

Section B: Community Characteristics

1.0 REGIONAL CONTEXT

The City of Port Alberni is located on the west coast of Vancouver Island and was incorporated in 1967 following the amalgamation of Alberni and Port Alberni (the commercial centres downtown of the two cities are referred to as Northport and Southport respectively). It is one of three incorporated areas in the Alberni-Clayoquot Regional District and together with six “Electoral Areas” comprises a population of about 30,000 residents within a land area of over 6,600 square kilometres.



Source: City of Port Alberni

Port Alberni accounts for nearly 60% of the Regional District’s population and less than one percent of the overall land area.

Traditionally, Port Alberni has been reliant on the primary resource sector, particularly forestry and fishing. This is due in part to proximity to resource supply and the advantage of a deep sea port. However, it also functions as the service centre for a large region that includes the Alberni Valley, the Barkley Sound communities and the Pacific West Coast communities; as such its economy is quite diverse. It is the regional service centre for hospital care, recreation, and senior’s care services. Port Alberni is the educational centre providing the only high school within the Alberni Valley and is home to a campus of North Island College. Finally, it is the centre of a rich agricultural area which is developing its agri-tourism potential.

Port Alberni has experienced some uncertainty in its local economy over the past 25 years. This is largely attributable to an unstable resource sector. A number of external factors underlie this problem such as U.S. countervailing duties, anti-dumping levies, and high production costs in the forest industry, and declining commercial salmon stocks in the fishing industry (sport fishery salmon stocks remain healthy).

Leakage of the consumer dollar is also an obstacle to a vibrant local economy. Nanaimo with its “power centre”, “big-box” retail outlets and overall commercial mix appears to attract a considerable number of shopping and entertainment visits. This trend has been exacerbated by increasing commercial vacancies which further impacts the local commercial mix.

The Port Alberni area offers spectacular tourist opportunities and is an anchor for the renowned tourism/ eco-tourism destinations of Tofino, Ucluelet and Bamfield. The tourism infrastructure of these west coast communities is growing steadily and is facilitating an evolution into high-end tourist destinations.

Highway 4 is the primary access into the region. Access could be enhanced through highway improvements, and an upgrade of the airport facility located in the Alberni Valley to make it more of a regional facility offering scheduled flights. These improvements would likely benefit the tourism industry.



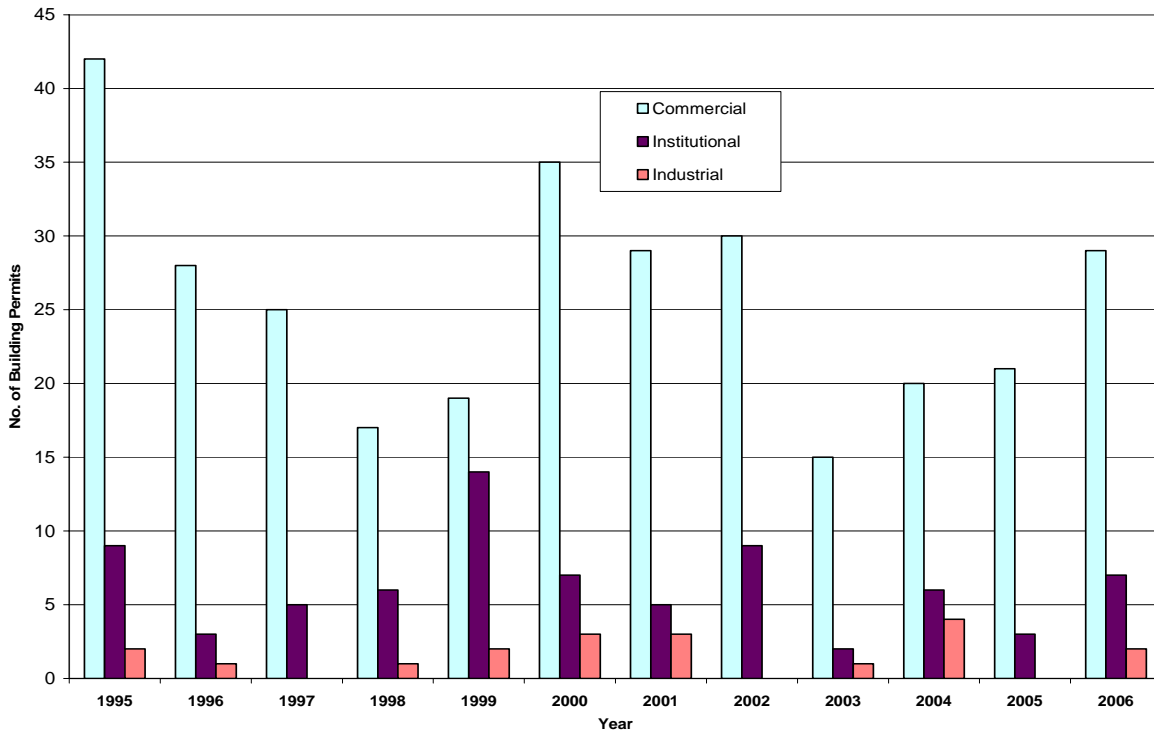
Source: City of Port Alberni

2.0 GENERAL DEVELOPMENT TRENDS

The forest and fishing industries have been the traditional economic backbone of Port Alberni. However, these industries, over a number of years, have faced significant economic hardships. This has had a ripple effect throughout the community and was reflected in a population decline.

The primary resource sector and related industries continue to maintain economic primacy in Port Alberni. The number of industrial building permits issued between 1995 and 2006 has been reasonably consistent (see Figure 1). This might indicate more stability and a renewed degree of confidence.

Figure 1 – Commercial / Institutional / Industrial Permits – 1995 – 2006



Source: City of Port Alberni

This trend is not reflected in the commercial sector which has seen a substantial annual variation in the number of building permits issued. Much of the recent commercial development has been occurring in the Johnston Road corridor. The mall development in this area will account for the largest commercial development in Port Alberni in recent years. However, the commercial sector, and particularly retail, has been struggling in the City and has been most acute in the Southport area.

Much of the recent single family residential development has been occurring primarily in three areas of the City: Westport Place, Redford Heights, and Huff Drive. There are three emerging trends that should be considered in the context of residential supply and mix in Port Alberni. The first trend concerns an aging population that will likely translate into an increased demand for senior’s oriented housing (e.g. independent living, assisted living, congregate care, etc.) These forms of housing are under-developed in the City. If this residential niche is not filled, it will ultimately force some seniors to move from the community and cause a loss of potential service employment for this sector.



Source: City of Port Alberni

The second trend involves Port Alberni becoming a magnet for retirees looking to relocate to the west coast. Notwithstanding the beautiful setting, lower housing costs in Port Alberni may be an important factor in attracting this segment of the population.

Lastly, is a trend involving a segment of the population working in or around the community that is electing to reside outside the City in locations such as Sproat Lake. Based on development trends and land value, it would

appear that amenity value is the underlying motivation. As such, there could be an opportunity to capture some of this “amenity residential” niche market within Port Alberni.

In recent years, the tourism industry has declined on Vancouver Island. However, in view of the spectacular natural setting, tourist amenities (such as McLean Mill and the No. 7 Steam Train) and the strategic location of Port Alberni, it is well positioned to capitalize on the tourism industry in the longer term.



Source: City of Port Alberni

Strengthening or developing water-based attraction down the Alberni Inlet and Barkley Sound would intensify the use of Port Alberni’s harbour. Additional attractions in eco-tourism, outdoor sports, winter sports and agri-tourism are opportunities that could be explored. Related to this is the sports fishing industry (salmon and steelhead) which attracts sports anglers and gives Port Alberni bragging rights as the sports fishing capital of Vancouver Island.

3.0 POPULATION

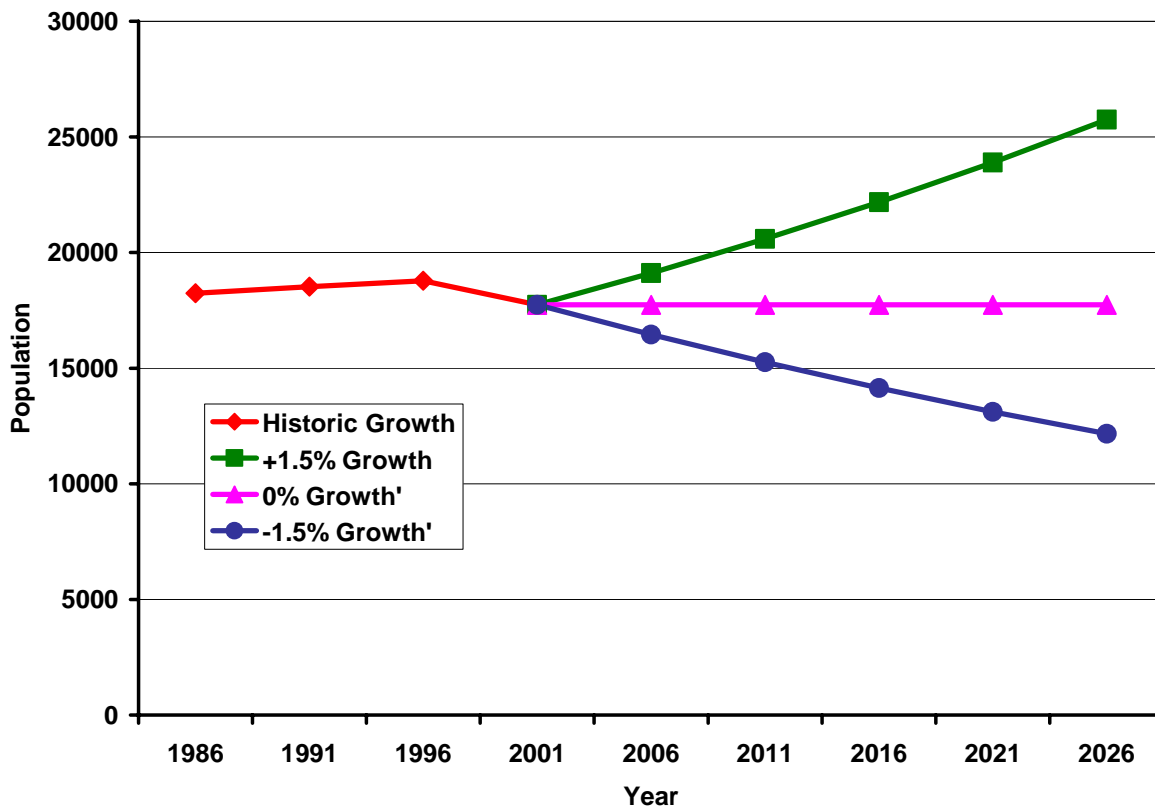
As of the 2001 Census period, Port Alberni’s reported population was 17,743. This number represents a population decline of approximately 13% (or a mean annual decline of 0.6% from 1981-2003) since the population peaked at 20,394 in 1981. The City has experienced two periods of substantial decline since the 1980’s. The first was a population decline of approximately 8% between the census years of 1981 and 1986. The second major decline was 5.5% occurring between the 1996 and 2001 census periods. In this same period, the Alberni-Clayoquot Regional District experienced a similar population decline of over 4%. However, in the census years of 1986 and 1991, Port

Alberni experienced positive growth of approximately +1.5% for each reporting period. Given the spectacular natural setting, associated outdoor recreational opportunities and overall quality of life, it is likely that Port Alberni’s population growth will mirror the 1986 and 1991 census periods in the medium term.

Based on these trends, three population forecast scenarios have been developed as follows (see Figure 2):

- -1.5% annual growth rate which translates into a reduction of 5,582 residents for a total population of 12,161 by the year 2026;
- 0% annual growth which translates into a stable population growth rate;
- +1.5% annual growth which translates into a population increase of 8,002 residents for a total of 25,745 by the 2026.

Figure 2 – Population Projections to 2026



Historic: Statistics Canada; Projections: UMA

It is reasonable to assume that population growth will occur concurrently with economic growth within Port Alberni. However, a large industry would dramatically affect the population forecasts and have a trickle-down affect for all aspects of the community and the Official Community Plan.

A second source of growth that should be considered is the “empty-nester” category. There is a significant population of retirees moving to a number of communities along the central east coast of Vancouver Island. Given the low housing costs as compared to other island communities, and given the proximity to the Island Highway and Nanaimo, it is likely that Port Alberni will experience a similar growth trend particularly if new development coupled with City plans and policies reflect senior’s lifestyle preferences.

4.0 DEMOGRAPHICS

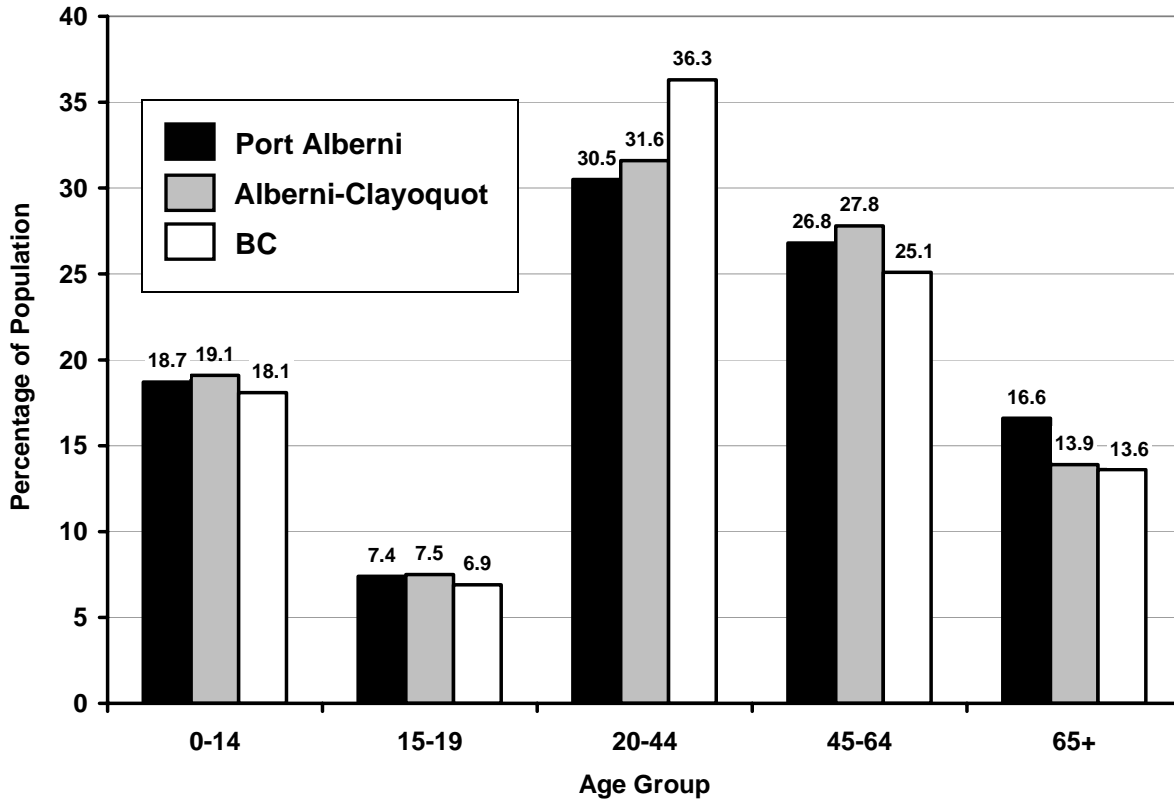
Age distribution is an important factor in predicting future demand for specific forms of housing and community services (medical services and schools), commercial/ retail trends, and infrastructure requirements. Figure 3 represents the 2001 Census age distribution for the City, Regional District and Province. A number of age categories exhibit similar trends for all three jurisdictions.

However, there are two age groups of note. First is the 20-44 age category which is lower for the City and Regional District than the Province. This group can be broadly characterized as having yet to attain the highest income earning years, are acquiring their first residence, and having family units comprised of pre and school aged children.

The 45-64 age group represents a segment of the population that is typically in the highest income earning years. Family units tend to have secondary or post secondary aged children and a higher disposable income. The percentage of Port Alberni’s population in this age group is 1.8% higher than the Provincial average.

A second category is the 65+ age group which can be broadly characterized as “empty nesters” that typically enjoy greater mobility and higher disposable income. The percentage of Port Alberni’s population in this category is approximately 3% higher than the Provincial and Regional District average. As a percentage of Port Alberni’s population, this age category has increased by approximately 6% between the 1986 Census period (accounting for 11% of total population) and the 2001 Census period (accounting for 17% of total population). It is likely that this trend will continue and perhaps will expand in relation to the aging “baby-boom” population. This has significance for medium to long range community planning and will translate into a number of land use/ development issues such as the composition and location of appropriate housing stock, the development of residential care facilities, and provision of other related services and amenities.

Figure 3 – Population Profile



Source: Statistics Canada - Census 2001

5.0 EMPLOYMENT PROFILE

In reviewing the employment profile for Port Alberni, three significant trends emerge in relation to Provincial averages (see table 1). In the sectors of “*management*” and “*business/finance/administration*”, the percentage of the Port Alberni workforce falls substantially below the provincial average. Jobs in these sectors tend to be high paying relative to some other sectors.

The second area of significance relates to the sectors of “*primary industry-related*” and “*manufacturing/processing/utility-related*”. In these sectors, Port Alberni maintains a significantly higher percentage of the workforce than Provincial averages. This is reflective of the continued reliance of the forest-based sector as a major local economic contributor. This sector has struggled in the Province over a number of years and has significantly affected the economy of resource oriented communities.

While other employment sectors closely mirror Provincial averages, the “sales and service” sector is nearly 3.5% higher than the Provincial average accounting for nearly 30% of Port Alberni’s workforce. This is likely a reflection of Port Alberni’s role as a regional service center. However, jobs in this sector tend to be low paying. This is reflected somewhat in the average annual income which is over \$3,000 less than the Provincial average. This alone does not account for the lower average annual income: the percentage of Port Alberni’s employed population is nearly 10% less than the provincial average, and a greater percentage of income is derived from government transfers. This has obvious implications for consumer spending habits and vibrancy of the local economy. It is the recognition of this situation that reinforces the need to continue efforts to promote diversification of the local economy and to increase the number and stability of higher paying jobs.



Source: City of Port Alberni

Table 1 – Employment Profile

Sector	No. of Employees PA	No. of Employees BC	% Workforce PA	% Workforce BC
management	530	218,445	6.7	10.8
business/finance/admin	980	353,710	12.5	17.5
natural and applied sciences	345	123,755	4.4	6.1
health	385	105,690	4.9	5.2
social sciences/educ/govt. services/religion	625	160,650	7.9	7.9
art/culture/recreation/sport	90	67,325	1.1	3.3
sales and service	2260	514,985	28.9	25.5
trades/transport/equipment operators	1090	288,940	13.9	14.3
primary industry	530	84,525	6.8	4.2
processing, manufacturing, utilities	985	96,585	12.6	4.8

Source: Statistics Canada – 2001 Census

6.0 HOUSING PROFILE

Assuming a +1.5% population growth projection, Port Alberni could grow by approximately 8,000 people by the year 2026. This translates into an increase of 3,334 dwelling units for the same period (as shown in table 2) or an increase of approximately 45%.

The City's Alberni Valley Aluminum Smelter Community Impact Assessment identifies a total potential infill population of 2,980 within four designated OCP sectors (based on a calculation of land currently vacant and zoned residential). This would translate into 1,242 detached single-family dwelling units based on a current average household size of 2.4 people. The Impact Assessment also noted that vacant lands currently zoned for future development could accommodate approximately 1,940 building lots or detached single-family dwelling units. The total for both categories is approximately 3,200 dwelling units. This figure does not reflect redevelopment opportunities, multi-family residential, row housing etc. which would yield a significantly greater number of dwelling units per hectare. However, it is evident that there is sufficient capacity to accommodate an average annual population growth rate of +1.5% over the next 20 years. These figures are useful for understanding general growth implications associated with any major new industrial development.

Table 2 – Residential Dwelling Units Projections (1.5% Annual Growth)

Total Population	Period (Year)	No. of New Dwelling Units Required	Total No. of Dwellings	Yearly Average
19,114	2002 – 2006	571	8,126	114
20,591	2007 – 2011	615	8,741	123
22,183	2012 – 2016	663	9,404	133
23,898	2017 – 2021	715	10,119	143
25,745	2022 – 2026	770	10,889	154

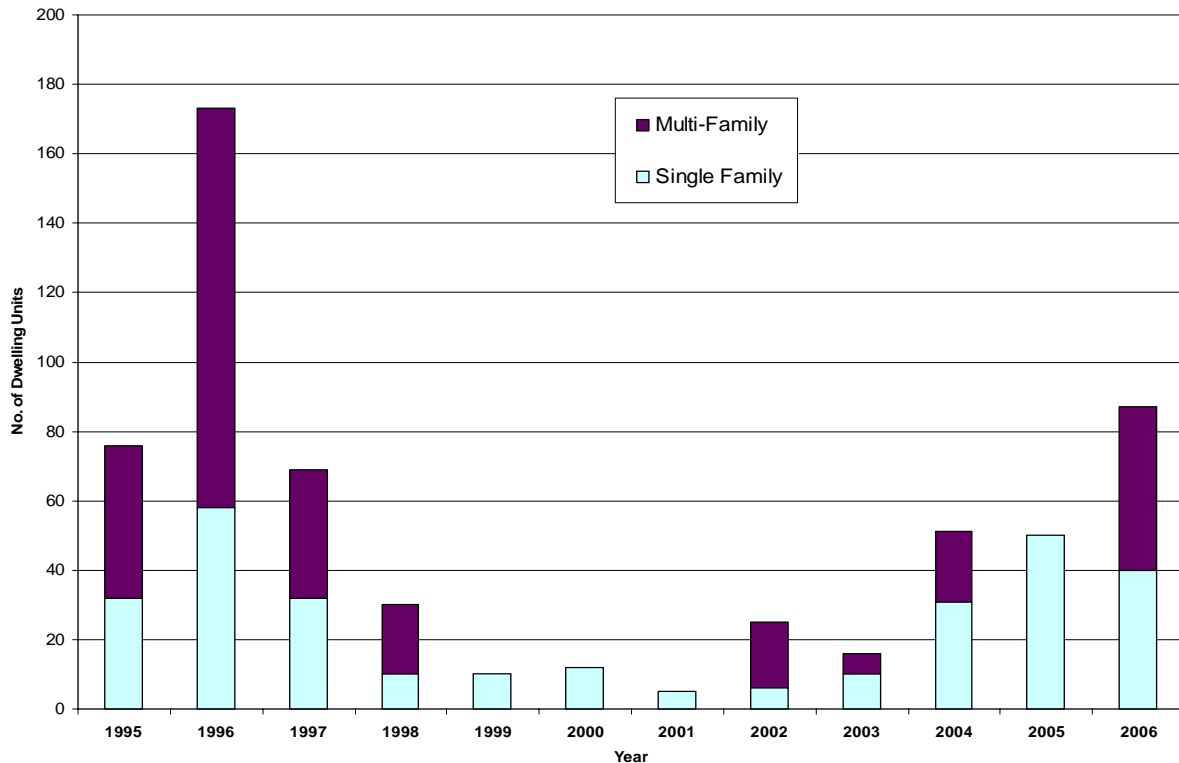
Projections: UMA



Over the period 1995- 2006 the combined average of single-family and multi-family housing starts has been 50 units/ year. If the high number of units from 1996, are not included the housing starts is a more typical 39 units / year. After the spike in 1996 the number of units decreased until 2002. The number of single-family and multi-family between 1997 – 2001 was 25 units / year, with no multi-family in 1999-2001. A small upswing of new housing began in 2002 and increased in 2004 through 2006, with 46 units / year for 2002 – 2006.

Source: City of Port Alberni

Figure 4 – Single and Multi-Family Housing Starts - 1995-2006



Source: City of Port Alberni

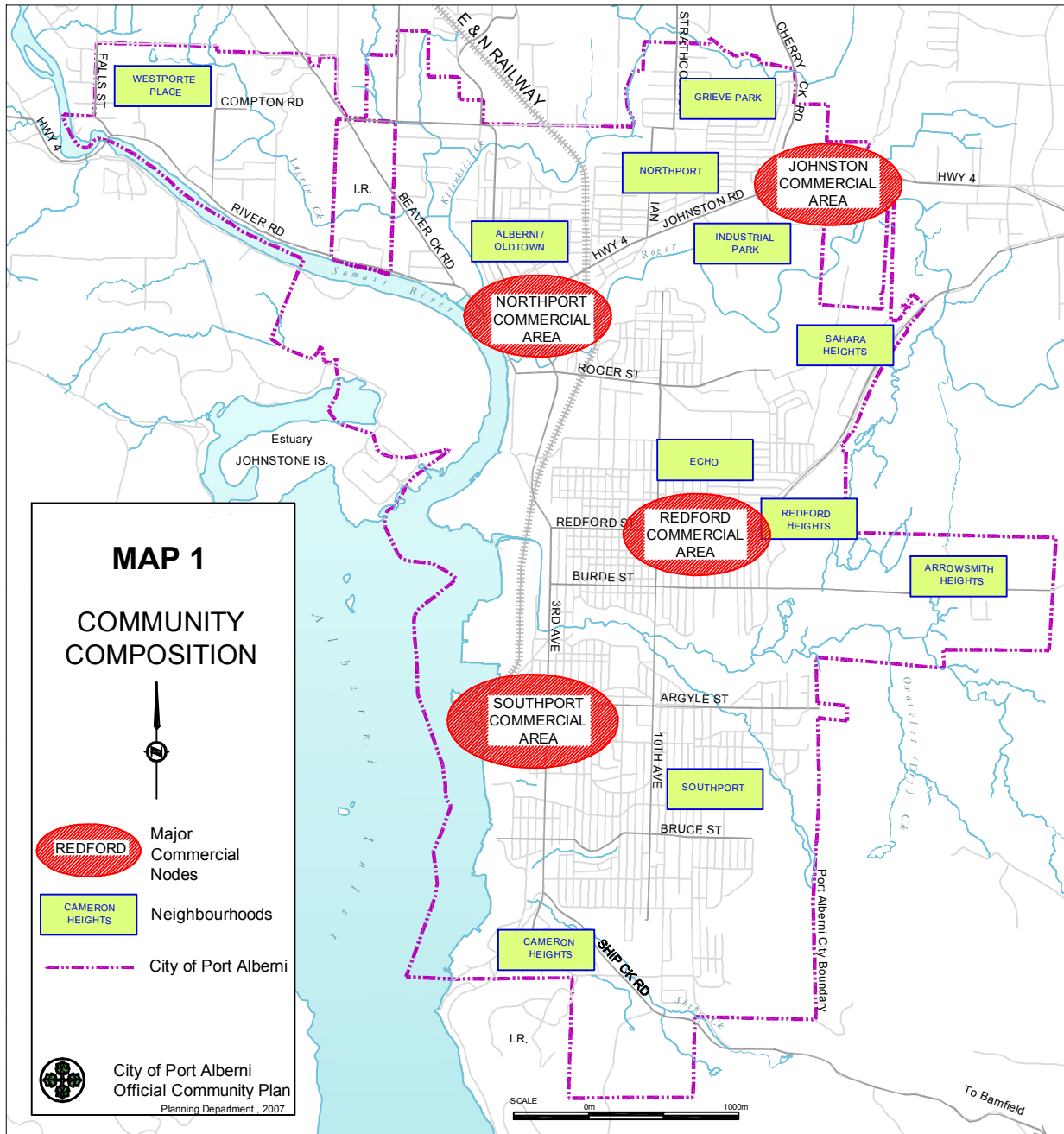
7.0 INFRASTRUCTURE

The City has a well developed infrastructure system. All parts of the City are serviced by water and most of it serviced by sanitary sewer. Given the recent growth trend, existing water capacity is sufficient for the foreseeable future. The existing sewage treatment facility is considered to be at or close to capacity and warrants expansion. The City is currently undertaking some significant upgrades to the sanitary sewer in the northern sector of Port Alberni. This initiative is intended to improve efficiencies in the system, and to separate the shared line into storm and sanitary lines. In regard to road infrastructure, the current network of roads is adequate to service the existing and projected populations. However, there are issues related to industrial traffic, right-of-way widths and improved linkages.

7.1 Growth

The City has a number of established commercial nodes and mature and developing residential neighbourhoods, as shown on Map 1, each with their own distinctive characteristics. From a servicing perspective the City should encourage development/growth within existing developed areas (through infill and redevelopment). This would be more economical and practical than opening up new development areas as it would require less infrastructure for the City to maintain. However, Port Alberni has an existing sewage treatment/ capacity issue which must be addressed before substantial new growth occurs. By replacing the combined sewers with separated sewers, upgrading the existing sewage treatment lagoon and construction of a new wastewater treatment plant, there will be sufficient capacity to accommodate the projected population growth.

Map 1: Community Composition



8.0 ENVIRONMENTAL CHARACTERISTICS

A significant area of Port Alberni is situated on a side slope with a west aspect that terminates at the Alberni Inlet. It benefits from a spectacular natural setting with incredible views such as Mount Arrowsmith. The Port Alberni landscape is incised by numerous creeks/ravines such as Lugin Creek, Kitsuksis Creek, Roger Creek, Dry Creek (Owatchet Creek), and Ship Creek. The Somass River is an additional significant water feature in the area. With a watershed of over 1,200 square kilometres, it is Vancouver Island's second largest river. It feeds into the Inlet at the north end of the City and comprises part of the Somass Estuary. According to the Somass Estuary Plan, the river system supports one of the most productive fisheries on the Island **representing** all five species of Pacific salmon as well as steelhead.

The Somass Estuary is an ecologically sensitive area and is currently the subject of a major inter-agency study. The management plan characterizes the Estuary as having significant aquatic, wildlife, botanical, and habitat values.

The Estuary contributes to the overall distinctive natural quality that defines, in part, the special character of Port Alberni.

Port Alberni is vulnerable to tsunami inundation as illustrated by the 1964 tidal wave generated by a powerful earthquake in Alaska. Because of the length and narrowness of the Alberni Inlet, the ocean surge was funnelled and amplified. The ensuing high water damage was limited to the low lying areas of the City, particularly in the River Road area. The OCP has reflected this hazard in the land use designations by identifying a "tsunami inundation zone" below the 6.0m contour line. For emergency planning purposes a 20m contour line delineates a worst case tsunami hazard zone as adopted by the Provincial Emergency Program.