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Citizen Engagement in Sustainability Planning: Patterns and Barriers from Hinton and Wood Buffalo, Alberta, Canada

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Abstract

Canada's Gas Tax Fund is intended to support municipal sustainability initiatives, provided that each applying municipality formulates a form of Integrated Community Sustainability Plan. Both the federal and provincial governments made citizen participation an important requirement of the planning process for creating these sustainability plans. This article's goal is to describe the nature and challenges of citizen involvement in developing sustainability plans for rural communities in Alberta, Canada. Using the Town of Hinton and the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo as case studies, planners, public officials, and sustainability coordinators offered their perceptions of citizen engagement, including stages of involvement, participatory techniques, promoting factors, and challenges. Our results show that sustainability planning was broadly consultative, employed diverse techniques, and respondents welcomed the opportunity to provide input and support for the sustainability plans. Key challenges to citizen engagement included busy lifestyles, mobile populations, poor travel conditions, and citizens' lack of understanding of broader sustainability issues. The results indicate that sustainability planning is better understood as an extended process of social learning—simple consultation processes do not necessarily facilitate the deeper, long-term goals of sustainability.

Keywords: municipal, sustainability, planning, citizen participation, rural, Alberta, Canada

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Sustainability Planning

Sustainable development is a priority issue in the field of municipal planning and policy making (Termorshuizen, Opdam & Van den Brink, 2007; Blowers, 2013; Hallström, Hvenegaard, Stonechild, & Dipa, 2017). To better integrate sustainable development into municipal planning, Canada's government introduced a Gas Tax Fund (GTF) in 2005; this initiative acknowledged that sustainability was an essential factor for improving the social, environmental, and economic conditions of municipalities across Canada. While revenues were originally raised through the federal gasoline excise tax (thus the GTF name), legislation now sets allocations from the government's Consolidated Revenue Fund (Dupuis, 2016), a permanent annual investment which allocates about 2 billion CAD to Canadian municipalities for municipal infrastructure priorities.

The Government of Canada and each provincial and territorial government signed agreements to implement the fund. This included the Government of Alberta's (2005) Gas Tax Agreement, which affirmed that, in order to access GTF funds, municipalities must submit long-term, comprehensive community sustainability plans which are known as Integrated Community Sustainability Plans (ICSPs; Planning for Sustainable Canadian Communities Roundtable, 2005). The development of ICSPs is intended to occur in consultation with community members to help that community achieve the environmental, cultural, social, and economic dimensions of sustainability (Government of Alberta, 2005). To that effect, several government agencies made toolkits available to help communities prepare their plans. The desired approach to sustainability is broad-based, consultative, and inclusive (Government of Canada, 2019). We define sustainability as an integrated effort to link environmental, social and economic decision-making, with the recognition that cultural and institutional or governance pillars are important, but not necessarily universal, elements. Similarly, while considerations of equity (both within and across generations, as well as pillars), engagement, and multi-level change were critical elements of early conceptions of sustainability, yet particularly for rural communities, integrated perspectives on issues of wealth and inequity are less common. In turn, despite the description by Roseland (2000) of sustainable community planning, the practice of sustainability planning in Canada has proven to be highly diverse, fragmented, and often disconnected from other forms of planning, from local community engagement or legitimacy, from implementation, or from evaluation (Hvenegaard, Hallström, & Brand, 2019).

ICSPs are expected to be based on collaboration and mutual understanding between local citizens, planners, and municipal representatives (Planning for Sustainable Canadian Communities Roundtable, 2005). Federal and provincial levels of government emphasize the importance of citizen participation in the planning process, not only to improve trust between municipal governments and local residents, but also to ensure citizens' acceptance of, and support for, the implementation of sustainability plans (Planning for Sustainable Canadian Communities Roundtable, 2005). Of course, because citizens are very heterogeneous, strategies are needed to include all demographic groups in the process.

Rural municipalities are in particular need of effective sustainability planning due to their unique characteristics (Hallström et al., 2017). Rural communities have small populations, so a planning intervention can exert significant influence; such small communities can serve as an indicator of potential sustainability challenges; and they provide an opportunity to examine the “scope and scale for meaningful engagement by citizens in planning” (p. 132). As such, the goal of this study is to gauge the level of citizen participation and uncover the challenges that are encountered in rural sustainability planning.

1.2 Citizen Participation

Citizen participation has been given particular emphasis by both federal and provincial government in case of developing the ICSPs. More specifically, such plans differ from the typical planning process, in which local government administration is primarily responsible for making public policies and decisions; rather, ICSPs are unique in making citizen participation one of the core requirements of the planning process. One of the major goals of doing so is to integrate environmental, economic, social, and cultural considerations into community sustainability based on citizens’ views, perceptions, and local knowledge (Calder, Beckie, & McMann, 2016). ICSPs are, therefore, expected to be based upon the principles of collaboration and mutual understanding between local citizens, planners, and municipal representatives (Planning for Sustainable Canadian Communities Roundtable, 2005).

If the local planning process is intended to create a pathway toward both local and global sustainability goals, it follows that sustainability planning should follow the ‘process-based’ approach rather than the ‘fixed-goal’ approach, because “the most important product in planning is the process” (Bagheri & Hjorth, 2007, p. 85). In turn, they have suggested the following characteristics of a ‘process-based’ approach:

- Sustainability planning should be based on learning rather than predicting, and should involve all stakeholders, experts, planners, and citizens in order to facilitate social learning (i.e., it must be inherently participatory).
- Sustainability planning should be based on perceiving and adapting to change. In traditional planning systems, the planners fix some optimal goals for the future based on rational and calculated projection. In contrast, sustainability plans need to be participatory since long-term sustainable development can be difficult to achieve (especially at the local level) without integrating social values, traditional knowledge, and local interest in the decision-making stage of sustainability plans.

Such a shift is consistent with Frank and Hibbard’s (2016) discussion of multi-functionality for rural planning—ideally, the process and goals of sustainability planning noted above should also integrate the ‘new’ rural reality of diverse goals and expectations, the future economic, social and environmental consequences of extant and planned actions, and the abundance of stakeholders that challenge rural planning as a ‘top-down,’ expert-driven practice (p. 250).

Despite such goals, it is not clear how well they are integrated into practice. As a result, this study examines citizen engagement, specifically in the context of rural communities, as there is increasing evidence that sustainability planning has not necessarily assisted such Canadian municipalities in meeting the goals that “support

quality of life and sustainable growth;... help communities become more dynamic, more culturally rich, more cohesive, and partners in strengthening Canada's social foundations; ... and deliver reliable, predictable and long-term funding" (Clarkson, 2004, p. 11). This study contributes to improved practices of sustainability planning for rural communities by identifying approaches that promote citizen engagement and by identifying common barriers which can be overcome with advance planning.

This study uses two frameworks to conceptualize citizen participation. First, Arnstein's (1969) "Ladder of Citizen Participation" seeks to explore and assess the level and role of citizen participation in shaping visions of sustainability planning and to identify the challenges associated with such participation. Arnstein's framework is considered, in the public decision-making field, to be an effective and appropriate way to understand citizen engagement (Collins & Ison, 2006; Baum, 2012; Garau, 2012).

Arnstein developed the typology of citizen participation as a response to a participatory planning approach where the involvement of citizens was mandated through legislation, presenting citizen participation as a mechanism for attaining and practicing citizens' democratic power. Active citizen participation is linked to citizen empowerment, in which citizens not only have the freedom to express their suggestions, but also gain the opportunity to decide policies and plans alongside traditional power holders (e.g. elected officials). Without the power to influence final policies, citizens find decision-making "an empty and frustrating process for the powerless" (Arnstein, 1969, p. 216).

Arnstein's hierarchical ladder has three main stages: (1) non-participation, (2) tokenism, and (3) citizen power (see Table 1). The non-participation stage entails the least citizen participation, and is made up of two rungs: the manipulation rung, which does not allow citizens to participate in the decision-making processes or even express their views and ideas; and the therapy rung, where traditional power holders—elected officials and expert planners—make decisions, formulate policies, and convince citizens to accept those policies.

The tokenism stage encompasses three rungs. The informing rung involves one-way communication in which traditional power holders provide information in a variety of ways to citizens to keep them updated. In the consultation rung, citizens have the opportunity to express their views through surveys, workshops, open houses, town meetings, and focus groups. At this level, both one-way (surveys) and two-way (open houses, town meetings) communication processes occur. However, final decisions are made by traditional power holders. On the placation rung, citizens begin to influence final decisions. Citizens are selected by traditional power holders (on the basis of social status, educational background, and profession) to join citizen advisory committees, working groups, or joint panels to take part in the final decision-making process. However, the authority over final plans and policies remains in the hands of expert planners and elected officials.

The highest stage of citizen participation is citizen power, which incorporates three rungs. On the partnership rung, citizens receive some power by working with traditional power holders and sharing decision-making responsibilities. However, every decision depends on the consent of both local citizens and traditional power-holders. For delegated power, citizens receive more authoritative power than traditional power-holders. At this stage, citizens' views are prioritized when disagreements occur between groups of citizens and elected officials about any

specific policy or project. Finally, citizen control asserts that decision-making authority solely rests in the hands of citizens.

Table 1: *Ladder of Citizen Participation*

Stage	Rung	Indicators and Criteria
Citizen power	8. Citizen control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Citizens take on entire tasks of planning, policy-making, and implementation
	7. Delegated power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Citizens are in majority on decision making committees • Citizens have veto power over decisions
	6. Partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Power is redistributed among citizens and power holders • Planning and decision making is shared
Tokenism	5. Placation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some citizens join decision-making committees • Citizens provide advice to power holders
	4. Consultation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gathering information from citizens • Power holders maintain decision-making authority
	3. Informing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One-way flow of information to citizens • Timing at a late stage of decision-making • Information is superficial
Non-participation	2. Therapy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeking a cure or attitude change for citizens • Convincing citizens to accept new policies
	1. Manipulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One way education of citizens • Rubber-stamping of approval from citizens

Source: Arnstein (1969).

Although widely used, there are some weaknesses to Arnstein’s approach. Arnstein (1969) identifies ‘power’ as “the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future” (p. 216). While Arnstein identified power as the main factor for defining the effectiveness of citizen participation, the redistribution of power is not the sole or decisive objective of citizen participation; other goals include social learning, knowledge distribution, and participation itself (Connor, 1988; Collins & Ison, 2006). It is highly unlikely that only one group of people (such as a group of citizens or technical experts) can solve complex issues of policy-making alone (Collins & Ison, 2006). Arnstein’s framework implicitly indicates that full citizen control (the highest rung of the ladder) is the most desirable level of participation (Collins & Ison, 2006; Connor, 1988; Tritter & McCallum, 2006); however, it is not necessarily true that the higher levels of the ladder are better from

a functional, rather than normative, standpoint. For instance, a partnership situated at the bottom rung of the citizen power stage can be more meaningful compared to the citizen control and delegated power rungs as—through the exchange of knowledge and information—the broad-based partnership may yield greater impacts than a simple transfer of power or authority.

This ladder also oversimplifies the complex stages of, and obstacles that arise during, a planning project by focusing solely upon power (Collins & Ison, 2006; Tritter & McCallum, 2006). It may not be feasible to involve citizens in some projects through partnerships or other modes of participatory methods (e.g., joint panels, citizens' advisory groups, and focus groups) due to financial and time constraints. In these cases, informing can be an appropriate or acceptable level of participation. Furthermore, the concepts of social learning and knowledge exchange (Collins & Ison, 2006) are absent in Arnstein's typology. This study does not therefore assume that higher rungs on Arnstein's ladder are normative; rather, this typology is used primarily as a rough measure of the process of citizen participation. Despite these concerns, Arnstein's framework still plays a valuable role in analyzing the level of citizen engagement (e.g., types, extent, location, impacts, and practices; Hurlbert & Gupta, 2015; Kalandides, 2018). Indeed, recent studies have used Arnstein's framework on many issues, such as parents' participation on school councils (Stelmach, 2016), collaborative urban management (Kotus & Sowada, 2017), and the concept of post-collaborative participation (Bacqué & Gauthier, 2017).

An alternative theoretical framework for citizen engagement operates through the lens of deliberative democracy. In this framework, it is not enough to simply invite citizens to town meetings to get them to share their problems, or to gather citizen input by distributing online surveys (Goetz & Gaventa, 2001). Rather, deliberative democracy views citizen engagement as a process in which citizens not only express their views, but also listen to the logic and opinions of municipal staff and other citizens; through this process of constructive discussion, citizens evaluate various alternative policies, defend their arguments based on rationality, and ultimately reach a final decision (Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004). In this case, various competing arguments are considered on their merits (Fishkin, 2016).

Thomson (2001) identifies three central criteria which makes a participatory program deliberative. First, planners or municipal staff must be involved in face-to-face conversations with the local public to discuss various issues of the plan; in other words, asking for feedback and suggestions. Second, planners or municipal staff should discuss topics or issues with citizens which affect their lives both directly and indirectly. Third and foremost, as without this feature deliberation fails to be effective, citizens should have the power and opportunity to affect the final decisions or policies by being engaged in the implementation stage. In effect, traditional power holders would not have sole control over the decision-making and policy analysis process.

Fishkin (2016) argues that deliberative democracy occurs when the conclusions reached during such a process match the conclusions that would have been reached by the general population if they "could somehow consider the issue in depth under the same good conditions" (p. 8). Thus, Fishkin outlines five additional criteria for deliberative democracy (see Table 2). Potential problem areas for deliberative democratic processes include certain advantaged groups (e.g., men) dominating deliberations and group polarization (Sunstein, 2002; Fishkin, 2016).

Table 2: *Criteria for Deliberative Democracy*

Criterion	Description
Democratic representativeness	Representative by various categories, such as class, gender, education, income, and ethnicity.
Attitudinal representativeness	Representative of various viewpoints in the population.
Sample size	The number of participants is sufficient for statistical analyses of meaningful opinion changes.
Opportunity to engage policy arguments for and against proposals for action	Effective methods to engage participants in weighing competing arguments for or against one or more courses of action.
Avoiding distortions	Effective methods to reduce the potential for distortion or bias towards participants who are male, educated, or more advantaged. Effective methods to avoid distortion or bias towards group polarization.

Source: Fishkin (2016).

Of course, there are many potential difficulties in engaging citizens in planning processes. These barriers include a lack of shared vision, lack of clear leadership, short-term versus long-term planning approaches, lack of knowledge of key issues, and a lack of time and energy required (Hatipoglu, Alvarez, & Ertuna, 2016). Other constraints arise from geographic distance, socio-economic status, language or cultural barriers, lack of interest, assuming others will look after their interests, and seeing no personal relevance (Cropley & Phibbs, 2013). These barriers may arise from a very heterogeneous population, structural inequities, and poor information sharing.

The goal of this project is to examine the nature of citizen engagement through two case studies of municipalities in Alberta. Making use of both Arnstein's (1969) typology of citizen engagement and the broader model of deliberative democracy, we will examine the relationships developed between citizens and planning officials, strategies for engagement, and enablers and barriers to engagement. Our research question focused on: to what extent were citizens engaged in the municipal sustainability planning process? This study is important because it examines citizen engagement in a new era of sustainability planning, as most municipalities across Canada are now seeking to access Gas Tax Funds (Hallström et al., 2017).

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Case Study Regions

For this project, we used purposive sampling (i.e., sampling that involves a conscious selection of participants—see Coyne, 1997) to select two municipalities

in Alberta as case studies: Hinton and Wood Buffalo. These are diverse communities in terms of economy, demography, and geography. Both completed their sustainability plans with funding support from the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association (AUMA). The AUMA, as a parameter for choosing case studies, was also used by Calder & Beckie (2013) to understand the citizen engagement process in sustainability planning. The two case study regions are not intended to be representative of rural communities in the province, but to help illustrate the issues and challenges involved in citizen engagement in the planning process.

The Town of Hinton is situated in west-central Alberta, about 290 km west of Edmonton. The Hinton area is well-known for its coal, forestry, pulp and paper, oil and gas, and tourism industries (Canadian Business Journal, 2014). The population of Hinton is approximately 9,800. The Hinton Community Sustainability Plan, which covers both Hinton and Yellowhead County, was adopted by the Hinton Town Council on May 17, 2011. Economic diversity, environmental stewardship, and social values were stated as important goals for the town's future plans. (Hinton Town Council, 2011). Proposed actions within the sustainability plan have been prioritized by integrating Hinton's ICSP into the Town Council's strategic plan.

The Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, situated in northern Alberta, is one of Alberta's fastest growing municipalities in terms of economic growth (Statistics Canada, 2010; Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, 2012). This municipality was created when the Government of Alberta merged the City of Fort McMurray with Improvement District No. 143 in 1995 (Province of Alberta, 1994; Envision Wood Buffalo Plan, 2010). The population of the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo is 116,407, and the region has undergone significant economic development due to the oil and gas industry in the area (Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, 2012).

2.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Many citizen participation studies have used a qualitative method, providing more in-depth information to examine 'why' and 'how' issues than purely quantitative information can provide (Bryman, 2008). This data collection technique provides accurate and comprehensive explanations when "particular settings, persons, or events are deliberately selected for the important information they can provide that cannot be gotten as well from other choices" (Maxwell, 1997, p. 87). This is particularly true for understanding citizen participation in sustainability planning exercises, since a qualitative approach better explains the nuances behind the data and experiences/perceptions of study participants.

In order to obtain a list of potential respondents for each case study, we used snowball sampling (Robinson, 2014), in which study participants were asked to provide names of people (such as colleagues and associates) who held positions in the communities which provided them with a broad overview of any efforts to engage citizens in developing community sustainability plans. To collect contact information about potential initial respondents, we carefully reviewed the official websites and planning documents of both municipalities. Key informants typically included planners, professional consultants, councillors, sustainability coordinators, planning supervisors, members of the citizens' advisory group, chief administrative officers, and other municipal staff. We did not ask citizens to be respondents because they hold a narrower, "internal" view on the citizen engagement process. We eventually conducted 12 telephone interviews with respondents from Hinton and 12

from Wood Buffalo in 2013–14. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes.

Using a semi-structured interview format, we asked respondents questions about six broad areas of inquiry. First, were citizens involved (at any stage) in developing ICSPs? Second, if citizens were engaged in sustainability plans, what was the level or degree (e.g., the extent, stage of involvement, opportunity of deliberation) of that participation? Third, what participatory techniques were used to involve citizens in the plan development? Fourth, what factors encouraged citizen participation in developing community sustainability planning? Fifth, what challenges occurred during the citizen engagement process? Last, were citizens involved in the implementation stage or not?

For this set of qualitative data, we coded the open-ended questions (i.e., related to methods and barriers of citizen engagement) for common themes (Newing, 2011), starting with a thorough reading of responses, followed by an initial annotation for themes, a review with the co-authors for ambiguities and redundancies, and a final description of the themes.

3. Results

3.1 Case Study 1 – Hinton

In this section, we report on common themes related to citizen engagement in Hinton, focusing on the type of group guiding the process, methods of communication, approaches to gathering citizens' perspectives, strategies for engaging citizens, and challenges to citizen engagement. In general, despite the challenges associated with ensuring quality citizen participation, the sustainability planning process involved citizen representation and processes for one-way communication to citizens, information gathering from citizens, and refinement of sustainability plan priorities.

In Hinton, members of the citizens' advisory group, supported by the local administration, were largely responsible for engaging citizens in the sustainability plan development process. The Hinton Town Council selected a variety of people for the advisory group to ensure diversity in community representation. The ten members of the advisory group included educators, business people, and news reporters. The town councillors selected a retired senior citizen as chairperson.

A variety of methods were used to keep Hinton's citizens informed about the planning. One interviewee mentioned that "the plan was posted on the town website and citizens could read it if they wanted." Another respondent stated that "Hinton has put (sections for citizens' feedback) on its homepage ... under Hinton Listens or Notify Me section ... All this type of communication, I mean, multi-faceted communication." The Town Council gave citizens regular updates about the progression of the plan through mail-outs, website posts, news-letters, presentations by planners at open house meetings, online surveys, email notifications, radio announcements, and newspaper advertisements in the community. Additionally, the local newspapers (*The Hinton Voice* and the *Hinton Parklander*) published updates regarding various sustainability actions and new government initiatives. These techniques are considered nominally participatory, as final decision-making authority lies predominantly in the hands of traditional power holders.

Hinton's administrators also surveyed its citizens (with 700 surveys collected) regarding the contents of the proposed sustainability plans. The survey allowed citizens to agree or disagree with pre-determined questions, but did not provide the opportunity for written feedback explaining those choices. Surveys are another 'one-way communication method' in which citizens can give feedback. Apart from these surveys, members of the citizens' advisory group arranged 111 stakeholder meetings. The town meetings and open houses were well attended, with the number of participants ranging from 20 to 50 people. In addition, coffee shop sessions (76 in total) attracted over 2000 people in total. The sessions were informal, easy-going, and allowed citizens to come and go as they wished, allowing participants to engage in one-on-one discussions with municipal representatives. Deliberate effort was made to ensure accessibility: One senior planner from Hinton mentioned that "sitting up there in ties and suits, you just kind — you've already set the tone that the average lay person working in the mine wouldn't even want to become a part of." Other respondents said that when communicating with citizens, regardless of position, status, and expertise, one should dress like a typical community resident.

Another medium for citizen participation in Hinton was the formation of the Citizen Engagement and Accountability Committee (CEAC). This committee was mainly responsible for aligning citizens' input at the final stage of the decision-making process in developing the sustainability plan. Local citizens could apply to this committee to actively work as citizen representatives. Citizens could become a part of the committee after being evaluated and approved by the town councillors so long as there were vacant positions. Despite these extensive efforts to consult the public, none of the respondents could explain how the citizens' input was used in the implementation phase, even though both municipal staff and planners did emphasize that everybody's input was considered.

Hinton's municipal staff and planners reported numerous challenges related to citizen engagement in the sustainability planning process. First, planners and municipal staff identified representation as a challenge. A member of the citizens' advisory group was concerned that the plan reflect the interests and expectations of the majority, but often only heard back from certain portions of the community. For example, when planners wanted feedback from citizens regarding the construction a new recreation centre incorporating soccer fields, they only heard from citizens under 50 years old; it was extremely challenging to obtain feedback or suggestions from senior citizens. Conversely, if planners wanted to hear concerns about the impact of Hinton's current health care system, the group aged 50 and older came forward.

This reflects the common reality that citizens were only interested in talking about 'specific topics.' To wit, citizens only actively give their input on those topics or issues that have a direct effect on their lives; and were largely unresponsive otherwise. In the words of one planner, "if people don't see a critical issue or a fire burning in their own backyard ... they don't care." In Hinton's case, local citizens were primarily interested in issues of housing, transportation, and recreation, rather than broad areas of action such as the sustainable use of energy, waste management, or climate change.

Second, study respondents were concerned that the administrative change brought about by recent elections, in which a new mayor and some new councillors were elected, could disrupt the accountability of the sustainability plan or fail to maintain

citizens' visions at the implementation stage. One member of the citizens' advisory group stated:

As you know, we've just gone through Municipal Elections, so we have a whole new mayor-council in the community. I think one of the big challenges and opportunities [is] to make sure that the mayor-council take up the plan and run with it and don't attempt to go and do their own thing.

Third, the citizens' busy lifestyles posed a challenge. Many community residents take on shift work; some work through the night. Others have inconsistent schedules: they may work three hours in the morning, then another three during the evening. This makes it hard for them to participate in surveys or open houses. Both planners and citizens' advisory group members said that the duration of town hall meetings and open houses had to be limited to accommodate citizens' time restrictions and tight work schedules.

Fourth, convincing people to commit to long-term planning proved difficult. Interviewees mentioned that longer-term planning, like 'Hinton 2040,' is always a challenge for any municipality, especially if the project requires or relies upon getting input from citizens. According to the respondents, many senior citizens (who are generally keen to participate and share their experiences) noted that by 2040, they would likely be dead, so there would be no point to their participation in long-term strategizing.

3.2 Case Study 2 – Wood Buffalo

In contrast to Hinton's process, Wood Buffalo favored a more technocratic approach (i.e., controlled by experts) toward sustainability planning, which emphasized the efficiency of using knowledge and time, but also employed one-way information gathering from citizens through meetings, surveys, and social media.

Wood Buffalo's ICSP is called 'Envision Wood Buffalo' (2010), and was built upon three stages: (1) citizen participation; (2) plan formulation; and (3) implementation, monitoring, and assessment (Envision Wood Buffalo Plan, 2010). To illustrate Wood Buffalo's technocratic method, when it came to planning for traffic flow, one councillor said that "community residents don't fully understand roads, traffic lights, and 24-hour traffic patterns; as technical issues like these really need the help and opinions of experts, citizen input would not be as appropriate." All of this study's respondents emphasized that technical expertise ensures efficiency in the decision-making process in a way that seeking public opinion does not. As a result of this underlying concern that average citizens would not be able to provide appropriate and efficient decisions about the sustainability plan, the decisions of technical experts were given precedence over opinions from the public. Respondents also mentioned that seeking opinions from the public is time consuming.

The initial stage (in which problems were identified) used 24 citizen engagement sessions, including community leaders' meetings, focus groups, online surveys, facilitated community workshops, telephone interviews, comment sheets, open houses, and town meetings (Envision Wood Buffalo Plan, 2010). In every open house or town meeting, citizens could ask for more detailed information. Multiple media venues were utilized, including "television, newsprint, radio, mail-outs, local trade shows and events, presentations at corporate meetings, rural communities'

telephone campaigns, and attendance at the community association” (Envision Wood Buffalo Plan, 2010, p. 41) The municipality also used alternative initiatives to encourage citizens to participate in developing the sustainability plan. For example, high school students were hired to survey local citizens; they received iPads from municipal staff and went to various public places, including Walmart, shopping centres, local diners, and playground zones, to collect citizen feedback about various actions on the sustainability plan. The students also informed the people they met about open houses and focus groups. This increased citizen awareness of opportunities to express ideas and feedback regarding the sustainability plan. However, this method was simply a one-way flow of information: although citizens were contacted face-to-face, there was no outlet to express their own thoughts. Participatory methods were designed such that citizens, staff, planners, and stakeholders were engaged in discussion, but not all together at the same time and place. Citizens were restricted to identifying problems at the initial stages, as compared to the analysis and synthesis of sustainability strategies assigned to planners and municipal staff.

Social media, especially Facebook, was chosen as a popular method for communicating with citizens, since a majority of people have Facebook accounts, and it is easier for people to post comments on Facebook than to physically attend open houses and town meetings. One senior planner mentioned that “traditionally most municipalities have open houses where people go [to] see some material and respond, but I think talking [through] social media literally takes that opportunity to your desktop, to your home.” Many respondents said that Facebook also helped them to increase the number of citizens providing feedback. However, respondents did not raise the inherent challenge posed by citizens who did not have access to computers at home.

Both planners and municipal staff prioritized one-way communication techniques, using online surveys and Facebook as the two primary methods through which citizen feedback was gathered. Citizens provided ideas on materials posted to Facebook, and answered various questions through online surveys. A committee of planners, municipal staff, and professional consultants categorized and sorted the ideas and answers thus collected. Once sorted, some common themes emerged in the feedback, and common areas of concerns mentioned by majority of the participants were integrated into the final recommendation by municipal staff and planners. Citizens did not have the opportunity to join the decision-making committee that formulated the final proposals, and hence this level of participation was based on a one-way flow of information and feedback, in which citizens could not justify their opinions.

The technocratic approach was more dominant than the deliberative approach when developing this plan. For instance, thanks to funding from AUMA, a consulting company—Dillon Consulting—was hired to direct the development and implementation process of Wood Buffalo’s plan. This company was well-known for its technical proficiency, technological innovation, and professional staff. Our respondents said that it was important to hire consultants from this company in order to enhance the efficiency of the plan. Dillon’s strong involvement further minimized the role that citizens played in the plan development and implementation process.

Wood Buffalo’s official website explicitly states that the ‘Implementation, Monitoring & Assessment’ phase was mainly conducted by municipal staff and expert planners. Citizens did not get the opportunity to work with technical experts

and professional consultants in a collaborative manner, particularly in the final decision-making stage. Citizens were invited only to participate at the beginning of plan development. In addition, many respondents indicated that ‘Envision Wood Buffalo’ was “outdated” and some of its sustainability goals (e.g., housing, infrastructure, health and education, efficient usage of natural resources) have been integrated into the statutory Municipal Development Plan for implementation purposes.

Among respondents, municipal staff said that they did not want to overburden citizens by requesting they make final decisions on the sustainability plan as citizens were already busy with their own lives. Moreover, respondents preferred that the elected mayor and councillors make final decisions for the community on behalf of its residents, and assumed that citizens would also prefer that the local government take charge of policy-making, as citizens were adjudged apathetic by municipal staff when it came to participating and giving time to discussions about sustainability planning. One senior planner illustrates this attitude among the majority of respondents by saying: “It’s a hard lifestyle and not everyone wants to get involved in anything because of that.” The respondents in this study also characterized the process of sustainability planning as a complex and time-consuming task, and both planners and municipal staff said that they did not wish to impose the added stress of decision-making through formulating final plans and policies on citizens’ already hectic lives.

Municipal staff and planners also tried to generate consensus among citizens through a citizen engagement process. Planners, professional consultants, and municipal representatives tended to highlight consensus when citizens agreed with and supported the municipality’s proposed actions, but none mentioned any complaints, protests, or disagreements from the local public. As one senior councillor said, “You only hear the good when making a decision, you don’t really get the negative feedback and it’s harder for the decision-maker when you are only hearing that one side of the story.” Another senior planner said “We heard we had 70% of the people come out and speak in favour of the plan. You never hear about what those other 30% said and what the issues were.”

Wood Buffalo respondents noted numerous challenges in engaging citizens in the plan development process, and these challenges contributed to minimal citizen engagement, especially in the implementation stage of sustainability plan. First, much of Wood Buffalo’s workforce is linked to the local energy sector, which means many people come to Wood Buffalo from other communities or provinces, generally for a short amount of time, to earn money. Many of the workers that come to Wood Buffalo maintain their official residences in other locations. Thus, respondents said these workers do not feel a sense of belonging to Wood Buffalo and are rarely interested in engaging in the municipality’s long-term planning. One senior municipal staff member stated: “it’s a constant struggle to get them to call this place home when a lot of people come here with a five-year plan to make a quick buck and leave.” Another municipal staff member agreed: “They’re transient. They still don’t see themselves as being resident[s] even though they’ve lived there for years.” This transient population was one of the biggest challenges in getting citizens involved in sustainability planning.

Second, local citizens were not clear about the meaning and implications of sustainability. There was also a lack of understanding among citizens over what is needed to achieve sustainable development in Wood Buffalo. Most respondents’

understanding of sustainability revolves around the idea of ‘environmental sensitivity,’ particularly in Fort McMurray. For others, sustainability could refer to energy efficiency, transit, or recycling. According to the respondents, there was no consistency among the locals regarding the definition of the term sustainability.

Third, distance and weather sometimes prevented citizen participation. Numerous small villages and hamlets in Wood Buffalo are in remote locations. Sometimes planners were forced to cancel participatory sessions due to harsh weather and bad road conditions, which made local citizens angry. In some cases, citizens in hamlets where events were cancelled subsequently refused to participate in later sessions.

Most citizens were not very responsive to sustainability-related discussions unless issues directly impacted their lives. Citizens were most interested in discussing topics such as health, recreation facilities, housing, and education. The biggest challenge for planners and municipal staff was to identify the connection between these topics and the goals of the plan. Planners also had to recognize what kind of actions would directly affect citizens’ lives, and what factors would inspire citizens to actively participate in the planning process.

4.0 Discussion

This section will address the key issues arising from the citizen engagement efforts from Hinton and Wood Buffalo for their sustainability planning processes. The first issue relates to the type, level, frequency, and reciprocity of information flows during the citizen engagement process. The second issue addresses how much the planning processes involved expert guidance. The final issue compares citizen participation in these two case studies with the frameworks outlined in the introduction.

In Hinton, municipal representatives were motivated to engage citizens in the planning process in order to get public support (in terms of implementing various actions of the plan) as well as to avoid protests or conflicts (as indicated by Sheedy, MacKinnon, Pitre, & Watling, 2008). Moreover, respondents indicated that citizens were a valuable source of local knowledge and that they have experience with various issues (e.g., transportation, housing, education) that can benefit both planners and municipal staff (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004). Municipal representatives formed the citizens’ advisory group and the Citizen Engagement and Accountability Committee which helped them maintain a relationship of trust with citizens (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004). The key challenges to citizen engagement in the sustainability planning process were finding representative citizens to participate, the need to educate newly elected politicians, conflicts with citizens’ busy lives, encouraging long-term thinking, and a lack of response to broader sustainability issues.

In Wood Buffalo, citizens were predominantly engaged in the problem identification stage, but were not actively involved in the implementation stage. Instead, final decision-making authority remained largely in the hands of municipal staff and expert planners. Citizens did not get the opportunity to join any working group or committee where they could sit and work with traditional power holders. Specific challenges in engaging citizens in the plan development process included the transient, less committed nature of many workers, lack of clear understanding about the meaning of sustainability, unforeseen distance and weather constraints, and a lack of response to broader sustainability issues.

When evaluated using Arnstein's (1969) model, we categorized Hinton's level of citizen participation as placation. While this term has undesirable implications (i.e., citizens are given shallow assurances that their voices have been heard), such insinuations do not hold true here, as Hinton's citizens were given numerous opportunities to express their views (e.g., give advice to power holders), and their concerns were given priority during the plan development process (e.g., part of the citizens' advisory group). Moreover, citizens were not only consulted about plan development, but also received the opportunity to give feedback on plan implementation through CEAC. However, there was no guarantee that citizens were empowered to take part in any final decision-making processes, and indeed citizens were not given authority to make such decisions. Also, respondents did not provide examples of projects in which citizens and municipal staff worked together through the CEAC. Thus, the citizen engagement process in Hinton is complex in nature and cannot be understood purely through Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation.

In the case of Wood Buffalo, the citizen engagement process is consistent with Arnstein's (1969) consultation stage. Unlike Hinton's CEAC, there was no joint panel or committee through which citizens could work together with traditional power holders at the decision-making stage (i.e., as would be found at the placation level). Instead, participation largely occurred in the initial stages of Envision Wood Buffalo (i.e., and largely only through information gathering). Though this level does not guarantee that citizens will receive the opportunity to influence final decisions, consultation can help integrate citizens' visions and local knowledge into the sustainability plan. Municipal staff of Wood Buffalo provided citizens the opportunity to express their concerns and visions through consultative methods, despite the challenges noted in getting citizens involved.

When the case studies are examined against a model of deliberative democracy, we find that Thomson's (2001) first two criteria of deliberation were present in Hinton's participatory planning program. Municipal staff of Hinton conducted a variety of participatory sessions to directly communicate with citizens, as the citizens' advisory group, planners, and the local administration staff met people at public venues instead of merely inviting people to join open houses or attend town meetings to discuss their concerns and expectations. However, there is little evidence that citizens actually took part in plan formulation or project design, which shows weak citizen influence during the final stage. Thus, Hinton's participatory approach did not meet the third condition of Thomson's (2001) participatory or deliberative framework. No respondents could provide an example of where citizens actually participated in decision-making, or could identify how they influenced the final decision. Regarding Fishkin's (2016) criteria, while sample size was large, the community did not undertake statistical analyses. That said, the sample was likely representative (democratically and attitudinally), but we cannot know for certain. There were many opportunities to debate policy options, but we cannot know if there was distortion towards certain groups or group polarization.

In contrast, the first two criteria of deliberation were less present in the participatory planning program in Wood Buffalo. While citizens were engaged in the problem identification stage, they did not interact much with municipal staff and planners, nor did citizens have many opportunities to discuss the municipality's sustainability issues with staff involved in writing the sustainability plan. Ultimately, citizens had little involvement in the implementation stage of the sustainability plan. Instead, expert planners and municipal staff were responsible for making final

recommendations to councillors based on citizens' visions; thus, one criterion of deliberative democracy (that lay people should have the opportunity to influence final decisions through constructive discussion [Carpini et al., 2004; Dryzek, 2001]) was not evident in this case. An approach that sees planners and municipal staff deliberately failing to include citizens' opposing viewpoints is a potential threat to the process of representation and the legitimacy of the decision-making process (Healey, 2006; Carpini et al., 2004). The task of integrating citizens' input into the final decision-making process (e.g., at the implementation stage) is challenging; citizen participation can become more effective and productive when citizens do not simply identify problems, but also receive and use the power to influence final decisions (Goetz & Gaventa, 2001). Specifically, the issue of 'weighing down' citizens' input is complex since citizens' expectations are wide-ranging (to wit, one group of people might want a performing arts center and another group might want an aquatic center) and expert planners and consultants with specialized knowledge are technically suited to fulfill this complex task. Addressing Fishkin's (2016) criteria, Wood Buffalo's sample size was also sufficient, but again, without statistical analyses. Similar to Hinton, we cannot know how representative (democratically and attitudinally) the sample was. Nevertheless, there were many opportunities to debate policy options. Given the unique demographics, it is possible that there was some distortion towards groups that were more willing to engage in the planning process.

Planners and municipal staff in both Hinton and Wood Buffalo considered citizen participation a significant factor in the creation of sustainability plans. Diverse participatory methods were used by both communities to gather citizens' feedback and concerns with an aim to integrate those in the goals and objectives of the sustainability plans. However, citizen participation was more robust at the initial stage of planning than the preliminary phases of implementation. Various obstacles, specifically citizens' busy lifestyle, low public understanding about sustainability as a concept, and the transient nature of the population were identified as reasons for neither transferring decision-making authority to citizens nor increasing their involvement in the process. Over the long term, such reluctance by key stakeholders or planners to engage citizens in all phases of the planning process may decrease public trust of the municipality and public service sector in these communities (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004; Beierle & Cayford, 2002).

The respondents of this study recognized citizen participation as a practice that has become increasingly important in community sustainability planning (Monno & Khakee, 2011). Both communities used diverse techniques to encourage, and provided many opportunities for, citizen engagement, gathering their visions and feedback regarding the sustainability plan. Hinton's citizens were granted the opportunity to engage in the implementation stage through the CEAC as they worked together with municipal staff and expert planners to make final recommendations to the councillors; thus, citizens were given the scope to work with traditional power holders by being a part of the CEAC. This level of citizen participation can empower citizens to influence the final decision-making stage by allowing them to sit and work together with expert planners.

Both Hinton and Wood Buffalo faced many challenges in engaging citizens in the sustainability planning process. Major challenges included transient populations, citizens' limited understanding of the concept of sustainability, busy lifestyles, and the logistics of attending meetings. These issues were more evident in Wood Buffalo

since respondents had more concerns about the transient nature of residents (Deacon & Lamanes, 2015), potentially affecting the level of interest in engaging with long-term community sustainability plans. Additionally, in both Hinton and Wood Buffalo, citizens were often unconcerned about broader sustainability issues (e.g., energy efficiency, waste management, climate change), focusing instead on specific issues of local relevance. These challenges in citizen engagement partially accounts for limited community involvement in the ICSPs in Hinton and Wood Buffalo.

Citizens' understanding of the concept of sustainability is particularly problematic for the planning process. Flagged by both planners and decision-makers, the concept itself, as well as the integrative elements within the common definitions of sustainability, proved to be a challenge to both public engagement and determining the contents of the plan. This gap may likewise prevent community residents from adopting more sustainable lifestyles (Jepson, 2004). These difficulties suggest that a greater emphasis upon the processes of social learning (in which planners and local citizens exchange knowledge through constructive discussions regarding the meaning and implications of sustainability) may be beneficial (Sastre-Merino, Negrillo & Hernández-Castellano, 2013).

Respondents in both communities claimed that citizens were given the opportunity to speak up or to give feedback, but no mention was made of any opportunities for citizens to learn about sustainability. Because education was not stressed, sustainability remained only vaguely defined in both communities. If citizens do not understand how to lead a sustainable lifestyle by protecting natural resources, cultural diversity, economic stability, and social values, then the possibility of achieving rural sustainable development becomes less likely.

Had citizens been given the opportunity to work directly on a sustainability project or action, then both experts and local citizens could have benefitted from the exchange of local and technical knowledge. However, the core characteristics of collaborative planning were not present in these communities. These characteristics include knowledge sharing, construction of knowledge, co-operative communication between technical experts and local people, a combination of technical and local knowledge in the final decision-making process, and equal distribution of planning responsibilities among stakeholders, local citizens, and expert planners (Healey, 2006).

Similarly, a more technocratic approach to planning received precedence over local knowledge in both communities. Unfortunately, this approach can prohibit active citizen participation, as citizens will feel isolated and incapable because they lack adequate technical knowledge. Allowing technocrats to dominate the decision-making process does not ensure an effective implementation of plans and policies (Eden, 1996). If local residents are not given the opportunity to integrate local knowledge and diverse viewpoints into the plan, the final outcome of the environmental decision-making process will not be efficient enough to address their concerns and local problems (Eden, 1996). In order to understand the economic, social, and cultural diversity of a rural community, planners and municipal staff have to understand the values, beliefs, and lifestyles of a community's residents (Albrechts, 2002) by sharing knowledge as well as solving problems and working with residents at the policy formulation stage.

Another crucial finding of this research was the lack of systematic alignment between the planning and implementation stages in both communities. Plan

development was given more attention than plan implementation. In particular, given that respondents in Wood Buffalo considered their sustainability plan outdated or largely incorporated into other key planning documents, little time and energy was invested in the implementation phase. In Hinton, the CEAC has assumed accountability for implementing the sustainability actions proposed in the Hinton Community Sustainability Plan, but it was a different group, the citizens' advisory group, who conducted citizen engagement sessions and helped develop the plan. Because plan development and the implementation processes were led by two different groups of people, there were inconsistencies and communication gaps between the members of these two groups. These inconsistencies and gaps became evident when it came time to integrate and prioritize proposed actions in the final stage.

Owing to the lack of alignment between plan development and the implementation stage, both communities experienced common and persistent problems: (a) local citizens and municipal employees continued to experience uncertainty over the concept of sustainability; (b) contradictions persisted between stakeholders' interests and citizens' input; and (c) planners, councillors and municipal staffs, and committee members could not justify or guarantee that citizens' visions were incorporated in the final outcome. These challenges can impede the promotion and adoption of rural sustainable development in the long run. Most importantly, this inconsistent process (wherein the lack of a shared vision is evident) poses a challenge to the effective implementation of sustainability actions at the local level.

5.0 Conclusion

When considered in light of Frank and Hibbard's (2016) 'rural multi-functionality,' it is clear that the two case studies presented here point to only partial alignment with the desired opportunities for rural planning. Specifically, while sustainability planning for municipalities in Alberta was intended to be highly participatory (if not deliberative) in order to foster meaningful change and increased resilience, this has not necessarily held true for the communities in the case studies. The characteristics and dynamics of particular communities affect not only the degree and nature of participation, but expectations of, and subsequent implementation, of the sustainability plan.

The second key finding concerns the transition from planning to implementation phases. This transition is commonly problematic (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984; DeLeon, 1999; Hvenegaard et al., 2019) and the two case studies presented here demonstrate the importance of not just planning, but planning for implementation. While there are good reasons for political and bureaucratic engagement with the results and strategies of the planning process, a longer-term perspective (if not strategy, as was the case in Hinton) on citizen engagement has significant benefits. Potential benefits include greater community validity, feedback, and local activism. Other benefits align with more recent models of rural development (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2006), including citizen participation to maintain territorial, place-based perspectives for sustainability, the increased possibility of partnerships, potentially greater public accountability, and, potentially, a focus on assets rather than liabilities or deficits.

Our third finding involves the difficulty of assessing both the scope and effects of public participation in planning. As these case studies demonstrate, participation is complex and subject to numerous internal and external influences (such as

demographics, local economies, administrative capacity, community histories, and local politics). In addition, the level, intensity, and duration of participation are subject to both overt and more subtle influences. Thus, even while attempting to engage citizens in both the discourse and processes of community sustainability planning, factors such as time, place, season, and community dynamics (such as employment patterns, profiles and competing events/resources) play a key role.

At the operational level, our results reinforce several strategies for improving citizen participation in the community sustainability planning process. First, good communication plays a key role in improving citizen participation in public decision-making. Local governments need a strong communication strategy that is built on listening to citizens in order to build trust and accountability. Second, planners and municipal representatives need to be patient throughout the citizen engagement process, including the steps of devising various strategies, encouraging participation in information sessions, and raising awareness about local sustainability issues. Third, a deep understanding of the local population can help devise ways to engage residents in the planning and decision-making process. For instance, familiarity with the basic demographic features of local citizens (e.g., nature of employment, level of income, level of education, age, and gender) will help in the design of diverse participatory methods.

There were a few limitations to the study. First, to reiterate a point in the methods section, the two case studies cannot be truly representative of rural communities across the province. Second, while interviewing respondents who had a broader, governance-based overview of the citizen engagement process provided a unique perspective, interviewing citizens involved in the planning process would have provided another valuable perspective, particularly regarding perceptions of inclusion, access, information flow, and engagement in various phases of the process. However, the scope of the latter was beyond the possibilities of this study. Third, we recognize the drawbacks of snowball sampling, including a potential lack of representation in the sample and sampling bias (e.g., respondents recommending people with similar responses). Fourth, because sustainability planning is an ongoing process, sampling during a particular period of time, even when asking respondents to reflect over the prior events, can restrict the results to what has happened up until that point in time.

For future research, several questions have emerged. As noted above, while other authors have examined citizen engagement in planning, the natural counterpart to this study would focus on citizen assessments of participation in the sustainability planning process. Similarly, it would be helpful to gain insight into not only the process, but the views and assessments of community sustainability more generally, as well as sustainability planning, from those who elected to not participate in the process. Such perspectives might inform a broader examination of the power dynamics within rural communities, both formal and informal, and some of the asymmetries between institutional, planning, and policy-based authority. Finally, it would be useful to develop a more detailed exploration of how different approaches to sustainability planning influence subsequent actions such as innovation, implementation, assessment and planning or policy revision, as this is also an under-explored area of research.

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