

Approaches to Environmental Innovation: A Rural Municipal Perspective

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Introduction

Sustainability and environmental stewardship is different in rural communities than it is in urban regions. Different issues, economies, industries and a different culture suggest a different approach is needed to develop appropriate responses and implement successful strategies in dealing with the diversity of environmental issues that afflict rural communities.

Many urban environmental programs (transportation, pesticide use, water management, climate change amelioration) are not directly transferable to rural communities. Given the dissimilarities between urban and rural settlements, environmental approaches will have different responses and outcomes. Other issues and concerns such as soil erosion, septic system management and private land stewardship are unique to rural communities with no comparable problems in a highly regulated and planned urban Ontario. Rural communities tend to have a different approach to interacting with the environment than urban dwellers do because many of the environmental priorities in rural Ontario have traditionally focused on local and immediate environmental issues relating to the health and economic problems associated with living in a rural area.

While there has been much written of recent on urban environmental issues and the area of best practices in municipalities, there is a dearth of similar writings through a rural lens. Therefore, there is a risk of rural areas relying on top-down, urban-based assumptions and policies which fail to address environmental planning issues from a rural perspective. This can lead to a disconnect between the needs of rural regions and the strategies pursued by local government to deal with specific environmental issues.

To develop a better understanding of how rural municipalities can innovatively respond to environmental issues we conducted a survey of municipalities from across Ontario. From this survey we profiled a subset of 6 municipalities to develop a more in-depth understanding. These include Huron County, Caledon, Prince Edward County, the City of Kenora, York Region, and Waterloo Region. In summary, we found that many rural municipalities, despite financial and staffing limitations are attempting to respond. Some focus on regulatory policy while others experiment with community-based processes and the application of more innovative tools such as payment for ecological goods and services. Still others develop programs and processes internal to their municipality and specific to their region. From the initiatives and experiences of these municipalities, we have distilled the following 10 strategies for rural municipalities in their efforts toward environmental innovation.

Ten Guidelines to Environmental Innovation...

1. Identify and Engage Community and Political Leaders

As an initial step, it is important to identify and engage key community and political leaders, particularly those who have an interest in environmental issues. If willing, such individuals can become champions for a particular environmental issue or initiative, helping to recruit others and

leading the way. Typically people trust and respect such leaders. Their involvement is therefore strategic. As well, it is they who are able to build the necessary political will and develop the interest of local councils. Critical to the success of any environmental project is relationship building, both with these leaders and then for them with the larger community.

Examples of this are seen in Prince Edward County where the mayor, who had a strong environmental interest, was able upon election to initiate the creation of the first Environmental Advisory Committee (EAC) in the county in 2007. Another example is in the City of Kenora where, as part of a “Lake Capacity Study for Black Sturgeon Lake” to address issues of water quality in the watershed, planners approached leaders from key community organizations to sit on the study Steering Committee. In such capacity, while learning about and having input into the study, these committee members became its advocates and champions to the larger community which ultimately led to much wider acceptance of the final report and implementation strategies than would likely have happened otherwise.

2. Set up an Environmental Advisory/Action Committee, engaging diverse stakeholders

The purpose of an EAC is to bring advice and relevance to council on environmental issues, as well as to be a means of facilitating communication between different stakeholders. To set up an Environmental Advisory/Action Committee (EAC), look for groups with interest in an environmental area as well as those that should be at the table because of what they represent. Identify and capitalize on the strengths of individuals. Clearly define roles and responsibilities. Make sure that the dual purpose of the committee is clear, that it is not only about advising. Including municipal staff (often from the planning department) and councillors as members both validates the work of the committee and creates linkages back to council. Ultimately, an EAC is about promoting a community-led, bottom-up initiative through which stakeholders have a voice at the table and are able to participate in processes around environmental concerns.

In Ontario, in addition to the EAC in Prince Edward County, there are several other such committees that are active. Some of these include Halton, Niagara, Waterloo Region, Norfolk, Durham Region, Kingston, London, and Oshawa. Tap into the vast experience of this group, some of whom have had an EAC since the 1970s. Where an EAC has not been established it is possible to develop partnerships with organizations that may have a similar purpose. Stewardship Councils, which are connected to the Ministry of Natural Resources could play a useful role.

3. Attach Resources from the Municipal Level

To make an environmental initiative such as an EAC a success, as well as to give it broader credibility, it is critical for the municipality to allocate resources to it. These may be financial and/or staff resources. Having someone in an administrative capacity related to the initiative is an indication of the importance of this to the municipality. Doing so also gives this initiative a ‘home’, a place where people in the community are able to access it.

We recognize that municipalities are different sizes with varying levels of available resources. Some have full-time staff but others that are smaller do not and have real financial constraints. In such instances, a municipality may need to reposition staff by reorganizing a department or revising its mandate or a position description in order to make such a resource available to the

project. A student position, depending on the type of person available, can be invaluable in this regard. Also, searching out other sources of funding, for example through universities and colleges, can tap into unexpected resources and opportunities.

4. Create a Rural Environmental Vision

As already mentioned, there are significant differences in the rural context, culture, industries, and issues compared to those of urban areas. This speaks to the fact that rural environmental concerns and approaches to addressing them must also be different in order to be locally relevant and effective. It is critical that rural municipalities cultivate and maintain a uniquely rural focus, not simply cutting and pasting urban programs onto the rural community and landscape. It may be necessary to specifically define a rural vision of sustainability and environmental stewardship that adequately reflects the local context. Related to this is the need to develop relevant indicators or ways of measuring movement toward such a vision. The more rural municipalities are able to create a rural environmental vision, the more recognized and influential this vision will be in the larger society. As well, a defined vision puts the focus on what is important to rural areas and makes that easier to articulate within the larger environmental discourse. For example the County of Huron put much effort into the development of a Sustainability Plan that addressed many of the environmental issues inherent in a county where agriculture and tourism exist side by side.

5. Strategic Planning – Identify and Invest in Priority Areas

Strategic planning is an important tool for municipalities to use in order to ensure that they get ‘the biggest bang for their buck’, so to speak – that actions are designed and coordinated and that resources are allocated to have the greatest impact. Environmental issues are many and varied and strategies for addressing them are ever evolving, with communities becoming more engaged and creative in their ideas and approaches. Strategic planning involves a process of dialogue to determine what it takes to move from the point of ideas to the point of action. It is about prioritizing those items that are most valued by the community in order to take action in strategic ways. As such, the process of strategic planning involves identifying goals, ‘scanning’ or looking at options, evaluating those options against the goals, creating action plans, and then monitoring and evaluating the outcomes. This is not a onetime exercise but rather becomes a cycle. Revisit a strategic plan on a regular basis as this allows for ongoing adaptation to changing circumstances, ideas, and resources.

6. Build Strategic Partnerships with Other Organizations

Much more can be achieved by municipalities when they work in partnership with other organizations. Building these relationships becomes critical to the success of environmental initiatives as there are many environmental groups and organizations with specialized knowledge, expertise, skills, and even funding to draw on. Such partnerships not only bring together people and resources but they can often result in a synergy of ideas and actions that ignite an enthusiasm and energy that would otherwise not be possible. An Environmental Advisory/Action Committee provides the opportunity for linkages between partners on the committee as well as with those external to the committee.

7. Keep the Community Engaged and Informed

By keeping the community engaged and informed, you foster interest in the particular initiative. You create a certain momentum around it. People want to get involved; they feel they want to or have made a contribution and therefore feel a sense of accomplishment. This supports a community-led, bottom-up approach which has been shown time and again to result in better processes and more effective and accepted outcomes. An informed public leads to a more active public which leads to democratic participation. People feel a sense of personal ownership and therefore of personal investment. They are invested in making positive change, in having a positive impact on the environment. They also hold leaders accountable.

Ways of keeping the community engaged and informed are many and varied. A key method is through the Environmental Advisory/Action Committee. What is important is to build awareness and sustain interest. Communication is key. Interest groups are important partners and allies, often being channels for messaging as well as for receiving information and public input. Experiential learning activities are second to none in moving people from being passive bystanders to taking personal responsibility, in shifting them from a place of head knowledge to firsthand experience. Create such opportunities for people. A number of jurisdictions for example host annual bus tours for local politicians and decision-makers to witness environmental issues and successful responses first hand.

8. Make it Action Oriented

It is critical to make any environmental initiative action-oriented. From an environmental perspective, there is an explicit goal of doing something, affecting some change and not just planning and reflecting. There should be multiple activities for people to get involved in. These keep people interested and engaged, empowering them and giving them a sense of ownership and accomplishment, as discussed above.

Community oriented, voluntary actions are significant in that they move beyond the regulatory approaches; they create more of a balance by having more nonregulatory actions happening. One example is of the *Rural Landowner Stewardship Guide* (www.stewardshipmanual.ca) which provides opportunities for landowners to identify and change or enhance their environmental practices on their property outside of the threat of any regulation. At the same time, policies play an important role and so effort must be made to develop effective Official Plan policies and Zoning By-laws oriented toward protecting and enhancing the environment and promoting community stewardship. York Region and Waterloo Region are both examples of municipal efforts toward coordinated policy approaches to Sustainability Planning.

9. Leverage Other Levels of Government

With resources often limited, local municipalities need to look for opportunities to leverage other levels of government for funding. There is much potential in this regard. The reality is that, while other levels of government have a mandate regarding the environment, they do not have a local presence nor therefore insight into local issues or opportunities. They are often looking for opportunities to act on the ground, at the community level, which is where local municipalities are most knowledgeable and active. This offers a potential win-win situation through multi-level government partnerships. There are examples of such partnerships in the involvement of Environment Canada and the Ministry of Natural Resources with the County of Huron in the

development of *The Rural Landowner Stewardship Guide*. Another example is of the Ministry of Environment's involvement with the County of Huron Water Quality Steering Committee.

10. Be Open to Different Ideas, Approaches, and Processes

In seeking greater involvement in environmental innovation, municipalities must stay open to different ideas, approaches, and processes – not getting stuck in a rut or confining themselves to the familiar ways of doing things. Revisit your vision and your activities, review what you have accomplished so far, and reflect so as to learn from these. Review your strategic plan.

There is always more than one way to address an issue. Recognize that as contexts and circumstances vary so it may become necessary to take another approach or do things differently. As each community is different, people vary, and circumstances change, flexibility and adaptability are required. What is most important is to continually listen to people in order to be in touch with what resonates with them and therefore with the larger community. And maintain a broad based view of environmental planning, one that is at the same time comprehensive (seeing the big picture) and integrated (approaching an issue from different angles and with multiple, coordinated actions).

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There is no one single approach for rural municipalities to pursue, but rather a compendium of strategies to be blended into an informed approach that works for a given municipality. Necessarily, the approach will vary by municipality accounting for differences in resources, leadership and issues. With this in mind, the ten guidelines presented in this article provide the building blocks or elements that we have come to see as most necessary for municipalities in successfully moving towards innovation in responding to rural environmental issues.

Notes Re Authors:

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