



# Planning With People

## What Does An Engaged and Inclusive Community Look Like? Learning from the City of Burnaby's Social Sustainability Strategy



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### Abstract

**“Social sustainability is about people – individuals and the community working together to meet their needs, realize their potential, and prosper in a healthy environment.” (p2)**

The City of Burnaby's Social Sustainability Strategy conveys a community vision, setting long-term goals that will guide plans for the next ten years. Together with the Economic Development Strategy and the pending Environmental Sustainability Strategy, this initiative will continue strengthening the community's well-being. The community-driven process was led by a twenty-five-member steering committee, who worked to identify goals and strategic priorities. First, the context and identified strengths and challenges were considered. From these points, the strategy evolved to address the different issues. Overall, the objectives are to identify and create community inclusion, liveability and resilience. Precedents include the City of North Vancouver (BC) and the City of Boulder (CO) with implemented social plans, promoting social sustainability through civic engagement. The completed strategy received a 2012 CIP Planning Excellence Award for Social Planning, due to the work to “improve quality of life and opportunity for a community's residents” (CIP website). From the strategic objectives to the implementation stage, there are many lessons to be learned for future cities interested in promoting social sustainability.



# What is Social Sustainability?

*“Social sustainability challenges us to take inequity, conflict and intercultural tension and convert them into dynamic human interactions and social cohesion extending and strengthening the societies we want to live in”* (UBC Sustainability website, 2013).

Why should planners care?  
What is important about it?  
It can be argued that social sustainability is often pushed aside in favour of ‘green’ development, or economic sustainability (Hancock, 2012). Planning buzzwords and ideas often include ‘high density’, ‘transit-oriented development’, ‘LEED-certified’ – concepts that convey a sense of duty to do our part to mitigate impacts on the environment. But should that come at the expense of well-being and livelihood?



Photo credit: youthspeak.blogspot.com

Community means people. Planning should be more than just about place; it should consider who the space is for, and how it is used.

## Burnaby

In 2011, the City of Burnaby released their comprehensive Social Sustainability Strategy. Burnaby is the third largest city in British Columbia, after Vancouver and Surrey. As of 2011, the population was 223, 218 (Statistics Canada, 2012). Burnaby’s size, at 98.6 square kilometres, is relatively large. Interestingly, 25% of the land is reserved for parks, which makes the municipality attractive in terms of recreation and green space.

Burnaby also offers a variety of transportation options: two Skytrain routes connect the city to Downtown Vancouver and other municipalities. There are a number of bus routes, cycling trails and a major highway for motorists.



Burnaby. Photo credit: www.localsites.ca

## Planning Excellence

Due to its diverse population and land uses, the Social Sustainability Strategy builds on the city’s strengths and proposes tangible recommendations to build on these qualities. The Canadian Institute of Planners (CIP) recognized this and awarded the City of Burnaby with a Planning Excellence Award in Social Planning in 2012.

According to the CIP website, social planning excellence acknowledges planners’ roles in ‘improving quality of life and opportunity’ with an emphasis on promoting safer places and crime prevention (2012).





Inclusive urban design. Photo credit: [www.edmonton.ca](http://www.edmonton.ca).

## Background

### Defining ‘social sustainability’

Social sustainability is ultimately about people and the impacts of our everyday life. Social planning should facilitate well-being for the future. Social sustainability can be policy-oriented, and allow room for participation, increasing social capital and planning for a greater quality of life (Colantonio and Dixon, 2009). Generally, social planning has considered housing, education and employment as the basis for well-being (Kavanagh, 2009). It comes down to understanding how people live with each other (Kavanagh, 2009). Without a formal social sustainability agreement or plan, places may not feel inclusive or welcoming. There can be a sense of placelessness and a lack of belonging and identity (Woodcraft, Hackett and Caistor-Arendar, 2011).

### Planners’ roles

Similar to working with environmental projects, planners should ensure that negative social impacts are considered and mitigated (Brain, 2012). This can be achieved through efficient social infrastructure or promoting creative and thoughtful urban design (Brain, 2012). Specific projects could include urban food policy and improved access to work and education, spaces that foster interaction and participation, and increasing the well-being of low-income individuals (Hancock, 2012).

### Challenges

Social sustainability is often overlooked because of the difficulties in defining it (Kavanagh, 2009). Developing indicators or quantifying data makes it challenging to measure how socially sustainable an initiative is. Social sustainability means different things to people.

Planners can use demographic information and develop ways to determine security, liveability and social equity – but social sustainability strategies must be firmly rooted in context. It should be up to the community to identify priorities and create ways to measure success.

## Social sustainability in the future

Many countries in the European Union are calling for a developed social sustainability assessment framework (Colantonio and Dixon, 2009). Social sustainability initiatives not only need to supplement overarching municipal development plans, but also be considered together with environmental and economic sustainability (Kavanagh, 2009). Implementing ways to monitor and regularly assess priorities and goals are very important: strategies could help planners and officials understand social change and shifting of priorities over time (Brain, 2012).



Engaging children and youth. Photo credit: City of Burnaby

# Facts

Burnaby's Strategy is unique in that it begins with the strengths and community assets. This sets a positive tone at the beginning of the document, focusing on building on what works. The municipality's strengths include: a diverse and well-educated population, exceptional community services and facilities, variety of housing choices, wealth of natural assets, a sound economic base, outstanding educational institutions, and a thriving cultural and recreation scene (City of Burnaby, 2011). In contrast, the identified challenges are increasing cultural diversity, a high level of poverty and limited municipal access to funding (City of Burnaby, 2011). The Strategy takes these assets and opportunities, and provides a clear social sustainability vision for the community. A steering committee made up of twenty-five community members set the direction of the initiative, and facilitated greater public engagement.



Burnaby's Social Sustainability Vision. Photo credit: City of Burnaby

## Vision

This Vision was developed by the Steering Committee. It encompasses all of the values of a healthy and socially just community. The Vision of a caring, inclusive and vibrant Burnaby lays the foundation for the Strategy.

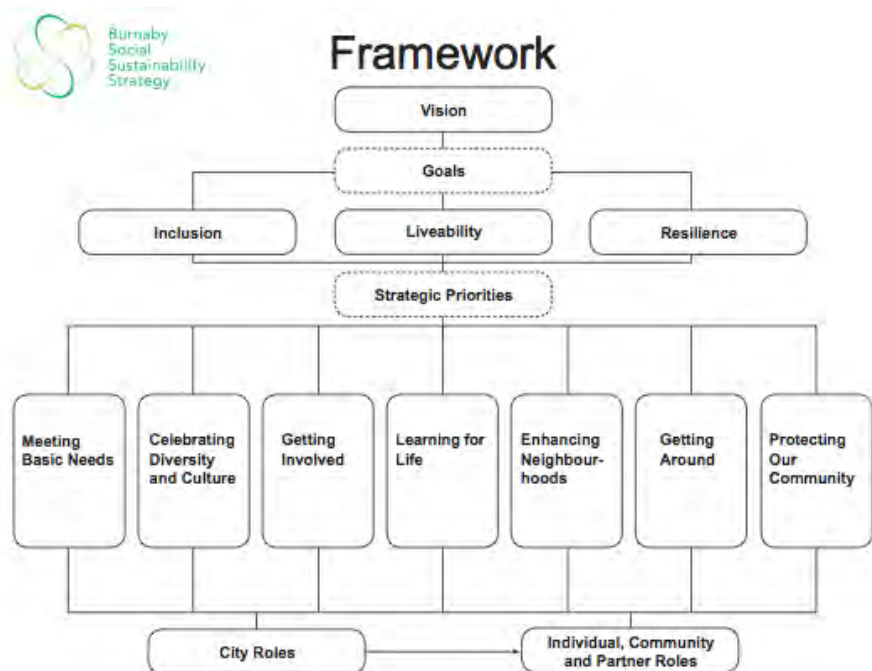
## 10 Year Goals

These three goals “set the framework for action” for the next ten years in the community (City of Burnaby, 2011, p18). They include:

- community inclusion
- community liveability
- community resilience

## Strategic Priorities

The seven Strategic Priorities aim to **build on our foundation, expand our horizons and break new ground**. This ensures a multifaceted approach where current strengths are acknowledged, and there is room for partnerships and creative new ideas.



Social sustainability flow chart. Image credit: City of Burnaby.



Boulder. Photo credit: www.sangres.com



North Vancouver. Photo credit: identity.dnv.org

## Precedents

Cities and townships in Europe and Australia have compiled research and design suggestions for socially sustainable development. Although formal strategies have yet to be implemented, this topic has been explored in conferences, forums and reports. Typically, these examples involve planning for new communities or urban regeneration.

North American precedents focus mainly on strategic plans, which are adopted by Council. Most of these initiatives supplement an overall community vision or plan.

### North Vancouver, BC

In 1997, the City of North Vancouver produced a Social Plan Background Document. This outlined the City's role in social planning, identified target groups, policy issue areas, and provided a summary of what has been achieved so far (City of North Vancouver, 1997). The document would provide the foundation of a social plan framework.

The City adopted a Social Plan in 1998. It was used as a framework to guide the City's responses to social issues in the community. The main objective was to outline an efficient allocation of resources for social planning, which was developed through consultations with a citizens' working group, community service providers and residents (City of North Vancouver, 1998). As of 2013, there has not been an updated Social Plan to supplement the Official Community Plan.

### Boulder, CO

In 2007, the City of Boulder implemented a Social Sustainability Strategic Plan. This plan formalized strategies, while providing social policy guidance (City of North Vancouver, 1998). Under the heading of 'community sustainability', the Plan's objectives combined social sustainability with economic and environmental sustainability (City of Boulder, 2007). The Plan stressed community engagement, and included sections for children, youth and senior services and programming. The main objective of this project was to provide a basis for an 'integrated' approach to planning – combining social and health aspects of planning, in collaboration with other departments and services (City of Boulder, 2007).



# Lessons Learned

## Identify Strengths

Planning is usually based on problem solving or reacting to current issues. It is easy to overlook the strengths and assets within a community. The Strategy identifies these strengths and uses them as a starting point to determine clear goals and realistic actions.

## Engage the Community

Strategies and plans will only be successful in the long run if the processes are community-driven. Having a steering committee that guides the Strategy ensures participation from the public, and can also be a meaningful way to engage other residents, stakeholders and community groups.

Also, it is important to consider where the people are, and make efforts to go to them. Don't expect them to come to you. This allows for more meaningful engagement with community residents and stakeholders. The largest number of citizens reached was by staff presentations to specific groups

## Visual Cues

Using pictures and graphics is an effective way to maintain interest and convey ideas in a readable format. At times, plans and processes can be difficult to follow. Using informative graphics that visually highlight the main points distinguishes the Strategy from other planning documents. It also allows community members to relate more easily to the points and recommendations.



Metrotown crossing. Photo credit: City of Burnaby

## Make Links

The Strategy is also simple to follow because of the clear links to other parts of the documents. The strategic priorities relate to the community strengths, and the structure of the Strategy ensures that each goal and objective is tied to the overall vision of the City - whether it is economic, social or ecological.

## Community Ownership

The document included photos of real Burnaby residents in real Burnaby settings without the use of stock photos. City staff feel that this helped to create community ownership of the plan. It makes the plan seem very Burnaby-specific.



Photo credit: City of Burnaby.



An engaged community. Photo credit: City of Burnaby

## Clear and Concise

The language used in the Strategy is very clear and concise. The use of bullet points outlines what is important and prevents readers from losing focus. It is easy to follow the main objectives and identified goals.

## Know where to begin...and how far you can go

Because of limited jurisdiction and resources, it was important to engage community partners early and throughout the process. Some initiatives fall under provincial jurisdictions or are better suited to other stakeholders, so it becomes crucial to establish these relationships and limitations in the beginning.

It will be these partnerships that move the strategy forward.

## Implementation

Implementation and action are usually the most difficult tasks to follow after creating a strategy or initiative. What sets this particular strategy apart from other social planning initiatives is the detailed and carefully laid out implementation phases.

To ensure its application, these following five implementation steps articulated within the Strategy should be considered. These provide a foundation for other cities interested in adopting their own implementation programs.

*Prioritize Actions for Implementation in Phase One, including sequencing of actions*

In prioritizing, all actions in the Strategy were assessed against twenty criteria, ranging from the availability of

resources and the timing implications of forming new relationships to an action's ability to forge links across the social, environmental and economic dimensions of sustainability, and its capacity to foster public participation and engagement. This task was undertaken by an internal, inter-departmental City team and in partnership with major external partners who were consulted regarding their capacity to participate in implementation of specific actions, their priorities, and their timelines for those priorities.

### *Develop Workplans*

It is important to develop workplans for the first year and future years of Phase One. As of May 2013, draft workplans have been prepared by staff for consideration by Council.



Implementation flow chart. Image credit: City of Burnaby



## *Implement Phase One*

Implementation of the Strategy is meant to take place over the next 10 to 15 years, with 2012/13 serving as Year One. Many of the actions are complex and will require considerable groundwork, such as the establishment of new partnerships and the securing of long-term funding, before they can be realized. Nevertheless, quick progress on and/or achievement of 26 of the 127 actions in the Strategy has already occurred. It should also be noted that a considerable number of actions involve the continuation of important work the City is already involved in – and that work on those actions continues.

## *Annual Accountability*

Monitor and report on progress to Council and Burnaby citizens on an annual basis. This ensures a sense of accountability to the public and officials, which also creates an incentive for implementation and forging partnerships and connections at an early stage. Monitoring on an annual basis also provides an opportunity to work with any challenges that may arise from the implementation processes.

## *A Living Document*

Refresh the Strategy after five years and adopt a new Strategy after ten years or so. Doing so will reflect the changing needs and issues in Burnaby's social context over time. This makes the document reflective and relevant to current opportunities and challenges. As well, this can contribute to a stronger sense of community ownership, if



Community arts performance. Photo credit: City of Burnaby

the public is consistently and periodically engaged to share their experiences. Refreshing the Strategy every five years also addresses any challenges or problems, and provides a platform for open and critical dialogue.

The City can also consider other opportunities to integrate social sustainability into existing management functions. This also prevents current practices from creating barriers to realization of the City's Social Sustainability Vision.

Reviewing committee mandates are also an effective way to renew and monitor implementation progress. In Burnaby, the Social Issues Committee would have the opportunity to provide recommendations to Council if the mandate aligns with the goals of the Strategy.



The Canada Trail: promoting an active and healthy community. Photo credit: City of Burnaby.





Social sustainability is about community. Photo credit: City of Burnaby.

## Conclusion

The City of Burnaby's Social Sustainability Strategy leaves many lessons learned for other municipalities. It provides a framework on how to make social sustainability a truly community-driven process. The document itself is presented in such a way that allows for easy reading and includes details that relate to the daily lives of Burnaby residents and stakeholders.

Integrating social sustainability into large-scale plans is not a new concept. Burnaby's vision of strengthening existing partnerships and making new connections ensure this Strategy will complement other City directives. Finally, the importance of implementation and monitoring is stressed and effectively laid out in this Strategy.

Social sustainability is rooted in context and understanding the realities people face. Perhaps the biggest lesson learned is how to take these challenges and turn them into opportunities.

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## Resources

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