms and information packages are up to date
- Know what financial help might be available and what is needed to access it
- Be aware of uninsurable infrastructure such as the sewage lagoon, sidewalks and roads

## Recover

- Establish a recovery operations team (or continue the cleanup team (see **Disaster Cleanup**) and include:
  - the municipality
  - Municipal Affairs
  - utility companies
  - insurance companies
- With the recovery team members, develop a communications plan for reconstruction including:
  - advertisements
  - meetings with contractors and residents
  - open houses
  - development documents and information
- Assess upgrade options for neighbourhoods in case a major rebuild is needed:
  - move wires underground
  - upgrade water and sewer to new standards
- Develop an in-house system to track new residential and commercial construction and keep an ongoing tally of:
  - issuance of permits
  - sewer service camera review
  - utilities location requests
  - utility accounts activations
- Have construction safety controls in place:
  - develop additional safety procedures to include in development permits for the recovery zone such as:
    - no burning of construction materials
    - no contractor camping on site
  - reduce the speed limit to 30 km/hour in high-construction zones
  - one or more Occupational Health and Safety inspectors to monitor contractor adherence to safety procedures
  - a Safety Codes Officer to ensure contractors have adequate permits
  - a Construction Inspector for municipal servicing issues
  - require contractors to video the home sewer line; observe the video prior to issuing a water meter
  - expect development and building permits to be displayed
  - install a new rod and residential water valves at each home construction site, and keep the stake above ground until construction is complete
- Encourage local staffing through Canadian Locators for quick location of utility lines
- Waive taxes of owners who have not yet been able to rebuild and identify ways to make up for these lost tax revenues
- Prepare a tally of what is destroyed; consider uninsurable infrastructure in discussions about disaster relief funding





## Slave Lake's experience

The rebuilding that follows major disasters presents opportunities to draw on local expertise and help the business community to recover. It creates jobs and the wealth helps the community to get back on its feet. Slave Lake area businesses were eager to be part of their community's recovery, though their early participation was hampered due to a loss of data on vendors and contractors. As well, the emergency management team did not know the local community, and equipment and services were soon being brought from outside.

As business owners started to return to Slave Lake, they became part of the recovery effort. The Town and Chamber also organized meetings to share information and opportunities with local businesses.

Emergency and recovery situations bring out the generosity in some, while others see an opportunity to take advantage of high demand by increasing prices. A wide range of rates were being charged for work. This required considerable sorting out after the fact to determine fair reimbursement for services.



*Various local companies put aside their usual competition to put in a joint bid for preparation of lots for the temporary housing, hiring trucks from throughout the region and bringing in 100,000m<sup>3</sup> of fill. They even bought coats with their logos to commemorate the collaboration."*

## Prepare

- In the recovery plan, include and update:
  - a vendor and contractor list and the services and goods they provide
  - the types of services, goods and businesses that are essential in recovery
  - a policy to use the Alberta Road Builders rate book and other similar sources for consistent rates
- Expect contractors to complete safety training to prepare them to work in recovery zones similar to what is required for Alberta Sustainable Resources Development
- Establish and share resource procurement processes and responsibilities

## Recover

- Consider what services can be delayed to allow better pricing
- Gather local business information from the best sources available:
  - the recovery plan
  - the local Chamber
  - Alberta Sustainable Resources Development contractor list
- Host information sessions for area businesses about what goods and services will be needed



## Slave Lake's experience

Many homeowners were at first not aware that they needed to play an active part in rebuilding their homes. Many had no previous experience building a house, nor any desire to do so. There was a range of expectations on what would be done for them and who was responsible for what. In addition, they did not understand the amount of coordinated demolition, cleanup and site preparation required before permits could be issued and construction could start. The Town planning department developed an information package to help homeowners through the process.

The Recovery Team, Alberta Government, homebuilder associations and the local Chamber of Commerce hosted house construction open houses and information fairs, both locally and in the region. Timing of the fairs may have been too early. People wanted to rebuild right away, but quite a bit of clean up and preparation work was needed to get the demolished neighbourhoods to a construction-ready state. In addition, some residents were still traumatized and could not process the information.

Another key issue was capacity in a community that in a regular year built approximately 25 to 30 homes. Imagine the trades people required to address the task at hand, and then consider where and how to house them during reconstruction. The Chamber facilitated builders' fairs for local contractors and others in the region. This gave builders information on progress, timing of lot releases and issuance of development permits. It also helped them to plan, put plans for homes built on speculation on hold and free up resources.

Working through insurance requirements was another challenge for residents. While companies collaborated, residents faced a steep learning curve. Some residents were adequately insured, while others discovered too late that they did not have adequate insurance. Small things, such as requirements that everything in a fridge or freezer needed to be itemized, caused some frustration. Timelines for rental accommodation, rebuild and replacement of contents put pressure on homeowners and builders alike.

*"Lots of people haven't built homes for themselves, now they have to."*



*"Make sure to use local capacity – they are eager to help"*



*"So many decisions to make in building – we're not home builders!"*

## Prepare

- Encourage residents to review their home or renters insurance so they have adequate coverage and understand what is or is not covered

*"There is a span of knowledge - some know what to do, others don't."*



*"They need to be able to do the work within time – people will be mad if you don't finish on time"*

## Recover

- Include construction timelines and other important information in general communications
- Establish an advocacy service to help residents deal with insurance companies and contractors
- Provide support for new home builders:
  - work with the Chamber, contractors and insurance companies to host home construction open houses
  - be flexible where possible
- Provide information to contractors:
  - road use agreements
  - camera inspection of sanitary sewer
  - private lot demolition requirements
  - lot grading requirements
- Provide information to residents needing to rebuild:
  - documents needed to apply for a development permit
  - other permits needed
  - bylaws and any other conditions that affect rebuilds
  - hard surfacing requirements
  - lot grading information and sample site plan
  - real property reports
  - timelines
  - appeal processes
  - waste disposal options



## MY LOT HAS BEEN CLEARED FOR CONSTRUCTION WHAT DO I DO NOW??

If you have been visiting the Slave Lake Recovery web site ([slavelakerecovery.com](http://slavelakerecovery.com)) and noticed that your property has been cleared for construction you may be wondering **what do I do next?**

1. You need to get your lot dimensions so you can determine what size of home will fit on your property. Either the Planning Department or Focus Surveys can provide you with this information.
2. You need the setback requirements for your district. Contact the Planning Department and find out what zone your house is in and what the required setback distances are for the front, rear and side yards and total parcel coverage for your new home.
3. You need to then select a house plan that will fit on your property.
4. You need to decide if your home will be stick built, modular or RTM (Ready to Move).
5. If you are choosing a modular home or RTM home you need to select your home design and order your house. If you are not sure if the home you are considering buying meets the Town's definition of a Modular or RTM please contact the Planning Department for clarification before you sign a contract or put down a deposit.
6. If you are choosing to have your home stick built you need to choose a contractor.
7. You need to obtain a Development Permit Package from the Planning Department. Either your contractor or you may apply for the Development Permit.

8. Submit a completed Development Permit Application Package to the Planning Department. A completed package consists of the following:

- a. Completed and Signed Development Permit Application Form
- b. Site Plan showing where the house will site on the lot including dimensions of the house, setbacks from the house to the front, rear and side property boundaries, as well as location of the driveway.
- c. Two copies of the blue prints or house plans.
- d. \$2,000.00 refundable Development Deposit. The Deposit is returned to you once all conditions of your development permit have been completed.

9. Obtain a Building Permit Package from the Planning Department or from the building agency you will be using. Either your contractor or you may apply for the Building Permit. The Building Permit is not issued by the Town and deals with Alberta Building Codes. Essentially, the Building Permit deals with how your home is constructed.

10. The Building Permitting Agencies that provide this service in Slave Lake are:

- a. Superior Safety Codes Inc. 1-866-999-4777
- b. The Inspections Group Inc. 1-866-554-5048
- c. Canadian Safety Consulting Services 1-877-780-7233

11. You will need to provide the Building Code Agency with your Development Permit Number issued by the Town. If you do not know what this is you may contact the Planning Department.

12. Once you have all of your permits you may commence construction.

13. The Development Permit will require a number of conditions to be met. The conditions will include these and more:

- a. A Detailed Lot Grading Plan will be required to be prepared by you or your builder and submitted to the Town prior to construction commencing. This plan will illustrate how you will drain and slope your lot from the foundation of your home.
- b. You will need to provide a camera inspection of the sewer line to ensure no debris has made its way into the Town's system. The plumber hired to plumb your house can provide this for you.

- c. You will need to provide new water and sanitary sewer services for your home. The plumber hired to plumb your house can provide this for you.
- d. A Real Property Report (RPR) is required after the foundation of your home is completed. This ensures that you have placed your home in the correct location. An Alberta Land Surveyor can provide this for you.
- e. A Lot Grading Survey will be required to be submitted to the Town once the landscaping is complete. An Alberta Land Surveyor can provide this for you.
- f. The driveway will need to be hard surfaced. This may include concrete, asphalt or unit pavers. This is to be completed within one year of issuance of the permit. If you will require an extension for completion please contact the Planning Department.
- g. The front yard landscaping must be completed within one year of issuance of the permit. If you will require an extension for completion please contact the Planning Department.

14. Please read over your permits in detail and ensure you understand all the conditions that will be expected for your development. If you do not agree with the conditions of your Development Permit you have 14 days from the date of issuance of that permit in which to appeal those conditions. If you do not understand any of the conditions, please contact the Planning Department immediately to discuss.

**IF AT ANY TIME THROUGHOUT THIS PROCESS YOU HAVE QUESTIONS OR CONCERNS OR REQUIRE CLARIFICATION ON ANYTHING, PLEASE CONTACT THE PLANNING DEPARTMENT AT 780-849-8000.**

**We are located on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor of the Lakeland Centre Building  
101 Main Street SE.**







## TOWN OF SLAVE LAKE

### Development Permit Application Checklist for the Recovery Zone

The following is a list of items you will need to complete your development permit application. A complete application package will ensure there are no delays in processing your permit.

- A signed and completed Development Permit Application Form
- Refundable Development Deposit fee - \$2,000.00 for a house
- A detailed Site Plan (should include driveway location)
- Detailed Lot Grading Plan
- Two copies of the House Plans / Blue Prints

*"BY WORKING TOGETHER WE ARE BUILDING A BETTER COMMUNITY"*  
P.O. BOX 1030, 101 MAIN STREET S.E., SLAVE LAKE, ALBERTA T0G 2A0  
(780) 849-8000 FAX (780) 849-2633



## TOWN OF SLAVE LAKE

### IMPORTANT NOTICE UTILITY INSTALLATIONS

Shallow utilities are not yet in place for Zone 4; however, the Town is allowing construction to commence. Shallow utilities consist of natural gas, telephone and cable TV. The installation of these utilities will take place between the months of September and October. As such, when digging the hole for your new home, stock piling materials, etc., please do not place any material, including dirt, in or immediately adjacent to the utility right-of-way on your property. This will allow ATCO Gas, TELUS and Cable TV the room they need to ensure a timely and safe installation and prevent any potential delays. Relocation of any materials placed on these right-of-ways will be at the expense of the landowner.

Please be aware that ATCO Electric and the Town of Slave Lake have their utilities in place. As such, please exercise caution as any damage to these utilities will be at the expense of the landowner.

ATCO Electric will be energizing their utility over the next few weeks (i.e. running power through the lines). Please ensure you exercise caution around this and all utilities.

Should you have any questions or concerns regarding these requirements, please contact the Town of Slave Lake, Development Services at (780) 849-8000.

*"BY WORKING TOGETHER WE ARE BUILDING A BETTER COMMUNITY"*  
P.O. Box 1030, 101 MAIN STREET S.E., SLAVE LAKE, ALBERTA, T0G 2A0 (780) 849-8000 FAX (780) 849-2633  
Email: [town@slavelake.ca](mailto:town@slavelake.ca)

Please be advised that the camera inspection of the sanitary sewer line is required before the Town will sell a water meter for a specific development within the Recovery Zone. This is required to ensure that a new sanitary sewer service has been installed and to ascertain if there may be a problem with the sewer line beyond the property line, i.e. within the service line to the Sanitary Sewer Main. We are aware that significant debris was washed down into the Town's Sanitary Sewer System after the May 2011 Wildfire and this camera inspection will identify areas of concern that will be rectified prior to residents occupying their new homes.



## Slave Lake's experience

Slave Lake's fire and floods not only affected residents' physical environment. It also affected residents psychologically and impacted on the community resources available to them.

The fire destroyed landmarks, and some residents lost a sense of familiarity of their neighbourhood and community. As neighbourhoods were rebuilt with new homes, streets took on a different look. Health and education have also been affected. Many doctors did not return to the community and this has affected continuity of care. Unclear numbers of returning students left the junior and senior high schools scrambling when school started again. Some child care and day home options disappeared with the loss of homes. Some organized sports operated on a drop-in basis instead or had more flexible programming.

Extra attention has been needed to support mental health needs. Many residents experienced feelings of depression, anxiety, and bitterness along with mood swings and nightmares. Anger and frustration were often directed at Town and RCMP staff, particularly related to lack of access to burnt properties. Family violence, visits by addictions and mental health clients, use of sleeping pills and need for victim services have all increased. Some who didn't lose their home have suffered from "survivor guilt" or felt other stresses. Most residents have friends or family who lost homes.

*"Psychologically it is good to get recovery soon – 'emergency response' plays on emotions"*

*"Just because houses are being rebuilt, does not mean it's over. Mental recovery takes a long time."*



The Town and community agencies learned that trauma, a sense of loss and increased social stresses are common in communities struck by a major disaster. They rallied to provide support and programming to help residents. Monthly speakers, insurance counselling, anger management workshops, bi-weekly family fun nights and a wellness conference gave opportunities for residents to learn and share. There was also a determined effort to rebuild normalcy by holding annual events, such as the Canada Day celebrations, the Sand Sculpture Competition and Riverboat Daze. Programming in schools helped children cope with their fears and emotions. The Concert of Hope and the visit by the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, Prince William and Kate, were particularly uplifting events. Christmas events helped lift the sombre mood that seemed to be in the community at that time. The one-year anniversary of the fire was a landmark. The numerous community-oriented activities surrounding this helped everyone "heave a sigh of relief," as visiting reporters and dignitaries repeatedly noted surprise at how much recovery had been accomplished to date.

*"You're angry – good, you're normal"*

Agencies are aware that it will take a few more years for the community to heal. The sense of loss and stress can easily resurface, even with small triggers such as realization of a lost Christmas ornament, the smell of smoke, sirens going off or even dark clouds in the sky. Social recovery programming will be continued for months or years after the disaster.

*"The Arts Foundation forged ahead and put on concerts - a feather in the cap of those who continued"*

## Prepare

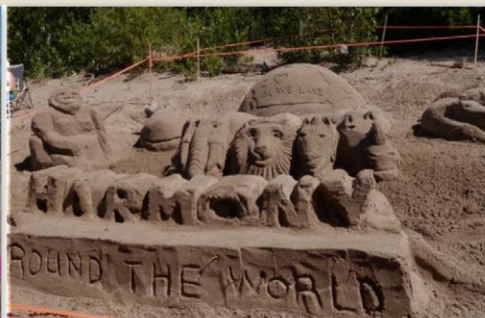
- Learn how trauma affects people
- Include ways to address emotional responses in the disaster and recovery plan
- Know the key social agencies in the area
- Identify disaster-experienced counsellors who can be contracted quickly
- Train staff to know how to help angry clients and deal with difficult people
- Train local residents in trauma recovery



## Recover

- Seek expert advice:
  - learn how trauma affects people
  - develop a knowledge-based social recovery plan
- Be aware of the emotional side of disaster cleanup:
  - allow victims to search through the remains in their yard, if safe, to help with healing
- Add at least two community programming staff members
- Work with the NGOs and key agencies in the area to:
  - avoid duplication
  - use resources fully
- Collaborate to address potentially lost resources such as:
  - child care, community agencies
- Help residents deal with emotional trauma:
  - communicate that their feelings are normal and expected
  - offer community workshops on how to support children, family members and neighbours
  - provide opportunities for residents to share, vent and be heard
- Provide support staff to deal with and support residents
- Determine the needs of the community for programming:
  - gather suggestions from other social agencies
  - listen to feedback from participants
- Acknowledge clients, persistently follow up on their questions and give quick feedback
- Include the voices of the disadvantaged in recovery planning
- Recognize local and external people for their efforts no matter how small their contributions
- Have ongoing community events as opportunities to get together and help with ongoing recovery

*"Don't let the fire define you"*





## Slave Lake's experience

In a major disaster, municipal staff are both an integral part of the recovery team and can also be victims of the event, therefore, support for their emotional wellbeing is critical. Many Slave Lake staff evacuated but a contingent stayed as part of the emergency response team. Some experienced the stresses of losing contact with their families and not knowing if they were cared for during this time. Eight Town staff lost their own homes in the fire and others experienced water damage in subsequent floods. Some operations staff even turned off water service at their own home destroyed by the fire. Many lived in temporary settings and dealt with personal losses, home construction, insurance claims and limited personal space. Everyone had friends or neighbours with personal losses. And many lost their place of work in the Town and federal/provincial offices, local businesses and the Widewater fire hall.

Initially Town staff worked in a temporary office with few resources (see **Rebuilding Town operations**). They rallied, along with the staff of the MD of Lesser Slave Lake and the Sawridge First Nation, to start the recovery process. For many this meant excessively long, exhausting days. Help came from municipalities across the province, funded positions and volunteer agencies, which reduced the burden. Yet, the increased workload still affected many staff over a year after the disaster. Children of staff have suffered emotionally as parents barely came home before children's bed time. Most expect that work life and home life will not be back to normal for two to three years after the fire. Such demands have since resulted in very high staff turnover.

While strong emotions are common in disaster recovery situations, no one was prepared for the anger and occasional threats by some residents towards Town staff and also to the RCMP. This was one of the most challenging aspects of the recovery process for Town staff. Training on how to respond did not take away the hurt and sometimes even concern for personal safety. This, coupled with long working hours, have affected morale, the desire to come to work and personal emotional recovery.

Some staff faced other challenges, such as limited child care, and affordable and comfortable temporary housing. Those who needed to rebuild have been dealing with financial, insurance timing and other pressures.

Some staff have used counselling services and the Employee Assistance Program to deal with personal and family stress. Sometimes, leaving town was the only way to get a break: *"Once you leave work, people want to still talk to you about work. I just don't want to go places – it wears you thin."*

Town Council and administration encouraged staff to take time off. However, when everyone is working hard, it is easy to lose sight of the effect that a heavy and difficult workload demand places on yourself and on others. And it's hard to remember to have fun.



*"Baskets of flowers showed up on our desk"*

*"It is hard to focus on work when your family is spread all over"*

*"Every day on the way to work I would tell myself that people would need to vent"*

*"We had 12 angry people per day vs. 1 per year"*

*"It would be helpful to take a touchy-feely course, but focused on emergency situations"*

*"Other people don't know why you are pissed off"*

*"I got some counselling and I should have done it earlier"*

## Prepare

- ❑ Train all staff on the emotional side of emergencies and disaster recovery - make it mandatory so even the 'tough guys' attend
- ❑ Develop a policy of maximum work hours during initial periods of recovery to ensure staff get the rest they need
- ❑ Work at creating or maintaining a positive organizational culture; respect and good faith go a long way in tough times
- ❑ Understand what supports are available through the Employee Assistance Program

## Recover

- ❑ Call for the help of other municipalities:
  - they are an excellent source of knowledgeable helpers who understand municipal systems and can help with little direction
  - arrange for an experienced backup for each staff position
- ❑ Have a thorough staff debriefing at the start and throughout
- ❑ Have an expert at the Town office to talk to distraught or abusive residents and have security if needed
- ❑ Look after staff and have someone dedicated to:
  - pay attention to staff needs and workload
  - make sure staff have enough time off and rest
  - find ways to address unusual expenses incurred by staff
- ❑ Watch for signs of stress – many people cannot recognize it in themselves
- ❑ Arrange for counselling with expertise in disaster recovery and post-traumatic stress:
  - one-on-one in a comfortable location
  - organization-wide
- ❑ Support staff emotional needs:
  - encourage staff to check out the counselling services, even if they are not yet sure they need it
  - provide opportunities for staff to talk, share stories and experiences
- ❑ Support staff family needs:
  - have someone check on the families of everyone who is called in to work
  - ensure they can access child care, especially when they need to work long hours
  - be flexible in work hours so staff can deal with family issues
  - give extra time off to staff who need to rebuild their home
- ❑ Regularly show appreciation for all the extra work: verbally, with flowers, surprise "free time"



- ❑ Nurture your staff team and organization:
  - ask how the work teams are doing
  - make time for team building
  - make a point of having fun
  - have regular staff social gatherings
  - celebrate small victories
  - celebrate milestones
- ❑ Arrange for others to organize social and celebratory events for staff
- ❑ Give key messages to staff:
  - Work with your co-workers – you're all going through the same thing
  - Do something normal, no matter how stressed you are, like you used to do: plant a garden, visit friends, pursue your hobby
  - Friends and family are important
  - Slow down, take time off
  - Get enough rest
  - "Get help and accept it – put your ego in your pocket"
  - Take your holidays; book some now
- ❑ Share case studies from other communities
- ❑ Offer training on dealing with difficult people and how to cope with your own emotions when confronted with difficult people
- ❑ Have follow-up debriefings to let people express:
  - what they went through
  - what supported them
  - what more support they need
  - where they are currently at
- ❑ Recognize that some people may show effects much later - be ready to support them
- ❑ Keep Town Council apprised of staff emotional wellness
- ❑ Model the way: senior management and Town Council need to lead by example in taking care of personal wellness by applying the above actions to themselves





## Slave Lake's experience

It took some time to fully recognize and use the strengths of volunteer agencies, referred to as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), for recovery. The Town had no prior experience and knowledge of the support they could provide. NGOs started arriving in Slave Lake within days of the fire. They included the Red Cross, Samaritan's Purse, Mennonite Disaster Relief, Salvation Army and the Billy Graham Evangelical Association of Canada. The local Ministerial Association, first recovering from its own state of shock, soon had helpers from across Alberta and started working with these organizations. Local organizations, such as the Friendship Centre, helped provide a food bank, soup kitchen and other services. The NGOs met daily to parcel out what each group could do well. Once the Town developed a closer relationship with them, they realized what a resource the NGOs could be. Even so, there still were times that volunteers did not have enough meaningful work to do.

The NGOs helped with some of the cleanup work, such as assisting seniors and disabled residents to deal with debris from the fire and floods, though some of the work was stopped to ensure insurance claim requirements were dealt with first. NGOs also provided services for others who "fell through the cracks." They provided emotional support by taking to the streets, striking up conversations with people and listening to their stories. The Ministerial Association opened a coffee house in one of the churches where people could come to share their experiences. When all the NGOs left, the Ministerial Association took on two key projects: welcome boxes with basic household goods for those in temporary housing, and Operation Christmas Cheer.

Organizational and operational nuances amongst NGOs can sometimes stand in the way of effectively assisting with recovery. In Slave Lake's case, many of the families affected were not poor. About 75% of those who lost their homes probably did not miss a pay cheque and most homeowners were well insured. However, they had needs that the Red Cross could support through its mandate to 'address unmet needs.' Initially, the Red Cross had a hard time justifying support for these families because these were not their typical clients. Knowing what the realities were, the Red Cross modified ways of doing things to reflect the unique needs and demands of the time. As well, it expanded its focus from disaster relief to recovery. The Red Cross had continued to provide support services two years after the fire and has funded community initiatives from the donations it received.

Many NGOs stayed shorter than they may normally do in similar circumstances. Partially, this was because of the high level of government support and involvement, partially due to lack of information around resident and community needs, and also due to the timing of the relief that the NGOs could provide.



## Prepare

- As part of your recovery preparedness plan:
  - list potential NGOs that assist in recovery, their mandates, key roles and specialities
  - include procedure to involve NGOs in recovery
  - recognize the limits of Town capacity and areas where NGOs could assist
- Develop relationships with local NGOs

## Recover

- Have a single contact for the NGOs
- Delay arrival of outside NGOs into the community until you are ready for them
- Ensure outside NGOs have realistic expectations and understand the need
- Harness the support available through NGOs:
  - connect with local churches, other organizations, and NGOs that come to help
  - identify the support and resources they each have access to
  - meet regularly to identify needs
  - maintain a schedule of newly arriving resources
- Recognize and use the specialized disaster recovery knowledge of the NGOs:
  - involve NGOs at strategic meetings
  - ask their advice
- Recognize the limits of municipal responsibility and ask NGOs to:
  - provide services that fall outside a normal municipal role
  - assist in relieving pressure on municipal staff
- Have NGOs help municipal staff:
  - let staff know the services that NGOs are providing
  - ask staff what NGOs could help them with
- Include NGOs in communications

*“NGOs will work together and don’t compete - One phone call gets you all”*

## “NGOs - people who have been there before”

These are the services offered by the main NGOs that came to Slave Lake:

- ❖ The **Canadian Red Cross** interviewed and assessed people’s needs, assisted with finances, referrals, accommodation, and provided psychological support to children and families. They received many donations with which they have funded school lunches and recreation for children and have supported many other community projects.
- ❖ The **Salvation Army** provided a mobile truck with meals.
- ❖ **Samaritan’s Purse** helped clean up debris from the fire and floods.
- ❖ **Mennonite Disaster Service** came prepared to search through rubble and rebuild homes; since neither of these were options, they became a support to Samaritan’s Purse in general cleanup.
- ❖ The **Billy Graham Evangelical Association of Canada** had trained counsellors who provided emotional support.

There were many other organizations that did not check in with officials.

*“If volunteer agencies called saying they needed food, accommodation, showers, they were advised not to come”*

*“Many NGOs used the church basement as a home base”*

*“Other agencies are of value – they can be your best friend”*



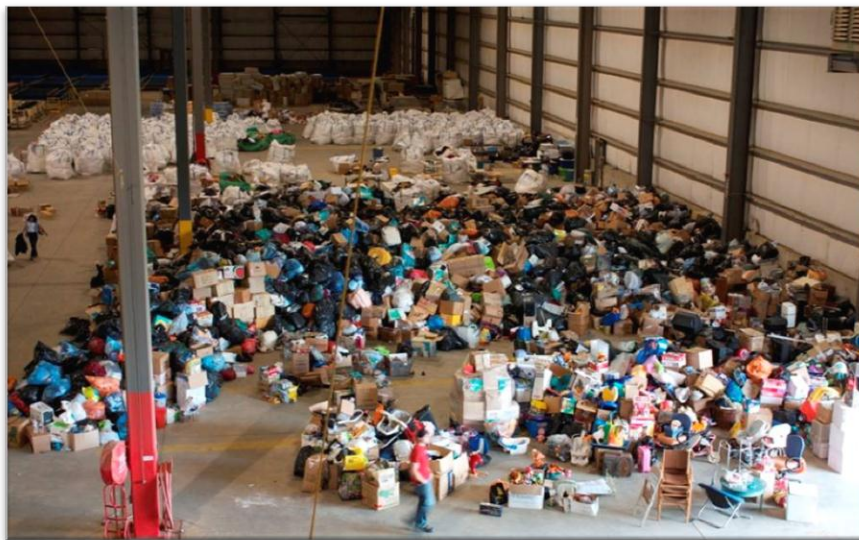
*“Prior to fire, we didn’t have pre-built relationship, rapport”*



## Slave Lake's experience

Generosity following the Slave Lake disaster was extraordinary. Donations started to stream in shortly after the fire. Physical goods arrived in Slave Lake, in other communities hosting evacuees, and were received by volunteer agencies. Cash donations were offered to the Town and to established organizations, such as the Canadian Red Cross, the Rotary Club, Samaritan's Purse, and the Community Foundation of Greater Grande Prairie.

Expected turnaround times to deal with donations was challenging. For example, the Red Cross had received many donations (from Alberta, across Canada and abroad) within the first two weeks and sought input into needs. Planning for



the provinces' recovery funds was needed to help identify the most beneficial long-term projects. Many well-intentioned donations of goods arrived when Town staff needed to focus their energies elsewhere. This created a difficult situation when Town staff and the recovery team were overwhelmed by the influx of donated goods, but did not want to appear ungrateful. Nonetheless, it was important to communicate that ongoing help, preferably in the form of cash donations, was still required.

The logistics of physical donations can be overwhelming. The Town's Community Services department handled local donations of physical goods. The quantity of items was so vast, it became a huge job that required a

number of full-time staff and volunteers. Pallets of items arrived, as did truckloads of clothes, furniture and household items that needed sorting, sometimes with little or no notice. The communities that housed evacuees experienced similar challenges.

The Town asked two local residents to coordinate the cash donation offers it received directly. These individuals tracked donor information and intent (a general donation or donation to a specific cause). They then worked with the Rotary District 5370 Charitable Foundation to hold the funds and send tax receipts. A Community Donation Allocation Committee was established and in coordination with other funding sources, allocated funds to community projects.

Other local agencies that assist the day-to-day living of low income earners can suffer during recovery. Regular donations to the Salvation Army food bank and the Friendship Centre were down drastically during this time as the focus was on those affected in the disaster. Volunteers were also in high demand. This made it harder for low income residents to get help.

### Things to be aware of:

- Donations of clothes, furniture and household items:
  - need sorting, cleaning and storing
  - are very labour intensive
  - can cost staff time and facility rental
  - can be counter-productive
  - up to 75% may not be used and could require disposal
- Cash donations are:
  - much simpler to deal with
  - can be used in diverse ways
  - can be used when needed
  - maintains dignity, pride and freedom to purchase according to personal needs
  - can be designated to specific uses to revitalize the economy



*“It was not about the stuff - it was more about the message that someone cared about them and that they were not alone”*

## Prepare

- ❑ Include procedures for dealing with cash and material donations in your recovery plan:
  - consider outside organizations to handle donations
  - establish a charitable organization or identify an alternate local organization to take in donations and write tax receipts
  - consider the potential impact on local organizations who rely on donations to assist low income individuals and families
- ❑ Have strategic regional and community plans to identify physical and social infrastructure projects for large-scale donations

## Recover

- ❑ Identify a local organization to accept cash donations
- ❑ Arrange with one or more outside organizations to run a physical donations centre:
  - local volunteers may not be able to coordinate this if they are personally affected by the disaster
- ❑ Include information about donations in early public communications:
  - identify physical donation needs, but discourage donation of goods
  - have clear information about cash donations
  - encourage ongoing donations to donation-based organizations such as the food bank and Salvation Army
- ❑ Have a third party send out the messages around the benefit of cash donations rather than donations of goods
- ❑ Keep Town staff informed about procedures for donations
- ❑ Encourage organizations who have received donations to:
  - work together to select worthwhile community projects
  - consider any existing regional plans as well as newly emerged needs
- ❑ Have a dedicated co-ordinator/reporter to:
  - coordinate the numerous agencies involved
  - report regularly on donations received and disbursements made

*“We received seven envelopes with donations per day on average, many with touching letters”*



*Photographs courtesy of The Lakeside Leader, August 17, May 25, and June 15, 2011*

*“I was humbled by the box of donated items I personally received, it was so appreciated; I had no pillows, no ...”*



## Slave Lake's experience

Two key principles of recovery are ensuring that there is a smooth transition from response to recovery and ensuring that recovery is led locally. In this case, the transition from response to recovery was not as seamless as it might have been. When the response professionals pulled out after the state of local emergency was lifted, a governance vacuum resulted due to the impaired capacity of the local jurisdictions to effectively assume responsibility and act on all of the things that needed to be done. More effective but not without its own challenges was the transition from crisis response governance to a more steady state recovery governance. This has been described as transitioning from a sprint to a marathon. Considerable adjustment to expectations, relationship management and decision-making approach was required.

Neither the communities involved nor the Government of Alberta (GOA) had experience leading recovery efforts of the magnitude required following the Slave Lake fire. Commitment, mutual respect, open communication and flexibility advanced the recovery efforts of consultants, volunteers and local, provincial and federal governments.

GOA representatives and local leaders of the Town, the MD and the Sawridge First Nation worked together on the recovery. The province struck the Slave Lake Regional Recovery ADMs Task Force, a cross-ministry team of key government leaders at the Assistant Deputy Minister level, to lead the GOA response. Many GOA departments were represented in Slave Lake with some working off-site, in addition to consultants, residents and others. The various stakeholders worked to coordinate interim housing, demolition and waste management, small business support, teachers for schools, mental health supports and make services from various departments available to help with the recovery.

Multiple working groups were set in place to assist with long term recovery. The GOA created a Regional Recovery Coordination Group (RRCG) of GOA employees and contracted advisors. A Tri-Council of the elected officials of the Town, the MD and the Sawridge First Nation was established to provide strategic direction, oversight and endorsement for recovery priorities. A CAO Secretariat was formed to act as a collective CAO to the Tri-Council, advise the three elected Councils and coordinate and implement recovery-related activities. RRCG provided resources to the Tri-Council and the Secretariat. Work began immediately to develop the Lesser Slave Lake Regional Wildfire Recovery Plan announced on August 3, 2011. A Governance Protocol to guide the Tri-Council's decision-making process was developed collaboratively between starting June 2011 and was formally signed by all three jurisdictions in June 2012.

The dedication, open communication, cooperation and positive relationships among all stakeholders through the recovery process was extraordinary. The Tri-Council developed strong ties. The Mayor, Reeve, Chief, Councillors and administrators met frequently to discuss the many matters to be addressed. External consultants and partners provided advice. Each stakeholder focussed on a common goal of advancing recovery. They sought help wherever it was available - from external experts, private service providers, and residents - for whatever needed to be done. Residents, governments and other stakeholders who came to help with recovery were pleased with the local administration and elected officials for the exceptional leadership, commitment and co-operation they demonstrated.

This is not to say that there were no challenges or disagreements. For example, the desire to get information out and the need to verify for accuracy sometimes put conflicting pressures on the timing of news releases. Input into recovery needs from low income groups and disadvantaged populations can be difficult to gather. One of the biggest challenges was to recognize and become comfortable with the reality that the recovery required a regional approach and that local desires sometimes had to be subordinated to that regional approach.

*"We established strong positive relationship with the Town, MD, and the Sawridge First Nation"*

*"Everybody had a can-do attitude"*



*"People were very much focussed on delivery e.g. schools have teachers, putting in place support for mental health"*

*"People were genuinely committed to taking risks to develop solutions"*

*"I have a lot of respect for Town Council"*

Lack of clarity on funding sources, governance structure, and responsibilities for recovery created some initial disorder and uncertainty. Linkages among the various levels of government and other stakeholders were unclear. Individual bureaucratic procedures made it difficult to navigate government processes and support. Answers were needed for questions such as: **Who decides what? What decisions can be made? What are the timelines? Who will commit resources?** The Recovery Plan and the Tri-Council Governance Protocol helped to clarify decision-making mechanisms.

At the Town administration level, many out-of-the-ordinary decisions needed to be made. Town staff at all levels sought clear direction, at a time when everyone was loaded up with an overwhelming level of work (see **Staffing for recovery**, **Staff wellness** and **Communication**). A Recovery Manager support position has helped the CAO focus more on day-to-day rather than recovery matters.

*“There are two key principles of recovery: a smooth transition from response to recovery and recovery that is locally led”*

## Prepare

- Include decision-making structures in the disaster recovery plan:
  - consider the increased need for quick decisions at multiple levels
  - plan for back-up municipal decision makers to deal with high volumes of issues
  - identify the difference between disaster and recovery protocols

## Recover

- Have powerful decision-makers on a Recovery Task Force to quicken decisions
- Clarify the municipal chain of command and back-up decision making procedures
- Clarify decision making protocols and authorities of different levels of government, particularly as it relates to funding support
- Engage local leaders and stakeholders from all walks of life for input on recovery planning
  - hold focussed group discussions with sectors such as businesses, contractors, service and hospitality
- Collaborate with local school boards about plans to resume education

*“We gained each other’s confidence”*

*“The process did slow everyone down, but maybe that was a good thing”*





## Slave Lake's experience

The Government of Alberta (GOA) was quick and generous in its offer of funding for recovery and support to the Town of Slave Lake, the MD of Lesser Slave River and the Sawridge First Nation. The most resounding sentiment expressed about this was one of deep appreciation. There is a sense that without this support, the town would take much longer to recover and may have never done so successfully.

The Province provided immediate help during the fire to the communities and residents affected. Soon after, it helped with initial recovery costs such as cleanup, temporary housing, support services through the Red Cross, replacement of the regional fire hall, and additional municipal staff. Funds have been allocated for municipal tax stabilization, infrastructure work and longer term recovery projects. Alberta government staff and contracted specialists provided expert guidance and support. The establishment of supporting organizational structures helped guide the recovery process and connections between different layers of government (see **Governance**).

Timing of this support has presented a couple of challenges. A gap between the departure of the Emergency Operations Centre team and arrival of recovery support left a void. Turnover of Government of Alberta recovery managers resulted in delays to the evolution of the on-site recovery team. There was also lack of clarity early on of what type of support the team would provide for Town staff. Early discussions of a recovery team led Town staff to believe they would have immediate help with the recovery of their operations. The recovery team has instead focused on supporting the Secretariat and Tri-Council (see **Governance**), and on developing and resourcing the large community projects identified in the *Lesser Slave Lake Regional Wildfire Recovery Plan* announced in August 2011. Funding support was announced for staff support in July 2011, though it took time to fill the positions. In the meantime all the recovery work and day-to-day activities vied for attention.

On the positive side, a lengthier planning process has been beneficial to help determine long-term projects as it has taken time to assess the full needs quickly.

*"The province came through unbelievably and continues to do so"*

*"The bureaucratic checks and balances of the GOA could have been more nimble"*

*"We needed direction and advice - we didn't know what we needed"*

*"I was absolutely impressed with the Government of Alberta – I was proud to be an Albertan"*



## Prepare

- Know how the Disaster Relief Program funding works

## Recover

- Recognize that there are immediate needs, and that it takes time to determine long-term needs
  - include all levels of administration in identifying needs
- Work with the Government of Alberta to secure immediate back-up staff to help with recovery management
- Work with the Government of Alberta to develop a recovery plan supported with resources from various levels of government and other sources, and include:
  - measures required to resettle residents into the community
  - municipal income stabilization
  - uninsurable infrastructure costs
  - short-term, intermediate and long-term recovery needs
- Consider all elements of recovery:
  - residents' physical, mental and social well-being
  - environmental elements such as public amenities, waste and pollution, and natural assets
  - rebuilding of homes, business, utilities and public buildings
  - revitalization of the economy
- Identify local leaders as potential recovery managers – they are invested in the community and know local resources
- Maintain regular contact the local MP and MLA
- Draw on the expertise of Government of Alberta experts



## Slave Lake's experience

The core challenge for Town of Slave Lake was that it had never dealt with anything with the magnitude of the 2011 fire before. The region has a long history of fires, and prepares for and fights wildfires each season, but no one anticipated the unprecedented winds and firestorm. The town's existing disaster recovery plan related to floods, not fire. A key question is: how much planning is enough, and what is too much? Consider these two comments:

*"Maintain a good standard of emergency response. Put the money into it but don't overly do it. The fire in Slave Lake was unusual; the size was never what one could anticipate. So don't over-invest in preparing for a fire of that size."*

*"If you didn't think it could ever happen to you..., it can!"*

Planning for recovery is referred to in most of the sections of this guide, and relates to specific elements of recovery. This section offers more general planning suggestions. Some may be too time consuming to plan for in advance, and could instead be added to the emergency and recovery plan as considerations that need to be addressed if the time comes.

## Prepare

- Use a regional approach for emergency planning
- Train staff from multiple departments in:
  - emergency management procedures
  - post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms
- Develop a business continuity plan (see **Rebuilding Town operations**)
- Have an Employee Assistance Program that provides emotional support (see **Staff Wellness**)
- Review the emergency response plan:
  - outline clearly when and how a local state of emergency is declared
  - add early recovery as an integral component of the plan
  - assess local circumstances and consider the ramifications of all types of potential disasters
  - include processes for contacting staff
  - include roles and expectations for councillors and staff from all departments during the emergency, potential evacuation, and return
  - consider the possibility that response may need to be sustained over time
- Be aware of emergency plans of others: hospital, RCMP, schools, college, SPCA, utility companies
- Ensure the emergency response and recovery plan is accessible remotely and publicly
- Conduct mock disasters to practice processes and understand lines of authority, and include:
  - all municipal departments staff and at all levels so everyone understands the overall process
  - local contractors (similar to Sustainable Resources Development)
  - neighbouring municipalities and other stakeholders
- Train new employees quickly
- Regularly update the staff contact list with multiple ways to contact them:
  - include personal cell phones, email or other electronic contacts
  - establish a 'contact tree' to fan out information quickly
- Regularly update contact lists for key businesses and organizations (see **Procurement** and **Governance**)
- Develop policies to cover:
  - casual workers in emergency situations
  - reimbursement of volunteer firefighters from out of town
  - acceptable rates for services and supplies
  - additional expenses incurred by staff participating in emergency response and recovery
- Prepare an emergency response trailer:
  - with signs, barricades, and barricade lights that can be taken to locations as needed
  - that is only used during emergencies so it is always well-stocked
- Keep a database of equipment and supplies:
  - inspect supplies regularly
  - ensure supplies are not expired
- Keep community plans up-to-date so it is easier to rebuild:
  - municipal development, operations and sustainability plans
  - risk management plans and Fire Underwriter Survey

*"Prepare, prepare; talk it and believe it"*

*"Take your emergency plan off the shelf and blow off the dust"*

*"Develop institutional muscle memory so you're not knocked back on your heels; practice it so you are not in dazed shock, but can react instinctively."*





## Slave Lake's experience

Adversity can inspire people to do wonderful things for others. The incredible generosity, humanity and compassion displayed encouraged and uplifted Slave Lake residents. Immediately, neighbouring communities opened their doors and homes to embrace over 10,000 residents that were displaced. Community organizations, individuals, churches and corporations raised funds to help Slave Lake rebuild and recover. Whether it was a few dollars, hundreds or thousands of dollars, people sent what they could. Quilters from across Canada stitched beautiful quilts for affected families. Alberta municipalities sent personnel and raised funds to help town staff with their losses. Municipalities across Canada sent cheques to help with the recovery. Celebrities, musicians, artists and broadcasting companies came together and hosted benefit concerts throughout the year. The visit by the Duke and Duchess of York spent time with families who lost homes and with emergency responders. And no one will forget the smiles and excitement of touching the Stanley Cup! There were and still are so many acts of kindness that it's difficult to name them all. It was heart-warming to learn that Slave Lake has so many friends both near and far.



## The Fingers of the Flame

Roger Borchert is the Director for Operation for the Town of Slave Lake. He is also a poet who has helped families grieving over loved ones lost in service for the Canadian Armed Forces through his poems. He received a Queen Elizabeth Diamond Jubilee Medal for these in 2012. When the Town of Slave Lake was ravaged by the wildfire in 2011, one of the families that he comforted through his words suggested that he write about Slave Lake's recovery. Following is Roger's poem.

### The Fingers of the Flames: A Poem of the Forest Fires Which Took So Much from So Many

*The winds howled with fury  
Flames lit the sky  
Sparks and embers everywhere  
Smoke and ash blowing by  
Burning homes and businesses  
They reached down with all their might  
Stole those things a lifetime brings  
As tears filled our eyes*

*Though the fingers of the flames  
Scorched mementoes of the past  
They stole those things material  
And left hearts pounding fast  
We will rise from our ashes  
Rebuild our town anew  
And be stronger in the future forth  
As we will do what we must do*

*Family friends and loved ones raced  
Flames licking at their heels  
As they left their homes to the fire's fate  
To safety and a new  
A new day that will see the sun  
Rise to bring a calm  
To hearts that need to rise above  
To where their hearts belong*

*The fury of a forest spoke  
Of hazards lying near  
Left our town in ashes now  
And held our lives in fear  
The work it took to overcome  
This endless daunting task  
The efforts of so many worked  
To bring them home at last*

*Though the fingers of the flames  
Scorched mementoes of the past  
They stole those things material  
And left hearts pounding fast  
We will rise from our ashes  
Rebuild our town anew  
And be stronger in the future forth  
As we will do what we must do*

Everything happened so fast, in the blink of an eye, a beautiful sunny day turned into a nightmare. We had no idea what was going on, we had to leave our homes, our neighbours. People were running, it was terrifying, there were sirens, smoke was everywhere.

# thank you

The chain of events that began on May 14, 2011 forever changed our world. Homes were lost, families were displaced and lives were uprooted as disaster descended upon us. The many challenges we've faced as a result have had a massive impact on who we are, how we live our daily lives and most importantly, what the word **community** truly means to us.

On the anniversary of one of Canada's worst natural disasters, it's vital that we acknowledge the citizens of our new, broader community who came to our aid when we needed them most.

On behalf of the residents of the Town of Slave Lake, the MD of Lesser Slave River and Sawridge First Nation, we wish to extend our sincere gratitude to the people who helped us through an incredibly grim time.

Without a second thought, they provided us with food, clothing and shelter, but their support extended far beyond meeting our basic needs. Countless gestures, from distracting our children with special activities and providing discounts at local businesses to just listening to our troubled thoughts, meant the world to us and will never be forgotten. The flames that engulfed our communities were enormous, but the heartfelt compassion of those who came to our aid was even greater.

For years to come, stories will continue to spread about the May wildfires. Stories told by thousands of people and from as many perspectives, but with one common thread: praise for our new friends and neighbours in communities across Alberta who took us in, kept us safe and saw us through our darkest hour.

From the bottom of our hearts, we thank you.





The following FireSmart information was provided by the Slave Lake Regional Recovery Coordination Group



Almost a third of the Recovery Project budget overseen by the Tri-Council was allocated to create a model FireSmart Community to implement and demonstrate FireSmart principles on a regional scale. FireSmart is a nationally recognized initiative designed to help home and property owners reduce the threat of wildfires in the “wildland/urban interface” where wildlands and human residences meet. The interface occurs when lifestyle and communities extend further into forested areas, becoming more exposed to wildfires. For more information, visit [www.livefiresmart.ca](http://www.livefiresmart.ca).

Citizen involvement is the cornerstone of a successful FireSmart program. The program helps reduce the risk to life, communities, resources and infrastructure; promotes principles and actions for individuals and companies; provides information to stakeholder audiences; and brings communities and organizations together to work cooperatively to plan and prepare for effective response to future wildfires. In 2011, the Tri-Council endorsed the creation of the FireSmart Regional Action Team (FRAT) working group, composed of representatives from the Town, MD and Sawridge FN, the CAO Secretariat, and experts from FireSmart and Alberta Sustainable Resource Development (now ESRD). FRAT’s mandate was to create model FireSmart communities in the Lesser Slave Lake region, following the Seven Disciplines of FireSmart:

**Education** of people living in wildfire-prone areas through in-school programs, community events, and property inspections

**Fuel management**, which involves thinning, pruning and removal of vegetation, including clear-cutting of trees in key areas

**Legislation**, including residential construction and design bylaws, sprinklers and potentially spark retarders on off-road vehicles

**Development guidelines** for builders and planners

**Emergency Response** and Pre-response Planning, Fire Control agreements, and regional emergency response exercises

**Cross Training** regional fire personnel who usually fight structural fires on wildland firefighting techniques

**Inter-agency Cooperation** to ensure an integrated planning, communications, training and response process

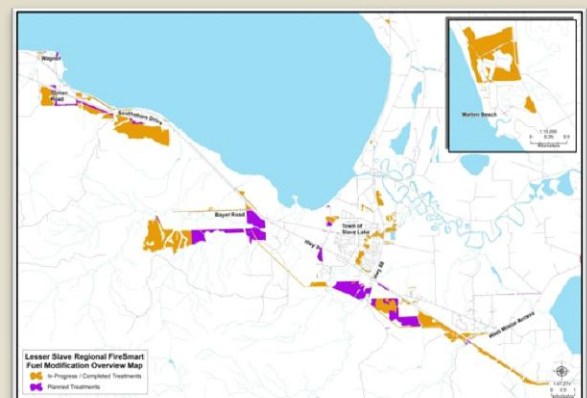
In April 2013, a new FireSmart Committee was formed to ensure the sustainability of the in the Lesser Slave Lake Region program beyond the Recovery/Transition period. FRAT has evolved into a technical advisory group that contributes to, advises, and supports the new Committee, which in turn evaluates and makes recommendations regarding investment of the balance of the allotted \$20 million budget. A key mandate of the new committee will be to help FRAT and Tri-Council achieve a sustainable cultural shift that engages regional residents and results in a broad-based uptake of FireSmart plans and practices.

## Fuel Management Program

Vegetation management is by far the largest single investment and most visible component of the regional FireSmart program. FireSmart crews – regional FireSmart personnel, Sawridge FN crews, ESRD crews, contract crews and forest industry partnerships working on Forest Management Agreement lands – have completed 830 of the 1390 hectares identified in detailed regional hazard assessment and fuels management strategies outlined in the 2012 Wildfire Mitigation Strategy (posted on [www.livefiresmart.ca](http://www.livefiresmart.ca)).

The map shows completed and proposed vegetation management programs, which range from thinning, pruning and mulching to removal of “dead-and-down” timber and commercial harvesting. Marten Beach and Widewater are examples of completed FireSmart treatments.

In early 2013, FRAT worked with local timber companies and small sawmill operators to leverage commercial harvesting activities near Highway 2 east of the Town and near the Hamlet of Widewater to the west. Although the harvesting of hazardous fire-prone stands initially appears very rough, natural regeneration will result in stands of aspen and other fire-resistant deciduous species, which are typically the first to grow in harvested areas. This should allow for several decades of reduced fire hazard.







### About the 2011 fire

- Lesser Slave Lake Regional Recovery Plan, [www.md124.ca/sites/all/themes/zen\\_Isr/Isr/docs/crisis/LSR\\_Recovery\\_Plan.pdf](http://www.md124.ca/sites/all/themes/zen_Isr/Isr/docs/crisis/LSR_Recovery_Plan.pdf)
- Lesser Slave Lake Regional Recovery Plan Executive Summary, [www.rebuildslavelake.com/uploads/7/6/6/4/7664072/lesser\\_slave\\_lake\\_regional\\_wildfire\\_recovery\\_plan\\_-\\_executive\\_summary1.pdf](http://www.rebuildslavelake.com/uploads/7/6/6/4/7664072/lesser_slave_lake_regional_wildfire_recovery_plan_-_executive_summary1.pdf)
- Crisis & Recovery from a Municipal Perspective, In the wake of Wildfire 2011, Lesser Slave River tells its story; a brochure available from the MD of Lesser Slave River
- The Slave Lake Fires May 2011 Lessons Learned, Recommendations for Community Preparedness and Mitigation, [www.ruralwildfire.ca](http://www.ruralwildfire.ca)  
Flat Top Complex, Final Report from the Flat Top Complex Wildfire Review Committee, [srd.alberta.ca/Wildfire/WildfirePreventionEnforcement/WildfireReviews/documents/FlatTopComplex-WildfireReviewCommittee-May18-2012.pdf](http://srd.alberta.ca/Wildfire/WildfirePreventionEnforcement/WildfireReviews/documents/FlatTopComplex-WildfireReviewCommittee-May18-2012.pdf)
- Lesser Slave Lake Regional Urban Interface Wildfire –Lessons Learned Final Report, [www.aema.alberta.ca/documents/0426-Lessons-Learned-Final-Report.pdf](http://www.aema.alberta.ca/documents/0426-Lessons-Learned-Final-Report.pdf)

### Sources of expertise

- Alberta Emergency Management Association, [www.aema.alberta.ca](http://www.aema.alberta.ca)
- Emergency Management, Public Safety Canada, [www.publicsafety.gc.ca](http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca)
- Dr. Valerie Cole, [www.valeriecole.net/content/disaster-mental-health](http://www.valeriecole.net/content/disaster-mental-health)
- Institute for Disaster Mental Health, [www.newpaltz.edu/idmh/](http://www.newpaltz.edu/idmh/)
- A guide to business continuity planning, [www.publicsafety.gc.ca/prg/em/gds/bcp-eng.aspx](http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/prg/em/gds/bcp-eng.aspx)
- Emergency Management Institute: [training.fema.gov/EMI/](http://training.fema.gov/EMI/)  
The United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction: <http://www.unisdr.org>
- Making Cities Resilient: [www.unisdr.org/campaign/resilientcities/](http://www.unisdr.org/campaign/resilientcities/)
- FireSmart Lesser Slave Region, [livefiresmart.ca/](http://livefiresmart.ca/)
- Restore your economy; Disaster Preparedness and Economic Recovery: <http://restoreyoureconomy.org>

### Federal and provincial disaster relief funding

- Disaster Financial Assistance Arrangements (DFAA), [www.publicsafety.gc.ca/prg/em/dfaa/index-eng.aspx](http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/prg/em/dfaa/index-eng.aspx)
- Disaster Recovery Program (DRP), [www.aema.alberta.ca/assistance\\_recovery\\_main.cfm](http://www.aema.alberta.ca/assistance_recovery_main.cfm)

### Non-governmental organizations (NGOs)

- Local non-profit service clubs and ministerial associations
- Alberta NGO Council, [www.ngocouncil.com](http://www.ngocouncil.com)
- Canadian Red Cross, [www.redcross.ca](http://www.redcross.ca)
- Mennonite Disaster Service, [mds.mennonite.net](http://mds.mennonite.net)
- Salvation Army, [www.salvationarmy.ca](http://www.salvationarmy.ca)
- Samaritan's Purse, [samaritanspurse.ca/rss/disaster-relief/canada/samaritans-purse-disaster-relief-in-canada](http://samaritanspurse.ca/rss/disaster-relief/canada/samaritans-purse-disaster-relief-in-canada)
- Billy Graham Evangelical Association of Canada, [www.billygraham.ca/ministries/people-in-crisis.aspx](http://www.billygraham.ca/ministries/people-in-crisis.aspx)



### Photos

Thanks to the many individuals and organizations that shared photos with the Town of Slave Lake of the fire and the many events that followed. These have added a rich visual dimension to this report.



*“Don’t underestimate the magnitude of the task. Slave Lake did not make that mistake. This contributed to the big success.”*

The guide has gathered the thoughts and experiences of Council members and staff of the Town of Slave Lake, and stakeholders from the region. They agreed to share so that other communities may be better prepared for unexpected disasters and come out of the experience stronger. There are some key messages: Recognize that the unexpected can happen. Bring in experts in disaster recovery immediately, and ensure recovery support is in place before emergency support leaves. Gear up quickly; plan your staff needs and bring in extra people. Communicate soon and well.

We hope this guide will be of help to other communities. If you are ever faced with a disaster recovery situation, we invite you, as you rebuild, to make notes about what worked and what didn’t, to give yourself opportunities to debrief and to share your wisdom with others.



*“The deployment of human and financial resources was quite outstanding-on whole it was very positive and worked extremely well”*

## NADC reflections on the process

An additional important lesson.... The Town of Slave Lake asked the Northern Alberta Development Council (NADC) to compile checklists of the wisdom they had gained in recovering from the 2011 wildfire. It soon became apparent that the discussions this involved also provided Town staff and Council, as well as many of the stakeholders, with an opportunity to share and debrief from very challenging experiences. It became part of the healing process. NADC staff felt the responsibility this entailed, to honour the experiences, capture the essence of the challenges and triumphs, and reflect the increased knowledge and experience. We hope you find value in the stories and the wisdom.

*NADC staff: Audrey DeWit, project manager, researcher and writer; Cynthia Arku, researcher and writer; Kim Pinnock, editing support; Donna Evans, report design. Additional editing support provided by John Sparks, Sparks and Associates.*

# NOTES



**“The vast majority of people will leave from this event  
stronger than they came”**



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