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February 14, 2008

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Interest high in eco-industrial park

By CHUCK CHIANG
Today staff
Thursday February 14, 2008

The planned **eco**-industrial park on Fort McMurray's north side could be opening to developers before the end of the year, which would help to alleviate the acute shortage of industrial land in the city.

Regional council this week unanimously approved to transfer control of the roughly 65-acre (23 hectare) site to Wood Buffalo Housing and Development Corp., a municipal corporation dedicated to affordable housing projects prior to the decision.

Ed Salmon, Wood Buffalo's manager of land services, told council that the transfer agreement is being looked over by lawyers, and the deal could be finalized very soon. Bryan Lutes, president of Wood Buffalo Housing, said it could be sooner than Salmon's estimates.

"I'm hoping for sooner, maybe by the end of the month," Lutes said of the time frame for finalizing the transfer. "I don't think any issues have come up."

He added that, depending on certain external factors, his group would like to open the lots to interested parties by this fall.

"We aim to have the lots ready for development by the end of this building season," Lutes said. "If we can do that, I think you'll see construction start by the spring of 2009. Hopefully, we'll see businesses in there in a year-and-a-half or two."

The wildcard to the parcel's development timeframe, however, will be the provincial government, municipal officials say.

The **eco**-industrial site requires stormwater draining requirements that aren't included in the current plot's plans, and Wood Buffalo is trying to acquire additional land from the province to allow those features to be built.

No timeframe for the provincial land transfer has been announced, and officials discussed a possibility of cutting into the existing parcel's industrial land for drainage features, but Lutes said that is unlikely.

"We're ever hopeful that (the land transfer from the province) will be dealt with in a timely manner," Lutes said.

"We're still focused on plan A, which is acquiring the land from the province, because we think it's the best plan. We haven't divided our attention from that."

At the meeting, mayor Melissa Blake and councillors expressed some frustration with the process.

"Round and round the bush we go," Blake said at the meeting. "But hopefully, we'll have something more solid to move forward on (with Wood Buffalo Housing's involvement)."

Coun. Mila Byron told Lutes and Salmon the industrial land shortage in the city is at a critical stage.

"What we need is to get industrial land to people as soon as possible," Byron said. "Is this the fastest way we can do so at this time?"

Lutes's answer is a firm "yes," and he added interest in the land continues to run high.

"Many lots have already been potentially spoken for," he said.

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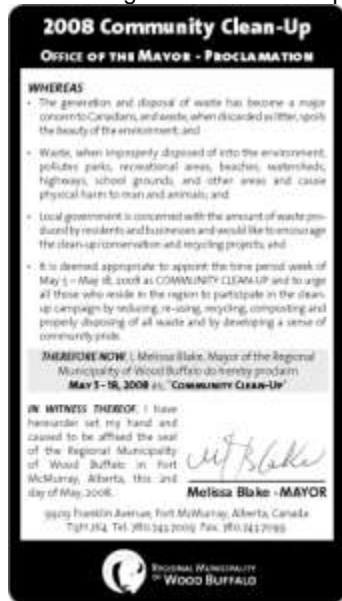
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