

THE TOWN OF MATTAWA SUSTAINABILITY CASE STUDY
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The Town of Mattawa, and the Mattawa Bonfield Economic Development Corporation (MBEDC) provide some interesting lessons learned that reinforce findings in AMO's A Sustainability Planning Toolkit for Municipalities in Ontario related to:

- Governance initiatives to enable smooth multi-municipality cooperation;
- Adaptive management/learn-by-doing approach to sustainability (see Tool #8: An Option to ICSPs: Adopting an Adaptive Management/Learn-by-Doing Approach);
- Community outreach (see Tool #9: Engaging the Stakeholders);
- Emphasis on overall quality-of-life variables to achieve long-term sustainability (see Tool #1: Making the Case for Sustainability).

Context: Establishment of the Mattawa Bonfield Economic Development Corporation

Mattawa is a town in Northeastern Ontario at the confluence of the Mattawa and Ottawa Rivers in Nipissing District. In the distant past it was an important historical hub for both fur and lumber along the voyageur route from Montreal to the Great Lakes. Thereafter, through the years, it enjoyed relatively stable economic growth based on its forestry industry, despite cyclical ups and downs. Roughly 10 years ago it became apparent that the forestry industry was not going to continue to be a viable mainstay. Significant lay-offs occurred. Mattawa found itself in a particularly difficult situation. It is land-locked and is surrounded by relatively more rural townships. Its tax base is all residential/commercial. So, any new development would have to happen outside its town limits or through redevelopment of the downtown.

Recognizing its growth limitations, and in view of the downturn in the forestry industry, Mattawa and its four neighbouring municipalities first formed a Mattawa Area Forestry Committee to look at future options to achieve diversification and long-term sustainability. Out of this initial cooperation came the recognition among the five communities that, given the many benefits of working together, a **Mattawa Bonfield Economic Development Corporation should be formed**. Thus, the MBEDC, borne out of a commonality of issues and proximity (approximately a 30 km. radius), would focus on supporting the community and economic interests of the 6,000 residents of Mattawa, Bonfield, Papineau-Cameron, Mattawan and Calvin.

Led by the 5 mayors and 1 full-time staff (an economic development officer) the MBEDC, at the beginning, went through some growing pains. The mayors were meeting once per month but would have to go back to their respective councils to make any decision, which resulted in delays and sluggish response times.

The Mattawa Bonfield Region continued to experience very tough times due to a struggling forestry sector and layoffs at 2 of the Regions major employers and the closing of its significant downtown grocery store. The MBEDC Mayors seconded the Town of Mattawa Municipal Staff, on a part time basis

and further contracted a consultant to carry out various deliverables including the creation of a **governance structure** that was more responsive and that enabled the Mayors to have a degree of autonomy to make immediate decisions.

Community Outreach

One of the MBEDC's first goals was to reach out to the community to obtain ideas, participation and support for any future efforts. To this end, the MBEDC formed a Community Advisory Committee (CAC) which includes thirteen sectors/areas of interest totalling 15 individuals. Areas such as tourism, health, schools, the Chamber of Commerce, etc., were represented. A **CAC governance structure** was also developed which in essence states that the Advisory Committee provide advice to the mayors of the MBEDC. Because a central aim of the MBEDC was a sustainable future, **youth were also invited to participate as part of the CAC.**

Adopting an Adaptive Management/Learn By Doing Approach to Sustainability

Rather than undertaking a long-term planning process with the group, the MBEDC decided to convene a one-day session with the Advisory Committee and the greater community. Approximately 49 individuals representing the community, various Ministries and staff attended this full day session. From this process eight to ten projects were identified. In many respects, **this approach embodies the Adaptive Management/Learn-by-Doing Sustainability Tool #8** described in AMO's [A Sustainability Planning Toolkit for Municipalities in Ontario](#)¹, whereby, rather than commissioning a sustainability plan, the Corporation undertook a series of on-going *projects* and *programmes* aimed at increasing sustainability. "We just "do, do, do!", explained the MBEDC representative.

The projects identified include hospital construction, development of trails to support the large tourism initiative related to the "Voyageur Trail", sewer and highway upgrading, etc., all of which have been done. "We've completed a number of improvement projects such as \$1 million in our downtown, \$1 million waterfront, \$1 million Municipal and Information Centre, \$2 million on our arena, \$3 million water/sewer upgrades and much more", noted the MBEDC representative. "We're good at getting grants. We have never been turned down. We show that we are operating in partnership, and government thinks we're moving in the right direction". Considerable government investment has been attracted from the Federal and Provincial level through sheer determination and aggressive pursuit by the Corporation.

When the main grocery store was closed down on Mattawa's main street, the MCEDC undertook an aggressive search for a replacement and successfully attracted Sobey's. ("We really bugged them, until they came, eight months later".) Since then, investment has been attracted to establish a new niche café and restaurant, outdoor adventure store and more Main Street investment. One of the greatest achievements has been in the realm of tourism. The area decided to rebrand itself for tourism and created, among others, Voyageur Days, a \$500,000 annual event that actually has made money over the years, and which brings over 33,000 visitors in annually.

¹ A Sustainability Planning Toolkit for Municipalities in Ontario (2008). Prepared for Association of Municipalities of Ontario.

Emphasizing Positive Quality-of-Life Variables to Facilitate Long-Term Sustainability

During discussions, the MBEDC representative articulated a key lesson related to achievement of community sustainability (see Tool #1: Making the Case for Sustainability): That government's main job is not to *run* businesses, but **"create an atmosphere for investment"** and put into place the social, economic and environmental conditions that will make Mattawa-Bonfield attractive and competitive to labour forces and investors. If a good quality of life is offered, then business will come. *"It is the community who generates economic growth"* so we [MBEDC] should focus on creating a favourable environment for investment.

As for next steps, the representative noted that the MBEDC has concentrated on "project-based community and economic development. It is now time to develop a longer-term strategic plan, which, in essence would be a sustainability plan, including development of performance indicators. Since the new governance model was developed, the MBEDC has, for the first time ever, received interest from outside investors such as inbound call centres. The MBEDC also took part in a mock community investment readiness where a consultant "representing" a phantom investor visited the Mattawa Bonfield Region to assess their potential business development. The MBEDC realized that there were some serious limitations on logistics of attracting shovel ready investment. As a result, the MBEDC and staff need to concentrate its most valuable time efforts on attracting investment that can realistically be realised as thus the need for a longer term strategy.