

THE COUNTY OF FRONTENAC SUSTAINABILITY CASE STUDY

Pursuing Greater Sustainability Through an Integrated Community Sustainability Plan

Located in the heart of Eastern Ontario, The County of Frontenac has been chosen as a case study for AMO's A Sustainability Planning Toolkit for Municipalities in Ontario for a number of reasons:

- The County and its member Townships decided to develop a County-wide ICSP instead of five individual ICSPs, thereby providing an interesting model for other Counties and their member townships to follow (See Introduction: Why This Guide?);
- It was one of the first municipalities in Ontario to decide to develop an ICSP according to the Federal Gas Tax criteria and offers some insights now that it is in the middle of the process (see Tool #2: Structuring a Sustainability Planning Process and Tool #7: Preparing an Integrated Community Sustainability Plan);
- It provides information on how to overcome the traditional hurdles of sustainability planning (see Tool #1: Making the Case for Sustainability, Tool #3: Defining Sustainability, Tool #5: Assembling Baseline Data and Tool #12: Securing Funding/Other Support for Sustainability Planning);
- It demonstrates how a relatively large area with considerable diversity of circumstances and interests have found areas of common interest and have learned to work together to achieve these.

Background

Frontenac's member townships have undergone considerable change over the past fifteen years. In 1998, fifteen former townships within the County were amalgamated to form four, which, today, include the Townships of North, Central and South Frontenac and the Frontenac Islands. Meanwhile, the responsibilities the upper tier government, were divided between the County of Frontenac and newly separated City of Kingston.

Today, the Council of the County of Frontenac is made up of the mayors from each of the four lower tier municipalities. It took time for the independently minded townships to get together to collaborate, and to work toward a long-term vision and plan. The benefits of such collaboration are growing. One of the impetuses for working together was the Federal Gas Tax Agreement which has channeled funds for sustainability purposes not only to the townships individually, but to the County.

Although all of the Townships are considered rural, the population density varies from north to south with a few higher density settlements. One municipality is on Lake Ontario with its own set of issues, and the three others are all north of the City of Kingston. All of the Townships are experiencing growth. And in each township, the municipal government is the largest corporation/employer which suggests a responsibility and an opportunity to lead by example.

Operating as a County: The Process Towards Collaboration

The Frontenac CAO Group was created in 2006 to review and discuss opportunities for cooperation and collaboration among the municipalities. They established a number of technical advisory committees and task forces to address common issues ranging from pavement management to GIS to planning. This set the stage for a proper structure that would lead the sustainability planning process (Tool #2), as **the CAO Group recognized that there were a number of issues currently facing the Townships that could be addressed through the process of developing a sustainability plan**. Since the creation of the Frontenac CAO Group, they have implemented several ICSP-specific activities including¹:

- Introduction of the development of a County of Frontenac ICSP to Joint Councils;
- Meeting of senior management to discuss sustainability baseline information;
- Approval of the ICSP Terms of Reference for the Frontenac CAO Group;
- Municipal Strategic Planning Sessions (baseline and SWOT);
- Municipal Matters publication including information on ICSPs;
- Frontenac Sustainability Survey;
- Contract with a consulting team to prepare Draft ICSP and Community Consultation Plan.

The Frontenac CAO Group has also initiated several other specific projects that demonstrate the success of the group, including:

- Short-term Integrated GIS Strategy – GIS Technical Advisory Committee (providing important baseline information for the ICSP – Tool #5)
- PSAB, Continuity Planning – Frontenac Treasurers Groups;
- Integrated and Coordinated Pavement Management System project – Public Works TaskGroup;
- Operational Review of Planning Activities, Planning Intern - Planning Task Force;
- Frontenac K&P Trail Project - Frontenac Trails Committee;
- Community Awareness and Community Engagement (newsletter, web site, posters, survey).

One of the key ingredients to success, as has been stressed by other case study participants/municipalities is that **support of Council and senior staff is absolutely essential to successful sustainability planning**. In Frontenac's case, the CAO Group has assumed an oversight role with respect to the ICSP.

Rationale for Undertaking an ICSP at The County Level

The development of an ICSP (Tool #7) is a requirement for recipient communities under the Federal Gas Tax Agreement (FGT). Although this requirement may be satisfied by communities with minor amendments to their Official Plans, the County of Frontenac does not have an Official Plan to amend. Therefore, in 2007, the County and its member townships decided to pursue development of an ICSP at the County level. Funding for the ICSP was obtained through the FGT Agreement, under the capacity-building component. The rationales for undertaking an ICSP were identified as follows²:

¹ County of Frontenac. Draft Framework for the County of Frontenac ICSP. (March, 2008) p. 4. (Report prepared by Jacques Whitford Consultants)

² County of Frontenac. Draft Framework for the County of Frontenac ICSP. (March, 2008) p. vi.

- **The ICSP will act as a road map for the County, the Townships** and other community organizations, allowing them to implement sustainability more effectively according to common vision. The project team was provided with over 100 documents and suggestions to contact over 60 groups who might have an interest in sustainability. Clearly the ability to map out linkages will be important. This approach is also expected to assist the lower-tier municipalities in completing their ICSP requirements under the FGT agreement.
- **Cost savings can be realized** as duplication is reduced. The ICSP process will promote coordination and support integration.
- **Public input into the development of the ICSP will bring the community together** and allow people and groups with many different backgrounds to create a collective focus on the future. This process will benefit from the results of past and present initiatives and it will provide insight into where the community may want to focus.
- Community sustainability plans are required for FCM funding and may soon be required for other sources of federal funds. **Having an ICSP in place will allow the County of Frontenac to apply for Green Municipal Funds and other sources of federal funding.** Given the pressure on municipal resources, any step that will position the county and/or the Townships for additional sources of funds, particularly for sustainability initiatives, is welcome (Tool #12).
- The long-term focus of the ICSP will result in **more effective policy development** through integrated decision-making.
- **Issues are often trans-boundary and affect multiple Townships.** The ICSP will provide an opportunity for cooperation amongst Townships and with neighbouring municipalities.
- As tourism and ecotourism increasingly become more important economic development tools in the Frontenacs, **an ICSP will provide support in marketing the County as an ecofriendly destination.**

As the County's Manager of Economic Development, Dianna Bratina noted: "With an ICSP we don't have to focus on areas of disagreement/conflict. Instead, we can focus on key areas of common interest. Our survival depends on it...[In addition], economic development is about promoting investment opportunities and this process provides us with an opportunity to define our offering. You either react to what others are doing, or, you take control of your own future...we wanted to find common ground and position ourselves for the future."

An Important Early Step of The ICSP: The Frontenac County Sustainability Survey³

Assuming all residents share a desire to create a healthy, prosperous, vital and sustainable community, the **Frontenac Sustainability Survey was set up to gather input on the use of principles to represent the values of the community and to guide decision-making as it pertains to sustainability.** In an effort to encourage public participation in sustainability planning, the County of Frontenac, in cooperation with its partners, developed a website and storyboards to briefly describe the current state of the four pillars of sustainability: economic, environmental, social, and cultural. Using a list of guiding principles

³ The description of the Sustainability Survey has been taken from the Draft Framework cited earlier. (See page 5.)

drawn from a number of sources, participants could select the principles they believe are the most appropriate to guide planning and decision-making in the County.

It is useful to note that the County did not “invent” the principles it put before the community. As the Manager of Economic Development stressed, the County chose not to “get caught up in developing a detailed vision of sustainability, but rather, to see if we could agree on some guiding principles that could be used to refine our vision”. The identification and narrowing down of Principles began with the CAO Group’s ideas and then was taken to the public on an on-going, iterative basis. Such an approach coincides with some other municipalities’ views (e.g. Pickering) that considerable time can pass and momentum be lost by “vision” processes and discussions about definitions of sustainability (Tool #3).

A website and a series of storyboards with paper surveys were developed to introduce the survey to the public and to gather feedback and input. In late spring 2007, the website was launched to test the response from the public. As of January 21, 2008, 29 groups and individuals provided responses to the survey. This initial group of participants represents the ‘test group’ and the survey tool and the website will continue to play a role in future public engagement efforts. Moving forward, local residents and stakeholders will continue to be directed to the website to complete the Frontenac Sustainability Survey and to stay up to date on the ICSP development process. The website and paper survey processes will be included into the Community Consultation Plan as an option under all scenarios. (The website can be found at www.directionsforourfuture.ca)

Subsequent Steps Undertaken Towards an ICSP

While the Sustainability Survey was in progress, the County of Frontenac began its ICSP by preparing a Terms of Reference for, and commissioning an ICSP, a community consultation plan and the development of criteria that will be used to review applications for the use of funds allocated to the County from the federal GTA. The work plan included completion of the following tasks:

- a review of relevant literature including ICSPs from similar sized communities;
- meetings with municipal staff and key stakeholders and completion of a detailed questionnaire with the Warden, Township Mayors, and the five CAOs;
- development of proposed GTA criteria;
- identification of public engagement scenarios;
- development of a community consultation plan;
- completion of an ICSP framework that can be taken to the public for consultation and completion;
- and, presentations to Township Councils, Joint Council and the CAO working group as needed.

While the collaborative process has, at times, generated controversy and disagreement, it is reported that, as a result of the on-going process, cooperative action is increasingly becoming viewed as beneficial, particularly in light of the fact that municipalities are being bombarded with new responsibilities on an on-going basis and are finding themselves in positions of increasing vulnerability.

Development of an “umbrella” ICSP is helping to identify sustainability issues that are of interest to all, explore infrastructure/other areas that are of interest with regard to FGT funding, and develop an approach that can compliment, supplement and/or integrate the other plans that are in place in each Township.

Lessons learned through the collaborative process, and in particular as a result of getting together to develop an ICSP, are several, including the following:

- **Although collaboration at this level may involve difficulties, it works: A long-term commitment requires a long-term relationship.** The process in the County of Frontenac has brought together people from all the local municipalities. As noted above, the collaborative process that has been required has provided an opportunity to get a wide variety of issues out on the table and open them up for discussion, and has identified areas where the benefits of cooperation are becoming recognized. Common principles related to sustainability have been agreed upon.
- **A governing body is required to sanction the ICSP process:** As stressed by all of the municipalities involved in successful efforts towards sustainability planning, it is imperative that a governing body formally passes a resolution supporting the exercise. It was noted that without this, “a group can “meet” but cannot take action”. Support of CAOs and senior decision-makers is imperative.
- **The process should not be rushed:** The process in Frontenac has been slow to develop, and this is seen as being necessary to develop trust, establish relationships, understand the different issues and demographics of the Townships, discuss and work through contentious issues among the different stakeholders (e.g., “development” versus “no development” perspectives; seasonal versus permanent property owners), overcome the fact that rural communities have traditionally been more used to making decisions on a year-by-year basis rather than in the context of long-term planning, etc.
- **The process illustrates benefits of dealing with issues based on longer-term planning rather than on a reactive, short-term basis:** While smaller, rural municipalities are used to dealing with issues as they arise, the benefits of working together to address issues in a planned way (e.g., brownfields and Community Improvement Plan areas) are becoming appreciated.
- **Financial benefits become apparent as a result of the collaborative process:** For example, Townships are beginning to see benefits associated with, for example, sharing the cost of engineering costs once, rather than each paying separately for the same services.
- **Process enables coordination of various resources towards the same goals:** Cooperation illustrates that there are many resources the Townships can pool/share for the benefit of all (e.g., consultation processes; human resource expertise; GIS and/or pavement management systems; etc.).
- **Process results in a better case for attracting investment:** Working together allows the County members to identify where the region as a whole is going, presenting a coordinated approach that will appeal to investors.

- **Collaboration allows for initiation of projects that one district could not do alone:** For example, the County has been able to use a Provincial program to purchase an abandoned rail bed for recreation/trails, a project that no one municipality would have done on their own.
- **Collaboration among the Townships has resulted in further collaborative initiatives between the Townships and other municipalities beyond County boundaries:** The benefits of cooperation are evident in new discussions and associations with other neighbouring municipalities in regard to areas of mutual interest.