



**FCM Sustainable Community Awards
2010 Winner — Planning
City of Williams Lake, British Columbia
Population: 10,744**



***Integrated Community Sustainability
Planning Framework***



Community engagement gathered feedback on nine priority areas.
Photo credit: City of Williams Lake

Summary

Working jointly with The Natural Step Canada and the Whistler Centre for Sustainability, the City of Williams Lake undertook an intensive community engagement process to uncover its citizens’ vision of a successful and sustainable city in 2030. A wide range of innovative events were held to gather public opinion. A diverse project team structured the community feedback into an Integrated Community Sustainability Plan (ICSP), complete with strategies on how to best move toward the desired goals. The ICSP will serve as the overarching guide to the city’s development over the next 20 years. The tools it provides to staff will be useful in developing policy and bylaws or in managing the development approval process. The plan will ensure that public concerns such as stable ecosystems, green infrastructure, food security, and efficiency in energy use and transportation are taken into consideration when pursuing new development in Williams Lake.

Background

Williams Lake is a city of 10,744 people in the Cariboo region of central British Columbia. The city’s economy has traditionally relied heavily on forestry, milling, mining, and ranching, and Williams Lake has recently faced many of the challenges confronted by similar resource-based towns: a mountain pine beetle epidemic, rising fuel prices, and the effects of climate change. The city was looking for an integrated approach at the local level that would address not only environmental and sustainability challenges, but also social issues such as increasing crime and the need for affordable housing.

Williams Lake decided to develop an Integrated Community Sustainability Plan — a long-term, high-level planning framework integrating the social, cultural, environmental, economic, and land use factors that shape the community. The city’s existing Official Community Plan (OCP) had been developed in 2000, and it had frequently been amended to accommodate development. The proposed new planning process provided an opportunity to review the OCP and to restructure it according to the principles of integrated community sustainability planning.

Being situated in the centre of the Northern Shuswap Tribal Council (NSTQ) traditional lands, and with the BC-NSTQ treaty negotiation close to Agreement in Principle, Williams Lake also saw an opportunity to create stronger partnerships and communication with local First Nations governments. In fact, the city was motivated by a desire to engage all local First Nations governments, community groups, citizens, and stakeholders so that the concerns of the entire community would be reflected in the ICSP/OCP.

Project Development

To build internal capacity in sustainability planning (SP), a consulting team worked with municipal staff and assisted the City of Williams Lake. A new internal working group called the Integrated Planning Task Force improved communication across departments. The task force, with representation from Development Services, Social Planning, Recreation Services, Public Works, Corporate Services, Economic Development, and Financial Services, coordinated public engagements, delivered staff training on SP, managed funding proposals, and developed an accountable and responsive governance structure. To provide context and guidance, city staff worked with the consulting team to bring together existing plans and strategies from various civic departments and active community groups. City council committed its support by creating a temporary position to oversee the ICSP implementation and to ensure consistency in the OCP review.

Externally, Williams Lake sought expertise from the Resort Municipality of Whistler to establish appropriate greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions reductions targets and ICSP policies and strategies. They also consulted with officials and staff from Canmore, Alberta, on tools and implementation tips. Early in the development process, Williams Lake was one of several communities that participated in a regional conference organized by the provincial Smart Planning for Communities team, which built and transferred knowledge about sustainability initiatives. Communities That Care, a local not-for-profit organization, contributed funding and resources to engage youth during the planning process. Williams Lake also worked with literature and principles from The Natural Step Canada on SP processes and techniques. The initiative was also supported in part by funding from the federal government's gas tax transfer.

Project Implementation

Williams Lake built its ICSP in partnership with three leading sustainability organizations — The Whistler Center for Sustainability, The Natural Step, and Smart Growth BC — in a collaboration uncommon to such plans. The team relied on research into best practices from other communities nearby, across Canada, and worldwide, and on a previous strategic planning exercise called *Imagine Williams Lake*. The resulting draft documents for community engagement identified nine priority areas as the initial foundation of the ICSP:

- resilient economy
- cherished local ecosystems
- arts, culture, and heritage
- world-class recreation
- social well-being
- partnership with First Nations
- lively downtown
- affordable and livable neighbourhoods
- active and convenient transportation

A creative public process organized to occur over four days in June 2009 gathered community opinion and feedback on the nine priority areas:

- In six "kitchen table" meetings (citizen-hosted short meetings around a "kitchen table" with a few invited friends) about 35 residents presented and discussed neighbourhood concerns and ideas.
- On the same day, a "Performance in the Park" engagement event held in conjunction with a local music festival awarded prizes to people who provided input to signboards for each of the nine priority areas. The event drew hundreds of people, many of whom might not have normally attended public planning meetings.
- The city also held a series of three "community partners' cafés," in which more than 60

participants came together at large tables surrounding a coffee station. Guided by some broad questions, they held group discussions on the nine priority areas and recorded their thoughts at nine related stations along the walls of the café.

- Community “hot spots”, where residents could learn about the planning process and write their ideas down on “table toppers” provided at the booths, were also set up around the town. As a spin-off, an “Imagine Our Future” booth later travelled to several local events to accept ideas and input.

In addition to those principal engagement activities, subsequent events continued to gather the community’s ideas and aspirations. Examples include a youth digital story-telling jam, special children’s events, partner interviews, an online survey, and the “Williams Lake Great Adventure,” a unique *Amazing Race*-themed event in which teams of citizens had fun while providing input into the priority areas of the ICSP. The breadth of engagement opportunities showed an innovative approach to planning, not only in leveraging planned community events, but also in developing unique social settings for dialogue.

The degree of community engagement during the planning process ensured that the ICSP is a collaborative vision for the city’s future. In an example of responsiveness, Williams Lake added a tenth priority area dealing with local food and agriculture, based on the volume of public feedback on the issue.

The planning team compiled all of this community input to create an inventory of assets and issues for each priority area and to develop medium-term transition strategies to deal with the issues. Staff also developed quantitative and qualitative key performance indicators for each of the (now ten) priority areas to gauge the impact of the plan as it proceeds. These indicators take account of community preferences, but also of ease of data collection.

The ICSP objectives in the ten strategic priority areas will serve as guiding principles in the revision of the city’s OCP and will be used to create policy. Once the ICSP is adopted, the OCP-related parts, such as guidelines for development permits, will immediately be implemented by city staff. And because the ICSP process identified energy issues and GHG emissions as important community concerns, the plan offers relevant performance indicators and possible actions. As legislated by British Columbia’s Bill 27, the Williams Lake OCP will include specific targets, policies, and actions for GHG emissions reductions. Williams Lake has taken up knowledge on this latter issue from the Federation of Canadian Municipalities through a Bill 27 workshop held in Prince George.

Results

- The “cherished local ecosystems” priority looks for clean air, healthy aquatic ecosystems, good water quality, carbon neutrality, zero waste, contained urban boundaries, and incorporation of local knowledge and wisdom in decision-making as long-term outcomes.
- Energy efficiency measures in municipal buildings will produce immediate operational cost savings.
- Energy expenditures in some B.C. communities are more than \$3,000 per capita annually and steadily rising. For a community of about 10,000 people such as Williams Lake, that amounts to \$30 million annually. A focus on conservation, efficiency, and renewable energy will ensure that more of the money is reinvested in the local economy.
- In prioritizing compact development, the ICSP will reduce municipal infrastructure and operating costs. As well, homes in compact and complete communities are more likely to retain their value as the retiring baby boom generation downsizes and desires easy access to goods and services.
- ICSP priorities are incorporated into specific tools at the municipal level such as an integrated capital assessment tool, a new council reporting format, and a new sustainability screening tool for private developers.

Lessons Learned

- ENSURE SUFFICIENT CAPACITY. A large strategic planning project requires significant staff resources. In hindsight, increased resource allocations to manage and implement the project would have been beneficial. Communities should also ensure that they identify and secure resources for monitoring the process after the initial implementation.
- ENGAGE YOUR AUDIENCE. It can be challenging to make a complex issue such as sustainable planning accessible and concrete enough for all community members. According to Williams Lake municipal planner Liliana Dragowska, "these barriers were overcome by simplifying the language used in publications and providing multiple options for the public and organizations to become involved.... We bounced drafts back and forth and found ways to communicate through media, Internet, e-mails, local coffee shops, recreation centres, schools, and much more."
- FIND WAYS TO GATHER FIRST NATIONS PERSPECTIVES. Williams Lake had no additional funding to offer to the local First Nations communities for engagement, which proved a large obstacle to meaningful dialogue and engagement. It would have been ideal to recruit a staff person from the local First Nations communities as a member of the project team. Despite these barriers, Dragowska notes that "the youth engagement component of the project was a great success in that it got First Nations and non-First Nations youth involved in the process."

Related and Future Initiatives

The city is in the early stages of establishing an electronic indicator monitoring system that would be publicly accessible and that would report on progress toward the ICSP goals. This level of accountability and performance measurement goes beyond the commitments made at the start of the project. As mentioned earlier, the ICSP framework will be used to guide the revision of the Williams Lake OCP in 2010. Additionally, consultants have used ICSP public input to develop a set of guiding principles for the Williams Lake 2020 Master Parks Plan.

The city has informally shared information and approaches to sustainability planning with other interested municipalities. In the future, Williams Lake intends to prepare and make available a formal case study, along with tools used in the project, perhaps through The Natural Step's network of municipal sustainability practitioners.

Partners and Collaboration

The Natural Step
The Whistler Centre for Sustainability
Williams Lake Indian Band
Soda Creek Indian Band
Northern Shuswap Tribal Council
Communities That Care
Community Arts Council
Federation of Canadian Municipalities
The BC Smart Planning for Communities team
City of Canmore, Alberta

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