

Catalyzing Change

Leading Practices in Alberta Municipal Sustainability Planning



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Alberta has emerged as a national leader in developing municipal sustainability plans (MSPs) to address growing economic, social and environmental risks and opportunities. In light of this, Stratos undertook the first comprehensive review of Alberta MSPs to identify trends and leading practices.

The review found that the majority of MSPs are grounded in strong community processes and frameworks, but would benefit from more specific goals, targets and integration strategies. There is tremendous variability in terms of the structure, quality and comprehensiveness of the MSPs, which poses risks for their implementation.

To address this issue, Stratos has developed a framework for structuring MSPs to support effective action on sustainability. It can be used to:

- Assess the quality of your MSP and benchmark it against leading practices in other municipalities.
- Support the implementation of your MSP by identifying gaps and areas for action.
- Inform the process, content and structure of other municipal plans (e.g. strategic plans, energy plans) which operate within a sustainability framework.

A FRAMEWORK FOR EFFECTIVE MUNICIPAL SUSTAINABILITY PLANS

Fourteen municipalities were selected for the review:¹

- Airdrie
- Brooks
- Cochrane
- Drumheller
- Fort Saskatchewan
- Grande Prairie
- Drayton Valley
- Hinton
- Jasper
- Morinville
- Olds
- Peace River
- Taber
- Wetaskiwin

A comprehensive assessment framework was developed based on a review of best practices² and input from an Advisory Committee of academic researchers and municipal associations.³

Each MSP was assessed and scored from 1-4 on each of the framework's nine elements, with four representing the leading practice. Figure 1 presents the results of the assessment.

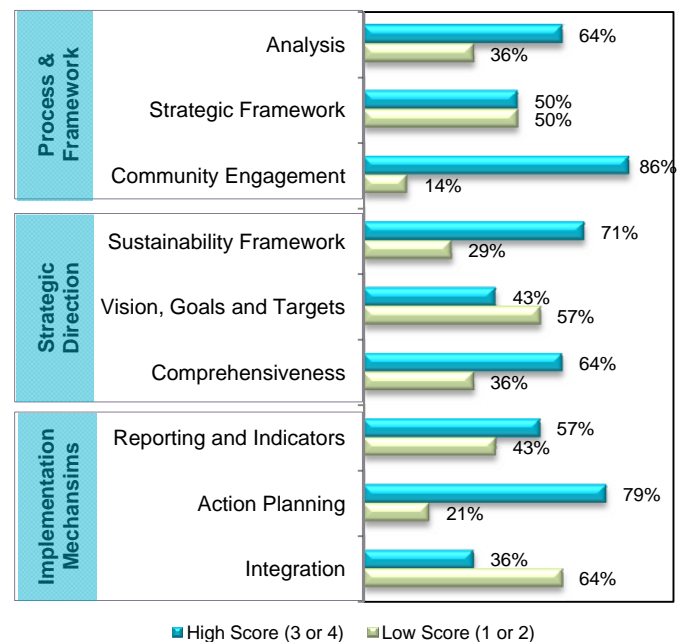


Figure 1 – Key Findings: Percentage of MSPs with high and low scores for each framework element

¹Selected municipalities had i) a Council-approved MSP, ii) a population of >4,000 and iii) developed their MSPs with the support of the AUMA MSP program and/or the FCM Green Municipal Fund.

²Key inputs included MSP guidance documents from the AUMA and The Natural Step Canada, a review of strategic planning best practices, and the findings of Stratos' three MSP implementation workshops.

³Stratos would like to thank its Advisory Committee: Rachel Bocoock, Alberta Urban Municipalities Association; Donna Chiarelli and Jeca Glor-Bell, Federation of Canadian Municipalities; Debbie Nielson, Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities; Lars Hallstrom, University of Alberta; and Sean Connelly, University of Regina.

RESULTS AND LEADING PRACTICES

In general the MSPs scored well, with a top score of 97%, low score of 33% and average score of 69%. The MSPs showed greatest strength in terms of Community Engagement, Action Planning and Analysis. Weaker areas of coverage were Vision, Goals and Targets, and Integration into Decision-Making.

Top Scoring MSPs

- Morinville
- Jasper
- Cochrane
- Hinton

It is important to note that Stratos only reviewed the MSPs themselves and not other supporting documents; however, points were awarded for clearly referencing external documents related to each element (e.g. an environmental scan). This ensured that all municipalities were treated equally and also reflects the importance of the MSP as the central document for establishing direction and accountability.

The results, leading practice scoring criteria, in blue, and examples for each element are presented below.

1) Analysis

The MSP is informed by a comprehensive analysis of relevant sustainability issues and the municipality's current reality, assets and challenges.

A strong analysis provides an overview of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in the community and is an essential step in forecasting exercises and the creation of targets. Generally plans did well in this category and many integrated quantitative data such as survey or census analysis and findings from community workshops.

Leading Example: Hinton provides current-state "snapshots" for each sustainability pillar. The analysis outlines current strengths and weaknesses and includes quantitative data from StatsCan, as well as qualitative input from resident and stakeholder workshops.

2) Strategic Framework

A framework clearly aligns the MSP with other municipal strategies and connects all levels of planning with a common language, structure and approach.

A strategic framework is vital to guide the implementation process and communicate to staff and the public why the MSP matters and how the municipality plans to use it. Fifty percent of municipalities did not communicate how their MSP relates to other plans (e.g. Municipal Development Plan), and only four provided detailed information on how the MSP will guide policymaking in the future.

Leading Example: Morinville's comprehensive strategic framework graphic and description positions its MSP as the overarching plan that sets the direction for municipal decision-making, corporate strategy, planning and policy development. The MSP is integrated with a 3-year strategic planning cycle for implementation.

3) Community Engagement

Community members were meaningfully engaged throughout the development of the MSP and there is a clear commitment and mechanism for ongoing engagement during implementation.

This was the highest scoring element with 86% of plans receiving a 3 or 4, consistent with the AUMA's emphasis on engagement. Most MSPs focused their consultations during initial visioning phases; however, mechanisms for ongoing engagement are also essential for building and maintaining momentum and action over the long term.

Leading Example: Jasper committed to a high level of engagement throughout the creation and implementation of their MSP. Steps included the creation of a Citizen Working Group (CWG), establishment of a website, multiple workshops engaging a wide-range of stakeholders, and site visits to local aboriginal communities. The CWG will continue to be active in the implementation of the plan, which will be renewed every five years through additional engagement.

4) Sustainability Framework

A comprehensive sustainability definition and framework guides planning and decision-making.

Clearly explaining what sustainability is, why it matters and how it will be used in decision-making is critical to inform readers and justify goals and targets. Leading plans presented a sustainability definition, narrative and principles that demonstrated its relevance to their local context and future planning initiatives.

Leading Example: Drumheller presents a high-level definition of sustainability, an overview of their 'backcasting' approach, a set of principles and an analysis of how sustainability applies in the local context.

5) Vision, Goals and Targets

There is a compelling long-term vision supported by clear, concise and inherently measurable goals with specific, time-bound targets.

This is a key area for improvement for most municipalities. Goals and targets were scored based on whether they were specific, measurable and time-bound, rather than their content or leadership stance (e.g. a 5% or 75% waste reduction target could score the same). Many MSPs present ‘narrative goals’ that provide a compelling description but lack any clear, measurable commitment or target that could be used for monitoring and reporting on progress. A second trend is ‘action goals’ that describe specific short-term initiatives but provide limited guidance for long-term planning.

*Leading Example: **Cochrane** provides a strong vision statement with a compelling narrative. The plan’s goals are clear and accompanied by thoughtful descriptions of success. Time-bound targets accompany each goal, such as: “By 2029, the number of businesses in Cochrane across all sectors increases by 50%.” Similarly, **Drayton Valley’s** MSP identifies key strategies and 1-,5-,10- and 25-year targets for each goal.*

6) Plan Comprehensiveness

The MSP addresses a broad range of municipal sustainability issues and pillars.

To assess comprehensiveness, Stratos reviewed more than 20 leading Canadian MSPs to develop a framework of 23 common sustainability goal areas across five pillars (Figure 2). MSPs were scored based on the percentage of goal areas they addressed, with >80% coverage receiving a 4 and <50% receiving a 1. Figure 2 presents the percentage of plans that clearly committed to action related to each goal area, with green and orange respectively representing the most and least common goals.

Sixty-four percent of plans scored in the high range for this element. Climate stewardship, air quality, agriculture, and infrastructure renewal were the least common goals, which is surprising given their importance in recent municipal surveys.⁴ Waste reduction and Safe Communities were also unexpectedly low with clear commitments from only 50% of municipalities.

The results validate the goal framework and highlight its value for ensuring plans address all key sustainability areas.

*Leading Example: **Morinville** addressed 100% of goal areas while **Jasper, Olds** and **Hinton** covered 91%, 83% and 83% respectively.*

7) Reporting and Indicators

Appropriate indicators and metrics are identified for each goal, a monitoring mechanism is in place and there is a clear commitment to regular, public reporting on progress.

Indicators and a commitment to reporting lend credibility and transparency to a plan and build accountability. Effective indicators are grounded in a broader framework that ensures their appropriateness and guides their interpretation. Forty-three percent of plans provided little or no information on this element and lacked a clear commitment to their future development.

*Leading Example: **Jasper** identifies indicators, metrics and data sources for each goal, and has committed to creating a long-term monitoring program and conducting a comprehensive review of the plan every 5 years.*

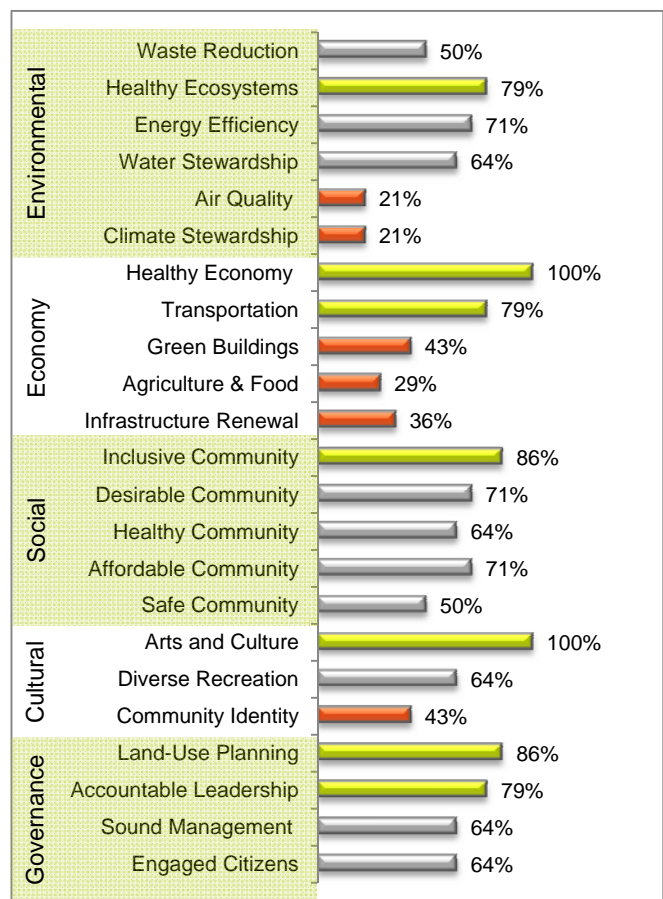


Figure 2 – Plan Comprehensiveness: Percentage of MSPs that addressed each sustainability goal area by pillar

⁴ Fresh Outlook Foundation’s 2010 “Community Sustainability Snapshot”

8) Actions

There is a clear indication that an action plan has been or will be developed that identifies short-term priorities and assigns appropriate resources and responsibilities.

Action planning is a key step in developing an MSP and builds momentum, excitement and credibility. Seventy-nine percent of MSPs identified actions for each goal area and highlighted 'low-hanging fruit'. Leading MSPs also included a prioritized action plan linked to resources and timelines.

Leading Example: Fort Saskatchewan provides a prioritized list of all actions, and a comprehensive list of actions linked to timeframe, budget, owner and corresponding themes and principles.

9) Integration Into Decision-Making

There is a strategy for implementation that outlines how the plan will be integrated into existing municipal structures, processes, documents and frameworks.

Implementing sustainability inherently requires adopting new processes, structures and criteria for decision-making. Leading municipalities made a clear commitment to integrate the MSP into planning and decision-making at all levels of the organization; however, most municipalities did not address integration.

Leading Example: Morinville includes a seven-part framework outlining how they will integrate the MSP into core planning and decision-making. Areas addressed include leadership, structure and performance management. The framework draws on research related to common implementation barriers and solutions.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

This research establishes a replicable baseline and process for assessing and improving the structure of MSPs in Alberta and across Canada. As municipalities transition into implementation, the framework provides a useful lens for identifying and addressing weak areas, such as by developing targets or creating ongoing mechanisms for community engagement.

Key observations on the state of MSPs include:

- **MSPs are generally grounded in strong processes and analysis.** The majority of plans were informed by

extensive community engagement processes, sustainability frameworks and current state analyses.

- **MSPs tend to favour short-term actions over long-term outcomes.** More than 71% of MSPs used a long-term lens of twenty years or more, but relatively few municipalities set clear, measurable goals to guide development over that timeframe.
- **Strategy and integration are key areas for improvement.** Most MSPs provided limited information on how they would be integrated into existing strategic, policy and decision-making frameworks at the municipality.

These findings highlight the importance of applying a strategic lens to the development and implementation of MSPs and related plans. Effective plans establish a clear, measurable and inspiring vision. As well, they build momentum and trust by establishing mechanisms for public accountability. In contrast, plans with vague goals and commitments fail to provide adequate direction for taking action and assessing progress.

In the long run, a great plan is not enough to create a great community - how it's implemented is what counts. Sustainability inevitably requires new structures and approaches. To succeed, communities need to integrate their MSPs into strategy and policy development processes, and establish mechanisms to track performance and manage change.



Figure 3 – Stratos' approach to sustainability planning and implementation

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. For more information on this research or to discuss particular challenges, please contact Chris Lindberg at clindberg@stratos-sts.com / 613.241.1001 ext 238 and visit our website at <http://www.stratos-sts.com/sectors/municipalities.html>.