

## **SEVERN SOUND SUSTAINABILITY CASE STUDY**

### **A Long-Term, Collaborative Strategy for a Healthy and Prosperous Watershed**

**Keith Sherman: Severn Sound Environmental Association**

The Severn Sound Environmental Association (SSEA) case study provides numerous and particularly interesting lessons learned related to AMO's [A Sustainability Planning Toolkit for Municipalities in Ontario](#). Its example offers insights related, among others, to:

- Tool #1: Making the Case for Sustainability, describing the motivation for a sustainability plan;
- Tool #2: Structuring A Sustainability Planning Process, including obtaining the alignment of nine partner municipalities and developing of a funding formula to facilitate cost-sharing among them;
- Tool #7: Preparing an Integrated Community Sustainability Plan, including integration with other municipal plans (e.g. Official Plans; transportation plans, etc.);
- Tool #9: Engaging the Stakeholders, including the adoption of a number of innovative techniques;
- Tool #12: Securing Funding and Other Support for Sustainability Initiatives.

The case study highlights what can be achieved by several municipalities, many of them small, working together.

#### **Summary and Background**

The Severn Sound Sustainability Plan, which received the endorsement of all nine municipal partners in June 2009, is a model of inter-jurisdictional and multi-sectoral collaboration. It represents the first watershed-based sustainability plan in Ontario, and possibly Canada.

**This case study highlights the process that was undertaken to collaboratively develop the Plan**, and secure the agreement of its municipal partners, along with obtaining the full support of the community that they represent. This was achieved through **extensive consultation** with municipal partners within a relatively short time frame. The plan was developed “from the ground up”, through the work of the 50+ stakeholder Sustainability Advisory Team, public input through surveys and forums, and an unique Citizen Panel representing over 400 watershed residents. Oversight, plan development and review were provided by the nine partner municipalities, a working Steering Committee, and the Severn Sound Environmental Association’s Board of Directors.

The Severn Sound watershed is over 1,000 square kilometres, and is located in South-eastern Georgian Bay. 110,000 people live permanently in the watershed and over 200,000 people visit in the summer. Nine municipalities along with the County of Simcoe and District of Muskoka are responsible for the continued prosperity of the watershed, protection of the environment, and the health and wellbeing of the people who live and work there. These local authorities, along with hundreds of other government and non-government organizations, ensure the continual health of the watershed. The watershed is under pressure from growth. This growth may lead to a significant impact on the quality of life, the ecological balance, and the economic prosperity of the area if not carefully managed.

Development of the Severn Sound Sustainability Plan was rooted in the identification of the watershed as an Area of Concern (AoC) by the bi-national International Joint Commission In 1985.<sup>1</sup> Caused by an oversupply of nutrients from sewage effluents, extensive shoreline development and the agricultural use of watershed land, the area required a comprehensive watershed-based Remedial Action Plan (RAP) that would engage and inspire all nine municipalities in the region to take action. The issues with Severn Sound's water quality included the growth of nuisance algae and the loss of fish and wildlife habitat. As such, the IJC identified that the watershed required an integrated approach to implementation led by a coordinating body that would guide all stakeholders towards a common restoration goal.

### **Partnership: Phase 1 - (1987-2003)**

The designation of Severn Sound as an AoC was fully acknowledged by all nine municipalities who saw the need to rehabilitate the watershed area. To support the joint Federal-Provincial Remedial Action Plan, the Towns of Midland and Penetanguishene, the Townships of Tay, Tiny, Oro-Medonte, Severn, Georgian Bay and Springwater, the City of Orillia, Environment Canada and the Ontario Ministry of the Environment Ontario came together in 1997 to create the Severn Sound Environmental Association (SSEA) as an implementing body. This partnership was created through a legal agreement among municipalities and agencies designed to improve the water quality of Severn Sound. This joint recognition, acknowledgement and action has resulted in an astonishing amount of progress: Severn Sound has been substantially restored and was removed from the list of Areas of Concern by the International Joint Commission in 2003; only the second area of the original 42 that has done so to this date.

### **Partnership: Phase 2 – Building on Early Successes**

With this significant progress, the partnership turned its focus towards longer-term commitments that would maintain the momentum of the RAP post-implementation. Activities such as monitoring, storm water management, rural programs and open water monitoring needed to be undertaken and documented. These activities were encouraged by the IJC and the federal and provincial governments in the form of continued financial and administrative support for the Severn Sound Environmental Association.

### **Concurrent to this ongoing management, the SSEA began in 2006 to develop an approach to long-term sustainability for the Severn Sound watershed by leveraging other work done at the community level.**

A local grassroots exercise was conducted in 2000 by the North Simcoe Community Futures Development Corporation (NSCFDC) which undertook extensive consultations to determine the long-term socio-economic directions for the community. The resulting plan, "Picture This", provided an economic and community-based action plan which was complementary to the watershed restoration action plan contained in the Remedial Action Plan.

Spurred on by the requirements of the Federal Gas Tax Agreement, Environment Canada's RAP requirements, and a general growing awareness for the need to balance the environmental health with social well-being, recognition of cultural and heritage values, and economic prosperity, SSEA recognized that **by building on their partnership model they could draw together the four pillars of sustainability in order to develop an all encompassing vision for the future of Severn Sound.**

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<sup>1</sup> The IJC is a cross border partnership between Canada and the U.S. that has responsibility for the boundary waters that flow between our two countries.

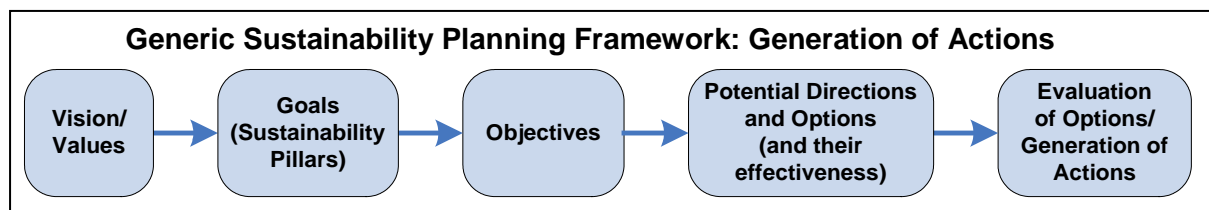
### **Charting the Sustainable Community Course – Funding the Plan - Phase 3 (2006-2007):**

Municipal partners began by facilitating project funding. The SSEA board, comprised of representatives from all partner municipalities, encouraged their respective Councils to pass resolutions of support to conduct a Sustainable Community Plan. The resolutions were accompanied by seed money, and each municipal council endorsed an application to the Federation of Canadian Municipalities for Integrated Community Sustainable Plan Funding. During the funding process (2 years), the foundation stones of the sustainability plan were laid, including selection of the Melbourne Principles to guide the process, and agreement on a definition of sustainability.

### **Creating the Plan - Phase 4: (2007-2008)**

Funding was obtained from FCM in December 2007 and a consulting firm was retained to lead the community-based planning process. The first step in the sustainability planning exercise was to establish a planning framework and organizational design for the process.

The selected sustainability planning Framework was based on a strategic planning model, and founded on the Melbourne Sustainability Principles. Reporting to the SSEA Board, a Steering Committee, comprised of representatives of the nine partner municipalities, and the North Simcoe Community Futures Development Corporation (initiators of the *Picture This* process) was formed to oversee and steer the project. A Sustainability Advisory Team, comprised of 50+ stakeholders from the watershed was formed in late 2007. It consisted of a diverse body with representatives from community organizations, government, businesses and cultural groups. Its role, as spelled out in a Terms of Reference, was to “iteratively” develop the plan, with its work overseen by the Steering Committee. In addition, significant public consultation activities were scheduled for the year-long project.



The first step was to confirm the Vision, created in 2005 through preliminary consultation, and to identify the general goals that each partner had for the project itself. As the main drivers of the SSEA, municipalities were the first to be consulted through formal and informal conversations with local councils, CEOs and key senior management personnel, reflective of planning, public works, economic development etc. Other government stakeholders such as the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit, the County of Simcoe and the NSCFDC were engaged at the board or Council level. The intention was a two-way conversation about sustainability – one in which the SSEA would gain direction and knowledge by providing a community conversation that promoted promoting learning, knowledge sharing and buy-in from all stakeholders.

Throughout 2008, the community engagement process continued through a number of public consultation workshops that were built on each other in order to systematically develop goals, identify the current condition of the watershed relating to those goals, set strategies and develop action plans, performance targets and progress indicators. The work of municipal staff and the public was mirrored by the

Sustainability Advisory Team. The ability of the group to come to a consensus created an environment where diverging views were respected. While diversity is a beneficial characteristic, it can create difficulties in discussion management if entrenched interests and points of view are allowed to take over the sessions. In our case, while the consultations were guided to ensure the discussion stayed on track, they were not micromanaged or overly structured. Participants were allowed to air their issues and to “duke it out” with each other. This ensured that the spirit of consultation, namely the acceptance of diverse views, would be maintained throughout the process.

These strategies were supported by a unique process that would engage the ‘silent majority.’ A community forum was established as a phone survey that would allow participants to share their values, and provide comments on their issues of concern. Over 400 individuals from all over Severn Sound were randomly contacted by a polling company. The results of this community forum supported the findings of the Sustainability Advisory Team as there was overlap in many areas. The community forum served as a network of contacts that provided a second opinion and also was a check to ensure that the proper messages were getting through to the SSEA.

As a sign of success, most participants recognized the ability of the SSEA to effectively move forward through the stages of the sustainability planning process. As such, participants remained actively involved in the process: of the approximately 50 members on the Sustainability Advisory Team, between 25 and 30 individuals were present at all 8 meetings. The presence of a majority of individuals meant the Sustainability Advisory Team was able to keep rolling and retain momentum as time went on.

### **Building the Plan upon the Current Policy and Program Framework**

Part of the success of the Planning process was the recognition that the Severn Sound Watershed municipalities and agency/non-government organization partners have become (as a whole, or independently) national leaders in various aspects of sustainability. In light of this, once the goals had been identified (there are 22 goals) the consultants undertook an extensive evaluation of each member municipality’s planning, policy and programs. Publications such as official plans, economic development plans, sustainability programs of all kinds, and growth management plans were all looked at and compared with each other as a way of assessing the area’s current status in sustainability planning. The evaluation showed each where they stand and leveraged existing documents at the local level. As a result, the appendix of the Sustainability Plan consists of a large summary chart that outlines what these plans contain and things that should be considered for the future. The process and outcome was well received and is now a major working document of the implementation committee, which is being used in the official plan review process of Simcoe County. Each member municipality is also reviewing their official plans to incorporate the outcomes of the Sustainability Plan, either by embedding its principles or using it as a referencing document.

In addition to understanding the current conditions in the partner municipalities, the study also reviewed the activities and programs of over 100 agencies and organizations within the watershed that are making progress towards one or more of the goals. The Sustainability Advisory Team made a major contribution to this research, ensuring that the identified initiatives were comprehensive and reflective of current conditions.

Based on the current conditions, the Sustainability Advisory Team and Steering Committee identified gaps between the current conditions and the goals. From this basis, over 80 Strategic Directions, and hundreds of actions were identified for prioritization and implementation into the future.

The Plan was completed in December 2008. Between January and June 2009, member municipalities endorsed the Plan.

### **Phase 5: Implementing the Plan**

Recognizing that many of the initiatives in the Plan go beyond the mandate of the Severn Sound Environmental Association, the SSEA Board sought representation of the municipalities and other stakeholders in the Severn Sound area to participate on an Interim Sustainability Plan Steering Committee (ISPSC). The SSEA readily acknowledged its limitations and sought to engage those other stakeholder organizations from outside of its area of expertise. The expanded membership includes organizations such as the Community Futures Development Corporations, the County of Simcoe and the Simcoe-Muskoka District Health Unit. The ISPSC was established at the completion of the Plan as a temporary body (one-year mandate) which would work towards integrating the plans' goals and directions into a strategic governance structure and policy framework for the future.

### **Overcoming Traditional Barriers to Progress**

The Severn Sound case points towards the ability of co-operation and partnership as a way of overcoming some typical barriers in sustainability planning. Member municipalities are small and lack the resources to complete such work on their own. During the process, the best practice review of sustainability plans revealed that most were from larger municipalities that have employees and fiscal resources dedicated to sustainability. The ability of one employee from a sustainability department to lead is an empowering resource that is simply not available in any of the Severn Sound member municipalities. Despite the desire, small planning departments are overextended by large workloads and limited time for sustainability issues. The SSEA's leadership in this area enabled municipalities to be provided with the leadership and assistance that would manage the process of developing the plan from start to finish.

Perhaps most important to our success was the individual leadership of both the Steering Committee members, and the Severn Sound Board of Directors. These individuals created Council reports, scheduled meetings between the SSEA, our consultant and key decision-makers in the communities, participate in workshops, reviewed each and every draft, and helped create a futuristic, leading edge community-based plan.

The SSEA watershed-based funding formula, apportioning costs to the nine municipalities based on properties and assessment, was used to provide the 50% municipal share required by FCM for the project. As a result, each member municipality paid less than \$9,000 a year to make up the \$35,000 municipal contribution of the \$70,000 annual project cost.

### **Challenges**

The progress towards a plan was guided under the direction the Steering Committee that was comprised of municipal staff from partner municipalities and the NSCFDC. This ad hoc steering committee provided the regular guidance needed to drive the process. As in larger municipalities, the process may have been better

served if it was preceded by an increase in human and fiscal resources. However, with the smaller municipalities joining to develop the Plan, this was not possible.

The need for more resources was compounded by the rigidity of funding programs. For example, the FCM grant was designed for a large municipality whose staff salaries are not reliant on grant funding. In the case of the SSEA, staff takes time to oversee the project could not be covered as an eligible expense under the terms of the FCM funding program. Thus, the SSEA was required to use a consultant, in order to move the consultation process forward.