CASE-IN-POINT 2017

SUSTAINABILITY IN PLANNING: FROM PRINCIPLE TO PRACTICE

The Thompson Sustainable Community Plan and Master Parks Plan

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ABSTRACT

Sustainability has become a mainstream concept in planning and design disciplines around the world, but practitioners struggle to turn these lofty principles in to tangible practices. Though there may be no blueprint for successful sustainability planning, three best practices can be identified in the Thompson Sustainable Community Plan and Master Parks Plan incluing Collaborative Discovery, Holistic Integration, and Resource Accountability. These characteristics are important, but are probably not sufficient conditions for success. Until there is continuity between those who design a plan and those who must administer it, the realization of sustainability principles in practice is likely to remain challenging.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Over the past 50 years, sustainability concepts and ideas have become staples of planning discourses around the world signalling the growing mainstream acceptance of the negative impacts of the predominant patterns of human development on the planet and concern for the long-term viability of our societies. This represents a commitment to make lasting changes that will safeguard the environment, promote equitable economic development, and make progressive improvements to our collective quality of life long into the future.

A brief survey of the academic planning literature over the past few decades reveals widespread and sustained efforts to integrate sustainability concepts into planning theory. For example, 'Communicative Turn' theorists see the goal of effective long-term governance to be inseparable from perspectives on environmental stewardship (Healey, 1997). Similarly, the New Urbanism paradigm seeks to realize alternative community design practices that reduce a community's reliance on the private automobile and to densify the built environment (Wheeler, 2004, p. 15).

Despite making its way into mainstream academic and professional discourses, sustainability has not had the impact many have hoped for. The key challenge involves transforming sustainability principles into practice; we need policies, plans, and practical frameworks that change the undertaking of public administration in a locality in the long-term. One of the findings in a study by Berke and Conroy was that, though sustainability concepts were making their way into contemporary plans, few were being translated into tangible policies with the capacity to effect change (Conroy & Berke, 2004, p. 1393).

While it's clear that there is no blueprint for success, there is evidence to suggest that best practices do exist that can go a long way to improving the chances that sustainability principles are transformed into actionable plans and policy documents. In collaboration with Don Hester, lead planner and landscape architect on the Thompson and Planning District Sustainable Community Plan (SCP) and Master Parks Plan (MPP), three key interrelated areas of focus emerge as important components of successful sustainable planning:

- The process must be derived from and applied to a local context. This local context should be defined from an iterative process of collaborative discovery.
- The process must be undertaken holistically, with as many facets of policy and administration as possible.
- The process must ensure that the community has the resources to observe and act upon sustainability principles. The community must plan to exercise resource accountability.

2.0 BACKGROUND

Located on the traditional territories of the Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation, the area today known as Thompson was a "Hub of the North". The area has a rich history of Indigenous settlement, trapping, and hunting, and the Burntwood River served as a key transportation corridor for Hudson's Bay employees using it as a means of accessing the Canadian interior and servicing many trading posts along its route (Buckingham, 1988, p. 2). The mid-twentieth century saw a flurry of activity by surveyors and mining prospectors seek to explore the mineral potential of the region. In 1955, nickel was discovered north of the Burntwood River near Mystery Lake by the International Nickel Company of Canada (INCO) (AECOM, 2010, pp. 4-1).

In many ways, Thompson can be seen to be a "critical case" for sustainable community planning. This is to say that, all other things being equal, "if it can work here, it can work anywhere" (Flyvbjerg, 2001, pp. 229-230). Since its founding, its history tells a story of resource dependency that has shaped both its economy and its administration. In 1956, the Province of Manitoba entered an agreement with INCO to create the local Government District (LGD) of Mystery Lake to provide a settlement that could service the mining industry. INCO was responsible for planning and constructing the "Townsite of Thompson", a locality estimated to support roughly 8,000 people. INCO provided per capita local government (utilities, services, capital improvements) and school costs (AECOM, 2010, pp. 4-2).

This arrangement shifted in 1966 when Thompson became a Town. The local government assumed greater responsibility for servicing the municipality and the LGD, but INCO still played a central role in the Town's administration through its ownership of various services and other assets (AECOM, 2010, pp. 4-3). The Great Recession exposed Thompson to uncertainty and economic volatility, but also new opportunity. Today, though still reliant on the mining industry (now principally represented by Vale Canada LTD) the people of Thompson have shown that they aspire to grow into something more resilient and dynamic – to regain its historic title, "Hub of the North".

In 2009, AECOM was retained by the Thompson Planning District to complete a plan to explore these aspirations and chart a sustainable course for the future.

FIGURE 1 | Spirit Way Inc. Wolves of Thompson and Norseman Floatplane

3.0 KEY OUTPUTS

The SCP references five key outputs: a Sustainability Vision, a Growth Management Plan, a Master Parks Plan (MPP), a Sustainable Asset Management Plan, and an Implementation Plan. The following is intended to provide a brief overview of the key components of each output.

3.1 Sustainability Vision

Visioning has been a core practice of planning for the past 25 years. Planners have used visioning processes to provide the community with an opportunity to define the values that guide plans, policies, and projects (Grant, 2007, p. 41). An intrinsic tension in this case involves reconciling the more transcendent values of sustainability with the local values of the community. Don's team at AECOM looked to the experience of their colleagues in Alberta who had recently undertaken sustainable planning processes. Through a comprehensive four-round community consultation process, their model incorporated an overall vision with individual vision statements for Five Pillars of sustainability: Economic, Social, Cultural, Built and Natural Environment, and Governance.

3.2 Growth Management Plan

The Growth Management Plan contains three phases of study and analysis. The first looks to Thompson's current and projected context. This involved the undertaking of a detailed demographic profile and population projections, as well as an assessment of housing need. Combined with a terrain analysis, AECOM had the ingredients necessary to begin thinking about possible options and

courses of action as they pertain to the growth of the city.

The second phase entailed the development of comprehensive growth scenarios for residential, commercial, and industrial development. In collaboration with stakeholders, AECOM developed a series of possible futures predicated on balancing increased residential densities and preserving a range of lifestyle choices, and encouraging economic diversification.

The final phase provided Thompson and the Planning District with recommended alternatives for future development, each rated for different costs, benefits, and levels of sustainability. It also provided a brief timeline indicating the recommended phasing of development.

3.3 The Master Parks Plan

The Master Parks Plan (MPP) was a separate initiative undertaken concurrently with the SCP, but built upon the vision described by the latter's Public Engagement Strategy and Visioning Process. Designed to support the management of the City of Thompson's parks and open spaces until 2030, the plan provides a typological inventory of current facilities and connecting networks, and recommends several courses of action for their improvement. Each recommendation is given with consideration of national standards and estimates for short, medium, and long-term costs.

3.4 Sustainable Asset Management Plan

The vast majority of Thompson's infrastructure was established when the townsite was established (1956) and when it incorporated some 10 years later (1966). Assuming most of the infrastructure has a useful life of 75 years, the city had about 20 years to replace 150,000 metres of infrastructure. The SCP's Sustainable

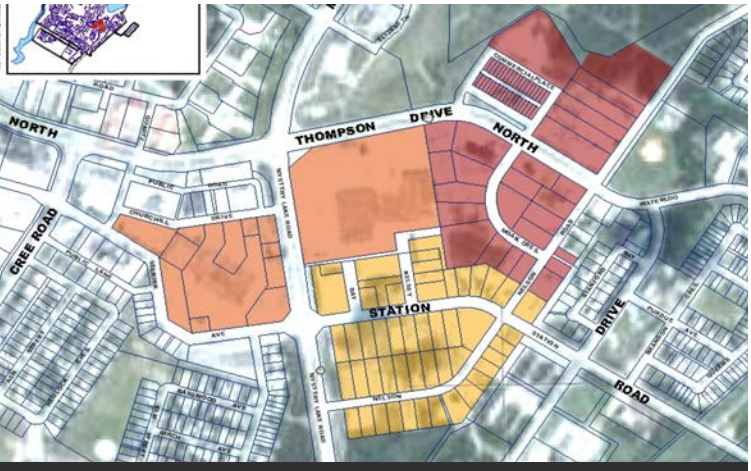

FIGURE 2 | Downtown Revitalization Plan - Growth Management Plan Excerpt

FIGURE 3 | Parks and Outdoor Spaces Inventory - MPP Excerpt

Asset Management (SAM) Plan is intended to provide a framework for managing this need effectively and responsibly. SAM is an holistic undertaking achieved by linking data on infrastructure with planning, decision-making practices, and tools on meeting the City's functional and operational objectives.

3.5 Implementation Plan

The SCP's Implementation Plan is intended to provide a framework for implementing the sustainable planning initiatives over the short, medium, and long term. Key to this framework is the inclusion of recommend best-practices, suggested partners for funding and undertaking elements of the plan, and performance criteria for monitoring the success of the plan and adherence to the sustainable vision outlined early on the SCP process.

4.0 / ANALYSIS

Though diverse, the theories underpinning sustainable community planning typically point to the need to fundamentally change the modernist "business-as-usual" practices associated with the late 20th century (Wheeler, 2004, pp. 34-52). AECOM employed The Natural Step © framework as a starting point for this paradigm shift. A key component of this sustainability model is a concept called *backcasting*, a concept that begins with developing a comprehensive vision for a sustainable future and works through the process of identifying policies and programs that will make such a future possible (The Natural Step, 2016). This process is intended to make sustainability principles the core organizing concept of planning. Combined with traditional planning and design expertise

and experience, this model contributed to the completion of a plan that features three interrelated characteristics taken to be pivotal to its success: collaborative discovery, holistic integration, and resource accountability.

4.1 Collaborative Discovery

The Five Pillars of sustainability developed by their colleagues in Alberta according to The Natural Step © program were used to guide the visioning process to focus on specific aspects of sustainability, but initially, they were 'empty' categories. The first round of pubic consultation was aimed at "discovering" their content through the perspective of the residents of Thompson.

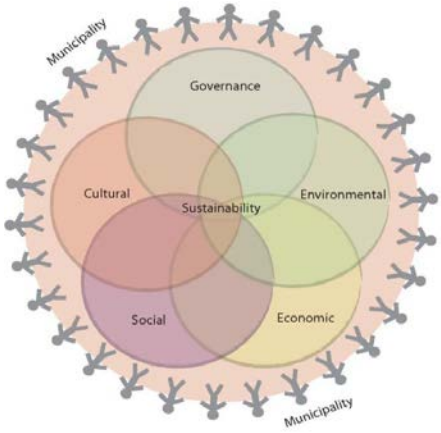

FIGURE 4 | Five Pillars of Sustainability

This collaborative approach to "discovering" a "Thompsonian essence" to sustainability was not limited to the first round of consultation. At each successive stage, from strategy to policies and actions, stakeholders had a role to play in the creative problem-solving and solution-generating process.

This process of discovery is identified to be key in the literature not simply for ensuring that a plan is accepted by the community, but also to develop social capital – "features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions" (Wheeler, 2004, p. 100). In short, ownership over the process produces social resources that make the implementation of sustainable principles more likely over time.

4.2 Holistic Integration

Holism in sustainable community planning is about using a systems approach to integrating sustainable planning principles. In practice this entails two interrelated aspects of association. First, traditionally compartmentalized planning specialties should be explicitly linked within each stage of strategy, policy, or action. Second, it means linking the different scales of planning in such a way that they build and reinforce one another (Wheeler, 2004, p. 36).

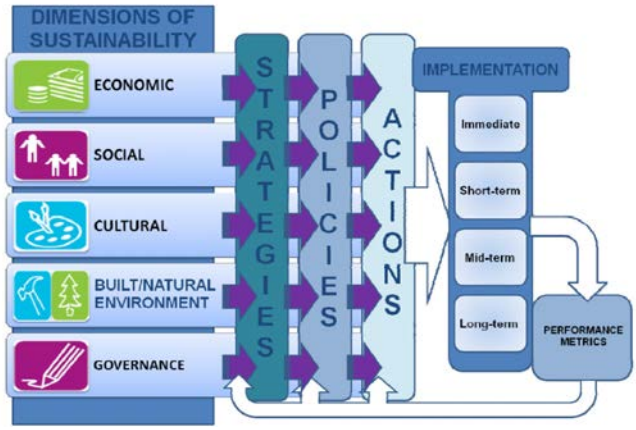

FIGURE 5 | Excerpt from Strategies, Policies, and Actions Summary

In the first case, throughout the SCP, a system of icons was used to associate a given strategy, policy, or action to the pillars of sustainability. Each stage was explicitly linked to the one that preceded it. This ensured that the actionable elements of the plan were accountable to the vision set out early in the planning process, prompting AECOM to continuously reflect on and evaluate the sustainable content of a given stage of project development.

Second, nearing the end of the report, all the recommended strategies, policies, and actions are organized into a table that provides the opportunity for comparison and relation between elements of the SCP. For each strategy, the table contains recommendations pertaining to possible local and regional partnerships for funding or administrative support, policies, actions, timing, and performance measures. This summarized and collated view is indispensable for planning the roll-out of specific actions because it permits an administrator to find synergies and operational reinforcements between the different scales of the plan.

4.3 Resource Accountability

The final characteristic found to be indispensable to the success of Thompson's SCP is resource accountability. The literature identifies inadequate resources to be the leading cause of low accomplishment of sustainability goals (Conroy & Berke, 2004, p. 1386). This is not necessarily an indication that sustainable policies are more expensive, but a reflection of the need to change

municipal administrative practices from being reactive to proactive. The team at AECOM recognized this at every stage of the project, providing capital and lifecycle cost estimates for the roll-out of different infrastructure improvements, the servicing costs of new development, a comprehensive Municipal Facilities Survey, among others. Central to the effort to provide administrators with Resource Accountability was the Sustainable Asset Management Framework and Toolset. Here, a methodology for planning around the maintenance and renewal of assets well in advance of any immediate need to do so goes a long way to ensuring a proactive, and accountable, approach to the management of local resources.

FIGURE 6 | Integrated Asset Management Methodology

5.0 / LESSONS LEARNED

Speaking with Don, the most successful feature of this plan was its sensitivity to context. Though he had consulted his colleagues in Alberta and applied The Natural Step © framework, it was clear early on that realizing sustainable principles in Thompson's SCP would not come from a "blueprint". There are many models and frameworks that are useful insofar as they provide guidance, but success is derived from many of the unique skills and competencies that come from planning expertise: attentive listening, creative problem solving, and a pragmatic outlook to the achievement of goals.

Furthermore, Don was frank about projects like the SCP, explaining that "they're essentially aspirational studies". What he meant by this was that there is no guarantee that the findings or recommendations made after concluding the project will actually be taken up in earnest, applied to policy, and used as they had been intended. Of course, as this Case in Point has argued, a good plan makes this more likely. He noted that this could be a defect of contemporary contract and tendering practices. Because the personnel that did the work to create the plan are usually not retained to implement it, too often the work is not fully realized. Thankfully, this was not the case in Thompson. A planner at the City of Thompson who had followed the SCP process closely was able to champion its implementation in the years that followed, seeing much of its content integrated into the official development plan and zoning by-law.

You can find the Thompson and Planning District Sustainable Community Plan and Master Parks Plan at:

http://www.thompson.ca/index.aspx?page=140.

FIGURE 7 | Bateman Wolf Mural

RESOURCES

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Image Sources

Figure 1: https://thehubwinnipeg.files.wordpress.com/2015/05/1-thompson.jpg

Figure 2: Thompson Planning District Sustainable Community Plan (§ 9-11)

Figure 3: City of Thompson Master Parks Plan (F. 1)

Figure 4: Thompson Planning District Sustainable Community Plan (§ 5-1)

Figure 5: Thompson Planning District Sustainable Community Plan (§ 11-40)

Figure 6: Thompson Planning District Sustainable Community Plan (§ 12-4)

Figure 7: http://winnipeglovehate.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/28-18828-post/29830756304_5ad2aa96a9_h.jpg