

Experience-Driven Planning

Envisioning and Delivering

Sustainable Growth in Ladysmith, B.C.



Abstract

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Experience-driven planning is an innovative community planning approach that uses the experiences and preferences of community residents to direct the planning process. This approach requires planners to be intuitive, ask evocative questions, and use imagery and stories to describe what matters most to community members. The experience-driven planning approach was used in Ladysmith, BC to engage residents on a deeper level and create a vision for sustainable growth. The Town of Ladysmith is currently working to implement the sustainability vision with the help of community members, local and regional stakeholders. The purpose is to collaborate on common goals, actions and initiatives by sharing resources and working together towards increased sustainability.



Figure 1: Streetscape in Ladysmith

Introduction

This case in point describes the experience-driven planning approach used to develop Ladysmith's sustainability vision and the lessons learned that can be applied more generally in rural and community planning, especially in settings like Manitoba at the present time. The visioning and implementation planning processes in Ladysmith can be looked to as an example of best practice on innovative community planning and enhancing sustainability in a small town setting.

Ladysmith is located on the east coast of Vancouver Island, BC, approximately 90km north of Victoria. The Town's population is approximately 7,500 and is known for its 'small town' atmosphere, built heritage, and commitment to environmental sustainability. The town is growing rapidly and is dealing with the challenge of

embracing growth while maintaining its small town character. In 2008, the Town of Ladysmith worked with HB Lanarc (now HB Lanarc-Golder Associates) to develop a sustainability vision focused on addressing this challenge. This vision won the 2009 Canadian Institute of Planners award for Rural and Small Town Planning for its community planning process.

Currently, the Town is implementing the vision through a collaborative process involving local and regional stakeholders to explore areas of common interest and partner on local initiatives. Collaboration at this level is seen as important because it helps smaller local governments such as Ladysmith achieve greater sustainability by partnering with stakeholders and community organizations.

Experience-Driven Planning

Great places are considered to be great based on the experiences that they provide. Conventional planning has often been too focused on the technical, external characteristics of a community and failed to effectively consider peoples' internal perceptions of place. Because of this, some such as Wight (2011) argue that planning is potentially best repositioned as place-making, where planning and design are integrated with community feelings and perceptions. Beasley (2009) also emphasizes the importance of experience, arguing that love should be a guiding element of city building.

The experience-driven planning approach in Ladysmith, at its core, prioritizes community experiences as the guiding factor for creating a community



Figure 2: Location of Ladysmith (www.sealegskayaking.com/sealegs-getting-here.html)



Figure 3: Clock in Ladysmith

vision. It recognizes that people usually live where they do because they like where they live, and seeks to reveal preferred experiences that make their community a great place in their eyes. It focuses first and foremost on peoples' perceptions and feelings of their community and collective identity. In Ladysmith the preferred identity was one that valued sustainability and its small town heritage feel. One resident stated: "If we are to bring more density, the small town feel of Ladysmith should prevail" (Town of Ladysmith, 2009a, p.8).

The process focused on experiences people had in Ladysmith, experiences from other places, and the participant experience throughout the planning process. Questions focused on

great experiences people had in their community (ie. where is the best place to experience nature?) and experiences in other settings (ie. what was your best downtown experience? What made it great?).

Community engagements included personal workbooks where people could write down their feelings and preferences. This ensured everyone was heard and focused peoples' thoughts. Table discussions explored community experiences and preferences in a comfortable setting. Educational presentations were given on the realities of towns, infrastructure, local economies, and sustainability. Community members were shown many images of various building typologies and built environments, then asked to indicate their preferences. An online discussion forum facilitated the continuation of these community conversations.

"If we bring more density, the small town feel of Ladysmith should prevail" - Resident of Ladysmith

Storytelling was also a part of the visioning process. Storytelling is noted to be an important part of planning but few practitioners use it as part of a planning process (Sandercock, 2003). A creative writer was hired who documented elements of the planning process in poetic and story form, creating a narrative about the evolution of the vision. A land economist was also involved to make sure the vision was tangible from a financial perspective.

These methods helped community members identify common ground and understand their town and each other more. A clear sense of Ladysmith's identity and preferred experiences emerged. Through understanding the desired functional, social and aesthetic experiences, the technical planning and design team was able to develop goals, policies and guidelines to direct future growth to create more of what people loved about Ladysmith.

The Eight Pillars of Sustainability:

The Ladysmith Community Sustainability vision was also centred on the 8 pillars of sustainability, developed by HB Lanarc (Town of Ladysmith, 2009b, p.6). These pillars were developed by HB Lanarc as a framework for applying the principles of sustainability in

community planning and design.

Eight Pillars of Sustainability:

Complete community land use: Compact building, mixed-use, and development patterns that promote low impact transportation. In Ladysmith this means increasing density in the downtown, diversifying housing types, and promoting the pedestrian environment.

Low impact transportation:

Promote forms of transportation such as walking, cycling and transit that have a low environmental impact. Ladysmith already has a pedestrian friendly downtown and a healthy trail system; this will be further enhanced along with other low impact transportation options.

Green buildings:

Promote green buildings to be part of new developments in an effort to reduce energy, water, and materials usage while minimizing negative impacts to the ecosystem.

Multi-use landscapes:

Landscapes will be used for recreation to promote health,

8 pillars of sustainability:

- complete community land use
- low impact transportation
- green buildings
- multi-use landscapes
- innovative infrastructure
- local food systems
- healthy communities
- a local, diverse economy

support ecological well-being, provide opportunities for urban agriculture, and promote the integration of arts and heritage in public spaces.

Innovative infrastructure:

Promote the development of environmentally friendly infrastructure for energy, water, and waste management. The town will continue to move in this direction by promoting renewable energy, ongoing education, and creating a zero-waste strategy.

Local food systems:

Develop a sustainable, local food system. This would include promoting purchasing from local growers, connecting people to where their food comes from, farmers markets, and community gardens.

A healthy community:

Celebrate the heritage, arts and culture of the community, hold



Figure 4: Community Engagement Session



Figure 5: Street in Ladysmith

festivals, and create places for people to meet. Examples include supporting local artists, emphasizing the history of local First Nations, and increasing the capacity of local facilities.

Local, diverse economy:
Promoting a range of local economic activities that utilize local resources to build an economy that is resilient over the long term. In Ladysmith this may include a sustainable economic development strategy, education on the importance of buying local, and preserving commercial and industrial lands.

Further information on the 8 Pillars of Sustainability can be found at:
<http://www.hblanarc.ca/>

Planning Process:

A total of 6 workshops were held in Ladysmith (Town of Ladysmith, 2009, p.1). Each had a different focus but used the experience-driven approach.

1. Overall character and vision workshop:

Focused on what people loved about Ladysmith and how to build upon its strengths to create the reputation and character that Ladysmith community members wanted.

2. Sustainable development workshop:

Focused on how the 8 Pillars of Sustainability could be woven into Ladysmith's community vision.

3. Downtown workshop:

Special emphasis was placed on focusing on the types of ex-

periences people wanted downtown, as well as the programs and design elements needed to deliver these experiences.

4. Holland Creek Development Area workshop:

Focused on a green field area planned for future development and how it could be developed in a way that is sustainable, fits Ladysmith's existing heritage character, and maintains Ladysmith's small town feel.

5. Waterfront workshop:

Explored how waterfront sustainability could be enhanced and how growth could provide more of the experiences Ladysmith residents wanted to have on the waterfront.

6. Review workshop:

Reviewed the previous 5 work-



Figure 6: Streetscape from Ladysmith

shops to ensure that what was understood at these workshops was accurately incorporated in the draft vision and to make revisions where necessary.

Outcomes from the Community Sustainability

Vision:

A vision for sustainable growth: There is a clear direction for increasing sustainability, preserving Ladysmith's small town heritage character, and assuring future growth will create more of the experiences the community wants.

Enhanced community members understanding of small town sustainability: Community members have become more informed on the challenges facing Ladysmith, in part by putting them more in touch with their experiences and their meanings, allowing them to contribute more deeply.

An enjoyable, accessible, and interactive community planning process: Many community members commented at the end of the process that it was one of the most pleasant community planning experiences they had ever had.

Quiet time and personal notebooks facilitate reflection. Everyone has their voice heard.

Implementation:

HB Lanarc-Golder is currently working with Ladysmith to develop the Community Sustainability Implementation Plan. This will focus on the implementation of the sustainability strategy, overall vision, the downtown plan, the waterfront plan, and the Holland Creek Development Area plan. Within these areas of the vision, new strategies and plans will need to be created (ie. a formal sustainability strategy), existing plans updated (ie. update the economic development plan with sustainability principles), and new groups formed (ie. volunteer stewardship groups).

The Town of Ladysmith is a small government organization and will need assistance from other individuals and organizations to implement the plan. HB Lanarc is currently working with the Town of Ladysmith to establish goals, outline clear responsibilities for local and regional stakeholders, create

steps for action, and establish a plan for monitoring progress. A key part of the implementation planning process focuses on building relationships with local and regional stakeholders.

Effort is being made to implement via collaboration. Collaboration focuses on achieving results through identifying common interests, building consensus between autonomous stakeholders, and achieving results while maximizing resources (Margerum, 2011). For collaboration to occur, stakeholders such as BC Hydro, the Cowichan Valley Regional District, and community members need to be convinced and understand how the Community Sustainability Vision aligns with their goals and un-



Figure 7: Bench with Artwork

derstand the importance of their role in making the vision a reality in Ladysmith.

Lessons Learned:

Several lessons have been learned from the Ladysmith Community Sustainability Vision process and the in progress Community Sustainability Implementation Plan:

1. Distinguish between growth and unappealing growth.

People usually live where they do because they like characteristics of their community. Sometimes they fear potential changes to what they love. Growth that is envisioned and directed in a way that gives communities more of the experiences they want – functionally, socially, and aesthetically – is likely to receive support.

2. Intuition is vital to revealing preferred experiences.

Questioning must be intuitive and evocative to get people into the experiential mindset. Where is the best place to experience nature? Listen to children playing? What is the best experience you've ever had on a waterfront? What makes these experiences great?

3. Preferred experiences must direct technical planning.



Figure 8: Community Engagement

Internal experiences and perceptions should be the focus of questions, not technicalities like height, density, and setbacks. Through understanding the desired identity and experiences of a community, an integrated planning and design team can formulate technical guidelines that will shape development to deliver the vision outlined by the community.

4. Convey results in a clear, visual, accountable manner.

Preferences for identity and character, as well as sustainability directives, should be publicly conveyed so the town, community, developers, and local and regional stakeholders are aware of the direction and move towards a common goal.

5. Relationships facilitate collaborative implementation.

Collaboration with local and regional stakeholders can assist with implementation in a small town like Ladysmith. Informal and formal relationships with these parties can promote understanding and identify common interests, facilitating implementation.

Conclusion:

Experience-driven planning can potentially be replicated where there is the will. It utilizes internal perceptions and feelings to direct the making of great places with great experiences. It requires planners to be intuitive, ask the right questions and use creative methods to reveal the experiences community members desire. These experiences must be interpreted by planning and design professionals to determine the technical requirements needed to deliver these experiences and achieve sustainable growth. Once a vision is created, collaboration with local and regional stakeholders can help facilitate implementation, especially in a small town setting. When mutual interests have been identified, the process has the potential to move forward in a collaborative manner, efficiently creating more of the experiences the community wants.



Figure 9: Storefront Sign

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Images

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