

Implementing Sustainability



Integrating Sustainability into Municipal Decision-Making

By Chris Lindberg, Senior Consultant

Many Canadian communities have completed their first sustainability plan and are now faced with the daunting challenge of implementation.

Implementing sustainability requires municipalities to adopt new initiatives, approaches and ways of thinking. The key to long-term success lies in integrating sustainability into decision-making structures, processes and practices at all levels of the organization.

This brief guide presents a framework for integrated decision-making that municipalities can use to assess their current approach, identify gaps and develop ideas for moving forward.

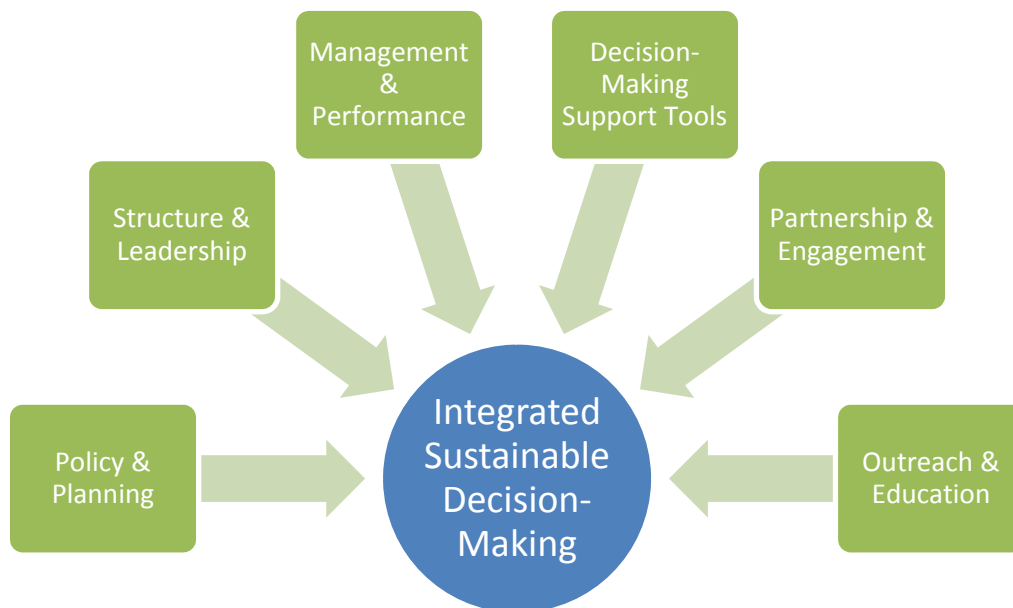
This framework is based in part on a 2010 review of practices in six cities (Calgary, Hamilton, Port Coquitlam, Toronto, Victoria, Whistler) commissioned by the City of Ottawa, Ontario.

A Framework for Integrated Sustainable Decision-Making

Community sustainability planning is inherently complex and cuts across departmental, jurisdictional and geographical boundaries. Implementing a sustainability plan is equally complex and therefore poses a challenge to traditional compartmentalized decision-making practices and structures.

Integrating sustainability therefore requires a strategic approach to managing change throughout the organization. This requires action on six broad fronts (Figure 1):

Figure 1: A Framework for Integrated Decision-Making



1) Policy & Planning

Creating the specific policies and plans needed to implement sustainability and aligning all community policies with your sustainability objectives.

This provides the foundation for the development of specific project or departmental approaches by outlining a set of cross-cutting goals, targets and commitments.

For example, the Resort Municipality of Whistler's (RMOW) sustainability plan - WHISTLER2020 – has been formally adopted as the organization's highest level policy document, above the Official Community Plan, and sets clear goals, targets and indicators to drive planning and decision-making.

2) Organizational Structure & Leadership

Creating the right organizational structure and formalizing the senior commitment needed to facilitate implementation.

This could involve assigning responsibility for sustainability to a new or existing individual or group, providing them with the mandate and authority they need to operate and clarifying cross-functional relationships. Over the long term, it may also involve organizational restructuring to better align the organization with its sustainability commitments.

For example, the City of Calgary has created a sustainability office that is positioned in the City Manager's Office and the City of Victoria has created a senior Director of Sustainability that operates at an equal level with other departments. The RMOW reorganized and renamed branches and departments to reflect the structure of their WHISTLER2020 sustainability commitments. This reorganization aligned roles and responsibilities with the strategy and communicated its importance.

3) Management & Performance

Developing effective management and performance measurement tools and processes to track and report on progress towards achieving sustainability objectives.

Public reporting demonstrates accountability, increases transparency and provides critical information to inform decision-making.

For example, the RMOW monitors and reports on performance through Whistler Explorer, an online interactive website (Figure 2).

4) Decision-Making Support Tools

Developing tools and processes that support decision-making at all stages and levels of planning and implementation.

The majority of work on integrating sustainability has been at this level. This includes operational policies, business planning and budgeting tools, specific process and project tools and reporting templates.

Examples of common decision-making support tools include:

Operational Policies – The City of Calgary has a Triple-Bottom-Line (TBL) policy that links more than 350 Council Approved policy statements to 20 social, environmental and economic themes.

Business Planning and Budgeting Processes – The RMOW has developed a Major Capital Project Form that assesses how a project impacts the achievement of RMOW's long-term sustainability objectives.

Specific Process and Project Tools – These include Port Coquitlam's Sustainability Checklist for rezoning and development permit applications; Toronto's Green Standard; and Victoria's TBL evaluation criteria developed for the Request for Expressions of Interest, RFP and master agreements related to the award-winning Dockside Green development.

Reporting Templates – Calgary, Hamilton, Victoria and the RMOW have a template that staff members are required to fill out that accompanies reports to Council and highlights the sustainability or TBL implications of the report.

Figure 2: Performance Reporting with Whistler Explorer



5) Partnership & Engagement

Engaging internal and external stakeholders as key partners in the process, including the development of formal partnership agreements.

This applies to the development of the sustainability policies, approaches and tools as well as to their implementation and evaluation. Ongoing engagement is critical to maintain momentum and build trust and accountability. This is particularly important for those community objectives that are outside of the direct control of the organization (such as per capita carbon emissions) and require the engagement of multiple stakeholders to deliver.

For example, the City of Calgary led the development of its 100 year sustainability plan (imagineCALGARY) but considers itself just one partner in its implementation.

The RMOW has created ongoing Task Forces that are comprised of staff, Council and representatives of business and community groups. It has also created a formal WHISTLER2020 partnership agreement. Each Task Force member is considered equal, regardless of their role or position. Task Forces meet annually to review the long-term plan, consider the progress made to date and establish a set of actions and priorities for the coming year. These actions are then taken on by the RMOW and the WHISTLER2020 partners.

6) Outreach, Training & Education

Developing an ongoing program to help people understand sustainability, use the decision-making support tools, and engage in community sustainability activities.

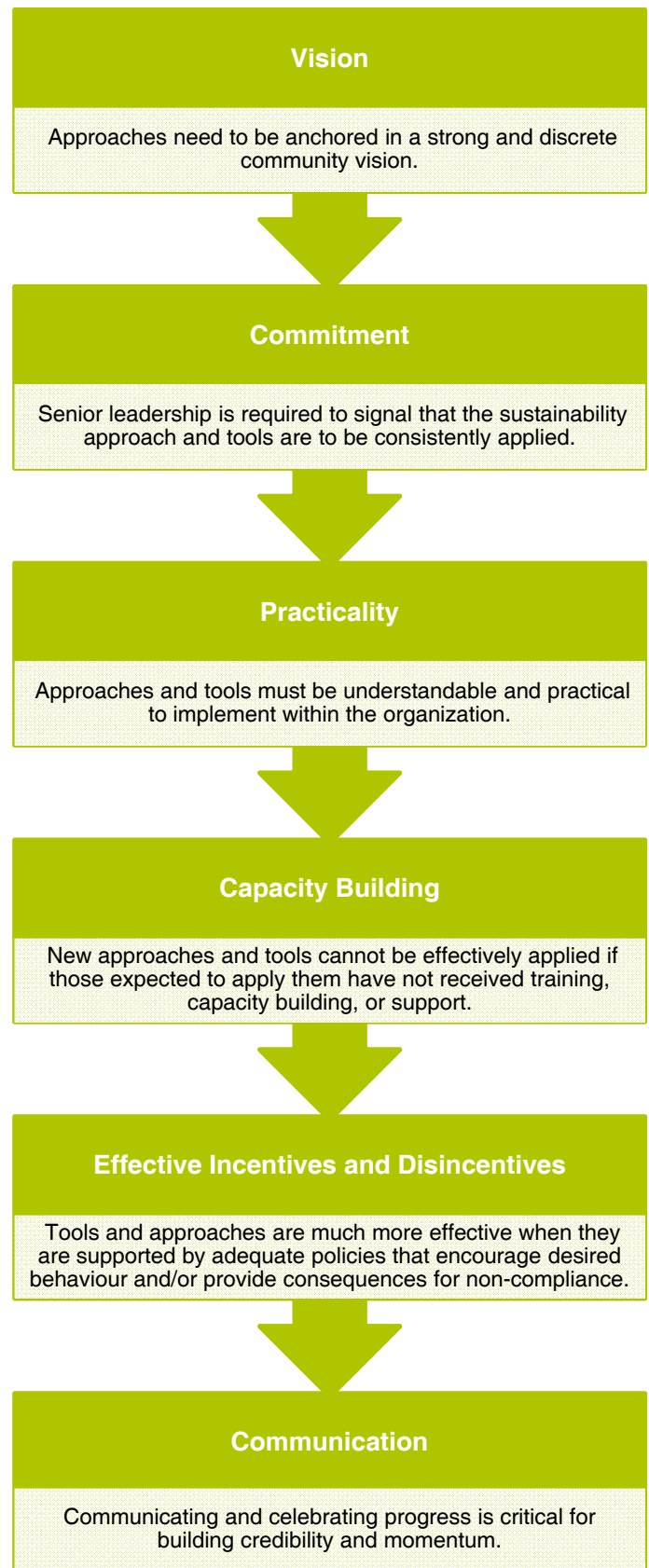
Ongoing outreach, training and education activities were identified as key elements of every organization's approach. These activities are critical for engaging community champions, maintaining momentum and ensuring staff have the knowledge and skills they need to implement sustainability.

For example, the City of Calgary runs a half-day course dedicated to TBL that is targeted at all managers, in addition to those departments and business units that request training. Project Management courses integrate TBL, and there is TBL training for those who write reports to Council.

TBL is also integrated into training for other purposes; for example, Integrated Risk Management training includes the TBL.

Enablers and Success Factors

Researchers and practitioners have identified six cross-cutting success factors for implementing sustainability:



Applying the Framework: Best Practices

Stratos has identified a number of best practice strategies for each framework element (Table 1) which can be used to identify gaps and generate new ideas.

The framework can and should be scaled up or down to match the size and capacity of the community. For example, Leadership and Structure strategies can be as simple as passing a Council motion and assigning staff responsibility for the plan, or as comprehensive as RMOW's corporate reorganization.

Closing Thoughts

Ultimately, it is not enough to develop an inspiring sustainability plan; to be successful, municipalities also need an implementation strategy that engages stakeholders, tracks performance and manages change (Figure 3).

The organizations that report the most progress with implementation are those that take a systematic, comprehensive and integrated approach across all six levels of sustainable decision-making.

Figure 3: Stratos' Approach to Sustainability Planning



For more information or to discuss particular challenges, please contact Chris Lindberg at clindberg@stratos-sts.com / 613.241.1001 ext 238.

Stratos is a values-based consultancy that specializes in sustainability. We work with businesses, governments and other organizations to develop and implement sustainable policies, strategies and practices.
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Table 1: Best Practice Strategies

| Action Area | Best Practice Strategies | Questions to Consider |
|--------------------------------------|---|---|
| Policy & Planning | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use a Strategic Planning Framework - Get the Plan Right - Align Other Policies - Take Early Action | <p>What is my community doing already?</p> <p>What are other communities doing?</p> <p>What could my community do next?</p> |
| Leadership & Structure | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Secure Commitment - Give Sustainability a Home - Integrate Structures and Processes | |
| Management & Performance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Align Incentives and Disincentives - Build Trust Through Accountability and Reporting - Plan for Change | |
| Decision-Making Support Tools | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Create Operational Guidelines - Develop Project & Process Tools - Integrate with Business Planning and Budgeting - Use Reporting Templates | |
| Partnership & Engagement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Make Sustainability Everyone's Business - Empower Champions - Engage on an Ongoing Basis | |
| Outreach & Education | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Create Shared Understanding - Build Capacity - Celebrate Success | |