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Short Term Rentals in Edmonton: Perceptions, Attitudes and Usage

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Prepared for:
The City of Edmonton



Edmonton



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Introduction & Methodology



Introduction and Research Context

Licensing requirements for short-term rentals (STRs) were initially introduced in Edmonton in 2019. Additional requirements were introduced in 2020 and 2022, which included a requirement for hosts to complete and follow an approved guest management operational plan, and to record a valid business license number on all advertisements. Over the last year, inquiries from Councillors' offices have increased - typically accompanied by constituent complaints about the impact, or potential impact of STRs on neighborhoods, including noise and nuisance issues, safety, waste management, and parking.

In April 2024, City Council passed a motion directing Administration to provide a report on:

- 1) a review of the current state of municipal and provincial short-term rental regulations (including licensing, zoning, taxation and other regulatory models) with options or recommendations for further bylaw amendments and programming,
- 2) amendments to Bylaw 20002, Business License Bylaw, including but not limited to, requiring Residential Rental Accommodation (Short-Term) licensees to remain on the premises while operating the business.

In response to this direction from Council, the City of Edmonton commissioned a comprehensive multi-phased study, including current-state research and analysis of STR regulations in other jurisdictions, interviews with municipal Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) to explore policy objectives and implementation, and extensive research among Edmonton residents. The total research program included surveys among 4,300 residents and 500 non-resident visitors, eight (8) focus groups among residents, 20 innovative 'On-Site Observational Interviews' (OSOs) among those living in close proximity to an STR in Edmonton, one-on-one interviews with 25 STR operators in Edmonton and one-on-one interviews with 18 SMEs including city of Edmonton employees (7) and those of other municipalities in Canada (11) who are involved in the regulation of STRs.

This report summarizes the findings from all phases of research. The City of Edmonton commissioned Narrative Research for this body of work. Narrative Research partnered with professional urban planning firm V3 for the jurisdictional scan.

Narrative is a member of the Canadian Research Insights Council (CRIC) and confirms that this research fully complies with all CRIC Standards including the CRIC Public Opinion Research Standards and Disclosure Requirements. This research is supported by The City of Edmonton Corporate Research team, which is a corporate member of CRIC. This research was sponsored by The City of Edmonton's Development Services Branch. For information about data collection, please contact Corporate Research at research@edmonton.ca or Narrative at info@narrativeresearch.ca.



Introduction and Research Context (*cont.*)

Comprehensive Research Program



2 online surveys



8 online focus groups



20 On-site observational interviews (OSOIs)



43 online one-one-one interviews



Comprehensive jurisdictional scan

Including the following municipalities:
Calgary, Edmonton, Halifax, Saskatoon,
Winnipeg & Vancouver.



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Key Insights & User Profiles



Key Insights – Perceptions and Attitudes Among Edmonton Residents

The following is a summary of key findings of primary qualitative and quantitative research among residents of Edmonton including eight (8) focus groups, 20 innovative ‘On-Site Observational Interviews’ (OSOIs) among those living in close proximity to an STR and an online survey among 4,300 residents. Objectives included understanding how residents are affected by STRs, specifically the positive and negative experiences of people who live near an STR, the frequency and severity of neighbourhood disruptions, benefits that long-term residents experience living near STRs and personal STR use.

Most participants define short-term rentals as any property available to rent via one of the popular platforms with particular focus on Airbnb.

- VRBO is another well-recognized platform, though it is most associated with cottages and other rural properties.
- Whole-home rentals are the top-of-mind reference point.

Many participants have stayed in a short-term rental when travelling, and believe they provide an important option for travelers.

- While all describe themselves as “good renters”, acting in a manner that is considerate of their neighbours, they are also quick to suggest that others may not behave as well as they do.

People choose STRs for greater comfort, convenience and cost advantages.

- Comfort: Staying in an STR provides guests with the comforts of home such as separated sleeping and living areas, a kitchen, and typically, laundry facilities.
- Convenience: Short-term rentals are often in locations where hotels and other options do not exist, be that a lakeside cottage or a basement suite next door to a relative’s home.
- Cost: Traditionally, STRs have been less expensive than hotels, though many note that costs are increasing. There can be a significant cost advantage when multiple bedrooms are required, such as when families or groups of friends are travelling together.

Most participants believe that there are short-term rentals in many areas of Edmonton.

- While people differ in perceived prevalence, all feel that Edmonton would not likely have the proportion of STRs as “destination” cities like Vancouver or Toronto.
- As with most considerations about STRs, those over the age of 55 are more likely than younger people to say they do not know how many STRs are in Edmonton.



Key Insights – Perceptions and Attitudes Among Edmonton Residents *(cont.)*

Neighbours become aware of the presence of an STR in many ways, including:

- Observation: They see people coming and going with suitcases and see unfamiliar people around the property.
- Ownership change: After selling, no one moves into a property as a permanent resident, or the new owners advise the neighbours that the property will be used as a short-term rental.
- Own Use: They search the popular platforms looking for a short-term rental for their own use (for themselves or guests).

Many participants have concerns about the presence of STRs nearby or in their neighbourhood.

- Most participants would not want to live near a short-term rental – but when spoken to one-on-one, those who do generally are not that concerned.
- The concerns and fears about STRs that people reference are primarily based on media reports of events that have occurred elsewhere. These incidents are often many years apart from each other.
- Nonetheless, the most extreme cases occupy a prominent place in many people’s minds and lead them to be strongly opposed to having STRs next door or even in their neighbourhood because of what they imagine might possibly occur.

While concerns are widespread, only very few participants have personally experienced more than a rare nuisance.

- Relatively few focus group or OSOI participants have personally experienced problems attributable to an STR near their home.
- Of those who have had concerning personal experiences, very few have experienced anything more serious than an inconveniently parked vehicle or, occasionally, bothersome noise.
- Most participants admit that such concerns could come from anyone, not just short-term rental users. Indeed, some also say that problems with long-term renters or owners could be harder to deal with, and may linger, while STR users will be gone in a relatively short period of time.

Most concerns about STRs relate to properties where there is no long-term resident present.

- People fear that those who rent for only a day, or a few days, will be less likely to temper behaviour that could cause disturbance, inconvenience or even compromise safety than would a more permanent resident. With no owner present, no one associated with the property will have a vested interest in controlling such bad behaviour.
- They further believe that the popular STR platforms “automatically” approve anyone making a booking, so renters are not vetted.
- If there is a long-term resident present, most concerns are relieved, or at least moderated – unless they are the renter, in which case most want the privacy of not having anyone else onsite.



Key Insights – Perceptions and Attitudes Among Edmonton Residents *(cont.)*

Concerns are reduced notably if neighbours know the STR owner/manager personally.

- This gives them a point of contact for someone with the authority and presumed desire to resolve whatever the concern is, and to do so in a timely manner.

Awareness of regulations concerning STRs is very low.

- Most participants aren't able to identify what the existing regulations are unless they are a registrant themselves - and even many registrants cannot fully recall the regulations.
- Most believe the City should regulate STRs, if only for health and safety considerations.
- A few advocate for strong, multi-faceted regulation, but most believe “less is better than more” when it comes to regulations.

Most participants are satisfied with the existing regulations when they are revealed.

- Many participants consider the license fee to be surprisingly low.
- People generally assume that the STR next door is registered and fully compliant with the regulations.
- Questions and concerns with the implementation of the regulations do arise, spanning enforcement, inspections, complaints, property specific concerns, and community involvement.



Key Insights – STR Users

The following is a summary of key findings of primary quantitative research in the form of an online survey among 612 participants spanning four user-types across three geographical regions, (necessity visitors, family visitors, leisure visitors, and Edmonton residents needing temporary accommodations in Edmonton). Additionally, although not a focus on this specific study, some survey respondents indicated that they have in the past, or may in the future, visit Edmonton for work/ business travel. The objective was to gather insights on accommodation preferences among visitors and residents using temporary accommodations in Edmonton and to understand how proposed further regulation will impact these visitors and residents.

Most respondents say leisure is among the reasons for their travel to Edmonton.

- Even if not their primary reason for coming to Edmonton, most travellers living outside of Edmonton cite leisure as being among their reasons for visiting, or wanting to visit, the city.

Among those who have visited or anticipate visiting Edmonton, the most likely travel parties are adult families with no children and families with children.

STRs are the preferred accommodation choice for most participants needing temporary accommodations in Edmonton.

- Edmonton residents needing alternative accommodations within the city (i.e., while their home is being repaired following an insurable loss) have a very strong preference for STRs relative to hotel/ motel options.
- All travellers are strongly net positive in their preference for STRs, and it is the most preferred option for all but medical travellers.

Edmonton visitors and residents choose STRs for many different reasons; three quarters (76%) stay in short-term rentals at least occasionally when travelling.

- Having a kitchen and a comfortable atmosphere are most often cited as reasons to choose an STR. Other factors include value for size of travel party, flexible check-in/check-out times, proximity to attractions or places to visit in Edmonton and greater privacy or space compared to other types of accommodations.
- Four in ten (39%) visitors and residents say they stay in short-term rentals every time or most of the time while travelling.



Key Insights – STR Users (*cont.*)

Only one in five (21%) travellers are highly likely to book a private basement or backyard suite and only one in seven (14%) are highly likely to book a property where the common spaces may be shared with the owner as an STR.

- Half (50%) of those using STRs in Edmonton (both from Edmonton and outside) have never stayed in a short-term rental where the owner is present in the same property at the same time.
- The proportion unlikely to stay in a basement/ backyard suite with the owner present on the property (34%) exceeds the proportion highly likely to do so (21%) by more than 50%.
- The proportion of people saying they are unlikely (54%) to stay in a short-term rental with (potentially) shared common spaces is about four times greater than the proportion who are highly likely to do so (14%).

The majority of visitors and residents would book a hotel or motel if private short-term rentals were unavailable.

- Six in 10 (58%) Edmonton residents/ visitors would stay in a hotel/ motel if private short-term rentals were not available.
- Fewer than one in 10 (8%) would plan the same trip and stay in a non-private short-term rental or stay in a non-private short-term rental but shorten the duration of their trip.



Key Insights – STR Operators

The following is a summary of key findings of primary qualitative research among STR operators. The research consisted of 25 one-on-one interviews among Edmonton residents who are STR owners and managers (referred to as “STR operators” as they could be owners of an STR managed by a professional, owner-operators or only STR property managers). The objectives of this study included understanding how STR owners view the current licensing and operational regulations and their reactions to proposed bylaw changes.

Most STR operators would not consider a long-term rental.

- Many specifically choose to offer their rental accommodations as an STR because they don’t want long-term tenants due to negative impressions of the regulatory environment and perceived difficulties with removing problematic long-term tenants.
- Operators also believe the STRs are generally better maintained and suffer less wear and tear than long-term rentals.
- Additionally, some operators say that rental rates for long-term tenancies are generally below those for short-term rentals and would not cover their costs, even considering that costs with short-term rentals are also higher due to frequent cleaning and greater administrative work.

Operators believe that STRs are an important accommodation option.

- Guests tell hosts how much they appreciate the opportunity to stay in a comfortable, “homey” environment where they can prepare their own meals.

Privacy is an important element of STRs.

- Hosts don’t want to feel their privacy is compromised by the presence of guests if in a basement or backyard suite, and guests want privacy from their hosts.

All who offer STRs to the general public are using Airbnb (either alone or in addition to other platforms), have awareness of current regulations, strive to be compliant, and believe other hosts should be as well.

- The few who accept guests in their personal homes don’t think of themselves as offering an STR and are least likely to be aware of, or compliant with, regulations.
- Airbnb is widely used because of its reach, ease of use for hosts, and tools available to hosts. All note that it requires a business license number to list a property.
- Operators believe they benefit from wide-spread compliance with regulations and support initiatives to drive compliance (as long as the regulations are not unreasonable).



Key Insights – STR Operators (*cont.*)

Operators believe proposals to restrict STRs to properties occupied by the owner are punitive and will not prevent the nuisances associated with STR guests.

- Many participants also believe that despite already high fees and taxes, they are scapegoated for problems that could arise with long-term tenants or even owners as much as with STR guests.

STR operators believe the greatest source of problems with STRs are inexperienced or naive hosts.

- They feel that supports and education for hosts would do much more to address concerns with STRs than restrictions or limitations.

Enhanced regulations would largely be welcomed.

- STR regulation enhancements proposed within the context of this study are largely acceptable and, in many instances, welcomed by STR operators. These include encouraging registration compliance, financial incentives (but not regulations) encouraging owner-occupied STRs, having a “responsible & accessible contact”, graduated sanctions for violations, making Airbnb the sole authorized platform, strengthening the 311 system, linking STR license rates to the vacancy rate, and educational campaigns for the public and policy makers.



Key Insights – SMEs

The following is a summary of key findings of primary qualitative research among 18 municipal SMEs from Edmonton and other Canadian jurisdictions, including Halifax, Toronto, Waterloo, Winnipeg and Vancouver. The objectives of this study included understanding the factors incorporated in the evaluation of STRs, the policy objectives developed and the approach to STR regulations and their enforcement.

Houses are assets.

- Municipal staff involved in housing related policy work believe accepting that all homes are financialized assets is an important lens through which to view housing when contemplating regulations impacting how the property can be used.

There is no consensus on how STRs impact affordability.

- There is no consensus that STRs directly impact either housing affordability or housing availability because there is only very limited data available on the matter. The data that SMEs know of is market-specific and focused on Vancouver, which is considered an “extreme” and unique situation.

Nuisance reduction is not a goal of STR regulation.

- While all cities participating in this study had clear objectives for their STR regulations, none had nuisance reduction as a primary goal.
- In every case, the primary objectives focused on housing affordability and housing availability.
- All cities indicated that local housing market conditions were considered when developing STR regulations.
- Edmonton staff believe the City’s resources can be targeted at other areas of concern to yield a much higher quality-of-life dividend for residents.

All want to facilitate STRs.

- All cities, even those with the most extreme levels housing market stresses, were intentional in developing regulations that permit, at minimum, individual homeowners to rent their personal home on a short-term basis. They cite benefits in affordability for homeowners and tourism benefits for travelers desiring a short-term rental.




Key Insights – SMEs (*cont.*)

Enforcement of regulations is key.

- Regulations must be enforced in a timely manner and non-compliance must result in meaningful sanctions. This can take significant resources, and the cities with the most restrictive regulations have sizeable STR-specific teams, sometimes in the dozens of staff.

Beware of unintended consequences.

- SMEs underscored that every regulation creates an incentive to skirt the regulations, and the tighter the regulations, the greater the incentive.



Key Insights – Jurisdictional Scan

The following four (4) pages are a summary of key findings of secondary research comprising a jurisdictional scan of how Canadian municipalities manage their short-term rentals (STRs) by identifying regulatory best practices, enforcement challenges, and policy gaps, highlighting key trends and potential approaches that could be adapted to Edmonton's local context.

Part A: Short-Term Rentals Regulations: Overview of Municipal Provincial, and Federal Policies

Approaches to STR policies typically revolve around tax market activity; policy goals, definitions, and prohibitions; licensing system and standards for market actors; and compliance and enforcement strategies. The following was highlighted to inform the trends and best practices municipalities in Canada have been undertaking:

- All municipalities reviewed require business licenses, with associated fees and fines for non-compliance. Fee structures vary (e.g., initial vs. renewal fees, different rates for STR types).
- Provincial regulations focus on taxation and alignment with housing and tourism goals, while Federal regulations address unforeseen and perceived impacts of STRs.
- Policy and zoning regulations must be clear and non-discriminatory, focusing on land use rather than hosts.
- Some municipalities differentiate residential STRs (host lives on-site) and commercial STRs (host does not live on-site) to maintain neighbourhood cohesion and prevent commercial operations, believing that this will help in easing housing shortages (despite limited data to support the theory).
- Many municipalities struggle with enforcement, but some STR platforms (e.g., Airbnb) have introduced compliance tools such as reporting systems for unlicensed STRs and educational campaigns for STR hosts to comply with local laws.
- Emerging best practices include requiring building/fire safety plans; mandating business license numbers on advertisements; designating a responsible person for STR management; implementing primary residence restrictions to prevent excessive commercialization in markets experiencing extreme conditions.
- Policies and regulations are a tool to mitigate land use impacts and these tools should be correlated to real versus perceived impacts before implementing.



Key Insights – Jurisdictional Scan (*cont.*)

Part B: Enforcement Practices and Compliance Outcomes

Enforcement is one of the most challenging aspects of STR regulation. Research in this area focused on identifying effective enforcement strategies from other municipalities and assessing their outcomes:

- Cities with popular STR markets have implemented stricter regulations and higher fines (e.g., in Vancouver). Others use third-party monitoring tools to implement proactive measures such as tracking unregistered STRs and improving compliance through automated identification and data management.
- Municipalities typically regulate public nuisances such as parking, waste disposal, property maintenance, and noise through general municipal bylaws rather than STR-specific rules.
- Public perceptions of STRs are largely negative due to affordability, safety, and neighbourhood livability concerns; but, public nuisance complaints can apply to all property types, not just STRs.
- Edmonton requires STRs to display their business license number, but in 2021, less than 5% of Airbnb hosts complied despite the \$500 fine, suggesting the need for stronger strategies such as partnerships with online platforms, better data sharing, and more consistent audits. In 2024, Airbnb agreed to require business license numbers for listings in Edmonton.
- When a complaint is submitted, Edmonton's enforcement officers tag and categorize the complaint.
- Monitoring and documenting STR registration and compliance helps assess enforcement effectiveness. Many municipalities have a framework of documenting and auditing compliance.
- Some municipalities collaborate with STR platforms through a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), which can require platforms to disclose data, post property registration numbers, and remove illegal listings, enabling them to monitor STR activity and identify non-compliant listings.



Key Insights – Jurisdictional Scan (*cont.*)

Part C: Impact of Short-term rentals on Housing Availability and Affordability

One of the most debated aspects of STR regulations are impacts on housing availability and affordability, particularly in urban areas where the housing market is already under pressure. Data on the housing market impacts is very limited at present.

Beliefs:

- STRs can contribute to rising rents by reducing long-term rental supply, as landlords may be more willing to raise rents when they can fall back on STRs, prioritizing short term profits over long term housing stability.
- In some markets, regulations limiting STRs to primary residences have shown early evidence of reducing STR numbers, increasing long-term rental availability, and lowering rents in cities like Toronto and Vancouver.
- Across Canada, housing affordability challenges are worsening due to many factors including underinvestment in purpose-built rentals, barriers to timely construction of new housing, pandemic-era jumps in real estate values and other factors. It is likely that STR conversions also can contribute to these challenges.
- Some markets – generally those with extreme housing market pressures – are dominated by commercial STR operators with multiple listings.
- In Edmonton, 360 out of 1,352 licensed STRs belong to 89 businesses in 2024, showing that commercial STRs can operate legally within regulations.
- While stricter regulations could impact tourism, measures like notifying neighbours of proposed STRs can help balance housing concerns and tourism needs.

Market Activity:

- Rental rates are falling in many Canadian markets as new supply comes online. Even markets with extreme conditions, such as Toronto, have seen rents falling in recent quarters. There is no data to support that STR regulation is contributing to this.
- Homeowners can use STRs to generate income and offset mortgage costs.
- While STRs tend to cluster in areas where it is already desirable to live, and tourism demand is high, they also provide accommodation options in areas not well served by commercial accommodation providers in residential neighbourhoods where tourists visiting family or friends may wish to be located.



Key Insights – Jurisdictional Scan (*cont.*)

Part D: Impact of Short-term rentals on Neighbourhoods

STRs can have both positive and negative impacts on neighbourhoods, influencing everything from local economies to community cohesion. Edmonton specific data was analyzed:

- STRs in Edmonton are widely distributed, with single-detached homes making up the majority, offering whole-home rentals in various neighbourhoods.
- Clusters of STRs exist in the city's northeast, west, and southwest, catering to different groups such as tourists looking to stay near the airport and West Edmonton Mall and transient workers needing proximity to job hubs like Acheson and Fort Saskatchewan.
- STRs are concentrated in lower-value areas, where entry costs are lower for people to convert properties into STRs, though downtown's high-density housing also influences this trend.
- STR-dense areas have higher levels of nuisance reports, but citizen-initiated complaints may not always reflect the full impact due to complaint fatigue/underreporting.
- Permissive STR regulations can encourage economic activity by supporting tourism. It could be possible; however, for unchecked growth to ultimately contribute to neighbourhood destabilization, with long-term residents displaced due to rising rents or property values, conflicts over shared resources, such as parking and waste management, and a diminishing sense of community, though this is a hypothetical potential outcome for which there is no current data.



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Conclusions



Conclusions

Most respondents like using short-term rentals – but only whole-home rentals.

- Particularly when travelling, many enjoy the various benefits of an STR versus other types of accommodation. They also like having them available locally for visiting friends and family. Few, however, would accept anything other than a whole-home rental because they want privacy.

Most concerns people have about STRs are informed by dramatic or even sensationalized reports from distant places.

- In part, concerns are fueled by a lack of confidence that enforcement can respond quickly enough to address problems with renters who are only present for a day or two.
- These can be significantly reduced if the owner/ manager is known to them, or if they at least have contact information for a responsible party.

In isolation, most people living adjacent or very close to STRs say they have not experienced significant problems from the renters.

- The few who have experienced anything bothersome consider them brief nuisances and acknowledge that a permanent resident could have been just as likely to cause a similar issue.

When reviewed in their entirety, most participants believe the existing regulations governing STRs in Edmonton are fulsome and appropriate.

- Enforcement needs to be fast when disturbances are reported, and people need to have confidence that the channel they are directed to use will result in fast enforcement.
- Some participants believe there should be proactive inspections by the City to ensure compliance with the requirements of the Operational Plan and regulations concerning health and safety. Some believe inspections should only occur following complaints or violations.



Conclusions (*cont.*)

At the highest level, people fear and distrust the unknown.

- These sentiments are deep-seated and instinctual. The larger social and political climate can heighten or diminish them and in the current climate it is probable that they are, and will continue to be, heightened. This could have policy implications with calls for ever-stricter regulation of “the unknown”.

STRs are an important part of the housing continuum for Edmonton residents.

- Among Edmonton residents, STRs are the top choice over a hotel or motel if they need temporary accommodations (such as if their home is damaged or under renovation).
- Basement or backyard suites are acceptable to some, but not all, residents.

STRs are an important part of Edmonton’s tourism infrastructure.

- STRs are either the top or second highest preference among all needing temporary accommodations in Edmonton.

STRs offer a homey atmosphere and facilities empowering independence – for some it is their only choice when needing temporary accommodation.

- Having a kitchen and a comfortable atmosphere are most often cited as reasons to choose an STR.
- For travel parties requiring more than a single bedroom, STRs offer value that hotels/ motels can’t match.



Conclusions (*cont.*)

Travellers are unlikely to accept an STR that isn't a "whole-home" property.

- Basement and backyard suites are unacceptable to most travellers.
- Few will accept one in which spaces are potentially shared with the operator.
 - If such an STR is the only option, between one third and one half of those willing to accept such an STR would shorten their trip.

Most travellers are "tourists" whatever the primary purpose of travel.

- Most travellers living outside of Edmonton cite leisure as among their reasons for visiting, or wanting to visit, Edmonton.

There is limited potential to have current STRs become LTRs.

- STR operators, for the most part, are neither interested in, nor willing to take on long-term tenants.
- They say the provincial regulatory framework imposes too much risk on long-term landlords and they fear suffering unrecoverable losses from bad tenants.

Nearly all STR operators want to be compliant with rules and regulations and to provide a high-quality experience to their guests.

- They say they are highly financially motivated to do so as it lets them get the best possible rental rates and the lowest vacancy rate.
- Very few are unaware of the regulations (only those not using any online platforms to attract guests lack awareness) and/ or don't believe that any regulations apply to their circumstance.



Conclusions (*cont.*)

Nearly all are at a loss to understand what problem will be solved by the proposal to limit STRs to properties occupied by the owner.

- They note that even with properties where the owner resides on-site, owners leave the property from time to time and all the concerns attributed to an STR could occur as easily if the STR was a whole-home unit.
- Experienced hosts say that the many technological tools available are a better way to ensure guests don't violate the rules or cause disturbances.
- Some hosts, such as single females, say they would be unwilling to address certain "extreme" situations alone because of safety concerns, whether they reside on-site or elsewhere.

Many STR hosts believe that "government" (any/ all levels) is opposed to their industry because of unfounded fears or ill-informed beliefs.

- They feel they are already treated unfairly and their contributions to the local economy – and their property rights – are ignored.



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Every insight tells a story.