

Sustainable Planning and Community-Building:

Learning from the Middlechurch Secondary Plan



Abstract

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This Case-in-Point will focus on the community engagement process used to create a sustainable secondary plan for Middlechurch, an unincorporated community within the Rural Municipality of West St. Paul. Middlechurch is an edge community characterized by a dispersed settlement pattern linked together by the provincial highway system.. This context provided planners with a unique set of challenges and opportunities in creating a sustainable planning framework (Lombard North Group, 2011, b).

The consultation process aimed to create a plan uniquely suited to the needs of community residents by engaging many different stakeholders, including: community leaders, business owners, and administrative staff from adjoining municipalities, to build support for the community's planning strategies (Lombard North Group, 2011, c). The process, and the resulting plan, brought the community together for a more sustainable future in planning as well as service sharing and is an example of innovation in Manitoba planning (Richard Mahe, March 15, 2012).

Location of Middlechurch

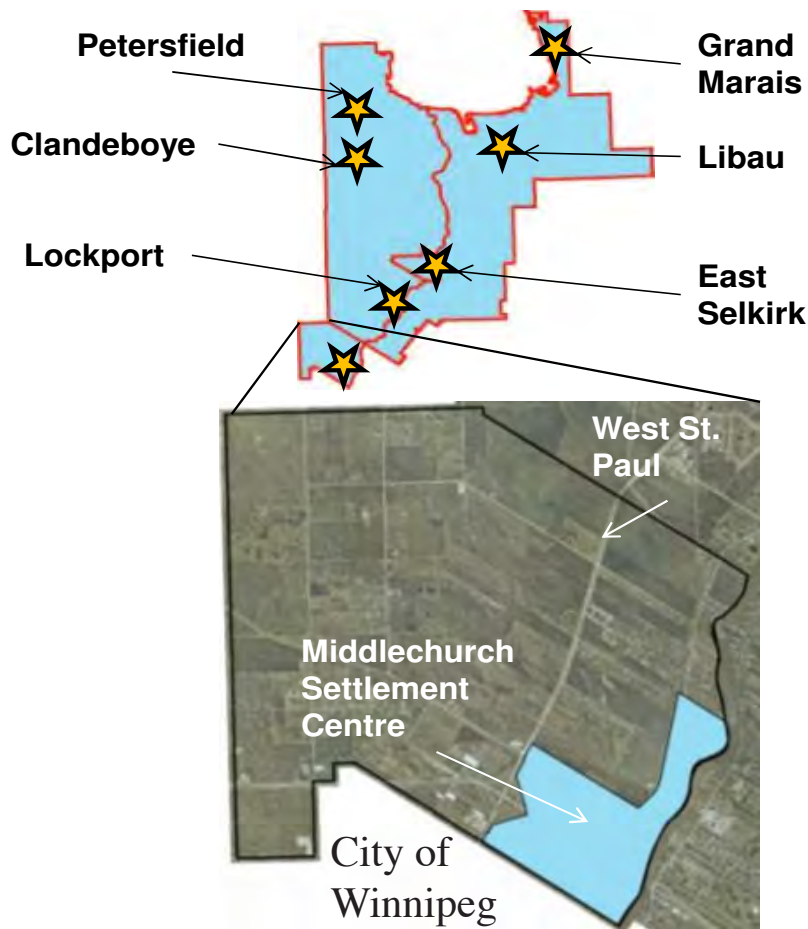


Figure 1: Middlechurch-Location and SAPD Context.

Background

Located between the Red River and PTH #8 on the northern edge of the City of Winnipeg (Figure 1), Middlechurch is one of the fastest growing communities within Manitoba. Its growth can largely be attributed to its close proximity to the City of Winnipeg for commercial amenities and employment opportunities, its open space character and the limited residential housing opportunities within the north portion of the City of Winnipeg (Lombard North Group, 2011, b & c).

Its open spaces, river lot system and isolated pocket neighborhoods characterize the landuse character of the community. These neighbourhoods reflect both a large lot rural residential and suburban built form character. This development pattern, which has evolved over the last 60 years, has created a strong community identity at the neighbourhood level (Richard Mahé, March 15, 2012). The neighbourhoods have evolved along the highways. Provincial Trunk Hw #8, #9 and #101 form the primary roadway system that connects the community internally and with the Capital Region.

The community, part of the Regional Municipality of West St. Paul, consists of a variety of poorly connected neighborhoods along Highways (Figure 2). The major pathways connecting parts of the community are primary and secondary Provincial highways of Highway #9, and the Perimeter Highway #101. The population of the community is diverse and includes long-time residents who are accustomed to a quiet rural lifestyle, and more recent residents that are moving into the area from larger urban areas such as Winnipeg. This spread out and diverse community had

Disconnected Neighbourhoods



Figure 2: Neighbourhoods are spread out and not connected



Figure 3: Vision of active transportation system for MiddleChurch

to come together to agree on a sustainable vision for the community's secondary plan (Lombard North Group, 2011, a).

This type of settlement pattern and characteristics of a community result in some planning challenges. The unique planning challenges of this community were:

1. Growth Management (how do we sustainably plan for increased population growth within the Capital Region)
2. How do we build a Complete Community (given #1)
3. How do we link our neighborhoods (currently isolated)
4. Resolving the wastewater infrastructure issues associated with failing on-site wastewater systems and

neighbourhood level wastewater treatment plants.

5. How do we preserve and enhance the current open space character (given #1)

These challenges resulted in the local municipality wanting to develop a sustainable plan to meet the specific characteristics of Middlechurch (Richard Mahe, March 15, 2012).

Community Initiatives

Prior to the initiative to develop a sustainable vision, a grassroots community effort had started to build an active transportation trail system (Figure 3) that connected individual neighborhoods. This effort is a demonstration of residents drive to create a more cohesive, connected community. The trail system became a very important part within the plan for linking the community and encouraging community participation and collaboration (Richard, Mahe, March 15, 2012).

Facts of the Case

The Middlechurch secondary plan was first started in 2010 when the community of West St. Paul and the Selkirk and District Planning Area saw a need for a plan that directly addressed the needs of Middlechurch (Richard Mahé, March 15, 2012). The Province of Manitoba, the Selkirk and District Planning Area, and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM), through

their Green Municipal Fund, financially supported the development of the secondary plan. FCM's funding was given to support planning for the transformation of communities on the urban edge of a large city into a more sustainable community (Lombard North Group, 2011, a).

The mandate of the secondary plan was to:

1. Need to improve the quality of surface drainage discharge into local waterways and Lake Winnipeg;
2. Need to address public health concerns regarding potential contamination of potable water;
3. Need for a cooperative inter-municipal approach to close the gap between the capacity of service infrastructure to meet needs, to improve the environmental sustainability of the District's settlement pattern and to manage population growth within the next 20 years; and
4. Need to undertake detailed settlement centre plans to engage citizens in how their communities apply and in turn are shaped by sustainable development strategies.

The process for public consultation (Figure 4/5) included 2 open houses and 2 workshops with

the residents of the area over a 1 year period. Notices about each public event and invitations were delivered to all households in the community, and residents were encouraged to tell others in their community to attend the events. Each event was well attended by community residents from all the neighbourhoods within Middlechurch. In addition, attempts were made to involve harder-to-reach populations such as youth and the business sector. Due to the diversity of people within the community, small breakout groups were organized to encourage conversation and sharing of ideas. A major part of each of the consultations was an education component that explained the context of the plan, as well as what sustainability was and what it could mean for the community (Lombard North Group, 2011, b). The consultant recruited informal champions from each community. Champions helped identify and engage community members to attend open houses and workshops. This strategy proved very effective in gaining a more



Figure 4: Middlechurch Secondary Plan Workshop



Figure 5: Middlechurch Secondary Plan workshop

diverse representation of people to the events. Also, it worked very well for disseminating information about the secondary plan projects. This helped the community take ownership of the process and the resulting plan (Richard Mahé, March 15, 2012).

The community residents supported opening up of communication outside of the Middlechurch borders to bring in other municipalities to support the sustainability initiatives of the plan. This was mainly due to the reality that sensitive aquifers within the region make water, sewer, and other services a priority for the sustainability plan. Negotiations have begun with neighboring municipalities to secure service sharing agreements for wastewater and water services. As a result, the plan does not look at the Middlechurch area in isolation. Instead, the process to create the plan looked at where this community fits within the

wider region and ensured that all were included in a collaborative manner (Lombard North Group, 2011, b&c).

Outcomes

Greenway Network & Preserving Sensitive Lands

A local ownership issue that was addressed during the consultation and the plan was the issue of green space within the community. The local group that built the active transportation path came together with other members of the community to argue in favor of a strong recreation focus for the sustainability plan. As a result, the plan included both a comprehensive plan for green spaces (section 2.6), and a river and streams conservation policy (section 2.7). These policies helped create a rallying point for the entire community and galvanized the opinions of a wide range of people within the community (Lombard North Group, 2011, b).



The green pathway plan (section 2.6), as well as other aspects of the plan, fit into the idea of Complete Communities. The community was asked what they saw as a complete community for them, and as a result, the plan addressed their concerns and created a sustainable land use plan and open space network that met their vision (Lombard North Group, 2011, b).

Groundwork for inter-municipal cooperation

Part of the diverse community that was united under this plan was the neighboring communities, such as the City of Winnipeg, and the RM of St. Andrews. The process included negotiations for the creation of a service sharing agreement. In addition to service sharing, the resulting plan proactively sought to address physical connectivity issues between the two municipalities in terms of both active transportation and vehicle connectivity. Previously the parties taking part had not communicated in such a productive way (Lombard North Group, 2011, a).

Healthy Sustainable Water

The plan includes agreements for a sustainable, healthy source of water and waste water treatment for the area. Before this time, the majority (Figure 6) of the community used wells and septic tanks, with some small scale micro treatment plants through the area. Due to the geology of the area, these types of systems were not sustainable. The agreement for combined services with the City of Winnipeg will provide a safe source of water and sustainable treatment of waste water for the community for years to come. This also resulted in a more sustainable allocation of land, which will create the conditions for smaller lot sizes and higher densities and the ability to create a commercial node to service the community (Lombard North Group, 2011, b).

A Diverse Community Came Together

By far, the most substantial outcome of the plan was mainly due to the process; the community and its neighbors came together under a common vision (Richard Mahé, March, 15, 2012). Due in large part to the planning process that took place, public participation process, negotiation and communication with neighboring communities, as well as focusing on complete communities. This process insured that the residents that took part had the opportunity to listen to each other, learn about sustainability and create

a plan that met their needs. In the end the plan was accepted without major issue at all levels (Lombard North Group, Summary, 2011, b & c; Richard Mahé, March 15, 2012).



Figure 6: pumping and water treatment station

Lessons Learned

Sustainability is such a ubiquitous term in the planning lexicon that planners often make the mistake that the public understands what it means or has the same conceptualization in their minds on how it may be applied in planning terms. Education, in this regard, becomes critical in creating the conditions for meaningful public engagement. It is by building this capacity that better plans are prepared and implemented; because after the plan is made, the community is responsible for implementing it.

Building capacity and education was an important part of this public engagement process and the fruits of the planning process made that investment a success.

Exploring additional ways of educating and building awareness of sustainability principles at the neighbourhood scale, as well as the community scale, may have yielded even more ideas and buy-in from residents. Getting broad community participation and buy-in is always a difficult endeavor in any community and Middlechurch was no different in that respect. By engaging residents at the neighbourhood level, promoting sustainability may have also had a better impact at changing behavior at the individual household level and not only at the municipal level.

In addition, the traditional forms of community outreach to get residents out to meetings are not necessarily the most appropriate tools to get young adults in their 20s and 30s out to meet-



ings. In a community such as Middlechurch, methods to engage young adults where they gather is difficult because of the lack of community social gathering locations. Middlechurch is primarily a residential community where residents often go to the City of Winnipeg to socialize. Improved use of social media may have been successful in reaching this constituency than letters to households or advertisement in local papers. Greater participation from this cross-section may have yielded more ambitious transformative objectives and strategies in the plan.

Another group that may have been targeted more closely could have been school children from Middlechurch School, who they themselves were undergoing a provincially led community sustainability initiative. It's unfortunate that a partnership between the planning initiatives was not realized because of the obvious synergies and overlap of objectives.



Conclusion

Overall, the Middlechurch Secondary Plan demonstrates many successes. It helps plan for a sustainable future for the community as well as helps address the servicing and connectivity needs of today. The process that was taken to create the secondary plan was one that resulted in bringing a dispersed and diverse community together under a single vision. Time will tell if the community is truly successful in implementing this plan, however, they have started on a stronger footing than many communities by becoming engaged from the very beginning of the planning process.





References

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Images

All images are from Lombard North Group power point presentation for workshops/open houses, dated 2011.