


## The Role of Local Government in Coal Transition: The Case of Rural Alberta

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### Article abstract

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# The Role of Local Government in Coal Transition: The Case of Rural Alberta

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## Abstract

Since the 1980s, Canadian municipalities have experienced pressures due to legislative/policy reforms and the downloading of responsibilities from senior governments. This shift has affected daily operations as municipalities struggle with outdated financial and jurisdictional structures. Such pressures have been exacerbated in Alberta by provincial and federal ‘coal phase-out’ policies, as the coal industry has historically been a primary source of revenue for some communities. In response, municipalities have engaged in processes to generate revenue, maintain service levels, and diversify their economies. This research, in Parkland County and Forestburg, Alberta, explores impacts and responses associated with top-down policy change. Results indicate that senior government supports were inadequate in the delivery of effective transition supports, which created challenges for local governments grappling with transition impacts. Municipalities have developed innovative and entrepreneurial solutions in transition, but the research outlines lessons and policy recommendations to better integrate municipalities into future transition policy and programs.

## Résumé

Depuis les années 1980, les municipalités canadiennes subissent des pressions en raison des réformes législatives et politiques et du transfert de responsabilités des gouvernements supérieurs. Cette évolution a eu des répercussions sur les activités quotidiennes des municipalités qui luttent avec de vieilles structures financières et juridictionnelles. Ces pressions ont été exacerbées en Alberta par les politiques provinciales et fédérales d'élimination graduelle du charbon, l'industrie du charbon étant historiquement la source principale de revenus de certaines collectivités. En réponse, les municipalités se sont engagées dans des processus visant à générer des revenus, à maintenir les niveaux de service et à diversifier leurs économies. Cette recherche, menée dans le comté de Parkland et à Forestburg, en Alberta, explore les impacts et les réponses associés au changement de politique descendante. Les résultats indiquent que le soutien des gouvernements supérieurs est insuffisant pour fournir des résultats efficaces. Les municipalités ont élaboré des solutions novatrices et entrepreneuriales en matière de transition, mais la recherche met en évidence les leçons et les recommandations politiques pour mieux intégrer les municipalités dans les politiques et les programmes de transition à venir.

## Keywords:

coal transitions,  
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## Mots-clés:

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## Introduction

Non-metropolitan local governments in Canada are an integral part of the economic landscape as they manage critical infrastructure and play important roles in land-use and resource development. Despite the significant responsibilities local governments have related to land-use planning, service delivery, and asset management (Tindal & Nobes Tindal, 2004), local governments in Canada have faced decades of economic restructuring and downloading from senior governments, while struggling with outdated financial and jurisdictional structures (Ryser et al., 2021). These limitations are particularly evident in rural regions during times of resource booms, busts, and transition when already precarious systems are under intense pressure. Issues like lacking/outdated infrastructure and limited local government capacity can significantly impede economic recovery and resilience (Alm et al., 2021).

In Alberta, the pressures on local governments are particularly acute surrounding the implications of the legislated coal phase-out. In 2015, the provincial government required all coal-generated electricity to be phased out by 2030 (Alberta, n.d.a). This phase-out was reinforced through the 2018 federal Off-Coal Regulations (Canada, 2021a). Canada's commitments to achieving a 30 percent reduction of GHG emissions below 2005 levels by 2030 via the Paris Agreement, along with goals to achieve a net-zero electricity grid by 2035, have catalyzed a transition away from electricity generated by fossil fuels (Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2022). As local governments grapple with the impacts of these policies, they face considerable pressure to both navigate transition processes and find new and innovative approaches to address socio-economic pressures.

The Government of Canada and the Government of Alberta have offered various programs to help mitigate local and regional impacts of coal transition

(Alberta, n.d.b; Canada, 2021a, 2021b). A noted feature of these programs is the requirement that local governments and communities be more innovative and entrepreneurial in their approaches to governance, operations, and economic development (Hallstrom, 2018). This is a common feature of top-down supports (when they do exist) and are linked with broader political and ideological manifestations of neoliberalism (Ryser et al., 2023; Grimshaw et al., 2020; Brenner et al., 2010). In the absence of senior government and industrial stewardship, local governments and their planning staff are required to play increasing roles to mitigate and advance local transition (Douglas, 2023).

The purpose of this article is to better understand the role of local governments in the coal transition process. Despite the important roles of local governments in planning and economic development processes, they have been largely excluded from research and policy attention linked with transition and post-carbon planning (Harrahill and Douglas, 2019). We address this gap with a case study and policy analysis of two non-metropolitan communities in Alberta. Our findings indicate that local governments were not adequately included within 'just transition' policies and programs, leading to poor transition outcomes and lost strategic opportunities to advance economic resilience for rural communities in Alberta.

## Literature Review

### Rural Restructuring

Rural municipalities in Canada have undergone significant change socially, economically, and politically, throughout much of the 20th and 21st centuries. These changes can be divided into different post-war phases: staples-based Keynesian development (1950-1980); neoliberalism (1980-2010); and a current, uncertain phase of reactionary incoherence (2010-) (Halseth et al., 2018).

Following World War II, public policy toward rural regions shifted dramatically. The federal government went from a 'laissez-faire' approach to creating specific regional development policies to connect rural areas with the national economy to more easily access resources (Halseth et al., 2018; Knuttila, 2023). The connection of these rural resource economies to the national and global economy created local benefits, but also more fully entrenched rural resource dependency (Vodden et al., 2019).

Halseth (2019) explains that the staples-based Keynesian era of rural development was influenced by a set of environmental and energy paradigms. Rural, resource regions were viewed with an extractive mindset of rapid economic and community growth to maximize financial gains. It is during this post-war development era that energy use shifted as well. Infrastructure development, resource extraction, manufacturing, and the general movement of people required energy use. Fossil fuels filled this need as an inexpensive and efficient way to power development (McKellar et al., 2010).

The 1980s marked a significant shift in the rural economies of Canada. The recession of the early 1980s facilitated a change in both industrial and government policy, which led to significant job losses and a withdrawal of supports for rural regions. This period was guided by a neoliberal approach to government that prioritized deference to market forces, smaller governments at all levels, and a policy priority aimed at attracting business and growth (Hallstrom, 2018; Finnegan et al., 2021). This shift coincided with a reduction in services provided by higher levels of government (Halseth et al., 2018; Ramp & Koc, 2001). While this aligned with a desire for more control at the municipal level, the loss of many provincial and federal services did not come with a consistent replacement of increased fiscal and policy levers for local governments (Halseth et al.,

2018). The investments in infrastructure and services that had helped rural communities grow into thriving resource centres were severely weakened or abandoned during this era, leaving many communities both depopulated and precarious.

The current period (since 2010) represents a time of considerable policy and regulatory flux. Markey et al. (2019) refer to this period as one of 'reactionary incoherence', whereby there is an incoherent deployment of state support, owing to decades of withdrawal and cuts inspired by neoliberal policy which have, among other things, left rural infrastructure in poor condition, thus necessitating re-investment. The period of reactionary incoherence creates both challenges and opportunities for rural resource regions in terms of seeking to influence their development futures. Municipalities are afforded some rights as evidenced through various Municipal Government Acts (MGAs) (Hallstrom, 2018), but these often fall short of providing adequate jurisdictional authority or fiscal resources to effectively facilitate local development processes. Local governments are subject to an enhanced negotiated landscape of attention and benefits that requires considerable capacity and regional coordination to engage. However, decades of reduced capacity challenge the ability of rural communities to adequately plan for and leverage these opportunities (Hallstrom, 2018; Patel & Parkins, 2023).

### (Just) Transitions

The current state of climate change impacts requires immediate action at global, national, and local scales. However, transition away from carbon intensive industries in Canada must be considered with care due to their deeply entrenched nature in the Canadian economy. The development of these staples' dependencies has created a volatile landscape for many regions which otherwise lack economic diversity and associated resiliency. The



discourse has captured the tension navigating between these competing realities with the term, “just transition” (Harrahill and Douglas, 2019; European Union, 2020).

According to the Government of Canada, a just transition revolves around three primary concepts: 1) preparing the workforce to fully participate in the low-carbon economy while minimizing the impacts of labour market transitions; 2) identifying inclusive economic opportunities to support workers in their communities; and 3) including workers and their communities in discussions that affect their livelihoods (Canada, n.d.). Just transitions can be summarized as the need to address social inequalities and put the well-being of workers and communities at the forefront of the climate policy agenda (Hussey & Jackson, 2019). As such, one of the core principles surrounding the just transition movement is that of, ‘no one left behind’ (European Union, 2020; Mertins-Kirkwood & Duncalfe, 2021).

Debates around just transition, shaped by environmental justice movements, have proposed a three-tiered framework to understand the structural processes and conditions that can support or impede socio-economic equity for workers and communities affected by post-carbon transitions (Argent et al., 2021). *Recognition justice* addresses inequality within post-carbon transitions by recognizing the needs and aspirations of vulnerable groups and communities who are typically not heard (Delina & Sovacool, 2018). This also includes the challenging circumstances when the needs of people and communities are misrepresented in transition processes (Moesker & Pesch, 2022). It considers which stakeholders or vulnerable groups will endure disproportionate impacts to identify ways to reduce potential vulnerabilities or harm (Dillman & Heinonen, 2022). *Procedural justice* is grounded in the extent to which communities are provided

representation within fair, objective, and inclusive decision-making and governance processes (Hall et al., 2018; Krawchenko & Gordon, 2022). This can be difficult when small communities already enduring stress lack the procedural capacity to engage in transition processes (Gillard et al., 2017). These challenges are exacerbated when such communities face uncertainty about procedural processes, or lack robust networks with universities or policy-makers through which they can obtain sufficient fiscal or informational resources to challenge the unfolding narratives of powerful industrial stakeholders, all of which serve to reinforce or lock-in their trajectory (Goddard & Farrelly, 2018). Closely tied to decisions unfolding about energy systems through procedural justice, *distributional justice* is about how the benefits and burdens of the post-carbon transition are distributed (Hall et al., 2018). This requires more meaningful discussions about how the impacts of post-carbon transition processes on labour and communities are addressed systematically (Healy & Barry, 2017).

While the environmental justice literatures address issues with top-down policy supports and programs, this is largely focused on workers and less on the communities that may experience additional direct and indirect impacts from low carbon transitions and coal phase out (Mertins-Kirkwood, 2018). There is some recognition that senior government policies, programs, and strategies are often fragmented and ineffective to address workforce and community transition needs (Standing Committee on Public Accounts, 2022). In some cases, there are examples where senior levels of government have used low carbon transition programs to fund basic infrastructure projects related to roads, water, and sewage (Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2022).

A key issue impeding the resilience and viability of resource-based towns in rural regions concerns the lack of a meaningful overarching development strategy in 'just transition' efforts (Burch, 2010; Hoppe & Miedema, 2020; Interreg Europe, 2022; Wieliczko et al., 2021). This is exacerbated by a limited planning to inform just transition processes in the post-carbon economy due to few mechanisms for institutional learning, often resulting in a focus on immediate needs or pressures (Burch, 2010; Collins et al., 2017). With no overarching strategy, small communities may either experience entrenched or locked-in trajectories with carbon-based economies (Goddard & Farrelly, 2018) or assume the costs to address sustainable pathways within just transition processes (Evans & Phelan 2016). However, long-term planning should inform just transition processes through attention to endogenous development to replace aging infrastructure (Stewart et al., 2016; Klaniecki et al., 2020; Krawchenko & Gordon, 2022). This approach also requires decision-making processes that account for recognition, procedural, and distributional forms of justice that can strengthen the sustainability of resources and outcomes for future generations (Delina & Sovacool, 2018). However, where the just transition literature examines local government case studies, these tend to be focused on metropolitan areas (Peters et al., 2010). As such, despite the important role of rural regions to support the low carbon economy through their space, minerals, and other related resources, limited attention has been paid to the capacities and needs of smaller municipalities to engage in just transition (Naumann & Rudolph, 2020; O'Sullivan et al., 2020; Phillips, 2019).

While numerous overarching themes and goals exist within the concept of just transitions, it can be received and implemented very differently from community to community due to varying local circumstances, capacities, and needs (Hussey & Jackson, 2019). The term just transitions itself has

created debate in Alberta, with many regarding the terms as merely representing the phase-out of coal, and eventually oil and gas, without addressing the issue of sustainable jobs (Thurton, 2023). According to the Auditor General of Canada (2022) concerns regarding transition are well founded given a lack of preparedness in supporting policy objectives. Their report states that "although the government had identified Natural Resources Canada as the lead department to deliver just-transition legislation in 2019, the department took little action until 2021. It did not establish a governance structure that would set out the related federal roles, responsibilities, and accountabilities, and it did not have an implementation plan to address a transition that involves a variety of workers, geographies, and federal and other stakeholders" (Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2022, p. 4). These findings are directly relevant to the gap we have articulated regarding the role of local governments in transition processes.

### The Role of Local Government in Transition Economies

Policies related to coal transitions are decided at provincial and federal levels, but the 'on the ground' impacts are experienced by local governments. As such, local governments play a significant role in transitions. Under Section 92 of Canada's *Constitution Act* (1982), local governments obtain their jurisdictional powers through provincial 'local government' acts. It is in this sense that Douglas (2005) explains the municipality as a "creature of the Province" (p. 232).

Following the economic and political restructuring in the 1980s, local governments have been playing increasing roles in economic development. Local governments are assuming roles and responsibilities associated with ensuring that private investments occurs within municipal boundaries to maintain the



tax base or create downstream benefits through the creation of local employment (Ryser et al., 2021). Other research has established the importance of local government leadership as integral to defining the future of communities even in situations where jurisdiction and authority appears limited (Beer, 2014).

Despite these changes, local governments and their planning functions have not been adequately included in discussions about the design of just transition policies and processes, leading to poor transition outcomes and lost strategic opportunities (Wieliczko et al., 2021). Instead, communities with varying strategies and interests are left to implement disjointed and even conflicting efforts within poorly coordinated governance structures (Hoppe & Miedema, 2020). These issues are exacerbated by small municipalities that have fewer staff and fiscal resources to invest in sustainable green infrastructure (Wieliczko et al., 2021). Within this context, there is an urgent gap in our understanding of how local governments have successfully dealt with just transition processes (Mundaca et al., 2018; Naumann & Rudolph, 2020).

## Methods and Case Context

This study is part of a larger national project that examines municipal reforms and the role of municipal reform and economic development in British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario, and Newfoundland and Labrador. The first research phase explored municipal fiscal and jurisdictional reforms unfolding in rural Canada, and how small municipalities are responding to these changes through innovative or entrepreneurial approaches to community and economic development. A second research phase examined detailed case studies of the role of municipalities in coal transitions in Alberta. Specific research questions guiding phase two of the study are: 1) What impacts have coal transitions created for rural and small-town local governments in

Alberta? 2) How are rural and small-town local governments addressing coal transitions through bottom-up innovative and entrepreneurial solutions?

In Alberta, for phase one, the research team conducted 17 key informant interviews in nine rural municipalities, throughout 2020 and 2021. We interviewed elected municipal leaders, CAOs, EDOs, planners, or retired staff who were able to provide insights regarding local development strategies. Drawing from this, Parkland County and Forestburg were selected as in-depth case studies for phase two based on two criteria (see Figure 1). The first stemmed from the presence of a coal industry as their economic base. These two case studies were part of twenty municipalities and First Nations affected by the coal phase out (Hussey & Jackson, 2019). Second, the two case studies exhibited the presence of local government entrepreneurial initiatives to deal with economic disruption (as identified in phase one of the project). Further, the case studies encompass varying capacities and scales of non-metropolitan communities. These differences in both economic and human capacity help to highlight certain barriers associated with transitions. The selection process was corroborated with phase one media searches, literature reviews, and results from key informant interviews.

In phase two (2022), we conducted 14 additional key informant interviews, 6 interviews were conducted in Forestburg, while 8 interviews were conducted in Parkland County. Interview subjects were selected based on experience working in an official government capacity, or through professional experience in the energy industry as well as transition processes. After the interviews were completed, follow-up notes were created for interviewees to check accuracy. Content analysis was performed using NVIVO and an applied thematic analysis (ATA) approach (Guest et al., 2012). Content analysis followed an inductive approach that was



Figure 1: Location of case studies.

reviewed by the research team (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

Limitations associated with this research include the potential for selection bias and convenience sampling and the impacts this may have on the external validity of the issues emerging from the key informant interviews and case studies (Robinson, 2014). We recognize that we spoke with people who were available and interested in this topic; although, this is directly linked to their roles and responsibilities for these issues in their municipality. The impacts and responses to top-down policies driving the coal-phase out process, however, can vary from place to place and can be shaped by the assets,

capacities, and relationships of different municipalities. The discussion of legislation and fiscal levers available to municipalities are also unique to Alberta. As such, there are limitations to the extent to which findings may be generalizable to other rural regions and policy contexts. However, we hope that the insights provided through this study will offer insights into the policies and programs needed to better integrate municipalities into transition processes.

### Case Studies: Context

The Village of Forestburg is located in central Alberta, roughly 82 km from the closest service centre in Camrose and roughly 180 km away from

Edmonton. It reached a peak population of 895 in 2006, before experiencing a decline of 9.8% over the next 15 years to 807 in 2021 (Statistics Canada, 2006, 2021). Although the community has a long history with agriculture, the coal sector has played a significant role in its economy to support power production in Alberta, with oil and gas production providing additional employment. It is home to the Battle River Power plant, a coal-fired power plant that opened in 1954 that recently converted to natural gas in 2021 (Collins, 2016). The Paintearth mine located just south of the Village, now in reclamation mode, was operated by Westmoreland Coal Company to provide coal to the power plant (Collins, 2016). At the time of transition planning, it was anticipated that the municipality would lose 65 jobs when the power plant closed (Bickis, 2016).

Parkland County is located just under 52 km west of Edmonton. Compared to Forestburg, it has a more diversified economy that draws upon agriculture, coal mining, oil and gas, manufacturing, tourism, and transportation. The community has recently reached a population of 33,519 (Statistics Canada, 2021). However, within this diversified economy, Parkland County was home to six coal-fired electricity generation facilities and one coal mine affected by the provincial and federal government phase-out strategies<sup>1</sup>. The community anticipated losing approximately 600 jobs (Parkland County, 2022). These pressures prompted the municipality to reduce its operating budget by \$4 million in 2018 (Heidenreich, 2018).

All the power plants in Forestburg and Parkland County are converting to natural gas (McCartney, 2020). In both case studies, participants explained that the full extent of economic impacts was mitigated as power plants were able to transition from coal generating units to natural gas, but these

transitions did not absorb all previous employment. The process itself was highly uneven and disassociated from municipal planning. In Forestburg, for example, the power plant went from 120 employees while generating with coal to roughly 40, with natural gas. These major economic impacts have forced municipalities to attempt to replace lost tax assessment and create jobs through attraction of new industries.

The Alberta and federal governments developed supports for coal-affected communities in the wake of the coal phase-out regulations to alleviate pressures for municipalities and workers undergoing transition. As a demonstration of efforts to address recognition and distributional justice, these supports include worker compensation and funding opportunities, funding for coal communities, as well as federal funding programs for infrastructure development.

The Province of Alberta created the Community Coal Transition Fund (CCTF) as part of Alberta's Community and Regional Economic Support (CARES) program. Identified coal-affected communities were given the opportunity to apply for funding to build economic development capacity, strengthen approaches to improve economic conditions, and aid municipal transition (Alberta, n.d.b). This funding supported impact studies to better understand and recognize communities most affected. In terms of distributional justice, it also supported business attraction plans, community surveys, and general transition plans. Successful applicants had two years to spend the money. In addition, the provincial government distributed worker supports to help with relocation costs, education costs, or providing funding to bridge to re-employment or retirement (Alberta, n.d.b). As the federal government introduced additional off-coal

<sup>1</sup> Previously, Parkland County was home to 9 coal-fire generating stations and the Highvale coal mine, with most assets owned by Trans-Alta. These units were retired. These industries accounted for a quarter of the county's tax revenue (Hussey, 2019).

regulations in 2018, they also developed supports for coal-impacted communities to address elements of distributional justice. Federal supports were provided via Natural Resources Canada (NRCan). The two supports available were the Community Coal Transition Initiative (CCTI) in the eastern provinces, while the Community Coal Transition Initiative Infrastructure Fund (CCTI-IF) was available in Alberta and Saskatchewan (Canada, 2021b; Canada, 2021a). The CCTI-IF was a \$150 million fund intended to support infrastructure investments, as well as economic diversification, in coal-impacted regions (Canada, 2021b). The CCTI, on the other hand was a \$35 million fund that helps communities increase capacity, entrepreneurship support, business start-ups, and supply chain development in other sectors (Canada, 2021b).

## Findings

The 2015 announcement of an accelerated coal phase out in Alberta, followed by the 2018 Off-Coal Regulations implemented by the federal government, created significant pressures for municipalities. Respondents noted a variety of negative community impacts commonly associated with significant job losses in the resource sector, including direct and indirect economic impacts, the loss of funding from major coal companies (particularly on recreation and community events), and a range of social issues associated with job losses, the uptake of remote work, and increased financial pressures on workers and families (Roemer & Haggerty, 2022). These reflect the burdens incurred through poor procedural and distributional justice for these communities.

As articulated above, local governments were already facing reforms, and associated jurisdictional barriers, in the form of downloading, funding cuts, and increased responsibilities (Hallstrom, 2018). When combining these pressures with those created

from coal transitions, local governments faced complex situations that required innovative solutions. In the following section we outline findings related to the local government response and the barriers they encountered associated with transition programs.

## Local Government Response

### Cutbacks

Interview respondents explained that one of the first actions taken to address the coal transitions was to reduce local government expenditures. Local governments recognized that previous approaches to budgeting and services had to be adjusted to be able ‘to do more with less’, thus demonstrating the burdens endured and associated actions that had to be taken by local governments. One respondent explained the need to ‘tighten the belts’ through a reduction of staffing and services to address the loss of tax revenue with the disappearance of the coal industry:

From an administrative perspective, you just got to pick up the tools and pivot and try to manage forward. Which the county did, which was difficult because we adjusted, we reduced staff, we reduced programming, to combat the 25% revenue loss we had. (Participant #8 2022)

As further explained by the respondent, local governments are not allowed to run deficits, as this would only postpone problems to the future. As such, the first goal was to reduce expenditures, followed by further plans related to diversification and creating new revenue streams.

### Regional Collaboration

Procedural justice for small municipalities can unfold through regional governance frameworks that are funded by senior governments that will better position these communities to chart a new path forward. Participants in Forestburg cited the

effectiveness of a regional planning approach to leverage government transfers to support coal transitions. This regional planning approach was mandated as a new requirement for municipalities through Intermunicipal Collaboration Frameworks under the Municipal Government Act (Alberta, n.d.c). As explained by participants, coal communities in the Battle River region created the BREOC (Battle River Economic Opportunities Committee) to identify pressures and community needs in a collective fashion. As explained by one participant, “after the announcement was made, BREOC was set up. And BREOC became the instrument for the provincial and federal government” (Participant #6 2022). Another respondent explained that applying for funds collectively gave these communities a louder voice, which resulted in more funding than if they had applied individually:

The announcement was in the summer, June or July. We had a meeting after that, and we decided that together you have a stronger voice as seven communities moving ahead than just one. And we took the approach as knowing that coal probably isn’t going to be the energy in the future. We weren’t going to fight the system. We’re going to work within the system and be proactive with whoever is in government. (Participant #4 2022)

### Changing Land Use

Another theme concerned changing the land use of old mine sites to help diversify local economies. Numerous participants noted that lands previously used for mining operations present a significant opportunity for reclamation and development. Participants in Parkland County, for example, explained that mine lands have been designated as prime agricultural lands under the Edmonton Metropolitan Region Board (EMRB). Other participants noted the continued presence of

infrastructure such as power, water, and rail spurs create opportunities in industries such as value-added agriculture. The presence of energy transmission lines may also translate into an easier transition to renewable energies such as solar power. Regional land-use strategies have been developed to help identify possible future land uses in relation to these former mine areas. One participant noted the potential for development and diversification of such large tracts of land to help future resiliency:

So from a land use standpoint you start to look at that and go that presents an opportunity. You can identify that this change at once is difficult, can’t underestimate that. But we also need to see what opportunity there could be in this change, because the die is cast, like the mine is not coming back. So we need to find a way forward. (Participant #11 2022)

In other instances, where mine sites are located outside of municipal boundaries, projects related to reclamation and land use still present opportunities for workers, which can create downstream benefits for local governments through increased employment. According to participants, mine reclamation projects have absorbed some of the laid-off employees. Private companies have also engaged in projects such as mining fly-ash from abandoned mines, and planting trees as part of other reclamation efforts.

### Transition Centres

Some local government initiatives revolved around creating transition centres to help former coal industry workers find employment and shift into new careers. These transition centres reflected a mechanism used to strengthen distributional justice. While participant responses varied regarding the efficacy of transition centres, the initial strategy was to help transitioning workers find employment or help them start businesses. The Centres struggled,



however, to reach workers and find appropriate (and accessible) training opportunities. One participant noted:

My sense is that it's never really got its feet under itself, to help who it needed- who it was designed to help. I think it had a vision - a big city vision that wasn't suited for rural Alberta. A big vision of what it could be and in practicality I don't think it worked. (Participant #5 2022)

Other responses, however, were more positive, citing that these centres were beneficial in connecting workers with employment resources, just transition resources, or to help them develop entrepreneurial initiatives. Respondents explained that the centres have also addressed some broadband pressures as they provided a location where residents were able to connect to online resources in areas where Internet connectivity was still limited. The centres have also contributed to economic development. While the centres initially had a focus on providing transition supports, they have widened their scope to fostering an entrepreneurial spirit in the region, which has contributed to local economic activity. One participant explained how the timeline of the BRIC transitions centre played out in relation to workers accessing resources provided:

We built the BRIC centres because out here access to services is limited, two and a half hours away from a federal resource, or a provincial resource. Like a service centre. Our Internet is sketchy at best and to access those services we wired Supernet into the centres, trained the staff so they could access employment services, federal, all that way. So it's a one-stop shop for a transitioning worker. And since that transitioning worker influx of, we thought hundreds, didn't really come, we expanded that to the small business and grow that economy that way. (Participant #4 2022)

### Shifting Identity

During interviews, participants were asked how the identity of the coal communities has shifted in the wake of the 2015 phase-out announcement. While in some instances community identity shifts have occurred naturally due to the loss of the industry, in other cases participants explained that there has been an active effort in shifting local culture away from coal to break previous path dependencies. The development of a new tourism identity was mentioned by numerous participants. Regions such as Wabamun Village in Parkland County, for example, have been identified as having potential for the development of a tourism and recreation culture due to the presence of Wabamun Lake. This shifting identity demonstrates how residents are engaged in recognition forms of justice as they acknowledge and accept the fate of the coal sector.

In Forestburg, respondents noted that efforts have been focused on fostering a culture of entrepreneurialism for small business to grow the community. As noted by one respondent, "we don't talk about coal, we talk about the opportunity in transition" (Participant #4 2022). This participant further explained the efforts put in by the municipality and the region to help change the existing culture around coal and local business:

What we did was really focused on the people that already made a commitment in our area for new job growth, to diversify the growth. And then to diversify we work on entrepreneurship. In rural, remote Alberta, entrepreneur spirit, other than agriculture industry, and oil and gas industry - nobody thinks to start a small production. That's just not in our mandate because it's been oil and gas and agriculture for a very long time. So how do you diversify away from those? So you have to give them the tools. Especially this community out here which is focused on a

generational industry, a large industry... entrepreneurship for a coal mine worker- probably last thing on their radar. They're thinking, I'm here until retirement. And so now we had to try to change the culture, or try to change the culture through programming, through women in entrepreneurship, children going to schools, stuff like that. You grow that entrepreneur spirit. (Participant #4 2022)

Another participant noted that with a transition from coal, the local community may shift significantly over a 20-year span to the point where the local identity no longer has any connection to coal due to efforts in diversification, tourism, and cultural initiatives.

### **Economic Diversification**

Respondents in both Parkland County and Forestburg were asked what actions local governments have taken to diversify economies away from coal. They explained that more active efforts have been put in place to attract new investment opportunities. Parkland County's Acheson Industrial Park, for example, has been a focal point in diversification efforts. Participants cited that current efforts revolve around attracting bigger business, while developing the area for shovel-ready projects through, for example, industrial park land.

As noted by another participant, a lot of foreign direct investment comes from Asia, where business decisions are made more quickly than in Western countries, necessitating the need to have shovel-ready land. Addressing infrastructure, service, planning, and zoning needs has helped expedite this process and facilitate investment attraction. Some of Parkland County's new investments include the development of a Champion Petfoods plant in the industrial park, as well as a new energy pellet plant in Entwistle.

Participants in Forestburg noted a similar focus on leveraging available land to attract new investment and spur economic activity in the region. Local efforts include attracting investments for a biomedical waste incinerator, a Genesis Fertilizers urea plant, as well as a canola biocoal press facility. According to interviewees, these investments have stemmed from an active pursuit of economic development initiatives, and leveraging resources such as land, water infrastructure, as well as the nearby rail line for transport of products and materials. One participant gave an overview how these resources play into building a new tax base in the region:

We need to process, and we have the rail access for transportation of more finished products or a greater degree of processing of input products right here. That's really the sweet spot for us. It is providing, you know, helping to enhance rail access. Helping to provide service land for these industries that develop, and then be as a partner with these industries to source the products that can be grown regionally by facilitating discussions with producers, access to capital amongst these folks that have it, and different things like that. You know, really, it's a facilitation and partnership approach that we need to take increasingly to build our assessment base either in town or in the county, which will benefit both of us. (Participant #2 2022)

These industrial-scale economic development initiatives are paired with local small business development. With efforts to shift culture and identity towards a more entrepreneurial spirit, respondents explained that actions are being taken to support the growth of small business through providing tools and resources to foster their growth. One such tool is the Grow Battle River website which was developed to provide information and resources to those looking to start businesses in the Battle River

Region (see: [growbattleriver.com](http://growbattleriver.com)). Collectively, these initiatives to advance economic diversification show the heavy lifting done by these communities after the coal transition funding was received. It was these local planning efforts that functioned as the mechanisms to address the burdens associated with distributional justice.

## Barriers to Effective Transition

### Restrictive Government Funding

Many of the negative responses to government transition supports revolved around restrictive funding. Participants noted that despite the availability of funding, financial support was often earmarked for specific uses such as developing impact reports or infrastructure development. Additionally, funds were limited by strict timelines and deadlines.

Funding limits highlight the challenges facing local governments in managing both short- and long-term impacts associated with economic transition. While responses varied in how participants believed the funding should have been allocated, a consensus maintains that there was a bottleneck for actual project implementation due to lack of local government agility to use this money given its associated restrictions and timelines:

It really is a short period of time. By the time you figure out what you might be able to use it for, you're on the clock to actually use it. And if it's a construction project, which that money is best used for, like a capital project, you're either using it on an existing project that's in your workflow that you're prepared to, or you're now on the clock to try an action on it, quick enough that you can utilize that funding. (Participant #11 2022)

In reflecting on procedural justice issues, participants felt the restrictions associated with

provincial government funding were developed with little input from municipalities. As a result, funding programs were not designed to better position communities to achieve a just transition and may only reinforce or lock-in their path trajectories.

### Strategic Support

Participants also identified a lack of government supports beyond provision of funding. Participants expressed that they would have liked more supports in the form of communication, community engagement, and general guidance regarding best practices for transition. A common sentiment is that the provincial government just threw money at the problem. Small local governments have limited capacity (Hallstrom, 2018), which gets stretched to the limit when dealing with complex issues such as transitions and diversification with multi-national corporations. More engagement beyond funding could have helped create a sense of direction; thereby, highlighting the importance of routine top-down supports to better support the planning capacity to advance the goals of distributional justice. Additionally, this lack of guidance was paired with sentiment that there was limited consultation with local governments, community groups, and residents; local needs could have been better addressed with more consultation:

I think you start to run into challenges where the question that you're trying to solve is so big and so complex that it's - the money helps, and now you have resources to start to pursue that, but at the local municipal level, it is still very hard to figure out how to get your arms around the problem. So you've got money to throw at it, but you're kind of like, what are we throwing it at? Like a vast change in industry like we're seeing with coal phase out is something that doesn't have a straightforward answer to it. So it is certainly helpful to have the funds to begin pursue an answer to that,

but it is still challenging to figure where you start, what question you're actually asking. (Participant #11 2022)

Moving forward, such limited representation and consultation with small municipalities in the procedural, governance, and decision-making processes of senior government programs will need to be addressed in order to advance the effectiveness of procedural and distributional justice.

### Private Sector Engagement

Two final barriers identified by participants are associated with limited and uneven participation from coal industry stakeholders in the transition process, which ultimately undermined effective distributional justice processes. Transitions centres and associated organizations found that a lack of communication from coal corporations prevented transition resources from reaching their full potential. For example, mines and power plants limited access to workers which negatively affected communication of transition programming. Such limitations may reflect an element of poor recognition justice as industry failed to recognize or meet their responsibilities as an employer to affected workers. Mine and power plant employers were reluctant to provide employee information, limiting any understanding of whether employees switched industries, left the province, or remained employed by the power plant:

So trying to then match people to the program has been challenging because then people aren't knocking on the door going 'I lost my job as a coal miner, can you help me?', because we couldn't go to the power plants. We couldn't go to the coal miners and say we have this program for you. So the government aspects to the transition worker program which were like you can take a course. You have so much money that you can take a course with,

there were certain allocations for pensions. All those things were very public. What we could do was contained because we couldn't get access to the people who could disseminate the information. (Participant #10 2022)

Second, part of senior government transition supports were allocated to power generation companies. TransAlta, for example, negotiated a deal in which they would receive \$37.4 million per year between 2017 and 2030 to transition away from coal; this timeline was adjusted, however, as TransAlta then accelerated the phase-out to 2022, successfully transitioning to natural gas (Nelson, 2021). This accelerated transition, however, also accelerated layoffs and presented considerable uncertainty for local planning processes. One participant explained the lack of government foresight in potential private sector decisions as a significant detriment to a just transition:

This is the frustration I have, is that a decision such as this is being made at the higher levels through government. And when they are making the decision I believe that they have the best intention, but I believe that often times, they are either naïve or they haven't thought out how to implement something like this. For example, when they announced the climate leadership plan they said, 'hey we're going to be off of coal fire generation by 2030'. Now at the time, it was 15 years right? So there were a lot of us that definitely could do the necessary planning. Or do the mathematics and say, 'okay well I'm 14 years away from retirement so I'll be good'. But what they didn't account for was the fact that the companies soon figured out that they would save money by converting to natural gas a hell of a lot sooner. So that's exactly what they did. (Participant #10, 2022)

## Discussion

The results of this study indicate a landscape that is highly complex especially as it relates to local municipal governments undergoing economic and resource transitions. These situations have wide-ranging implications that challenge local government capacity. As supported by the literature, this complexity, and its orientation to coal transition processes, stems from a combination of local government reform (Hallstrom, 2023) and the legacies of resource dependency (Halseth & Ryser, 2018), consequently requiring local governments to engage in innovative efforts to overcome pressures and barriers created by coal transitions. Seeking to understand the impacts and legacies associated with rural restructuring within a just transition framework (including our use of the recognition, procedural, and distributional dynamics) helps to situate the immediacy of transition impacts within a broader historical, political, and economic context – and, potentially, to better design transition policies and programs. Our findings suggest that deficiencies with procedural justice impact how distributional justice mechanisms unfold, and may ultimately lock-in trajectories associated with declining resource-based communities with limited capacity. Similarly, gaps in engaging with local governments highlight significant deficiencies in recognition justice.

### Legacies of Resource Dependency

Many of the issues related to coal transitions highlighted throughout the research stem from resource dependencies that emerged in the post-war era. Rural areas were connected to the global economy via large-scale investments, but this consequently created a more entrenched resource dependency. The case studies of Forestburg and Parkland County are no exception, as their economies were heavily reliant on the coal industry. The local benefits from coal were significant, as evidenced by the local businesses, services, and

recreation facilities in both case studies. External factors, however, disrupted the existing economic regime resulting in challenges due to the deeply entrenched path dependency on coal and the lack of proactive transition strategies and commensurate supportive public policy from higher levels of government. Price changes and external market demands have always influenced resource producing regions; however, in the case of the coal phase-out, external factors now include climate change and senior government policies. This in turn creates new forms of economic hardship and other trickle-down effects such as out-migration, an increasingly transient workforce, and downstream impacts on local business.

### Lack of Private Sector Support

The lack of support by the coal industry for local transition efforts underscored the failure of industry to recognize their commitments to support workers and these communities that would exacerbate a complex landscape and weakened success for distributional justice. This illustrates a significant gap within the current transition literature. Participants in our study indicated that the coal companies contributed to barriers through lack of communication. As soon as the coal-phase out announcement was made public, communication with the companies became much more difficult. This created challenges for local governments and community groups in both supporting workers as well as with long-term transition planning. While the private sector communicated with higher levels of government in terms of changes in operations, timelines, and transitions, this line of communication failed to reach local governments.

Similarly, transition centres suffered from an inability to reach out to workers, which prevented developing an understanding of worker demographics and economic trends. This lack of information would impede important feedback loops



and may have affected the capacity to support recognition justice in terms of knowing the extent that workers and communities were being affected. Transition centres were also not able to disseminate information surrounding transition supports as easily, which limited community engagement and hindered procedural justice. The lack of communication from the private sector to workers created a barrier, when paired with the inability of transition centres to contact workers directly due to communication barriers, further stifled efforts to advance distributional justice. Increasing access to local workers as well as communication with local governments in relation to transition efforts may have helped with both immediate worker supports and local government planning staff with longer-term strategic planning.

### Need for Place-Based Planning

Coal transitions are highly complex to navigate, especially for local governments with limited resources. In terms of procedural justice, a primary takeaway from interviews is that senior government policy lacked awareness of the need for place-based solutions to help both workers and local governments transition to new economic opportunities, accounting for local differences and preferences.

The results indicate that senior government policies showed little regard for rural/urban dynamics and the need for place-based solutions. This is an important recognition justice issue that undermines procedural and distributional justice arrangements to prepare small municipalities for transition. Rural communities and regions experience cumulative impacts associated with population decline, lack of broadband connectivity, and fewer services. As such, rural areas face inherent challenges associated with transition. For example, distance helps the need for out-migration and transience which causes further

social and economic impacts in resource communities. This phenomenon only amplifies existing demographic challenges such as low population densities. These dynamics were shown to have downstream impacts on local economies and social well-being in the case communities. Local governments have called for targeted consultation to achieve both procedural and distributional justice through programming that is focused on issues present in individual communities. Senior government transitions policies and initiatives, however, did not invest in the valuable human and social capital already present in Forestburg and Parkland County. The burden to develop and re-bundle capital assets were left to communities and restricted by pre-established funding criteria and short-term timelines.

### Bottom-Up Initiatives

Our cases illustrate that local governments are directly engaging in the complexity created by transition and government reforms. The case communities engaged in a variety of initiatives, including strategic planning, regional collaboration, land use planning, economic development, innovation, and entrepreneurialism. While funding to address transitions has been made available, the results of this research indicate that much was earmarked for specific uses, which limited its efficacy to address procedural and distributional justice for local governments. While certainly appreciative of the funding, our case communities had difficulty leveraging monies due to the limited use terms.

Reinforcing findings within the literature, the research shows that senior governments provided inadequate direct support or direction to local governments in terms of funding and guidance to navigate a complex transitions landscape. Transition conversations have largely bypassed local governments; again, reflecting the limited

engagement of small local governments in procedural justice processes that shape governance and decision-making outcomes (Vriens, 2018). This finding continues the trend of senior government disengagement associated with broader patterns of neoliberal political and economic restructuring that have been impacting rural regions for decades. Rural communities have been left to their own initiative to address significant fiscal and service delivery gaps via local and regional action. Such responsibility is always plagued by the precarity of assuming structural responsibilities without matching jurisdictional authority and fiscal resources.

Absent dealing with structural conditions of rural communities, criticism of higher government coal transition initiatives found in our study is that participants felt as if the government simply threw money at the problem. Instead, our case communities are finding traction and success in their own strategic initiatives, and the broader processes of cultural change (i.e. becoming more entrepreneurial), than from specific transition funding programs.

### **Conclusion and Policy Implications**

Coal transition policies in Canada have forced rural local governments such as Forestburg and Parkland County to transition economic activity to new industries while seeking to maintain local government operations and adequate service levels for residents. Population outflow, an increase in negative social issues, loss of funding from the private sector, and associated downstream impacts on businesses have all been consequences of coal transitions. Our findings indicate that while senior government supports were made available, local governments struggled to take advantage of these due to many financial and temporal restrictions. Additionally, local government planning staff faced difficulties preparing for transitions as they had limited communication with both senior

governments as well as stakeholders in the coal industry.

In response, local governments engaged in bottom-up initiatives to address pressures and enhance overall resilience associated with a new economic future. Local governments cut back staff and services, engaged in regional economic development, engaged in land reclamation and land use change planning, developed transition centres, addressed shifts in community identity, as well as facilitated efforts to diversify their local economies, often using innovative entrepreneurial approaches. Our results support broader patterns of rural restructuring, such that as top-down policies are implemented to force post-carbon economic transitions, bottom-up initiatives will be necessary to help maintain services and livelihoods at the local level. Senior government funding programs tied to specific forms of support are insufficient on their own and miss larger opportunities associated with providing strategic support and fully engaging local planning capacity and initiative.

The broader policy implications associated with our study point to several suggestions for increasing the efficacy of transition programs and funding. First, the critical role of local governments in the development process was largely ignored by senior government actors and programs. Local governments need to be key players in the transition process from the outset - involved in helping to shape program and policy design. This multi-scalar approach offers the opportunity to co-construct appropriate policy and programs that connect senior government priorities with place-based knowledge. Second, participants noted that the terms of transition supports were too time and use restrictive. Local governments needed more time to understand impacts (and gather relevant information) and devise local and regional responses and priorities - and then garner the needed support and capacity to

implement these initiatives over time. Third, local planners require capacity support to understand impacts and to plan for appropriate responses. The coal transition programs in Alberta continued a long-recognized trend in local development processes where local governments are expected to manage the impacts of change and downloading without corresponding capacity and resources. Finally, senior governments should use their influence (and tie funding supports to performance) to force private sector entities to share information about worker impacts and their transition strategies and timelines. Local government planning faced a significant void of information associated with corporate disengagement.

As Canada continues to grapple with current and future impacts of climate change, more policies will be implemented that limit and change fossil-fuel production and use. Canada's current plans to achieve a net-zero electricity grid by 2035, and further plans for a net-zero economy by 2050, indicate that energy transitions are only beginning. This will directly impact many of the same communities that underwent coal transition policies, along with many others across Canada. The fallout from coal transitions, and the local government initiatives outlined in this research, help to inform future transition policies to better prepare both senior and local governments.

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