

Manitoba Planning Conference: Feb 23-25, 2012

“Beyond Surviving: Planning to Thrive”

Title of presentation: Planning for Thriving Local Environments

Presented by: Wayne Caldwell, University of Guelph

Date: February 23rd, 2012

About the presentation

Central to Wayne’s presentation was the notion of sustainability at a local level. Wayne adopted the definition of sustainability from the renowned report by the Brundtland Commission entitled [Our Common Future](#) (1988) as comprising of development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Consequently, he stressed on an interaction of three integral parts of sustainability that include: (a) environment, (b) economy, and (c) society and culture. However, as for the purpose of his presentation, he paid particular attention to environmental issues and approaches while stressing on the importance of integrating a localized action to global and national initiatives in planning for thriving local environments within the context of sustainability.

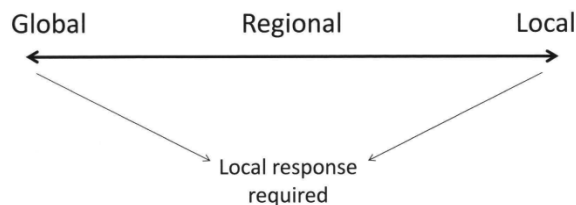


Figure 1: Interacting parts of sustainability. Figure 2: Local action in planning for thriving local environment

Wayne made specific reference to communities near the Lake Huron Shoreline (Ontario) as case examples of a localized approach to planning for sustainability. He shared with the audience three case examples in this regard that included the Huron County Water Protection Steering Committee, Provincial Stewardship Initiatives, and Sustainability Planning in Huron County. In one example, he referred to Sustainability Planning in Huron County to sum up the rationale for sustainable planning as follows:

- Interdependence of environmental, economic and social health
- Regional, national and global implications of a community’s actions
- Community involvement, awareness and education
- Inform and guide Municipal policy and actions
- Aid in Municipal leadership

As a further example, Wayne noted that a Sustainable Huron typically means the following:

1. Viable economy
 - Thinking globally, acting locally
 - Developing local skills and resources (local food, local businesses and manufacturing, local workforce etc.)

2. Social well-being
 - High quality of life for all residents
 - Equitable access to healthcare, education and social services
 - Adequate and affordable housing
 - A vibrant culture
3. Healthy natural environment
 - Viable ecosystems
 - Clean water
 - Diverse and healthy forest ecology
 - Accessible recreational opportunities

Wayne used the three case examples above to specifically enunciate his ‘ten-steps planning approach’ for thriving local communities:

1. Identify and engage community and political leaders
2. Engage diverse stakeholders
3. Attach resources from the municipal level
4. Create a vision
5. Strategic planning – identify and invest in priority areas
6. Build strategic partnerships with other organizations
7. Keep the community engaged and informed
8. Make it action oriented
9. Leverage other levels of government
10. Be open to different ideas, approaches, and processes

While speaking on the ‘ten steps planning approach’, Wayne emphasized that the audience takes note of the following key issues:

- Motivating different behaviour relative to addressing environmental issues is a challenge often faced by planners. To demonstrate one possible way to overcome this challenge, he referred to an interesting YouTube video that was shot in Stockholm (Sweden). The video (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2lXh2n0aPyw>) shows attempts by researchers to use the so called *fun theory*, which is backed by the belief that it is the easiest way to change people’s behaviours for the better by making it a fun process.
- Quality communication between or among stakeholders is key to success.
- Strategic planning must focus on overcoming perceptions with reality through information, coordination and partnerships with multiple actions such as field visits and dialogue.
- Strategic planning must be an engaging process that honors priorities that are set by communities themselves.
- In undertaking strategic planning, values and guidelines need to be developed to guide processes e.g. honoring talking piece, non judgmental, respect, confidentiality, fairness, OK to not reach conclusion, make it fun, etc.

In addition to engaging the audience in an informative Q&A session at the end of his presentation, Wayne actively involved them in ongoing interactive sessions throughout his presentation. At one point, he asked the audience to identify the key environmental issues in their communities, some of the key trends affecting water quality in their communities, and plans or policies existing in their communities that focus on the environment.

Commentary

Wayne's insights into the agenda of sustainability from an environmental perspective achieves importance with the fact that ecological systems are seriously strained by the increasing effects of past industrial activities and can barely withstand further strains that will result from future trends of growth. He correctly realizes that changing people's behaviours in favor of a sustainable living, as with any other positive cause, is a very difficult process that requires diverse and dynamic approaches. This difficulty stems from the fact that current behaviours (behaviours to be changed or discarded) comprise of the things that people *fancy* doing, influenced by the diversities in populations and cultures in varied environments. Wayne also wisely stresses a bottom-up approach to foster sustainable behaviours, whereby the community is actively involved in identifying its own priorities and taking ownership of the processes. This approach is crucial for achieving sustainability goals because the community becomes responsible for its own actions, including ensuing successes and failures. In the process, active members of the community become agents of behaviour change to others by acting as reference points (e.g. through dialogue, field visits, etc.) to the people they are inspiring, thus reducing the barriers to adoption of sustainable behaviours.

However, I wonder whether focusing his presentation more on the environmental component of sustainability Wayne is still talking about sustainability or, unknowingly, about environmental protection and conservation. In my opinion, these three pieces form a whole and are therefore inseparable as far as the concept of sustainability is concerned. That is probably why the term sustainability – as far as its definition goes - was coined in the first place to address the challenges of separating these three key attributes of development.

Again, the extent to which sustainability can be achieved regardless of the actions by global, national and local stakeholders is uncertain in the face of global market forces/competition on one hand, and national governments' desires to create employment opportunities for their people on the other hand. This may be why we see a ravaged earth today owing to *inevitable* mining operations, while nothing can be done to control the situation now or in future. The situation aggravates for developing countries, where poverty and corruption are severely in favor of economic gains regardless of the well-known environmental and social/cultural damages they may bring. In fact, based on my own life experience, the concept of sustainability – though very important – seems to belong to books and the mouths of *overambitious* elites and is so much less of a practical fact.

Summarized by:

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