

# COMMUNITY SUSTAINABILITY PLANNING

*Kelly Hawke Baxter and Mike Purcell*

Sustainability is the greatest challenge of our time. Human activity is now putting such a strain on social and ecological systems that the ability to sustain future generations can no longer be taken for granted. Sustainable literally means lasting, or standing the test of time. Sustainability

So how do we continue to make economic, social and cultural progress without continuing to undermine the systems upon which our quality of life depends? How do municipal leaders plan for the future in a way that stands the test of time?

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means making sure that we live within the ability of the planet to support us so that future generations have the same opportunities as we do.

Communities are on the front-line of the sustainability challenge. It's where the impacts of poor air and water quality, climate change and diminishing natural resources are felt. It's where people live, work and play. It's where quality of life and health improves or declines. It's where social fabric, art and culture are created and nurtured.

"Sustainability is good business for municipal government," says Ken Melamed, Mayor of Whistler, BC. "Applied to growth and development today, it will help protect tomorrow's generations to manage financial impacts of climate change, health risks, environmental remediation, infrastructure replacement, energy security and food security," he says.

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These are tough questions for municipal leaders to grapple with, and yet they are impossible to ignore. One way that communities are tackling these challenging questions is through the development of community sustainability plans.

## What is an ICSP?

An Integrated Community Sustainability Plan (ICSP), or a Municipal Sustainability Plan (MSP) is essentially a high level overarching document for a community that is informed by sustainability principles and guides the community into the future. It is a strategic business plan for the community that identifies short- medium- and long-term actions for implementation, tracks and monitors progress, and is reviewed on an annual basis. An ICSP is a big picture, holistic plan that provides guidance for the development or alignment of all municipal plans, policies and decisions (i.e. municipal development plan, transportation plan, energy plan, purchasing policy, capital planning, etc.), under one integrated decision-making framework.

This integrated planning approach sets an ICSP apart

from other traditional community plans. Because sustainability problems are often complex and overlapping, they cannot be solved in isolation, and are best addressed using a comprehensive, systems-based approach that addresses the root of the problem, rather than only the symptoms. For example, toxic effluent in rivers affects fish health (environmental), which affects people (social) and financial prosperity (economic). All of these elements and their connections must be considered to arrive at real solutions.

An ICSP is as much a process as it is a plan. The end result is more than a document: it is an on-going process of engaging stakeholders in the community in co-creating a vision of a sustainable future and linking that to realistic planning and collaborative action today. ICSPs emphasize long-term thinking, collaboration between departments and between sectors, engaging community stakeholders, creating partnerships, and continuous monitoring and evaluation.

Integrated community sustainability plans emerged as a concept in 2005 when the federal government created a funding program called the Gas Tax Agreement, in support of community infrastructure investment and long-term sustainability planning. All Canadian communities now have access to a stable source of revenue for the development of ICSPs through this program, announced in the 2005 federal budget. In addition, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities' Green Municipal Fund provides financial support for planning and infrastructure projects.

## How to Develop an ICSP

There is no single way to develop an ICSP and each community will tackle it differently, depending on a range of factors such as size, commitment, priorities, available resources and the involvement of local stakeholders. The Natural Step has been working with Canadian communities to pilot a process for developing effective, integrated long-term sustainability plans.<sup>1</sup>

The following steps outline a process that is modeled on the approach taken by Whistler in the development of its award-winning Whistler 2020.<sup>2</sup> The same process is further detailed in the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association's Municipal Sustainability Planning Guidebook, developed in collaboration with The Natural Step. This guidebook is available on-line and is being piloted by the AUMA with five Albertan communities.<sup>3</sup>

**Phase I: Structuring the planning process** – The municipal council commits to developing a community sustainability plan or a municipal sustainability plan, determines its scope, and provides the necessary resources for the planning process, including staffing requirements.

At this stage, depending on the scope of the planning effort, council may decide to create a citizens advisory group, comprised of community leaders and stakeholders, in addition to councillors and municipal staff.

**Phase II: Creating a shared understanding of sustainable community success** – After structuring the process and providing resources, the community then adopts

### Key elements of successful sustainability planning processes

- ▲ A community must have the political will to commit resources.
- ▲ The planning process should be guided by a **consensus on a desired vision** of a successful outcome.
- ▲ The planning process should be long-term.
- ▲ **“Backcasting”** means starting first with the desired outcome in mind and then identifying present-day actions to move in the direction of that outcome.
- ▲ Agreeing on a set of **sustainability principles** to help define a successful outcome enables strategic decision making and shared understanding of a common goal.
- ▲ The approach to planning is holistic, **systems-based**, and integrated as opposed to addressing issues in a fragmented, case-by-case basis.
- ▲ Start with **“low-hanging fruit,”** easy first actions that demonstrate quick success to generate momentum. Often these first actions are efficiency improvements that generate savings which can be invested in more challenging measures later.
- ▲ At the heart of this planning approach is a commitment to a **bottom-up participatory process** that engages those affected by decisions and those who will be responsible for implementing parts of the plan.
- ▲ **Ongoing** education and training programs, monitoring the effectiveness of actions with indicators, all guided by the vision and sustainability principles, help institutionalize change and keep adopted practices going over time.

sustainability principles to help define success, and engages citizens to develop a shared understanding of success through a dialogue about the community's vision, core values, and goals it has for the community.

Embedding the community vision within sustainability principles (see box) helps the community know if its vision and plans are moving toward sustainability, and provides a decision-making frame of reference to help screen all future actions and initiatives.

In an ideal process, community stakeholders are given an opportunity to provide input by reflecting on the community's values and what they want the community to become, a vision statement is created, approved by council, shared broadly and celebrated within the community.

**Phase III: Determining and analyzing strategy areas for community success** – After creating a shared vision of the future, the community identifies a number of strategy areas that need to be addressed to achieve the vision (eg. transportation, waste management, economic development, recreation, affordable housing). For each strategy area, the community may decide to set up small task forces with partner organizations. Some communities may simply use sub-committees of council or the citizens advisory group instead of forming separate task

1 <[www.naturalstep.ca](http://www.naturalstep.ca)>

2 <[www.msp.munilink.net](http://www.msp.munilink.net)>

3 <[www.whistler2020.ca](http://www.whistler2020.ca)>

forces. The role of the task forces or committees is to describe what that strategy area would look like in the community if the vision was achieved (i.e. “success”), and to describe the community’s “current reality” in that strategy area. The point of working on these two descriptions is to identify the gap between current reality and future success.

**Phase IV: Identify initiatives to move from current reality towards success** – Once the task forces or committees have described current reality and success in their strategy areas, they brainstorm a series of initiatives and investments in each area. These are then screened and prioritized to ensure that they:

- ▶ move the community towards its vision;
- ▶ move the community towards its sustainability principles;
- ▶ provide a flexible platform for further steps and actions; and
- ▶ generate sufficient economic and political return to seed future investments.

Ideas that meet these criteria are good short-term initiatives or investments that set the stage for future steps. Once priority initiatives have been identified, the municipality scans the full list of proposed investments and compiles

sion making.

Each year, Whistler 2020 task forces are convened on each strategy area to assess progress and to prioritize actions for moving them toward their vision. Through Whistler 2020, the resort municipality and its 27 partners have implemented over 200 actions in the past two years.

#### AUMA

The Alberta Urban Municipalities Association has been at the forefront of leadership in long-term community sustainability planning in Canada. “Anyone who looks at the future has to be concerned about what lies down the road. We know that the risks of climate change are real and governments everywhere in the world need to act, including our own in Canada and Alberta,” says Bob Hawkesworth, AUMA President.

“Looking into the future, we can’t help but conclude that we need to find very different ways of doing things. We need to be smarter about our use of resources and intelligent about the design of our communities ... we need to ‘future proof’ them, to help our communities become more resilient,” Hawkesworth says.

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them into an overarching plan of investment and action for the community that will take it in a step-by-step manner toward its vision, forming the basis for the ICSP.

**Phase V: Ongoing monitoring and implementation** – Once the plan is complete, the municipality monitors the progress of the plan and implements the actions laid out in the plan along with partner organizations. The task forces or committees meet annually to monitor progress and prioritize and agree to additional actions for the following year.

#### ICSPs in Action

##### Whistler, BC

The Resort Municipality of Whistler, BC has developed Whistler 2020, a comprehensive, community-wide, long-term sustainability vision and plan. The plan addresses both the *what* (vision and priorities) as well as the *how* (16 strategies). It is comprehensive – addressing all economic, social, cultural and environmental issues that are important to Whistler. It is long-term, taking a 15-year time horizon in the context of achieving sustainability by 2060. Whistler 2020 is one big step in the journey. It is a community-wide plan, developed and implemented by the entire resort community. And, it is systems and science-based, using The Natural Step framework at all levels of planning and deci-

According to Hawkesworth, community sustainability planning allows different thinking to occur. “Municipal sustainability planning is more deliberate – it’s about creating the future as opposed to being a passive recipient of what the future brings ... Long-term planning for the future means you’re much more in tune with the consequences of the choices that you make,” Hawkesworth says. “Most planning processes envision more of the same ... trends continuing into the future. A municipal sustainability plan starts from a different premise: that the future may be quite different from what we’re experiencing now. We shouldn’t assume the trends we’re experiencing now will continue. The future will be affected by the choices we make today.”

##### Olds, AB

According to Nina Gales, Manager of Corporate Affairs for the Town of Olds, AB, a community sustainability planning process has helped them bring a lot of different initiatives and activities together under one umbrella.

“Olds has a strong base of community people doing sustainability initiatives already. But, none of these groups were talking to each other or working together. There was no overarching plan in place to bring everything together,” Gales says.

Consequently there was some duplication of effort and

inefficient use of limited resources.

“For us, the sustainability plan provides an overarching framework to keep up the momentum of existing initiatives as well provide a frame of reference for new initiatives ... We want to have the same philosophy guide all initiatives.”

#### **Airdrie, AB**

The City of Airdrie, AB, situated 30 kilometres north of Calgary, is experiencing unprecedented growth. Faced with a near doubling of real estate prices and an increasing interest in sustainable growth and development by council, staff and citizens, the city has committed to creating a municipal sustainability plan with the help of The Natural Step.

For Mayor Linda Bruce – the community sustainability planning process provides a shared decision-making framework and communication platform to enable departments and community stakeholders to move in the same direction. It helps them, for example, engage residents, businesses,

schools and developers in discussions about land use and why increasing density makes sense. “The first time I heard about a comprehensive, systems approach to sustainability planning, a light bulb went on,” Bruce says. “I came back and started talking about it. We all needed to be going in the same direction, we needed something concrete.”

“It’s changing the way we think,” Bruce says.

#### **Conclusion**

An integrated community sustainability plan is an opportunity for communities to look long-term at the community they want, and to take the proactive steps to move there. It is an opportunity to engage citizens in a dialogue about what they value about their communities and what they want their community to look like in the future. It is an opportunity to find innovative solutions that address social, economic, cultural and environmental challenges today, while leaving a positive legacy for future generations. *MW*

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