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# Evaluating Citizen Participation in Sustainability Planning: The Story of Alberta

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UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Evaluating citizen participation in sustainability planning: the story of alberta

by

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A THESIS

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## **ABSTRACT**

This research tackles the question: what is the status of citizen participation in the development of sustainability planning in Alberta, considering both the process and the output? In Alberta, professional and academic attention to citizen participation is occurring in tandem with government support for sustainability planning initiatives. As a result of this endorsement many Albertan communities have had the opportunity to develop a range of sustainability plans. An environmental scan of sustainability planning activity in Alberta was completed, gathering stories from over 20 small-medium sized communities, along with a case study analysis of two communities. The results illustrate that a patchwork is emerging across Alberta, municipalities are adapting a range of sustainable planning process to make them work in their contexts. These place-based approaches can be knitted together to indicate clear shift towards more participatory planning that concerns itself with the long-term vitality of communities' futures.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## **PREFACE**

Upon my return to Calgary in 2008 an advertisement for a Plan-it Calgary event caught my interest. I had been away for over six years to go to school and have some fun. After living in blossom-filled Victoria and cafe-filled Europe I wasn't all that thrilled to be back. Coming across the advertisement provided a semblance of hope that something was brewing in my hometown. I thought to myself "Calgary is my community, at the very least I should check things out". So I went, and I was blown away. Keynote speakers presented on downtown revitalization, ideas for how to make streets more pedestrian orientated were shared, and there was an open discussion about how these ideas could be applied in Calgary. While at times I was hit hard with skepticism, I couldn't ignore the fact that a different kind of conversation was happening, and that I and my fellow citizens could be part of it.

So when I heard about the inaugural Civic Camp event in early 2009, I was curious to see if Calgarians were invested in their future enough to attend a loose citizen led event. Not only were they interested, almost 200 of them were. Calgarians of all stripes came to talk about building complete communities and putting forth alternative visions for Calgary from the status quo. The follow-up action to the event was showing citizen support for the vision proposed in Plan-it Calgary. I spent almost three full days at City Hall on the edge of my seat, fascinated and humbled by what seemed to be an endless line of citizens bravely speaking in favour of a very different way of planning and development.

As I worked through my degree in Environmental Design I often reflected on what I had experienced at City Hall over those three days. I had witnessed that citizens do care, that they are concerned about the long-term futures of their communities, and that they are open to making the lifestyle changes necessary to move towards that future. My experience left me curious about what is happening in other communities in my home province. What sort of conversations are they having? Who is participating in those conversations? My curiosity laid the groundwork for the motivation for this research. I hope I have offered a small glance into the work Albertan communities, and Albertan citizens are doing to envision and move towards a more vibrant, sustainable future.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ALSA	Alberta Land Stewardship Act
AUMA	Alberta Urban Municipalities Association
CAG	Citizen Advisory Group
CSP	Cochrane Sustainability Plan
GMF	Green Municipal Fund
ICSP	Integrated Sustainability Plan
LEED	Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design
LUF	Land Use Framework
MDP	Municipal Development Plan
MGA	Municipal Government Act of Alberta
MSI	Municipal Sustainability Initiative
MSP	Municipal Sustainability Planning
NDCC	New Deal for Cities and Communities
NIMBY	Not In My Back Yard
NRC	National Resources Canada
SPUR	Sustainability Partners Utilizing Resources
SUN	Sustainable Urban Neighbourhoods
UNCED	United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1 Motivation for Research

This research was sparked by a belief that citizens are willing and able to engage in decisions about the environment they live in. In a belief that citizens are holders of important and beneficial knowledge about their communities and environments. This motivation is nested within a deep recognition of the challenges embedded within both transitioning communities into sustainable lifestyles and incorporating meaningful citizen participation into planning processes.

A deeper exploration of citizen participation in community planning is important on a number of levels, especially as the role of local governance and municipalities continues to morph in response to globalization and the expansion of influences in decision-making at many scales. The challenge of realizing sustainability in practice only heightens the complexity. In Alberta, professional and academic attention to citizen participation is occurring in tandem with government support for sustainable community planning initiatives. Starting in 2007 the Alberta Government has committed long-term funding for both capital and operation costs to enhance municipal sustainability through the *Municipal Sustainability Initiative* (MSI), running along side federal programs such as the Federation of Canadian Municipalities' *Green Fund*. As a result, many small – medium sized communities have had the opportunity to develop a variety of community sustainability plans. Prompting the question: amid all this support what is the status of sustainability planning in Alberta, to what extent have these processes been participatory, and what have been the effects of citizen participation throughout the planning process on the completed sustainability plans?

### 1.1.1 Research Equation

This research addresses earnest topics: sustainability and citizen participation. Terms that get thrown around a lot and can sometimes feel both empty and everywhere all at the same time. But there is something to them, they are thrown around a lot because they touch on certain impulses: that people generally want to do things that add to the future,

not take away from it, and that people want to care about people and their communities. The following equation, presented in Figure 1:1, was developed as a way to begin to unpack the complex task of translating intentions around citizen participation and sustainability into professional planning practice.

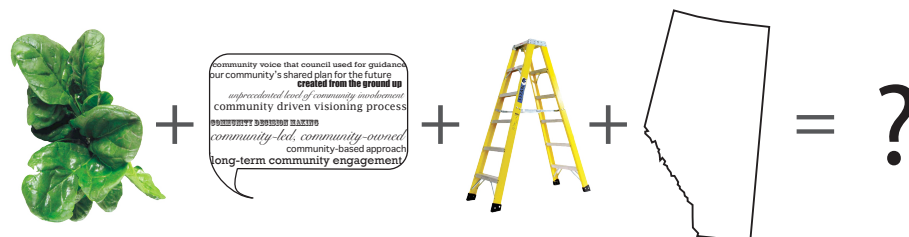


Figure 1:1 Research Equation

The equation was inspired by Arnstein's (1969) quote: "the idea of citizen participation is a little like eating spinach: no one is against it in principle because it is good for you" (p. 216). The spinach represents the wicked problems of the broader context including social democratic values and governance, the speech bubble speaks to the growing statements of intent from governments at all scales to incorporate more citizen participation, the ladder represents the various participation mechanisms that are used, and the outline of the province of Alberta is the study area for this research. This project aims to answer this equation and in the process expand our understanding of what it is we are doing and what we are getting from participatory sustainability planning in Alberta.

### 1.1.2 Key Definitions

This research explores topics, planning trends, and ideas that have a broad range of understanding and associated definitions. From the outset the definitional approach was taken that there is no perfect or widely agreed upon definition for any of the key terms that frame the project. The lack of general firm definitions is not viewed as problematic but a symptom of the interdisciplinary, interdependent, and emergent nature of the

keystone ideas of sustainable development, sustainability planning, and citizen participation. To provide some scaffolding for this research the definitional strategy suggested for the three key terms is provided below.

#### Sustainable development

Borrowing from the work of Wheeler (2000), sustainable development can simply be understood as development that aims to improve the long-term health of human ecological systems (p. 134). This approach works from a long-term perspective and emphasizes the relationships between human and ecological systems.

#### Sustainability planning

Sustainable development approaches were born out of conversations from the Bruntland Report (WCED, 1987), they have been adapted to different professions and applications from green building certifications such as LEED to the forthcoming ISO/PC 250, Sustainability in event management from the International Organization for Standardization. Sustainability planning is the emerging response from the planning profession to the continuously growing influence and importance of sustainable development. Generally speaking, sustainability planning approaches follow the “Three E’s” of protecting the environment, the promotion of social equity, and the pursuit of place-based economic development (Jepson, 2004). These three core elements are expressed through a variety of planning specialities or applications from compact urban form, to transit oriented design, to recycling and waste reduction, to the preservation of open space (Wheeler, 2000).

#### Citizen participation

There are multiple understandings of what counts as citizen participation and what meaningful participation entails, from mandatory public hearings, to engaged steering committees, to full on participatory design exercises. For the purpose of this research, citizen participation encompasses the formal and informal ways that citizens take part in the decisions that affect the environments they live in.

## **1.2 Project Goals and Objectives**

If we start with the impulse that participation is important in municipal decision making, with the good intentions of communities to engage their citizens, the different methods used to do so, and the political, cultural and planning context of Alberta what do we get? What does all this add up to?

From this starting point a thesis research project was embarked upon to explore the following question: what is the status of citizen participation in the development of sustainability planning in Alberta considering both the process and the output? The primary objectives of the research were:

- 1) To consider the role of citizen participation in sustainability planning throughout the process and as reflected in the finished plans.
  
- 2) To better understand the status of citizen participation in sustainability planning across Alberta in order to make recommendations of how to strengthen the processes and promote further maturation of planning practice in the province.

## **1.3 Framework of Analysis**

The framework of analysis that guided this research consists of a set of drivers, the sustainability planning and policy context shaped by the federal and provincial governments, the area of study, and two sets of outcomes. Figure 1:2 illustrates the relationship between the different aspects of the framework. While there is a certain degree of linearity, it is recognized that each component of the framework is influenced by the others. For example municipal experiences with citizen participation influence global expectations for engagement, which help shape federal and provincial policy, which affect municipal planning directives.



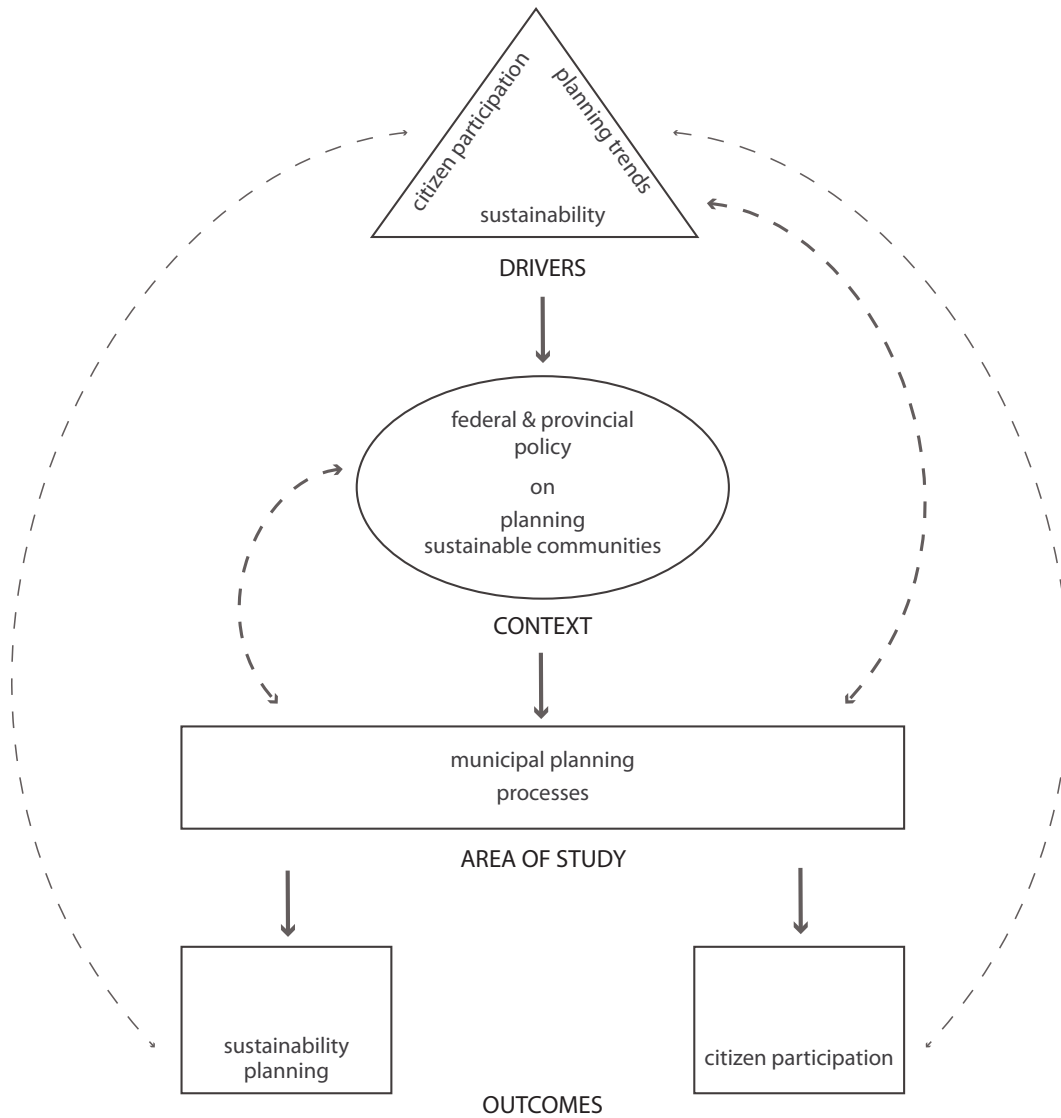


Figure 1.2 Framework of Analysis

The major drivers behind this research, and the emerging planning trajectory in Alberta, are the interdependent affects of growing experiences with and expectations for citizen participation in decision-making, trends in planning practice and theory, and the expanding global influence of sustainability. Federal and provincial policy on planning sustainable communities provide the research context, policy directions that offer some incentives for community sustainability action and policy development. at the municipal level. The area of study is the sustainability planning experiences of small-medium sized

municipalities in Alberta, Canada with populations between 10 000 - 80 000 people. The research endeavors to uncover how Albertan communities are responding to the drivers and context, and how they are articulating sustainability within their environments. Lastly, there are two research outcomes:

- 1) A better understanding of the approaches to and status of sustainability planning in Alberta. Through developing a typology of approaches to sustainability planning taken by Albertan communities according to qualitative accounts of plan focus and scale.
- 2) Uncovering the degree of citizen participation incorporated into these planning processes. Through an analysis of the number of avenues for participation provided and the type of communication the avenues allow for.

#### **1.4 Methodology**

The research question was answered in two parts; by completing an environmental scan of sustainability planning activities across Alberta and conducting two case studies. The environmental scan was completed and the case studies were explored in order to better understand the development of sustainability planning in Alberta, and to determine how participatory the processes have been. This two-pronged approach, illustrated in Figure 1:3, allowed for both an extended study area of a diverse set of communities, and a more in-depth look at the experiences of two communities that have achieved success with sustainability planning. Saha and Paterson (2008) argue that with larger samples of communities researchers are able to shed light on the pervasiveness of sustainable practices at the local level. The environmental scan enabled the consideration of planning activities from over twenty communities, allowing for a better understanding of the spread of sustainability planning in Alberta. In addition, as called for by Jepson (2004), the completion of the two cases studies provides examples of sustainability planning practices in Alberta that break the mold. Delving into what factors led to success in the case study communities allowed for the identification of key strategies, approaches, and relationships that other communities may learn from and be able to incorporate into their

own planning activities. This project was approved by the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board at the University of Calgary.

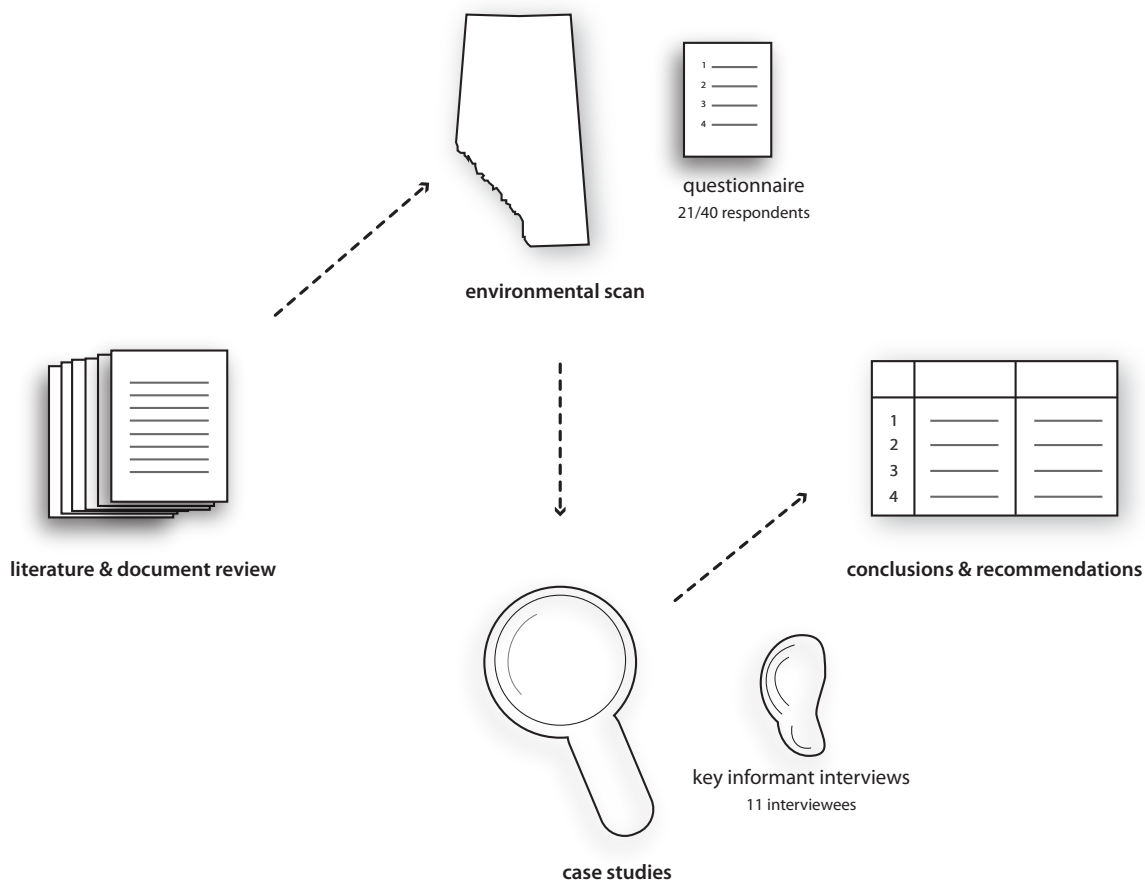


Figure 1:3 Methodology

The decision to complete an environmental scan of sustainability planning activities across Alberta was based on a desire to gain a comprehensive understanding of the Albertan planning context. In light of recent developments in regional planning in Alberta with the *Land Use Framework* and both federal and provincial policies and programs promoting sustainable communities, it was deemed important to get a clearer picture of what is actually happening in Albertan communities. Similarly, communities are being influenced by a push for more participatory planning approaches by the planning profession, theory, and citizen expectations. The environmental scan also looked at how Albertan communities are attempting to include more citizen participation in their

sustainability planning efforts. The goal of the environmental scan was to 1) capture a diverse picture of the development of sustainable community planning across the province, and 2) to identify two communities that have achieved success in this area of planning for case study analysis.

Following the environmental scan of Albertan communities' experiences with participatory sustainability planning it was decided to conduct two case studies. This decision was based upon the need to compliment the findings of the environmental scan with a more in-depth, descriptive account of how two communities were both able to achieve some success and overcome some of the common barriers identified in the environmental scan. Jepson (2004) insists that through the collection of case studies "communities might be able to learn from those among them that break from the majority" (p. 238). It was felt to be of great importance to provide Albertan communities with examples of innovation from communities that operate within the same provincial planning context. While it is helpful to identify common challenges and approaches through the environmental scan, providing a considered and comparative description of two successful planning endeavors offers insight into how communities can move passed cited barriers. From the results of the environmental scan two communities who took different approaches to sustainability planning and incorporating citizen participation were selected for a comparative case study analysis.

The research data was collected using three methods, which all informed each other: a literature and document review, questionnaire, and key informant interviews. To frame the context of both the environmental scan and the case studies, a literature and document review of academic journals, federal and provincial policies, and research papers pertinent to sustainability planning and citizen participation in Alberta was completed. Information required to complete the environmental scan was gathered through a questionnaire, which was sent out to 40 communities. Communities for the environmental scan were selected through a stratified sample based on the target population size of 10 000 - 80 000 people. The intention was to select communities without preference in order to get participation from a broad a selection of communities.

A recruitment email was sent to municipal planning departments in Spring 2010, with a follow up to non responding communities in early Fall 2010. All responses to the questionnaire were received by the end of Fall 2010. The questionnaire consisted of both open ended and closed questions, enabling respondents to self-define if/how their community has engaged in sustainability planning. Participants either completed the questionnaire through email or over the phone.

Additional information required for the case study analysis was gathered through key informant interviews, which provided first-hand accounts and perceptions from those directly responsible for or involved in the planning processes. Interviewees were selected through snowball sampling starting with the initial contact from the environmental scan questionnaire. The key informants were key players in their community's sustainability planning process including professional planners, consultants, decision makers, or citizen participants. The key informant interviews allowed for participants to share what they felt were key factors to the success of their sustainability planning endeavors. The interviews were conducted during Winter and Spring 2011. All of the data collected through the questionnaire and the key informant interviews was compared to the learnings from the literature review to identify common trends and to provide insight into interpreting the findings. And all participants in both the questionnaire and key informant interviews signed a consent form.

The synthesis of the data collected took part in three stages: compiling of the environmental scan, analysis of the key informant interviews, and a synthesis of both sets of data. Through combining the results of the environmental scan and the analysis of the key informant interviews of the case studies, potential areas for the development of sustainability planning in Alberta were delineated and explored. Approaches and strategies for overcoming the challenge of incorporating citizen participation into the planning process were identified, which shaped and informed the conclusions and recommendations.

The research drivers and context are explored through a literature and document review presented in Chapters Two and Three. The results of the environmental scan are provided in Chapter Four, and the innovative approaches to citizen participation and sustainability planning taken by the case study communities are examined in Chapter Five. The synthesis of common challenges from the environmental scan with the key factors for success identified through the case study analysis is shared in Chapter Six. The resulting conclusions and recommendations are also provided in Chapter Six.

## **Chapter 2: Shifts In Planning And The Emerging Role Of Sustainability Planning**

To better understand the first part of the framework of analysis, the interrelated driving forces behind this research, a literature review was conducted. The review focused on trends in planning practice and theory, the expanding global influence of sustainability, and growing expectations of and for citizen participation in decision-making. Specifically, this chapter will provide a brief account of shifts in planning practice and theory, the relationship between sustainability and planning, the growing role for citizens in planning, and concluding thoughts on the relationship between these driving forces.

### **2.1 Shifts in Planning Practice & Theory**

An understanding of planning as a purely technocratic process, focused solely on the spatial aspects of human settlement no longer holds the authority it once did. In response to the multitude of challenges communities of all sizes now face, planning has had to widen its scope of concern and adjust the conceptions of professional practice. The roots of modern planning shaped a particular focus and process that is no longer appropriate. Rationalism is no longer the primary principle behind decisions and the understanding of issues, nor are the silos created by the scientific-rational approach suited to managing contemporary planning challenges. As the scope of planning has widened, space and opportunity has emerged for new approaches, including an increased focus on sustainability and emphasis on citizen participation. A growing trend in Alberta and beyond has been the pursuit of community sustainability plans, or plans that identify sustainability as a major priority and framing device. The development of these plans has proved to be an opportunity for communities to re-think how they plan for their futures, manage challenges, and engage with their citizens.

Modern planning arose in response to rapid urban growth in Western Europe that created chaotic and polluted industrial cities. As a technical activity, carried out by experts, it produced comprehensive master plans that determined the physical design of communities (UN Habitat, 2009). Modern planning responded to mounting public

concern over a compromised quality of life due to incompatible land uses (McAllister, 2009, p. 110). The central challenge was to find ways to mediate the public's collective concerns with respect to the sharing of space and time (Healy, 1992, p. 145). In order to manage incompatible and competing land uses modern planning undertook an orderly and scientific approach to urban management that separated issues and their respective land uses. The predominant planning approach was the rational comprehensive model, which takes a rational scientific approach to problem solving (Hotovsky, 2006). This approach in its purest application includes "...a full analysis of all possible factors affecting a give set of circumstances and all possible alternatives to resolving the problem under study" (Hotovsky, 2006, p. 382).

This technical exercise rarely involved community members and regarded social, economic and political issues as separate matters outside its scope of concern (UN Habitat, 2009). The process of planning operated, and to some degree still operates, by separating land uses and public services within different 'silos' of planning practice and municipal bureaucracies (Marbek Resource Consultants, 2008; McAllister, 2009). These different 'silos' typically worked in isolation from one another, which left them ill-equipped to fully understand and manage complex systems (Edge & McAllister, 2009). This approach has resulted in major gaps between how experts plan and consider human settlement and how the majority of residents live out their daily lives (UN Habitat, 2009). These 'silos' and the isolated scope of concern of the separate planning departments they created has, according to some thinkers, contributed to a North American urban landscape plagued by sprawl, the loss of agricultural land, and fragmented natural spaces (Marbek Resource Consultants, 2008). Moreover, some critics argue it has created a management environment plagued by fragmented and uncoordinated policies unable to deal with polarized interests and jurisdictional conflicts (Edge & McAllister, 2009, p. 280).

Traditional approaches to planning are proving themselves to be unable to sufficiently address the increasingly complex and interrelated challenges that communities face. According to Edge and McAllister (2009) "[l]ocal governments ... are facing complex demands to plan for sustainability, provide services and include public participation in a



meaningful way” as they pursue economic vitality and healthy communities (p. 293). Not an easy task, especially when municipalities are constrained by traditional jurisdictional and institutional processes. In the face of this complex task, decision-makers are recognizing that the reductionist approaches of the past will not bring environmental health and thriving communities. Thus, attempts are being made to integrate biophysical and socio-economic considerations with new administrative and policy responses (McAllister, 2009, p. 110).

As local governments grapple with achieving the quality of life and healthy environments their constituents demand new approaches to planning have emerged. A major trend is the development of sustainability planning. This approach to planning is characterized by integrated planning techniques that recognize and embrace the complexity of socio-ecological systems. Sustainability planning attempts to break down the traditional silos of planning practice and look at relationships between different land uses and ecological concerns. While this approach to planning is still developing, it has been influential in recent planning activities in Alberta. The growing influence of sustainability planning is evident in the high number of communities that have some kind of community sustainability plan, whether it be in the form of an *Integrated Community Sustainability Plan*, or a renewed *Municipal Development Plan* with a strong sustainability focus.

## **2.2 The Developing Relationship Between Sustainability and Planning**

Communities of all sizes are grappling with challenges related to environmental, governance, financial, and social issues. In recent years, particular emphasis has been placed on environmental concerns. The 1990's saw the emergence of a general consensus that environmental issues could no longer be managed through isolation (Marbek Resource Consultants, 2008). There was a major shift in perspective from separating humans and the environment in decision-making, to an integrated understanding of local government policy and planning (McAllister, 2009, p. 112). This shift began to take shape as the emerging concept of sustainable development started to gain traction (Plummer, 2006).

The United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development (UNCED) introduced the idea of sustainable development at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. While the concept has been discussed and challenged at length, many planners and others responsible for the development of cities are utilizing it as a guiding principle. Amongst the now almost ubiquitous citing of the concept, numerous practitioners, thinkers, academics, and everyday citizens argue that the inherent contradiction between growth and sustaining ecological systems mute the arguments of sustainable development advocates (Robinson, 2004). While to a large extent these and other criticisms are well deserved, they do not fully acknowledge the historical context sustainable development emerged from, nor the profound influence it has had on public dialogue.

At its inception, the concept of sustainable development was a bold attempt to link environmental and development issues (Robinson, 2004). Two camps of understanding arose based on reactions to the concept and early approaches to environmental concerns and management. Many of the arguments for and against sustainable development can be separated into one of two frameworks: expansionist or ecological (Jepson, 2001; Robinson, 2004). Some would argue that these two frameworks are irreconcilable, and that the various understandings of sustainable development hinder its ability to accomplish much. Others believe that definitional variety can be a positive, arguing that “every major concept which encompasses human ideals—such as liberty or democracy— [is] subject to diverse interpretation” and that “it allows sustainability to be a unifying force, one that enables opposing camps to find common ground” (Jepson, 2001, p. 503). The vast use of the concept in contemporary planning and policy development suggests that the introduction of the concept has pushed environmental concerns into the forefront of public debate and decision-making.

Sustainable development has “emerged as integral to the vocabulary of the human-environment relationship” (Plummer, 2006, p. 18). The term has become a part of the global lexicon. While it means different things to different people, at a very basic level it suggests that individuals, governments, and corporations alike are starting to take the long-term impacts of their decisions into consideration. It has brought unquestionable

attention to the consequences of our actions on the ability of ecological systems to support future generations (McAlister, 2009). The extent to which society has been motivated to make significant lifestyle changes in response to this attention is less certain.

Within the planning realm, sustainable development is shifting how planners work. It is not uncommon for municipal planning departments to work on community sustainability plans, or at the very least spell-out for the public the sustainability principles they operate under. A search of many municipal websites will bring up something related to sustainability. If anything substantial is coming from these efforts is another conversation. Some writers on planning such as Gunder (2006) question whether the attention planning has paid to sustainability has achieved much. Gunder (2006) argues that planning has jumped on sustainability as a way for the profession to assert its significance. He notes that not only do most planning documents now include the concept of sustainable development, it has been declared as the ultimate planning goal, despite little clarity on what it means and how it is to be achieved (Gunder, 2006, p. 211). Despite these legitimate concerns, the point here is merely to emphasize the proliferation of sustainability in public decision-making processes.

The increasing significance of sustainable development as a concept has played a major role in creating the context that fostered the growth of sustainability planning as a renewed framework for planning. Sustainability is being integrated into the planning profession to some extent because the concept is clearly recognized as something that relates to planning (Jepson, 2001). Jepson (2001) argues that not only is sustainability being integrated into the practice of planning, but that planning has a unique opportunity to play a crucial role in the emerging concept. He cites the “numerous and persuasive” reasons why planning and sustainable development are linked, among the most important being the fact that “the constituent concepts that compose sustainability are considered by many of its proponents to be most applicable at the same level at which most planning occurs and on which it is most focused, that is, the local or regional level” (Jepson, 2001, p. 505). In other words, not only are the two applicable and applied at the local scale, the very nature of planning puts planners in a position where they can influence the way

citizens live and do business by creating built environments that encourage and enable environmentally friendly ways of living (Rohe, 2009).

Similar to the concept of sustainable development, sustainability planning is understood broadly and there are a number of working definitions and approaches (Marbek Resource Consultants, 2008). In Canada alone there are various models: *The Natural Step*, *Local Agenda 21*, *Smart Growth*, *Adaptive Planning*, *Municipal Sustainable Planning*, and *Integrated Community Sustainability Plans* (Marbek Resource Consultants, 2008). Regardless of the chosen model, efforts in Canada are echoing global shifts and are focused on broadening the scope of factors considered in planning and decision-making (Planning for Sustainable Canadian Communities Roundtable, 2005).

A general definition of sustainability planning is “a collaborative, integrated approach to community planning that steers the community towards the implementation of local and global sustainability goals, using a long-term perspective in an adaptive institutional framework” (Marbek Resource Consultants, 2008, p. 33). Advocates of the approach insist that it provides an opportunity for communities to look at their long-term goals, and provides steps to get there. Moreover, it is “an opportunity to engage citizens in a dialogue about what they value about their communities and what they want their community to look like in the future” (AUMA, 2009). While there are divergent opinions on what exactly sustainability means and the effectiveness of inserting it into public policy and planning, there is no denying that the concept is now widely used and influential. This research endeavors to unpack what is happening in the development of sustainability planning in Alberta amongst the growing influence and presence of the concept. In particular how sustainability planning is being used as an opportunity to engage citizens in conversations about the futures of their communities. An emphasis that seems to be increasing alongside the evolving role for citizens in planning over the past decades.

### **2.3 The Growing Role for Citizens in Planning**

As the scope of concern in planning practice has broadened it has also opened up a larger role for citizens in the planning process. This elevated role for citizen participation and its

associated challenges are intimately linked to shifts in planning thought and highlight the complex task of planning within a democracy. Kelly (2009) states that “one of the greatest challenges of planning in a democratic society is to balance the complex, differing, and often competing interests of many different constituent groups”(p. 36). How planners meet and understand this challenge has shifted as different models of planning have been used and citizen demands and expectations of governance have expanded. In order to understand the status of citizen participation in sustainability planning in Alberta it is important to consider the role citizen participation has played in the planning process over time, consider the various critiques of citizen participation, and to explore the relationship between sustainability and citizen participation.

The notion of citizen participation in planning is not a new idea, what has changed are the approaches and models used to balance differing public values and demands. Lane (2005) has observed that the role of citizen participation in planning is determined by the nature of the planning enterprise being undertaken. He and others (Ling, Hanna & Dale, 2009; Edge & McAllister, 2009; Healy, 1992; Innes, 1995), note the changing emphasis placed on citizen participation through various planning schools over time, from the rational comprehensive model to the emerging communicative paradigm. Additionally, while the role for citizen participation has shifted alongside theoretical developments and changes in planning practice, the relationship between citizens and planning has matured. Practitioners and theorists have commented on an expansion of citizen expectations and actual citizen involvement in planning and other decision-making processes (Canadian Policy Research Networks, 2000; Laurian & Shaw, 2009, MASS LBP, 2009; McAllister, 2009). Already in 1975 Lichfield et al. observed that “...the general public are becoming more and more interested in the whole planning process and determined to take part in it”(p. ix). The responsiveness of different planning models to these demands is dependent upon how they view the role of citizen participation in the planning process.

### *2.3.1 The History of Citizen Participation in Planning*

Lane (2005) argues that imbedded in all planning models is a particular definition of planning problems, preference for certain kinds of knowledge used in practice, and a

conceptualization of the planning and decision-making context. All of these factors frame the relationship between planning and citizen participation. The narrow focus of concern characteristic of early planning models has already been described. This slim focus also extended into how early planning models understood the public interest and the role citizens can/should play in planning. A dominant early stream of planning thought was the rational comprehensive model, which Lance terms Blueprint Planning. This model concerned itself (and still concerns itself, as the approach is still utilized) with producing fixed end-state plans within an implementation environment that required high degrees of control, it is characterized by a scientific/rational approach to decision making that emphasizes objective analysis (Lane, 2005; Hotovsky, 2006). Rational comprehensive planning has limited opportunity for citizens to influence planning priorities and action, it lends itself to top-down, expert driven approaches to decision making (Edge & McAllister, 2009).

The late 1950's to 1960's saw the rise of synoptic planning and the introduction of incrementalism, or what Flyvberg (2002) has called the knowledge/action theory of planning. This development in planning thought signaled a fundamental shift in the role of the planner and her relationship to the public (Lane, 2005). Planning was now understood to be both a functional and normative exercise and thus could include actors from outside the formal policy-making arena. While citizen participation was still restricted to providing comments on the goals of planning, the acknowledgment of a plurality of interests within this planning model was a significant development (Lane, 2005). With this development criticisms of the rational comprehensive paradigm in planning grew and new models of planning began to take shape. These new models did not add up to a single unifying planning model, rather a range of new approaches were suggested (Innes, 1995). Together however, they signaled an acknowledgment of the variety of societal interests that planning should consider, and a growing acceptance of the political dimensions of planning practice.

Included in these emerging approaches were advocacy, Marxist, bargaining, and communicative planning models. Lane (2005) suggests that all of these models emerged

from the social transformation planning tradition. A tradition based on the premise that “the state and other institutions need to be transformed in order that the conditions of others can be ameliorated” (Lane, 2005, p. 287). Within this climate emerged a diverse group of social activists concerned with the increasingly complex social realities of urban living (McAllister, 2009). Planning began to play a significantly different role within society in comparison to the technical emphasis of early planning models. No longer concerned with solely physical phenomena, planning practitioners and thinkers began to recognize and embrace the social and political aspects of the field.

Of these emerging approaches, one of the most influential trends is communicative planning. Some, such as Innes (1995), argue that communicative planning has the potential to bring forth a new planning paradigm. To plan according to this approach “is to communicate, argue, debate, and engage in discourse for the purpose of organizing attention to the possibilities of action” (Lane, 2005, p. 296). Based on the Habermasian understanding that knowledge is produced through a social process, communicative planning emphasizes citizen participation in the process, as the information and knowledge needed to make planning decisions cannot be pre-formulated but is created through exchanging perceptions and understandings (Healy, 1992; Innes, 1995). To achieve this communicative planning requires the involvement of a broad range of actors, and resists predefining the tasks which planning must address. The priorities and tasks are discovered and understood through the inter-communication process between the actors, stakeholders and participants (Healy, 1992; Lane, 2005). Where the rational comprehensive model attempted to ignore or separate planning from the political realm, communicative planning accepts the political context which planning operates within and infers that decisions must be made through “reflecting the interplay of communication, vested interests, politics, and negotiation” (Hotovsky, 2006, p. 393). Extending from this political understanding of the planning process is the way in which communicative planning defines the role of the planner. Where the rational comprehensive model sees the ideal planner as a rational professional operating at an arms length from politics, communicative planning accepts the professional as an interested participant and designer of the communication process (Innes, 1995). This fundamental shift in understanding

how planners should be and act has created an entirely different relationship between citizens and planners, both are considered necessary and important contributors to the planning process.

The rise of communicative planning illustrates the declining dominance of scientific-rationalism in planning thought. Contributing to the decline were reconsiderations of the nature of role and reason, and the introduction of new conceptions of democracy that promoted discursive processes and the notion of dialogic democracy (Lane, 2005). This is not to say that reason was abandoned, rather it signaled a shift in perspective in how reason is formed. Healey (1992) describes this process as "... far from giving up on reason as an ongoing principle for contemporary societies, we should shift perspective from an individualized, subject-oriented conception of reason, to reasoning formed within inter-subjective communication" (p. 147). In essence there was an erosion of earlier stances on who is capable of contributing to planning, and a horizontalization of the roles played by planning experts and citizens. Planning problems are now being defined by a recognition of the various factors at play, and the involvement of a broad range of actors to better understand the complexity of issues. However, while the importance of engaging citizens in the planning process may now be more widely accepted, there is less agreement upon how best to do so.

### *2.3.2 Critiques of Citizen Participation*

Housed within communicative planning are different camps that all emphasize the importance of discourse and the involvement of a range of actors for an assortment of purposes. Weaved into these different camps are critiques of planning practices still connected to the scientific-rationalism tradition, but also of conventional attempts to incorporate more citizen participation into the planning process. Despite how important we may feel citizen participation is, and the fact that citizen participation now plays a significant role within planning practice, the field suffers from what Innes and Booher (2004) have called a crisis of practice - made up of conflicts between individual and collective interests, democracy, and the reality that not all voices are heard. This gap



between theory and practice has spurred much of the criticism of citizen participation in contemporary planning.

One of the seminal critiques of the treatment of citizen participation in planning is Sherry Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation. Arnstein (1969) equated citizen participation to citizen power and boldly highlighted the tokenism embedded in many participatory processes. What Arnstein articulated is one of the classic concerns that have been raised about the ability of planning practice to fully realize the rhetoric surrounding citizen participation (Lasker & Guidry, 2009). In her focus on the power relationships in planning, Arnstein (1969) argued that "there is a critical difference between going through the empty ritual of participation and having the real power needed to affect the outcomes of the process" (p. 216). For Arnstein (1969), participation processes that did not incorporate some redistribution of power were empty, tokenistic activities that only lead to frustration. Since the days of Arnstein, the many different forms and frameworks of citizen participation that have evolved share a common promise, to "[give] people who have been excluded from decision making an influential voice about issues that affect their lives" (Lasker & Guidry, 2009, p. 6). It is the inability of participatory processes to fully live out this promise that has fueled criticisms such as Arnstein's.

As planning practice has moved away from rational-scientific traditions and incorporated more citizen participation, the critique of contemporary participation methods has deepened. When at first the argument was for including citizens and stakeholders at all, the focus now is on how citizens are being involved, which citizens are being involved, and how meaningful the processes are. In addition, amongst the growth of the field a multitude of understandings and methods for participation have formed. As Sanoff (2000) notes, participation can merely mean attendance at ongoing public hearings, or even donating money to a popular campaign. Sanoff offers a working definition of participation as "the collaboration of people pursuing objects that they themselves have defined" (Sanoff, 2000, p. x). The arrival of collaborative planning illustrates continued work on how to improve the incorporation of participation into the planning process and a response to some of the criticisms of participation. Innes and Booher (2004) argue that

“...legally required participation methods ... not only do not meet most basic goals for public participation, but they are also counterproductive, causing anger and mistrust”(p. 419). Innes and Booher and practitioners such as Wilcox argue that a relationship between citizens and the state based on collaboration will make participation processes more meaningful. Wilcox (1994) suggests that the citizen-state relationship should be based on collaborative consensus building, while Innes and Booher (2004) urge for processes that consist of a multi-way set of interactions between citizens and other players. Collaboration is presented as “a way to establish networks among the players in the system and to increase the distribution of knowledge among these players” (Innes & Booher, 2005, p. 5). Citizen participation is not a clean process, it inherently involves divergent opinions and interests. Those who argue for a more collaborative approach to planning claim it to be the model that best manages this diversity interests.

Despite efforts over the past 40 years to include marginalized and regular citizens in processes that affect their lives a gap between practice and theory still exists (Lasker & Guidry, 2009). Collaborative approaches to planning are attempting to bridge this gap through authentic dialogue and multi-way communication (Innes & Booher, 2004). Others are reframing participation as a right. Framing participation as a right is a progression from Arnstein’s argument for more citizen power, it connotes citizens as holders of rights with a stake in decisions, not merely as receivers of services (Eyben, 2003). If citizens are not able to participate in decisions how are they to insure that their other rights are being observed or to communicate that they are being denied? Both evolutions of approaches to citizen participation demonstrate an evolving understanding of how to best involve citizens in decision-making and to the promise of participation.

In the face of this often unfulfilled promise, there are some that question the effort and attention given to citizen participation. Hotovsky (2006) cites the concerns from practitioners that public participation can be counterproductive, slowing or hindering plan implementation and leading to NIMBYism (Not In My Back Yard). Other studies point to the need to better understand the actual effectiveness of participation in practice (Turnhout, Van Bommel, & Aarts, 2010). Part of what leads to frustration or disillusion

with participatory processes is that at their most basic level these processes are unpredictable. Turnhout, Van Bommel, and Aarts (2010) urge those who study and work in participatory planning to view both the intended and unintended consequences of these processes as an opportunity for the emergence of new ideas and perspectives. They implore that the important question is “not whether participation is exclusive, selective, and restricted, but how it is” (Turnhout, Van Bommel, & Aarts, 2010).

An underlying assumption of planning approaches that promote citizen participation is that citizens and stakeholders have valuable knowledge and resources to contribute to the planning process, and that to benefit from this knowledge planners must accept the risk of an unpredictable outcome (Brody, 2003). Accepting the unpredictability of participatory processes is connected to acknowledging that planning is a complex exercise that requires diverse knowledge to inform decision making. Communicative and collaborative forms of planning are centered around what is called social learning. Social learning can be understood as “...learning that occurs when people engage one another, sharing diverse perspectives and experiences to develop a common framework of understanding for joint action” (Schuster, Decker, & Prfeffer, 2003, p. 311). The emphasis of social learning processes is to facilitate the transferring of technical knowledge to participants from professionals and tapping the knowledge of participants, producing new knowledge through their interaction (Deyle & Slotterback, 2009). In addition to producing new knowledge, bringing together stakeholders, planning professionals and citizen participants can also result in communities “evolving their understanding of issues, relevant facts, problems, and opportunities, areas of agreement and disagreement” (Schuster, Decker, & Prfeffer, 2003, p.312). When successful, collaborative planning processes support the development of mutual understanding through social learning (Deyle & Slotterback, 2009). It is this potential that fuels proponents of robust citizen participation in planning, despite the challenges of reaching that potential.

In practice there are instances when knowledge and values are in contention. In response planners have designed innovative, stakeholder-based processes to build consensus and reach appropriate decisions (Innes, 1995, 187). These successes propel participatory

planning into developing more innovative and robust processes. It is integral to the designing of more sophisticated processes that come closer to fulfilling the promise of citizen participation to keep asking tough questions. Questions such as the one posed by Turnhout, Van Bommel, & Aarts (2010) which urges researchers and practitioners to ask themselves “not whether participation is exclusive, selective, and restricted, but how it is?” This question highlights a turn in the research and criticism of citizen participation in planning. The focus is now very much on the effectiveness of participation in practice, looking at all the consequences of participation (Turnhout, Van Bommel, & Aarts, 2010), and the influence of different voices in the process (Lasker & Guidry, 2009). Overall, the message from researchers is to aim to be proactive and flexible rather than reactive (Hotovsky, 2009). While there is much work to be done, there has been considerable growth in the field, and citizen participation is now an undisputed mainstay in planning practice. When the aim is to create sustainable communities the need to design effective and meaningful participation opportunities is heightened.

### *2.3.3 Participation and Sustainability*

The importance of citizen participation in the planning process intensifies when communities engage in sustainability planning. Community sustainability plans require residents to make significant lifestyle shifts in order to fully meet sustainability goals. These are plans that go beyond land use and resource allocation, they address daily activities such as how we get to work, buy food, the size of the homes we live in, how we recreate and so on. Sustainable communities are based upon a citizenry that is committed to and engaged in the day to day lifestyle shifts that move plans from policy into reality. The unique engagement requirements of sustainability planning have been recognized by the federal government. In their background paper the Planning for Sustainable Canadian Communities Roundtable (2005) state that “sustainability cannot be achieved, nor significant progress made toward it, without the support and involvement of the whole community” (p. 20). Sarkisson et al. (2009) go further and describe communities as the heart and hands of sustainability, commenting that “[e]ngagement helps communities articulate, develop and achieve their goals.” (6) Sustainability is not merely a technical exercise, it cannot be achieved solely by applying policy from above, it will take time and

the accumulation of many steps taken toward a lifestyle that is more in line with ecological realities. In light of this, communities are being directed to experiment with new forms of citizen participation that attempt to improve “the responsiveness of sustainability plans to community values, build partnerships, and help communities come to terms with change” (Marbek Resource Consultants, 2008, p. 113).

This policy direction aligns with discussions about sustainability on a theoretical level. Theorists such as Arias-Maldonado (2000) write about the difference between two models of sustainability and their respective relationships to democracy. Arias-Maldonado (2000) suggests that open or normative sustainability is necessarily linked to democracy, while closed or technical sustainability depends upon solutions that have a contingent relationship to democracy. Where technical sustainability depends upon solutions enforced upon a community, normative sustainability is founded within a deliberative conception of democracy that allows the achievement of sustainability to be locally conceived (Arias-Maldonado, 2000). This dialectic process can be challenging for communities, however, as noted by Ling, Hanna and Dale, it is up to communities to decide which methods and priorities are appropriate and useful within their own complex ecological setting (29, 2009). This fits within an understanding that there is no one definition of sustainability, and that the achievement of sustainability depends upon countless choices at various scales. For communities, the task is to determine what sustainability means in their context and establish a shared commitment to achieving it with the municipality, stakeholders, businesses, and citizens.

As previously discussed, sustainability is a nebulous idea that can be difficult for citizens to engage with. It is a topic that can be easy to agree with in principle but difficult to move from talk into action. Getting to sustainability requires making necessary sacrifices and developing new lifestyle patterns. Establishing a commitment to a place-based understanding of sustainability is essential to the implementation of plans designed to get communities there. Through his participatory practice Wilcox (1994) has observed that “people are most likely to be committed to carry something through if they have a stake in the idea” (p. 5). Participatory planning processes provide a forum for communities to

consider options and work through what should happen (Wilcox, 1994). By taking part in discussions about what sustainability means for their community citizens have the opportunity to not only broaden their understanding of the issues but begin to layout how they can contribute to achieving their community's understanding of sustainability. And not only do citizens have ideas and information to contribute to the discussion, they are ready for and demanding that the discussions to take place. Through their direct experience working with communities to draft sustainability plans Sarkissian et al. (2009) have found that "communities are able and eager to explore the ethical underpinnings of sustainability decisions" (p. 20).

All planning is a lived exercise; plans are not arbitrarily applied to a community but integrated overtime through a series of decision-making exercises and choices. Sustainability planning takes this to another level, where communities are pushed to toy with competing values and needs while considering the livelihood of their community today and in the future. In his writing on community Peter Block (2008) emphasizes the importance of ownership and belonging, he states that "to belong to a community is to act as a creator and co-owner of that community" (p. vi). When people have a sense of ownership of their community they are compelled to build and nurture it. In other words, when community members are involved in the process the responsibility of the outcome is spread to all involved, not just to the municipal planning department (Block, 2008). It is through the social process when communities come together to set their priorities, imagine their futures, and share their experience that, as stated by Innes (1995) "information [turns] into meaningful knowledge and knowledge into action" (p. 185). If communities in Alberta are to achieve sustainability there is much to gain from providing citizens the opportunity to participate in the process to help create meaningful knowledge and partake in the actions that bring their communities closer to their sustainability goals. In fact, it will be essential for citizens to be able to do so.

#### *2.3.4 Planning as an Iterative, Communicative, Design Activity*

As demonstrated through this review, the space for citizens to contribute to planning has grown substantially over the past 40 years. Today, citizen participation is not only

common practice, it has been institutionalized. In Alberta, The Municipal Government Act of Alberta (MGA) requires that all bylaw decisions have a public hearing, as a way to ensure citizens have an opportunity to provide their opinion and voice their concerns (Province of Alberta, 2010). All procedural details for public hearings and citizen participation in Albertan municipal affairs are laid out in Part 5 of the MGA. Aside from legally mandated processes, contemporary planning processes incorporate citizen participation in a variety of forms and intensities. The institutionalization of participation illustrates how citizen participation has been accepted on a large scale. While there may still be debate over what an appropriate amount of participation is, what forms it should take, and who should participate, citizens are participating in planning.

While planning admittedly depends upon technical expertise, the actual act of planning ads up to much more. It is a human exercise that contends with issues of trust and emotion, the complexities of communication, and the reality of power imbalances created by institutional and societal structures. In the words of John Forester (1989) “planners work on problems, with people. The problem-work is potentially technical, but it may often be more craft-like or routine; the people-work is always political, sometimes explicitly so, at other times not” (p. 4). This approach understands planning as a design exercise that is iterative, that responds to context, and that is based in communicative action.

Planning concerns itself with the future, pondering questions such as: What will be the physical form of our community in the future? What will be the trends and forces that will impact our community in the next 20 years? And how can we prepare ourselves for these impacts now? Demographic projections, expected economic growth, or the future cost of energy are but a few of the scenarios planners must necessarily engage with. Planners do not draft possible courses of action to these projections in isolation, they gather information from various sources, including stakeholders, and present the possibilities to decision-makers, and ultimately to the community at large. Feedback is provided either through acceptance or rejection by decision-makers, or through a series of citizen engagement processes, including legislated public hearings. The overall process resembles

a conversation, a practical but dynamic activity where thoughts are shared, responded to, and may or may not be incorporated into action.

Rarely do final plans exactly resemble the initial draft. The iterative planning process functions like a design exercise, where the final design intervention is a product of multiple stages of critique and feedback. Forester (1989) provides a definition of design that illustrates it as a “deeply social process of making sense together”, a process that is based in practical conversation (p. 119). It is through conversation that feedback is received and context is understood. Planning, particularly sustainability planning, is a process through which communities make sense of their future. The planning process is a forum through which communities make decisions about how they will adapt to and respond to emerging and growing ecological, economic and social pressures.

How communities make sense of their future depends upon their current context. Planners do not necessarily draft solutions, rather they respond to current contexts and foreseen trends. A strong reading of context is required to provide founded possible courses for action in response to that context. Part of understanding context, and making sense of it, is considering the relationships between the people involved in the process. Forester (1989) emphasizes the role emotions and relationships play in the drafting of design and planning solutions. He insists on recognizing that “[p]lanner[s], architect[s], and residents make sense together not only in a context but also in relation to one another, with fears and desires that are often ambiguous ... such emotions influence the meaning and character of design solutions.” These emotions are a result of the fact that “[a] designer’s work is not just a matter of technical problem-solving ... it is a matter of altering, respecting, acknowledging, and shaping people’s lived worlds as well” (Forester, 1989, p. 127). Taking the lived nature of plans into consideration, planners must engage with community residents in order to fully understand the contexts they are working within. Schneekloth and Shibley (1995) advocate for an enabling planning practice that focuses on place and people-in-place. An enabling practice strives to attend “thoughtfully to the people who inhabit and are affected by the particular place and who therefore need to be an integral part of the processes of change” (p. 5). This approach to planning practice



echoes Forester's communicative action, in that it recognizes the importance of communication in planning and that it is through social processes and conversation that information is shared.

Planners must not only read and respond to the context of their communities, they must clearly communicate the issues at hand and potential responses to them. How they communicate will affect what decisions are made and ultimately, which potentials for action are followed. Planners do not make decisions, they provide the technical expertise to inform decisions and carry out the decisions that are made by government. However, planners do control how they facilitate information gathering, provide public information, and design citizen engagement processes. Forester (1989) describes planning practice as communicative action, a practice whose success depends on intentions, interests, and an audience. According to Forester (1989):

What planners choose to say-and choose not to say-is politically crucial. If planners take the role of "informed technocrats," for example, they can focus attention on technical issues but obscure important political relationships. Or if planners present themselves as neutral mediators, they can encourage premature consensus-building when empowerment and organizing strategies, pre-negotiation strategies, are more appropriate. If planners adopt roles that ignore the political world, they will seriously misrepresent public problems and opportunities (p. 153).

How problems are presented and potentials for action described directly affects which solutions are adopted. This is particularly significant in sustainability planning, where the issues tend to be more abstract and the impacts not easily identified by citizens on a day-to-day basis.

The fact that communication is rarely a straightforward process further complicates planners' tasks. Carmona, Heath, Oc & Tiesdell (2003) note how communication can be adversely affected by 'gaps' in connection, for example the social and communication gaps between designers and users, and between professionals and laypersons. They stress that if

the desire is to make places for people “urban designers [and planners] need to narrow rather than exacerbate these gaps” (Carmona, Heath, Oc & Tiesdell, 2003, p. 482). A way to narrow these gaps is through satisfying the four criteria of mutual understanding: comprehensibility in interaction, sincerity, legitimacy, and accuracy of truth (Forester, 1989). If planners endeavour to meet these four criteria they will avoid the mistrust, anger, and distrust that comes with a lack of mutual understanding. This research aims to uncover how planners are engaging citizens in sustainability planning across Alberta. Are they enabling a shared understanding of the issues communities are currently managing and will face in the future? Or, are the words they choose and how they present creating gaps and leading to confusion and mistrust?

The work of Forester and others colours the current mood in planning, a mood that embraces complexity, strives to be flexible and responsive, and is increasingly inclusive. This mood is reflected in the institutionalization of citizen participation in Alberta and the deepening understanding of the political nature of planning practice. The current mood of planning is a product of many forces; the broadening scope of planning concern over the past decades, the burgeoning importance of sustainability on decision-making at a variety of scales, and the growing expectations for and actual involvement of citizens in planning and public decision-making processes. Contemporary planning can be described as an iterative process, which requires a deep understanding of context, and is made up of communicative acts. The communicative nature of planning is key to the understanding of planning that guides this research.

## **2.4 Planning, Participation, and Sustainability**

There are many interacting and evolving forces that are influencing planning practice in Alberta. Shifts in planning practice and concerns, the growing relevance of sustainability in all areas of public policy, and growing expectations for and actual involvement of citizens in planning processes have all impacted practice in Alberta. The interplay of these forces is the backdrop to this research and how they are being responded to is playing a large role in the emerging provincial story of sustainability. While these forces have followed individual paths to their current status, their development has not been in

isolation. There is considerable overlap between these forces, and to a large extent planning practice, sustainability, and citizen participation all operate on the same plane simultaneously. They are interdependent forces that together are not only contributing to current planning practice in Alberta, but to the futures of our communities. Sustainable communities are built upon a citizenry committed to and engaged in the day to day lifestyle shifts that move plans from policy to reality. To get to that reality Albertan communities will need to harness the maturing of planning practice, the growing influence of sustainability, and the expanding role of citizen participation in decision-making.

Planning provides communities with an opportunity to consider their future, offering the space to make considered choices about different possible actions. Sustainability planning opens up the conversation to link different actions and decisions together in an overarching look at how we live within the ecologies our communities. Conversations about sustainability are essentially reflections on how we live now and how we wish others to be able to live in the future. It is a conversation that requires thoughtful contemplation on how our lifestyle choices today impact the choices that will be available for future generations. Sustainability planning is a way to link these conversations to decisions about land use and the built environment of our communities. The aim of this research is to reveal the emerging stories of sustainability in communities across Alberta. How are they talking about sustainability? Who are they including in the conversation? What can be learnt from what they are doing?

## **Chapter 3: Policy Context For The Development Of Sustainability Planning In Alberta**

The previous chapter outlined the interrelated driving factors of trends in planning practice and theory, growing experiences with and expectations for citizen participation in decision-making, and the expanding global influence of sustainability. Added to this set of drivers is the local planning context in the province of Alberta, as illustrated in the framework of analysis guiding this research. This planning context is influenced by policies related to building sustainable communities of the provincial and federal governments. These policy directions offer some incentives for community sustainability action and policy development.

Chapter 3 will overview relevant federal and provincial policy to the development of sustainability planning in Alberta. A summary of related federal and provincial policy is followed by a discussion of the impact of the policies on Albertan communities, including reference to comments on participation in federal and provincial programs gathered through the environmental scan.

### **3.1 Sustainability Planning Policy Context**

#### *3.1.1 Federal Policy*

The federal government of Canada's relationship to sustainable development began in 1988 with the launch of the *National Round Table on the Environment and Economy*, which led to the creation of Canada's Green Plan (Plummer, 2006). Through the plan a national objective to "secure for current generations a safe and healthy environment, and a sound prosperous economy" (Plummer, 2006) was set. This initial goal highlights the tone of the federal government's take on sustainable development, a take that clearly sits within the expansionist framework discussed in Chapter 2, with a fundamentally link of environmental sustainability to continued economic growth.

In a 1995 amendment to the *Auditor General's Act* the federal government defined sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” It is a continually evolving concept based on the integration of social, economic and environmental concerns” (Government of Canada, 2006). Additionally, through the 1995 amendment Ministers of Federal Departments were tasked with writing sustainable development strategies (Plummer, 2006). The strategies are meant to “...outline the goals, objectives and commitments to be undertaken by a department to better incorporate sustainable development into department policies, programs and operations” (Government of Canada, 2006). What is of interest for this research is that through the drafting of the strategies the pursuit of sustainable communities was identified as a key area of action.

The federal government heightened their commitment to sustainable community planning through the *New Deal for Cities and Communities* (NDCC) in 2005. The cornerstone goal of the NDCC is “to achieve real, measurable progress toward the economic, social, environmental and cultural sustainability of Canada’s cities and communities” (Planning for Sustainable Canadian Communities Roundtable, 2005, p. 4). The 2005 federal budget that introduced the NDCC called attention to the need for long-term funding of sustainable community planning initiatives (Federation of Canadian Municipalities, 2008). The NDCC is made up of three commitments: providing municipalities with a share of gas tax revenues, renewing existing infrastructure programs as necessary, and increasing contributions to the Green Municipal Funds (Government of Canada, 2005).

The gas tax revenue sharing plan is a key pillar in the Government of Canada’s effort to support communities in their sustainable planning initiatives. \$5 billion was committed to municipalities over five years to support both infrastructure and operating projects. The agreements for funding require provinces and territories to ensure their municipalities develop an *Integrated Community Sustainability Plan* (ICSP). The intention of the requirement is to “accelerate the shift in local planning and decision-making toward a more long-term, coherent and participatory approach to achieve sustainable

communities” (Planning for Sustainable Canadian Communities Roundtable, 2005, p. 4). ICSPs are defined as:

a long-term plan, developed in consultation with community members, that provides direction for the community to realize sustainability objectives it has for the environmental, cultural, social and economic dimensions of its identity. (Planning for Sustainable Canadian Communities Roundtable, 2005, p.4)

Another significant commitment of the NDCC is increasing contributions to the *Green Municipal Fund* (GMF), which is administered by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities. Built from a Federal Government endowment of \$550 million, the GMF supports municipal initiatives “across Canada that benefit the environment, local economies and quality of life” (Federation of Canadian Municipalities, 2009). The fund provides support in five sectors of municipal activity: brown fields, energy, transportation, waste and water, alongside comprehensive resources for developing local capacity (Federation of Canadian Municipalities, 2009). More specifically, the fund provides financial support for the development of community sustainability plans, such as but not limited to ICSPs. Alberta provincial policy matches or at the very least mirrors this federal support, pushing communities to not only build a more sustainable future, but to plan for one.

### 3.1.2 Provincial Policy

Provinces and Territories, as outlined in section 92(8) of the Canadian Constitution, have exclusive jurisdiction over municipal affairs, and thus have a clear leadership role in discussing and implementing the goals of the NDCC and promoting sustainable communities. Currently the Government of Alberta is promoting three programs to promote sustainable community development. Specifically dealing with sustainability planning, the Alberta government has introduced the *Municipal Sustainability Initiative* (MSI), they also support the Municipal Sustainability Planning approach of the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association (AUMA). Less directly related, but still pertinent to sustainability planning, is the ongoing development of Alberta’s Land Use Framework. In

tandem with efforts at the municipal level, these programs signal a growing trend towards more sustainable community planning in Alberta.

The MSI was announced in 2007 as the Albertan contribution to the NDCC, and represents a 10-year funding commitment to provide significant long-term financial support for the enhancement of municipal sustainability. The fund has enabled communities such as Black Diamond, Canmore, and Cochrane to initiate and develop community sustainability plans and visions. Municipalities determine projects to be funded, and can include both capital and operational activities that meet general criteria set out by the program (Municipal Affairs Alberta, n.d.). Since 2007 over \$2 billion has been allocated to Albertan municipalities. This support has contributed to a surge in sustainability planning in Alberta.

The AUMA has also made significant contributions to promoting sustainable communities in Alberta. The AUMA has developed a Municipal Sustainability Planning (MSP) approach to provide guidance for the production or alignment of municipal plans and policies and a monitoring framework based upon five dimensions of community sustainability (social, cultural, economic, environmental, governance). While the MSP consists mostly of methodological advice (Federation of Canadian Municipalities, 2008), the AUMA has worked with many Albertan communities, particularly smaller ones (AUMA, n.d.). The organization offers capacity-building courses for municipal councils, administrators and community members in collaboration with the Natural Step (Federation of Canadian Municipalities, 2008). Both the MSI and the work of the AUMA operate within an overarching planning climate that is increasingly focusing on the long term. A major contributor to this planning climate is the ongoing development of the Land Use Framework and a renewed focus on regional planning in the province.

The Land Use Framework (LUF) was launched in December 2008 with the aim to improve land-use decision-making in Alberta and includes the development of seven regional land-use plans based on seven new land-use regions aligned with major watersheds. The LUF works congruently with the Alberta Land Stewardship Act (ALSA), which has

created the legal authority to implement the LUF, receiving Royal Assent on June 4, 2009. According to information bulletins from the Government of Alberta (2009), the LUF and the ALSA will help Alberta achieve a better balance between economic growth and the environmental and social values of the province. The major impact of the LUF is the resurgence of regional planning in Alberta, as implementation of the LUF is dependent upon the creation of seven regional land-use plans. While the focus of this research is on planning at the municipal level, the LUF has set a tone and focus in the province that emphasizes longer-term planning horizons, similar to the time lines of many community sustainability plans. In addition, the Government of Alberta clearly recognizes the essential role municipalities will play in achieving the goals of the LUF. In a 2007 speech Premier Ed Stelmach declared:

In these times of unprecedented growth, the importance of land use planning cannot be overstated. It's no secret that Alberta faces enormous challenges in managing growth pressures, as we work to address the demands that come with prosperity. Municipal governments are on the front lines of dealing with the historic levels of growth we're experiencing.

Currently two of the seven regional plans are being drafted. While the LUF has set a clear priority for better land use planning in the province, it is yet to be seen how successful the implementation of the framework will be.

Efforts and contributions from the federal and provincial governments have laid some of the ground work for Albertan communities to take steps towards building sustainable futures for their communities. This policy context along with a national dialogue on making NDCC goals a reality, have greased the difficult process of making those sustainable futures a reality. A significant part of that process is incorporating citizen consultation and participation in planning processes. Both the ICSP and MSP emphasize citizen participation as a necessary part of building sustainable communities. How citizen participation is designed and included in sustainability planning is a major focus of this research. However, it is also interesting to consider the impact of federal and provincial policy on the planning activities of Albertan communities. The policy push to incorporate



sustainability values and aims in municipal planning has been created through the various federal and provincial programs described above. But, when rubber hits the road municipalities need funding so they are able to invest the time and money that sustainability planning requires. The following section will overview the different types of funding that the environmental scan communities received for their sustainability planning efforts.

### **3.2 Impact of Federal and Provincial Policy on Albertan Communities**

Chapter 4 will provide a complete account of the environmental scan results. It was deemed appropriate to include comments gathered through the questionnaire regarding funding and participation in federal and provincial programs related to sustainability planning in this chapter.

More than half of the communities studied through the environmental scan were awarded some type of financial support for their sustainability planning activities. Suggesting that federal and provincial programs focused on supporting sustainable communities are working. However, drafting a community sustainability plan or ICSP is not necessarily an indication of a deep commitment to achieving sustainability goals. This shallow commitment is exemplified by some communities admitting to drafting an ICSP in order to qualify for gas tax money. There is a gap between the federal government's stated intentions of ICSPs and the depth of engagement at the community level. On the other hand, there are also examples of communities enabled through federal or provincial support to create innovative sustainability planning processes, and even with no funding, some communities felt compelled to incorporate a sustainability focus into their planning.

Table 3:1 and figure 3:1 lay out the different types of federal and provincial funding that the consulted communities received for their various sustainability planning initiatives. These source for this data were responses to the environmental scan questionnaire. Possible sources of funding cited by questionnaire respondents include the Federation of Canadian Municipalities' GMF, the federal Gas Tax program, the provincial MSI, support from Natural Resources Canada, support from the AUMA, other provincial programs

including the Municipal Sponsorship program. Some respondents did not clarify which programs their community participated in, and were classified as unspecified provincial funding in the results.

All together, thirteen of the communities received some kind of funding, five from federal programs, three from provincial, and five communities were supported by both levels of government. Six of the communities received no funding for their sustainable planning activities, and two respondents were unsure if they had received any support. The most common source of funding is the Green Municipal Fund, from which six communities were awarded some degree of financial support. Provincially, the Government of Alberta has primarily supported sustainability planning activities through their Municipal Sustainability Initiative. The extent of financial support provided to Albertan communities has clearly played a role in bolstering the development of sustainability planning in the province, as more than half of all communities consulted received some kind of support. If this support is leading to more sustainable communities is less clear.

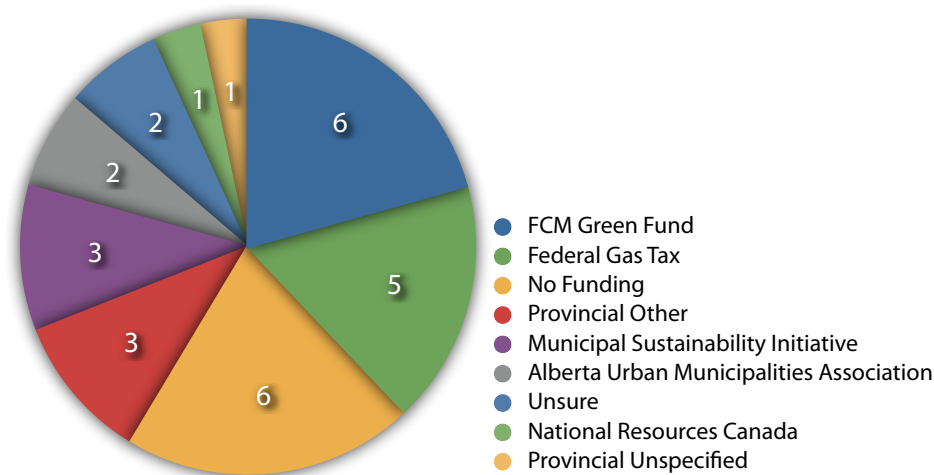


Figure 3:1 Environmental Scan Communities' Participation in Federal & Provincial Funding Programs

Communities	Federal Funding Programs			Provincial Funding Programs				None	Unsure
	FCM	Gas Tax	NRC	MSI	AUMA	Prov. Other	Prov. Unspecified		
Airdrie	•	•							
Cold Lake								•	
Red Deer County							•		
Strathcona County	•		•						
Sylvan Lake				•					
Canmore						•			
Stony Plain								•	
Beaumont								•	
Brooks		•			•				
Chestemere									•
Grande Prairie								•	
Clearwater County		•							
Fort Saskatchewan	•								
High River	•				•				
Leduc County	•					•			
MD of Foothills		•		•					
Mountain View County								•	
Spruce Grove		•							
St. Albert								•	
Strathmore									•
Cochrane	•			•		•			

Table 3:1 Environmental Scan Communities' Participation in Federal & Provincial Funding Programs

The number of Albertan communities that have benefitted from the federal Municipal Green Fund and the provincial Municipal Sustainability Initiative are a clear indication that government programs are effectively promoting sustainability planning efforts. However, having a plan on paper does not a sustainable community make. Moreover, not all sustainability plans hold equal weight in their comprehensiveness nor their impact on municipal decision making. In some cases communities have specifically drafted an ICSP simply to qualify for gas tax money. Respondents to the environmental scan from Brooks, the Municipal District of Foothills, and Mountain View County, stated that they went through the ICSP process in order to qualify for Gas Tax money from the federal government. This raises some concerns 1) whether the plans are in any way effective at accomplishing the intended goals of ICSPs, particularly in regards to citizen participation and promotion of community commitment to sustainability, and 2) if the municipalities themselves are actually committed to the tenants of sustainability, as in some cases ICSPs were drafted by pulling from existing planning and policy documents.

Concerns regarding the degree of citizen participation in the drafting of ICSPs is linked to the effectiveness of ICSPs supporting community commitment to sustainability. Both the community of Brooks and Clearwater County stated that their ICSPs processes did not incorporate much citizen participation, if any at all. It is important to note however, that in some instances communities partook in the ICSP process with intentions to engage in more robust sustainability planning at a latter date. Such was the case with Brooks, where an ICSP was completed prior to finishing the AUMA process for drafting a Municipal Sustainability Plan. Or Clearwater County, where an ICSP was completed in 2008 before embarking on a two-year review of their Municipal Development Plan. The availability of Gas Tax money through completing an ICSP does seem to be pushing communities to engage in sustainability planning, though completion of the ICSP process does not always meet the tenants of sustainability it claims to promote. In fact, some communities seem to be accomplishing more on the sustainability front through alternate planning paths, such as with in-depth Municipal Development Plan reviews with a strong sustainability focus.

While in some instances government policy is encouraging the development of sustainability planning in Alberta, there is most definitely a gap between the aims and intentions of policy and the way planning processes play out on the ground. In theory, integrated sustainability planning (ICSPs) is meant to engage and challenge communities to respond to the complex ecological setting within which they grow and thrive (Ling, Hanna, & Dale, 2009, p. 229). To accomplish this task integrated planning has a strong focus on citizen participation. The long term perspective that is an essential and distinguishing feature of integrated planning according to Ling, Hanna and Dale (2009), requires community engagement to strengthen the potential for successful implementation. As the findings in Brooks and Clearwater County demonstrate, this component of the ICSP process is often missing in the application of integrated planning. Is this then reducing the potential for successful implementation of ICSPs in Alberta?

The gaps between theory and practice surrounding ICSPs in Albertan communities brings to mind Gunder's (2006) critiques of planning's treatment of sustainable development. Gunder (2006) observes that "the definition of sustainability can be and often has been deployed selectively by planners or politicians ... rather than encouraging opportunities for social change ... the discourse of sustainable development often is deployed simply to further the interests of the entrepreneurial supportive state and its institutions" (p. 209). While federal and provincial support have definitely enabled sustainable community planning to develop in Alberta, there is clearly much room for growth so that process intentions begin to meet planning realities.

Despite this gap, there are also Albertan examples of innovative planning projects getting off the ground with federal government support. Perhaps the best example of this is Strathcona County's involvement in the SUNLiving Process pilot project. With financial support from the National Resources Canada (NRC) and the GMF, Strathcona County's Emerald Hills Project was the first community to apply the SUNLiving (Sustainable Urban Living) process. SUNLiving was developed by Will Mayhew of Howell-Mayhew Engineering and Elisa Campbell of the University of British Columbia Design Centre for Sustainability. As a decision-making tool SUNLiving emphasizes the development of

partnerships, thorough stakeholder analysis early on, and equal weight given to sustainable development and sustainable living (Mayhew & Campbell, 2008). The Emerald Hills project is a new urban development in Strathcona County, where the design attempted to implement sustainability principles based on a common understanding developed by all stakeholders. Use of the SUNLiving process enabled Strathcona County to form unique relationships with developers and stakeholders and promote deep collaboration that may not have been possible without the financial backing from NRC. For example, the county was able to hire a sustainability coordinator for the project (Will Mayhew), who was responsible for coordinating the overall process and communicating between stakeholders to keep the process on track. Strathcona County's successful experience with SUNLiving has led them to apply it to a second development project, illustrating what can happen when upper levels of government support innovative sustainable planning initiatives at the municipal level. This example will be explored in more detail as one of the case studies in Chapter 5.

In some instances, communities have engaged in sustainability planning on their own initiative, neither seeking nor receiving support from either upper levels of government. Of the communities consulted for the environmental scan six communities received no funding from either the provincial or federal government. This suggests 1) that communities understand the necessity of taking a more integrated approach to land use planning and management, and 2) that a focus on sustainability is now a dominant approach to community planning. Edge and McAllister (2009) note that with a growing awareness of complexity there has been "a wide-ranging re-conceptualization about how best to manage and plan for a sustainable environment" (p. 280). The fact that Albertan communities are engaging in sustainability planning on their own accord suggests that this re-conceptualization is taking place within the province. The term sustainability is now common in most planning documents. Gunder (2006) notes, albeit somewhat tongue in cheek, that despite the lack of concrete terms for the operationalizing of sustainability "...no planning or policy document can omit the concept these days, because sustainability, or 'sustainable development' is declared as the ultimate planning goal" (p. 211). While there may be some truth to Gunder's observation, that Albertan communities

are engaging in the concept when planning for their futures provides hope that they are re-conceptualizing how best to manage their environments. That some communities do so without any outside funding only increases the case for an optimistic view for the future of Albertan communities.

### **3.3 Concluding Comments of the Albertan Sustainability Planning Context**

Many Albertan communities have benefited financially from federal and/or provincial sustainable development policies. Some of the communities consulted have checked the necessary boxes in order to receive gas tax or funds, while other communities have been able to design innovative and effective processes in part from financial support through federal programs and ministries. The significance of these findings is that they show how the development of sustainability planning in Alberta does require support from upper levels of government. While it was not asked if communities would have engaged in sustainable planning without any possible financial support, the fact that more than half did receive some sort of funds suggests that they may not have. That said, the federal government's requirement for communities to have an ICSP does not seem to be entirely effective in producing robust, participatory planning processes. Strathcona County's success with the SUNLiving process, supported by both NRC and the GMF, does illustrate how financial support that is responsive to innovation at the municipal level may be a more effective path for promoting the development of sustainable communities in Alberta.

## Chapter 4: Environmental Scan Of Sustainability Planning In Alberta

### 4.1 Rational for the Environmental Scan

In Alberta professional and academic attention to citizen participation is occurring in tandem with government support for sustainability planning initiatives. In this context, many communities have had the opportunity to develop a range of sustainability plans. Despite this activity, it is unclear to what extent the planning processes have been participatory and how citizen engagement has shaped the completed sustainability plans. While there is a trend towards sustainability planning, the sum of different activities and approaches and their impact on planning practice in Alberta has yet to be fleshed out. To better gauge both the development of sustainability planning in Alberta and the degree to which these process have been participatory an environmental scan of small-medium sized communities was conducted. This chapter will focus on the results of the environmental scan, providing a description and analysis of the responses to the questionnaire distributed to communities.

The primary research centered on the experiences with sustainability planning of twenty-one geographically dispersed communities in Alberta, representative in terms of municipal type, size and diversity of approaches. Municipal planning professionals were asked about the status of sustainability planning in their communities, what types of sustainable planning they have engaged in, if citizen participation was a stated goal of the planning process, what participation methodologies were employed, and some of the major challenges they faced incorporating citizen participation. Responses to the questionnaire demonstrate that planners and city management are committed to effective citizen participation in plan making and implementation, but are finding it difficult to make their intentions a reality. Moreover, the results illustrate that a patchwork of approaches has emerged across Alberta, as municipalities are adapting a range of sustainable planning processes to make them work in their specific contexts. These place-based approaches are shaping a trajectory towards more participatory planning focused



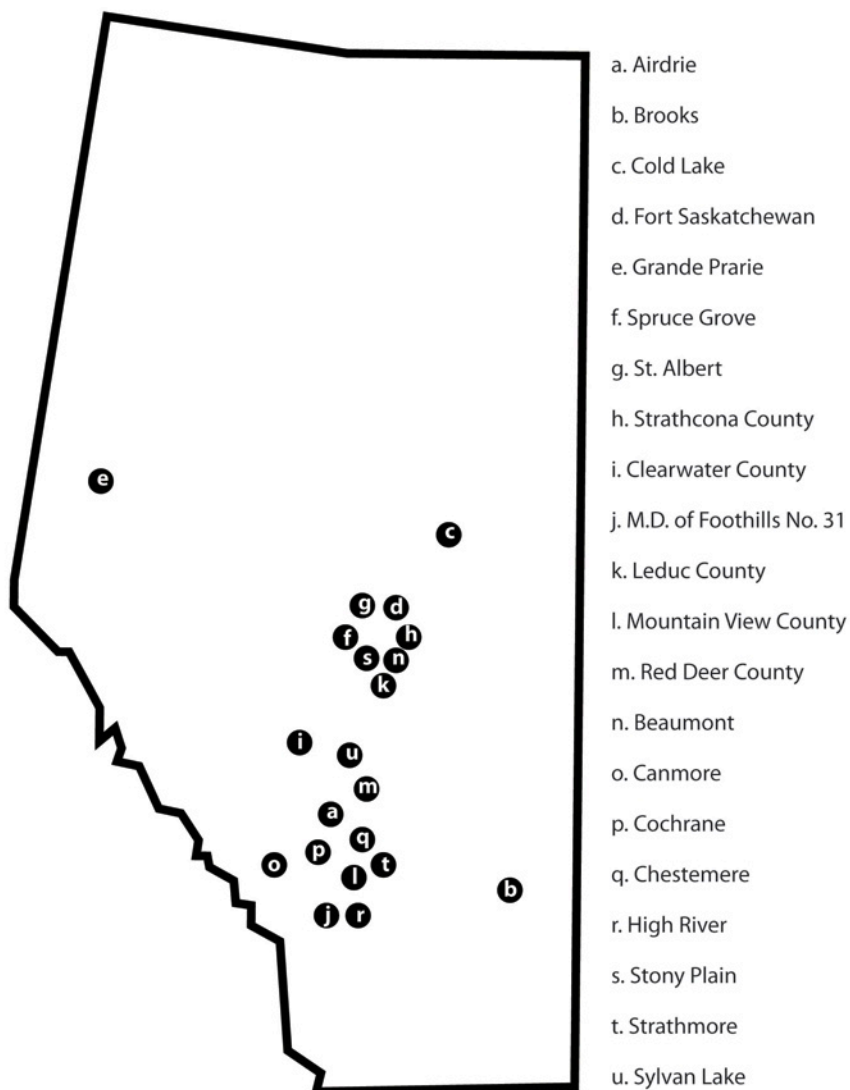
on strategies and investment priorities vital for the long-term future of Albertan communities.

This chapter will outline the results of the environmental scan explaining how the sample of communities were chosen, a description of the communities that were consulted, and an analysis of the results gathered through a questionnaire. The results will be presented in two domains: 1)an outline of the different types of sustainability planning employed by the consulted communities; 2)an account of the level of citizen participation during the planning processes.

#### **4.1 Community Sampling and Description**

To answer the research question an environmental scan of the sustainability planning activities of small to mid-sized communities in Alberta with populations between 10 - 80 000 people was conducted. This range of population was chosen because it allowed for a representation of different municipal types, geographic variety, and a range of median household income levels across the province. Additionally, the planning activities of the target communities are at a scale that is more approachable than those in Alberta's major cities of Edmonton and Calgary. For the purpose of this research it was easier to get in contact with professional planners and participants, and more appropriate to compare the sustainability planning experiences between communities within the chosen population range than it would have been to also include major cities. Many of these communities also share a unique relationship to their environments with a mix of a resource based economic history and a high value of outdoor recreation. This community narrative places the municipalities in a context where citizens have a deep commitment to the environment that must be balanced with need for community economic development and resiliency.

To conduct the scan a questionnaire was developed and distributed to the planning departments of 40 communities during the Spring of 2010 with responses submitted into the Fall of 2010. Contact information for planning departments or applicable municipal work units were found through municipal websites or through phoning municipal



information

lines. The ideal contacts were planning and development managers or planners who worked directly on the sustainability planning projects. The majority of respondents fit within these two categories, other respondents were long range planning managers, sustainable development interns, communication officers, assistant county managers, community environment coordinators, development officers, and business strategy team leaders. Responses to the questionnaire were either sent in over email or gathered through a phone interview. All those who gave responses did so from a professional position. Of

the 40 Albertan communities that fit within the chosen population range, responses were gathered from 21 communities, a response rate of 52.5%.

Figure 4:1 shows the location of the communities that took part in the environmental scan. While the majority of them are located within the Calgary-Edmonton Corridor, there was some representation from Northern Alberta and the deep southern areas of the province. It should be noted that a large percentage of the Alberta population lives within the Calgary-Edmonton corridor, hence the high representation of communities from this area of the province. All Albertan communities with a population ranging from 10 000 - 80 000 make up 23.18% of the total provincial population, the responding communities represent 13.81% of the Alberta population.

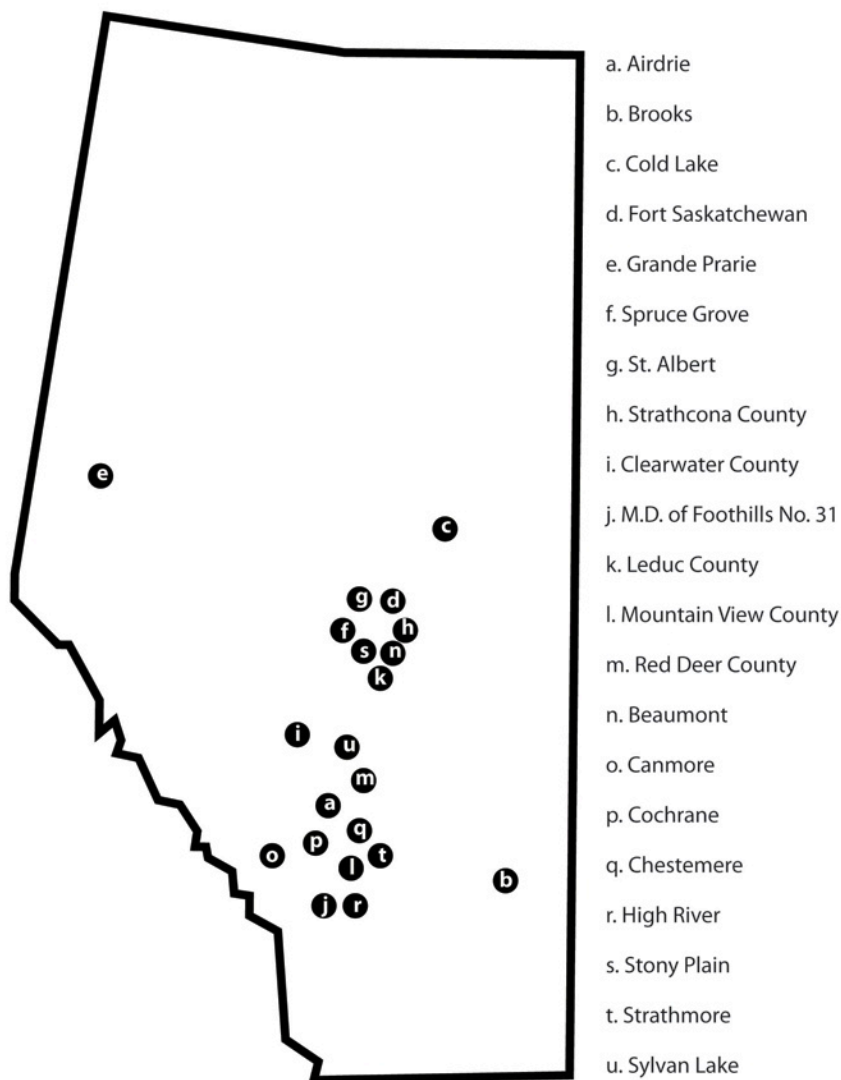


Figure 4:1 The communities that responded to the Environmental Scan questionnaire

The responding communities also represent four of the different types of municipalities found across Alberta. As shown in Table 4:1 seven cities responded to the questionnaire, five Municipal Districts, one specialized municipality, and eight towns. No villages, summer villages, improvement districts, special areas, or Metis settlements and First Nations reserves participated. Consulting a variety of municipal types allowed for the most representative collection of experiences with sustainability planning in the province as possible.

Table 4:1 also lays out demographic information for the responding communities. Population numbers are taken from the 2010 Official Population List (Government of

Alberta, 2010), and income and education information was gathered from the 2006 federal census (Statistics Canada, 2007). Education refers to percentage of population 15 years and over with a university certificate, diploma, or degree, and C-E Corridor refers to the Calgary Edmonton Corridor. The median income levels of all private households in the environmental scan communities are higher compared to provincial and national numbers. The national median income from the 2006 census was \$53 634, and for Alberta \$63 988. The environmental scan communities are between \$5 366 - \$46 298 grater than the national median household income. Amongst the responding communities, there is a range from 5.3% to 30.5% of the population 15 years and over with a university certificate, diploma, or degree. In comparison the national percentage is 17.9%, and provincially it is 17.2%.

Communities	Population	Location	Med. Income	Education
<b>Cities</b>				
Airdrie	39 822	C-E Corridor	78 097	17.2
Brooks	13 581	South	64 606	7.7
Cold Lake	13 924	North	75 900	11.6
Fort Saskatchewan	18 653	North	76 975	10.1
Grand Prairie	50 227	North	77 071	10.6
Spruce Grove	24 646	C-E Corridor	76 758	10.3
St. Albert	60 138	C-E Corridor	88 854	20.6
<b>Specialized Municipalities</b>				
Strathcona County	87 998	C-E Corridor	90 746	17.6
<i>urban service area</i>	61 660			
<i>rural service area</i>	26 338			
<b>Municipal Districts</b>				
Clearwater	11 826	South	60 084	5.3
M.D. of Forestburg	19 736	South	90 890	18.7
Leduc County	13 260	C-E Corridor	66 036	8.9
Mountain View	12 570	C-E Corridor	59 000	10.2
Red Deer	19 108	C-E Corridor	68 324	8.5
<b>Towns</b>				
Beaumont	12 586	C-E Corridor	98 532	14.2
Canmore	12 226	South	69 020	30.5
Chestermere	14 285	South	99 932	14.7
Cochrane	15 424	South	83 003	19.3
High River	11 783	South	61 528	10.7
Stony Plain	14 177	C-E Corridor	69 164	8.8
Strathmore	12 139	South	66 473	9.3
Sylvan Lake	11 115	C-E Corridor	77 102	7.2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>489 224</b>			

Table 4:1 Community Profiles

The unique characteristics and profiles of Alberta's small - medium sized communities contribute much to the province's development of sustainability planning. Their particular political cultures and connection to nature were mentioned by many questionnaire respondents as influencing not only community willingness to engage with sustainability, but the nature of the participatory aspects of the planning processes.

The 21 responding communities to the environmental scan provide a brief but representative look into the state of participatory sustainability planning in Alberta. The most telling finding is that they are doing stuff, they are engaging with a variety of approaches to sustainability planning and exercising a range of engagement methods. Work that has, as addressed earlier, some support from the provincial and federal government, but to a large extent has been the result of municipal initiative. The following section will outline the two domains of the environmental scan results, approaches to sustainability planning and the degrees of citizen participation, in more detail.

## **4.2 Environmental Scan Results**

The following section will outline the results gathered through the environmental scan questionnaire. Respondents were asked to comment on the status of sustainability planning in their community, which approaches were taken, and the degree to which the process was participatory. The environmental scan results are organized in two domains: 1) Approaches and Status of Sustainability Planning, and 2) Degree of Citizen Participation.

### *4.2.1 Approaches to and Status of Sustainability Planning*

Albertan communities have a suite of sustainable community planning processes, formats, and methodologies to choose from. The results gathered through the environmental scan suggest an emerging typology of sustainability planning in Alberta. While there is great variety amongst sustainability planning approaches in Alberta, all of them in some way deal with, consider, or address the long-term vitality of communities broadly considering economic, environmental, and social issues. Below is an account of the emerging typologies and status of sustainability planning within the environmental scan

communities. Points for consideration as the practice of sustainability planning in Alberta matures are presented after the second domain of results.

### Typology of Sustainability Planning in Alberta

Across Alberta communities have engaged in a variety of sustainability planning types. The depth and breadth of focus, level of citizen participation, and connection to municipal legislation varies between the different approaches. However, all types of sustainability planning take a long-term approach to community planning, in some way attempt to link municipal activities under a more holistic framework, and recognize the importance of cultivating sustainable lifestyles amongst community members. Through the analysis of the data gathered from the environmental scan seven types of approaches to sustainability planning in Alberta emerged: community visions, sustainability plans, integrated plans (ICSPs), sustainability frameworks, municipal development plan reviews, and neighbourhood design strategies. The typologies were delineated according to qualitative accounts of the scale and focus of the plan, illustrated in Figure 4:3. The planning scales vary from community wide to the neighbourhood level, and the plan focus runs the spectrum from project or program specific such as a green building policy for new municipal buildings, to higher level guiding documents that are non statutory such as community visions. The intent was not to evaluate which process is best, but to identify what exactly communities are doing, and what the different approaches entail. In essence, how do the approaches to sustainability planning fit into the equation?



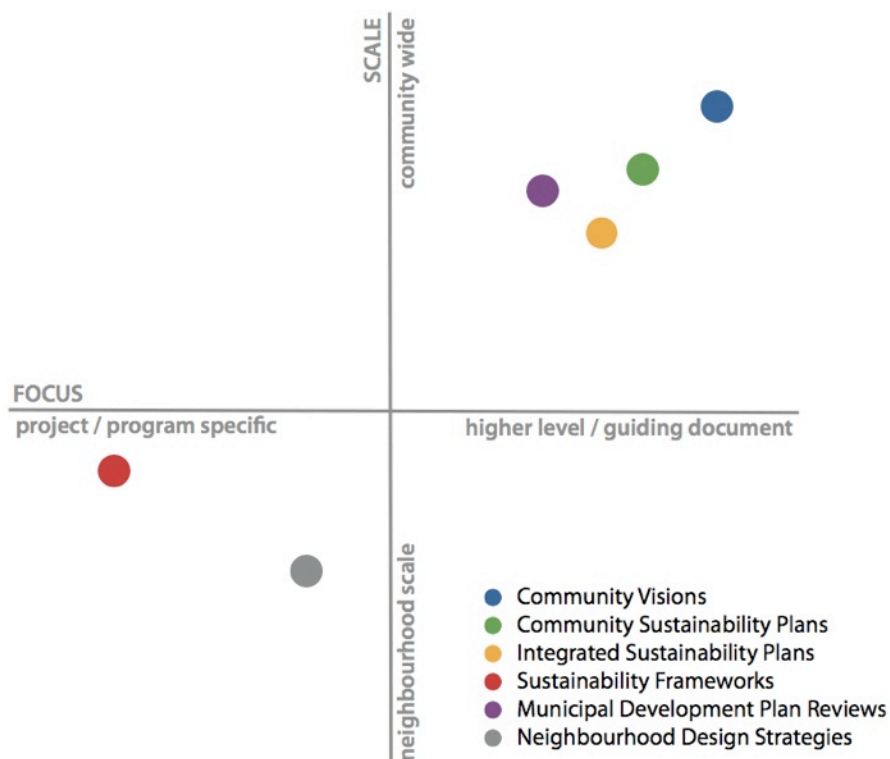


Figure 4:2 Typology of Sustainability Planning Approaches Delineated According to Focus & Scale

### Community Visions

Community visions are overarching documents that serve to guide municipal decision making. They are usually non-statutory and are typically made up of a mission statement, guiding phrase, or a series of statements that serve to provide high level direction and inspiration to decision and policy makers. Often the creation of a community vision includes extensive public consultation through a series of citizen engagement avenues and events. The impact of community visions can be difficult to gauge, as they are not necessarily implemented through strictly identifiable policies. The intent is not for community visions to be a hard target type policy, instead they operate as a trail marker to keep communities on track with their overarching goals for their future development. The scale of this sustainability plan typology is community wide with the focus of a high level document.

### Community Sustainability Plans

Community sustainability plans have a number of different names, but generally speaking this planning approach operates at the community wide scale and provides more detailed high level direction than community visions. Communities may develop a Community Sustainability Plan, a Municipal Sustainability Plan, a Sustainability Plan, or name the plan after their community such as the Cochrane Sustainability Plan. Regardless of what the plan is called, sustainability plans tend to be an expanded version of a community mission or vision, consisting of a number of strategies or pathways each with associated targets. The strategies or pathways tend to be formulated along the Three E's approach to sustainability: environment, economy, and equality (Saha & Paterson, 2008). Recognizing the uniqueness of sustainability planning and the importance of cultivating wide spread community commitment, sustainability plans typically incorporate extensive citizen engagement processes.

### Integrated Sustainability Plans

In Canada the most common form of integrated plans are Integrated Community Sustainability Plans. This is the approach to sustainability planning promoted by the federal government through their gas tax program, which comes with a specific methodology and set of components that communities can follow. The aim behind integrated planning is to bring together environmental, economic, and social considerations into all municipal decision making and policy formation (Ling & Hanna, 2009). Their scale is also community wide, and the focus of the plans can be more specific than the aforementioned approaches, but still function as a guiding document. While the theory behind integrated planning emphasizes community involvement, in practice some communities leave out this aspect of the planning process. Additionally, the intent behind integrated sustainability plans is very similar to the sustainability plans described above, but their direct tie to federal policy and connection to funding programs separate them from other planning types.

### Sustainability Frameworks

Community visions, community sustainability plans and integrated sustainability plans all focus on the wider community, with attention paid to actions at a variety of scales that lead to more sustainable lifestyles. Sustainability frameworks differ in their unit of focus, they tend to look at municipal corporations themselves, and are often internal documents used to guide municipal management and operations. Similar to the first three approaches, sustainability frameworks are usually built upon the Three E's approach, attempting to bridge municipal departments and operations so that environmental, economic, and social considerations are incorporated from the beginning. This is often done through assuring that representatives of the different municipal departments associated with each of the three pillars are included in the conversation. This attempt to harmonize municipal activities under a more holistic framework is an enabler for the implementation of other sustainability planning approaches that a community may engage in simultaneously to framework development or implementation.

### Municipal Development Plan Reviews

All communities in Alberta with a population of 3500 or more are required under the *Municipal Government Act* to have a Municipal Development Plan (MDP) and associated Municipal By-Law (Province of Alberta, 2000). Some communities are taking the opportunity through the MDP review process to insert a sustainability focus into their long term planning and decision making. MDP Reviews apply community wide and while linked to Municipal By-Laws, are still a guiding document. MDP reviews often incorporate more heavy community consultation than other planning activities. The environmental scan results also showed that communities who frame their review under sustainability seem to have an even more intensive citizen participation processes, reflecting the importance of fostering sustainable lifestyles within sustainability planning. This approach to sustainability planning is a relatively new trend in Alberta. The environmental scan found that many of the sustainability focused MDP reviews have taken place within the last five years.

### Neighbourhood Design Strategies

The sustainability planning types described thus far apply community-wide. Neighbourhood design strategies, as the name suggests, apply at the neighbourhood scale, focusing on urban design strategies that incorporate green building techniques and urban design gestures that foster more compact, walkable, mixed communities. However, while the implementation of the strategies happens on a case by case basis, the strategy itself can be applied across the municipality. Typically neighbourhood design strategies are used for the development of new residential communities, but there is potential for them to be applied to area redevelopment, and brownfield development. In comparison to the other types of approaches, neighbourhood design strategies have a more project specific focus.

In addition to the sustainability planning typologies listed above, some of the environmental scan communities have engaged in process that fall outside the delineated approaches. In some cases the municipal council has directed planning and policy making to incorporate sustainability in general, or the community has drafted a number of separate specific policies or initiatives, such as a green building initiative, that have not yet been brought together under a single approach or strategy. In other cases the participant who responded to the environmental scan questionnaire did not specify what particular approach to sustainability planning their community has taken, but indicated that in general the community is trying to incorporate sustainability considerations into their planning and decision making. Together, these less coordinated initiatives along with the six types of sustainability planning identified through the environmental scan indicate that this area of planning is experiencing growth in Alberta. Further, the results of the environmental scan suggest Alberta is on a clear trajectory towards more long term planning aimed at fostering sustainable lifestyles.

### Prevalence of Sustainability Plan Typologies

Most of the plans looked at in the environmental scan have been adopted, and are now in the early stages of implementation. Only a single sustainability planning process was

abandoned, the Canmore Sustainability Plan, due to a legal issue raised by the developer of Three Sisters Mountain Village. The year of completion of the plans is noteworthy, as all of these processes have taken place within the past six years, signaling that Sustainability planning is clearly still a young area of practice in Alberta. Table 4:2 provides a summary of the status and age of the different plans, and Figure 4:4 the prevalence of each of the different types of sustainability planning. It is important to note that some communities have engaged in more than one sustainability planning type. Sometimes this has happened simultaneously, sometimes one approach was followed as a lead up to the next, and sometimes communities have initiated one approach after a successful experience with a previous one. The most prevalent types of sustainability planning employed by responding communities are Community Sustainability Plans and Municipal Development Plan Reviews with a sustainability focus. The prevalence of these types suggests that communities are interested in setting a tone for their planning and development that is more holistic and long term, but are not as prepared to translate this tone into direct action.

<b>Communities</b>	<b>Plan Status</b>	<b>Year of Completion</b>	<b>Plan Type</b>
Airdrie	adopted	2010	Integrated, MDP
Brooks	adopted	2008	Sustainability Plan, Integrated
Cold Lake	adopted	2007	MDP
Fort Saskatchewan	adopted	2009	Sustainability Plan, MDP
Grand Prairie	adopted	2010	MDP
Spruce Grove	adopted	2008, 2010	Sustainability Plan, MDP
St. Albert	adopted & in process	2009	Integrated, MDP
Strathcona County	adopted & in process	2007, 2009	Frameworks, Neighbourhood Design
Clearwater County	adopted	2008, 2010	Integrated, MDP
M.D. of Foothills No. 31	adopted	2010	Integrated, MDP
Leduc County	adopted	2010	Sustainability Plan
Mountain View County	in process	-	Sustainability Plan, Other
Red Deer County	adopted	2009	Sustainability Plan
Beaumont	adopted & in process	2010	Sustainability Plan, Other
Canmore	adopted & abandoned	2006	Vision, Sustainability Plan, Frameworks, Other
Chestermere	adopted	2009	MDP
Cochrane	adopted	2008	Sustainability Plan
High River	adopted	2010	Sustainability Plan, MDP
Stony Plain	adopted	2007	Sustainability Plan, Other
Strathmore	adopted & in process	2009	Sustainability Plan, MDP
Sylvan Lake	adopted	2010	Sustainability Plan

Table 4:2 Sustainability Plan Status and Year of Completion

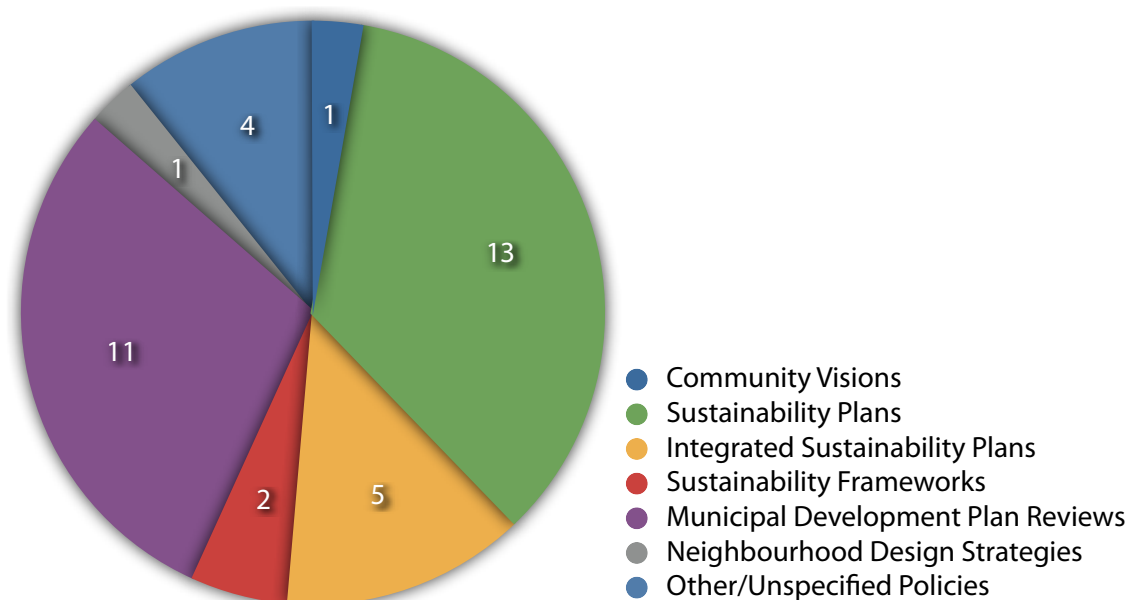


Figure 4:3 Prevalence of Sustainability Plan Types

#### 4.2.2 Degree of Citizen Participation in Sustainability Planning

The second domain of results from the environmental scan show that there is overwhelming intent to include citizen participation in sustainability planning processes in Alberta. The results also show that while participation was described by respondents as fairly prevalent prior to engaging in sustainability planning, for some communities this was the first time they had such an extensive citizen engagement focus. This section will explore the efforts of the environmental scan communities to incorporate citizen participation in their planning processes by outlining their participation goals and aims, the methods they utilized, and points for consideration as citizen participation becomes a cornerstone of planning practice in Alberta.

##### Participation Goals, Aims, and Prevalence

To unpack the degree of citizen participation in the planning processes under study it was important to first identify if the communities of the environmental scan intended to include participation. Communities were asked if they had an expressed citizen participation aim or goal, the specificity of that goal, and if they conducted an evaluation at the completion of the process to determine if their intention was fulfilled. In addition,

communities were also asked to comment on the prevalence of citizen participation prior to their sustainability planning initiatives.

All of the communities that responded to the environmental scan questionnaire declared an expressed intent to include citizen participation in their sustainability planning processes. As illustrated in Figure 4:5, of the twenty-one communities considered nineteen clearly stated that participation was declared a key part of the process, two of the communities had a more measured statement. These communities aimed to include citizen participation to some degree but it was not a major tenant of their planning activities.

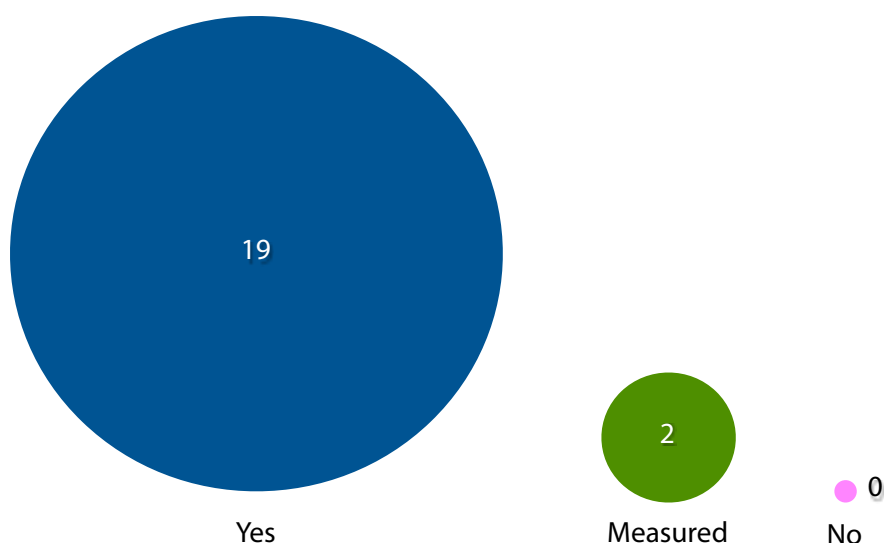


Figure 4:4 Participation Goal Expressed

Figure 4:6 shows that the findings are reversed in regards to the specificity of the participation goal or aim. When asked if the municipality had a specific aim in regards to what they wanted to accomplish with their citizen participation efforts only two communities indicated that they did. While nineteen of the communities were committed to incorporating citizen participation into the process they were less specific in regards to what specifically they wanted to achieve through participation. There was some confusion



with this question during the data collection, many respondents considered specific goals or aims to only included numerical aims i.e.) a minimum number of participants. The motivation for including this question in the questionnaire was to uncover to what degree communities considered and communicated what they hoped to accomplish through citizen participation, and if they designed participation processes around their expressed aim. For example, did the municipalities think through the type of feedback they wanted to gather (site/issue specific, comments on the general direction for the community etc.) and choose the appropriate methods to garner such feedback? The gathered results suggest that while Albertan communities are dedicated to incorporating citizen participation into sustainability planning, there is room for improving the intentionality of process design. Without clear aims or direction it is difficult to provide participation mechanisms that best serve planners and citizens.

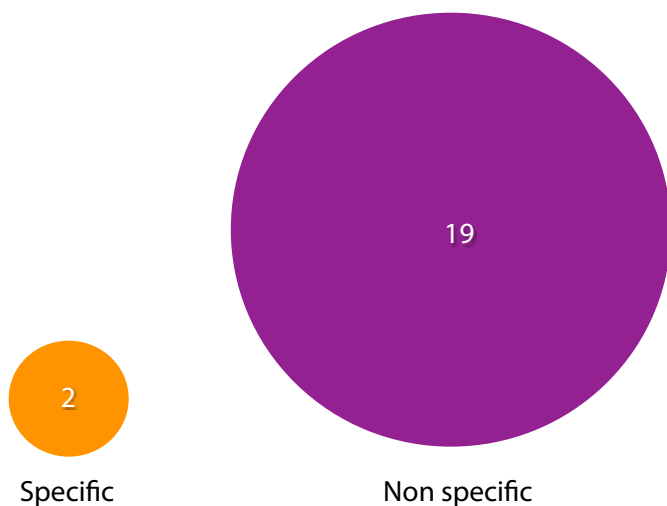


Figure 4:5 Specificity of Participation Goal

An encouraging and interesting finding from the environmental scan is the prevalence of citizen participation cited by respondents. Sixteen of the municipalities expressed that citizen participation is either already prevalent in planning processes in their communities or deemed important by elected decision-makers, see Figure 4:7. For some

communities their experience with sustainability planning was the first time they had committed to incorporating citizen participation throughout the planning process or included it to such an extent. This finding points to two trends found in the literature: 1) that citizen participation is becoming more and more central to planning practice, and 2) that sustainability planning requires significant participation because of the imperative to cultivate sustainable lifestyle practices amongst citizens (Laurian & Shaw, 2009; Sarkisson et al., 2009).

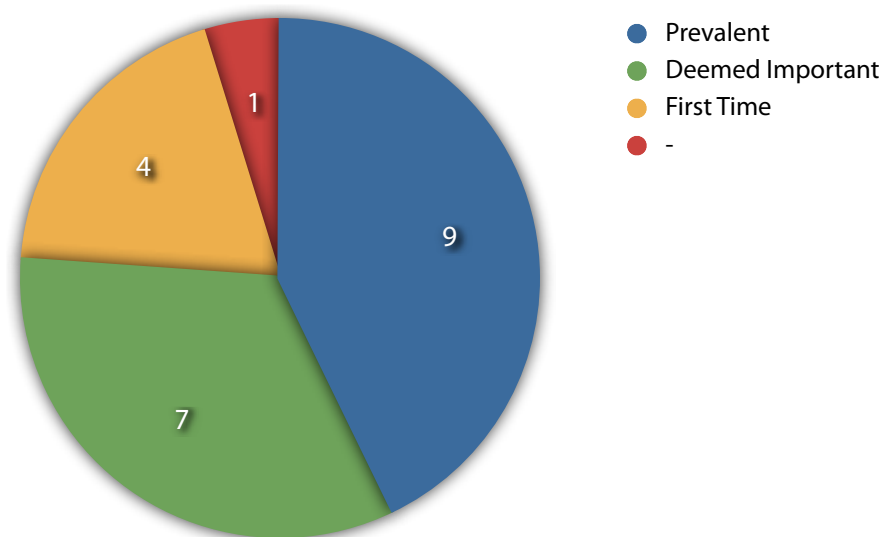


Figure 4:6 Prevalence of Participation in Communities

Lastly, it was found that few of the responding communities conducted formal evaluations of citizen participation processes. As shown in Figure 4:8 only four municipalities have administered a formal evaluation of citizen participation practices related to sustainability planning, three conducted informal evaluations, and fourteen communities conducted no evaluation at all. This lack of evaluation mirrors recent research on planning practice. A comprehensive study of participatory processes revealed that of surveyed practicing certified planners in the USA, only 9.4% evaluate the impact of the processes on planning decisions, and few do so in a systematic way (Laurian & Shaw, 2009). With heightened

policy attention being given to sustainable community planning at provincial and federal levels, and the corresponding financial investments, it is critical to evaluate if we are fully benefiting from the citizen participation being incorporated into these processes. These results suggest that there is room for significant growth in this aspect of sustainability planning in Alberta.

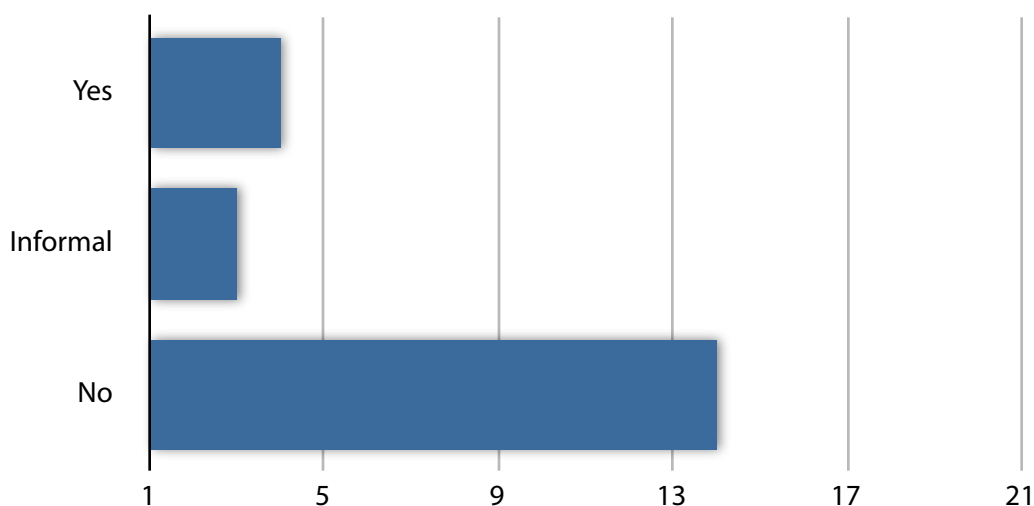


Figure 4:7 Completion of Participation Evaluation by Communities

The overwhelming commitment of communities consulted to incorporate citizen participation into their sustainability planning processes is a positive finding. The ability of citizens to impact the finished plans will be improved as communities give more attention to determining what kind of input they are seeking and how to best gather that input from citizens. Conducting more formal evaluations of citizen participation process will aid communities in understanding what they have achieved with past processes and how to better design future processes. Intention is an important first step to effectively incorporating citizen participation into sustainability planning in Alberta, however for citizens and communities to fully benefit from engagement efforts more attention to goal setting, processes design, and evaluation is necessary.

#### Participation Methods Used by Communities

The findings from the environmental scan indicate that generally, communities in Alberta need to further develop the design of participation processes so that they better fulfill the intentions and expectations of decision-makers, planners, and citizen participants. While it is encouraging to discover that all of the communities expressed a participation goal, more clearly defining what communities want to accomplish through participation will aid municipalities in meeting these expectations. In some instances planners from the environmental scan communities were simply given the direction to engage with as many and as wide a variety of citizens as possible. Not a bad impulse, but the generality of the direction makes it difficult to precisely choose methods and appropriately design processes.

Responses to the questionnaire also show that where municipalities have begun to innovate is with the participation methods they employ. To meet the citizen participation intentions discussed above Albertan planners have utilized a variety of citizen engagement methods. Methods used include focus groups, community workshops, and discussing planning issues and sustainability in classrooms in an attempt to engage youth. As to be expected, many communities use standard legislated public hearings, but there has also been some experimentation. Figure 4:9 shows the prevalence of the types of participation methods being used in the environmental scan communities, descriptions of the methods based on the responses to the questionnaire are provided below.

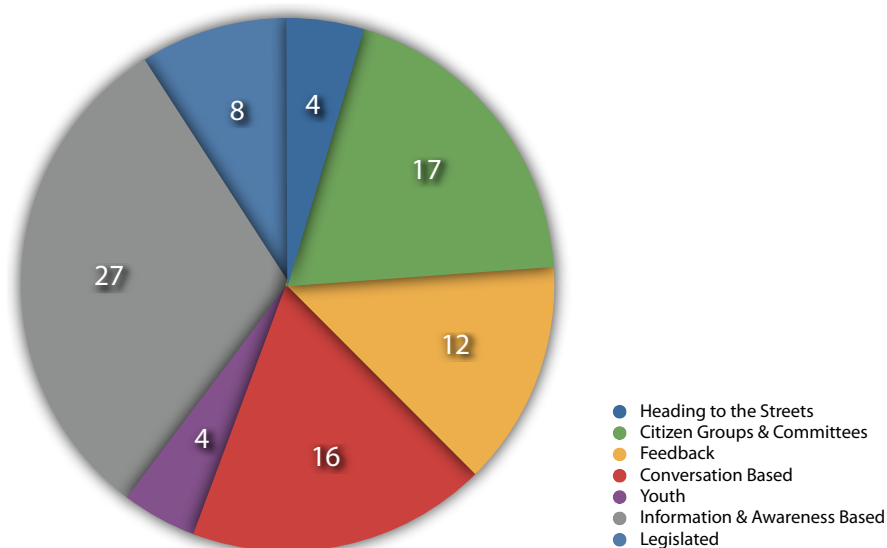


Figure 4:8 Participation Methods Utilized by Environmental Scan Communities

#### Heading to the Streets

This group of methods sees municipal planning staff heading out to the main streets, shopping malls, and gathering spaces in their communities to speak directly with citizens in an informal setting. Citizens may be asked to respond to a few questions or provide a thought on a sticky-note that is added to a board of suggestions from fellow citizens. The major difference between this method and more typical approaches is that planners go to citizens rather than relying on citizens coming to an open house or town hall at a specific time and place.

#### Information and Awareness Focused

This group of methods is more about supporting citizen participation by providing sufficient background information and context then it is focused on directly engaging with citizens. Information and awareness about sustainability planning and concerns is disseminated by municipalities in a variety of ways: through newspapers, speaker series, open houses, information sessions, presentations to different groups and organizations, and project websites.

### Citizen Groups and Committees

Many of the environmental scan communities establish some kind of citizen headed group as part of steering their sustainability planning processes. Citizen groups and committees can take the form of citizen action groups, bringing together community leaders, focus groups, steering committees, and stakeholder meetings. This method of participation typically involves an invited or self-selected group of citizens that participate over a longer time frame, often being engaged throughout the entire planning process and sometimes into plan implementation.

### Conversation Based

Conversation based citizen participation methods are centred around the idea of multi-way communication. Compared to typical question and answer sessions of more information based methods with little back and forth between municipalities and citizens, this participation method is much more dialogical. Design charrettes, community roundtables, workshops, and world cafes are just some of the variations of conversation based methods.

### Feedback

Online surveys, questionnaires, and surveys are all ways that the environmental scan communities have collected feedback from their citizens on sustainability planning activities. This group of methods is based on one-way communication with citizens responding to what they are presented with rather than asking questions back and forth in a more deliberative interaction between planners and citizens.

### Legislated

The MGA requires that all bylaw decisions have a public hearing. Some respondents to the environmental scan included public hearings as part of their citizen participation efforts, others consider it more of the legislative process and an augment to broader engagement initiatives.

## Youth

Several respondents to the environmental scan reported that they had presented on sustainability planning efforts of their communities in classrooms and to youth groups. This method aims to broaden awareness and understanding of planning issues and concerns amongst youth so that they are more likely to engage in planning processes in the future. This method is a mix of information and awareness building with conversation based processes.

The communities of the environmental scan have utilized a variety of citizen participation methods. This variety is indicative of the energy and innovation being put into methods of engagement. Many of the communities utilized more than one method for a single sustainability planning process, with some employing up to seven, and most utilizing three or four. The high number of methods used is not in itself innovative, but suggests that communities are experimenting with different approaches. Some of the more innovative methods being used see planners leaving municipal offices and heading to main streets, shopping malls, and gathering spaces, meeting citizen where they are to collect feedback and comments rather than driving them to official open houses. Cochrane, Beaumont, and Brooks have all used variations of this approach with some success. Another area of innovation is the use of world cafes, charrettes, and other conversation based methods that involve planners as discussion facilitators versus solely transferrers of information. These types of approaches embody the tenants of more communicative planning discussed in Chapter 2. Such deliberative approaches facilitate the building of community commitment and engagement required for the lifestyle shifts called for by all types of sustainability plans. Even though there is room for growth with the intentionality of participatory process design and evaluation of participation effectiveness, the openness to innovation with methods is a promising trend.

### **4.3 Discussion of Environmental Scan Results**

The results of the environmental scan are very clear on the fact that sustainability planning is happening in small - medium sized communities across the province. This is a

promising finding that bodes well for planning practice in the province as it matures to be more participatory and focused on the long term vibrancy of communities. Both domains of results show evidence that Albertan communities are employing a variety of sustainability planning types and innovating with citizen participation methods.

The six types of approaches to sustainability planning that emerged through the scan illustrate that communities are adapting a variety of approaches to their particular challenges and planning contexts. These place-based approaches are forming a patchwork of sustainability planning across the province that points to a planning trajectory that looks to foster sustainable lifestyles. Where the types of approaches differ is their scale and focus. Diversity of focus and scale is not necessarily negative, however that the majority of adopted approaches take a broad focus applied at a large scale does raise some questions. Are Albertan communities applying sustainability visions and guidelines in their day to day operations? Do higher level documents support citizens in adopting sustainable lifestyle practices? Are high level plans enough to move Albertan communities from talking about sustainability to living sustainability? These questions will be explored more in Chapter 5 through the case studies.

As noted in the literature review, what separates sustainability planning from other areas of planning practice is the importance of developing wide spread community commitment to the intentions of the plan through citizen participation. The commitment to incorporating citizen participation into sustainability planning across Alberta's small to medium sized communities is an exciting finding of the environmental scan. That municipalities are open to experimenting with different methods will support the development of a more participatory planning practice in Alberta. This is not to say there is no room for growth. The comprehensiveness of the approaches taken by the communities begins to be revealed when considering the type of communication the chosen methods allow for and the diversity of avenues for engagement provided. It is here where the environmental scan communities begin to diverge, despite shared citizen participation intentions.



Figure 4:10 illustrates how the citizen participation efforts of the environmental scan communities compare when considering the diversity of avenues for engagement and the type of communication facilitated by chosen methods. The more opportunities for participation provided and the more diverse the methods employed by communities the more likely citizens are to find some kind of participatory processes they are willing to engage in. Less than half of the environmental scan communities offered more than four participation opportunities to citizens during their sustainability planning processes. Those communities which offered diverse avenues utilized between five and seven methods.

The communities are more evenly split between the types of communication their participatory processes allowed for. They are dispersed along the communication spectrum from one-many to many-many when considering the sum of participatory methods employed for a single planning process. One-many communication refers to engagement that sees a single speaker or municipal representative addressing a large group of citizens in an informative capacity, or when many citizens respond in isolation to a single department through a survey or questionnaire. In comparison, participation methods that allow for many-many communication involve a group of citizens working through an issue with municipal representatives through a workshop or steering committee for example. These types of methods are deliberative and see communication flowing back and forth rather than in a single direction. Innes and Booher (2004) argue that for citizen participation to be collaborative it must involve multi-dimensional communication “where communication, learning and action are joined together and where the polity, interests and citizenry co-evolve” (p. 422). Types of communication allowed for through different participation methods relates to a key part of the research objective: how does citizen participation affect finished sustainability plans? More collaborative participation based upon communication from many-many facilitates plans evolving in a more deliberative manner. More research is needed to uncover why communities chose certain participation methods, how planners are supported in facilitating the different methods, and to what extent different methods enable the deliberative evolution of sustainability plans.

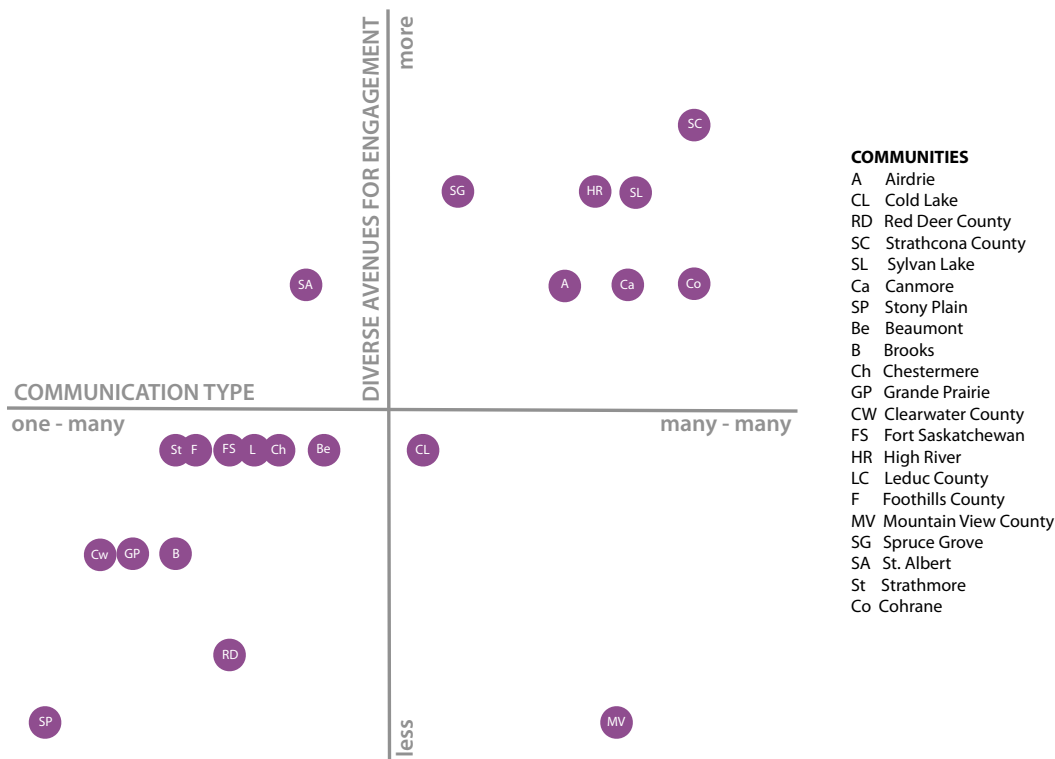


Figure 4:9 Comprehensiveness of Citizen Participation Approaches Delineated According to Diversity of Avenues & Communication Type

The environmental scan shows that there are some municipalities that are not only innovating with participation methods but proving themselves to be leaders in the comprehensiveness of their sustainability planning approaches. Thinking back to Figure 4:3 and Figure 4:10 which demonstrate the divergence between the environmental scan communities, we see that there are distinctions between scale and focus of the plans themselves, and a spectrum of participation avenues provided and the types of communication they enable. Chapter 5 will provide a case study analysis of two communities that proved themselves to be leaders in sustainability planning during

analysis of the environmental scan data. These communities both provided a broad range of engagement opportunities that allowed for the multi-directional communication called for by Innes and Booher (2004). Additionally they have engaged with sustainability planning at different scales and degrees of focus, one with a community sustainability plan that applies community wide and operates as a high level guiding document, the other at the neighbourhood scale that has a more specific focus on the development of new communities. The comparison of these two cases is an opportunity to explore in more detail how Albertan communities can overcome the challenges associated with participatory sustainability planning discussed in this chapter.

## **Chapter 5: Case Study Comparison Of Two Innovative Albertan Sustainability Planning Experiences**

To answer the research question it was determined that following the completion of the environmental scan two communities that showed themselves to be innovative and successful in their sustainability planning experiences should be selected for a comparative case study analysis. A case study approach was chosen as a way to further explore the key factors that contributed to the success the communities experienced and to illustrate ways municipalities can work through the challenges cited in the environmental scan. It was also deemed important to highlight sustainability planning experiences from within Alberta.

The two communities selected for the case study analysis have taken different approaches to working towards sustainability and to engaging citizens in the process of getting there. Cochrane is located in Southern Alberta just outside the City of Calgary, and Strathcona County is located in central Alberta East of Edmonton, see Figure 5:1. Strathcona County has numerous sustainability plans and policies, however the case study analysis focuses on the SUNLiving process for sustainable new neighbourhood development. This process works at the neighbourhood scale, and while the decision making tools of the process can be applied across the community, it is always done within a project specific focus. The second case study community, Cochrane, has drafted the Cochrane Sustainability plan to provide high level direction to planning and decision-making at a community-wide scale. The plan was completed in 2009, with the first progress report released in 2010. Both communities have been recognized for their sustainability planning efforts. In December 2009, the Cochrane Sustainability Plan was honored with the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association's Visionary Communities Award, and in 2010 Strathcona County was selected for the Canada Lands Company Sustainable Development Award for its community-wide environmental initiatives. This chapter will provide a brief background of sustainability planning efforts in each of the case study communities, followed by an exploration of key factors for success and common challenges.

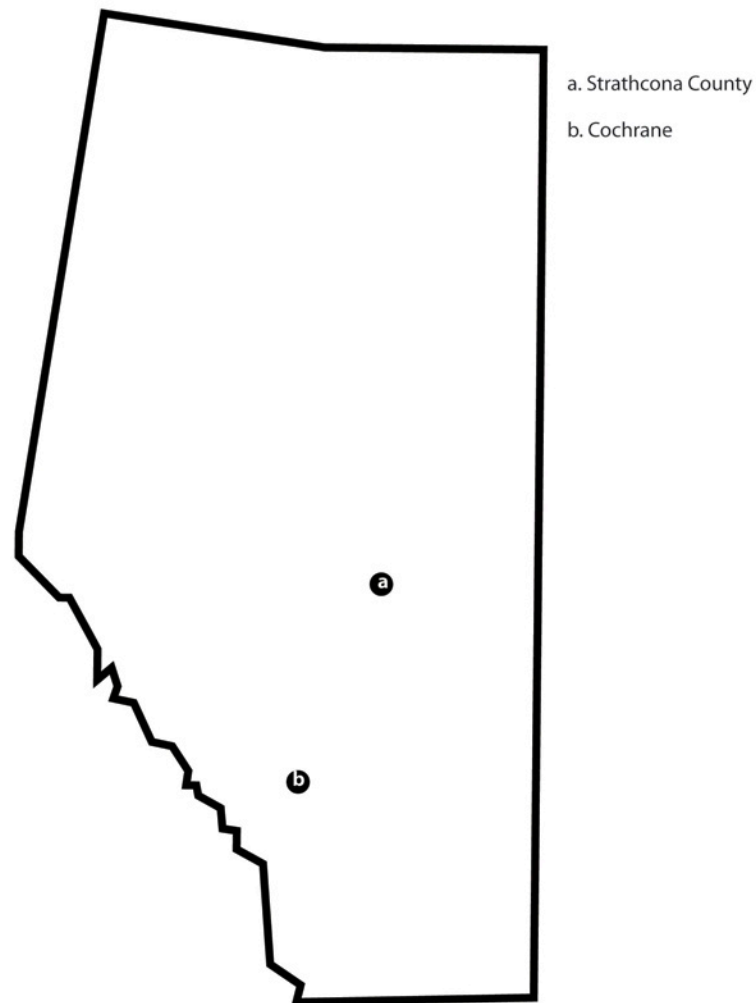


Figure 5:1 Case Study Communities

### 5.1 Strathcona County History and Background

Strathcona County is located East of Edmonton in central Alberta. It is home to a large urban centre, Sherwood Park, and a significant rural area and population. This research focused on the sustainability planning activities that affect the urban area of the county. Sherwood Park has an urban population of 61 660, the total population for the county including the rural areas is 26 338. While the municipality as a whole is above the population range set out at the beginning of this project, the urban centre is below the 80 000 cap and the noted leadership of the community in regards to sustainability made it too interesting a case to pass by.

The community was named a specialized municipality by the Province of Alberta in 1996 (Strathcona County, 2010d). The granting of this status came as a recognition of the unique needs and characteristics of the different resident groups in the county. With the urban area of Sherwood Park and a large rural area with eight hamlets, specialized municipality status allows the municipality to apply for separate programs and grant for the urban and rural parts of the community (Strathcona County, 2010). Interestingly, Strathcona County was the first rural area to become self governing in what is now the Province of Alberta (then the North West Territories).

Strathcona County is an affluent community and home to many young families, the average age of residents is 37.2 years (Strathcona County, 2011b). The average household income is 90 746 (Statistics Canada, 2006), and 55.3% of the population over 15 years has some post secondary education (Strathcona County, 2011b). Over the past decade the community has experienced incredible population growth, with an increase of 27% between 2000-2009. This trend is expected to continue, with projections of 2.2% growth between 2010-2011 (Strathcona County, 2011b).

The area has a strong agricultural history going back to the 1880's. In fact, local farmer Thomas Daly of Clover Bar won first prize for his oats at the 1901 Paris Exposition (Strathcona County, 2010c). Today the area is home to 772 farms, including cattle operations, dairy and poultry operations, fruit growers, grain and hay crops, and specialty farms (Statistics Canada, 2006 Census of Agriculture). In addition to agriculture there were stints of coal mining, threshing operation, and a saw mill in the county (Strathcona County, 2011c). Today the community has been named one of the top 10 places to do business in Alberta (Alberta Venture, 2010). Most notably Canada's largest oil refining complex and North America's third largest petrochemical complex is located in the community, providing a significant economic draw for jobs and a non residential tax base for the municipality.

In recent years Strathcona County has been garnering a reputation as a municipal leader in sustainability throughout the province and nationally. In 2007 Strathcona County's community energy system was selected as a finalist for the provincial Emerald Awards. Each year the awards recognize environmental initiatives undertaken by individuals, businesses, not-for-profit associations, community groups and governments within the province of Alberta. The community had previously been recognized for its Wilderness Centre in 2006. Nationally, Strathcona County was selected for the Canada Lands Company Sustainable Development Award for its community-wide environmental initiatives in 2010. While accepting the award County Mayor Linda Osinchuck expressed "Our community is fully engaged in environmental stewardship and sustainable development initiatives and we are proud to once again be recognized nationally for our efforts."(Strathcona County, 2010b) The award was given in recognition of the strong support the county receives from all sectors of the community for its various environmental initiatives.

One of the best examples of this support is the relationship the county has with Christenson Developments. The development Centre in the Park, a public-private partnership between the county and Christenson Developments, was honored with the 2008 Outstanding Achievement Award from the provincial Ministry of Municipal Affairs. The project is a mixed use development in the urban centre of the county that is dedicated to sustainable building practices and made great effort to respond to the needs of the community and stakeholders (Strathcona County, 2010b). The success of Centre in the Park led to the County further developing their relationship with Christenson Developments in the Emerald Hills Urban Village initiative which followed the SUNLiving process, a decision making tool that has guided Strathcona County's journey towards becoming a more sustainable community. The SUNLiving Process is the focus of the case study analysis of Strathcona County.

#### *5.1.1 Strathcona County's Sustainability Planning Experience*

Strathcona County defines sustainable development as "developing in a manner that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to

meet their own needs, while striking a balance between economic prosperity, social responsibility, and environmental stewardship”. (Strathcona County, 2010e). Building from this definition the County guides its development through a series of frameworks incorporated into its strategic plan, a revised Municipal Development Plan, and planning processes all centred around sustainability. The case study analysis will mostly explore the approach the county has taken to the sustainability planning process, but recognizes the importance of the relationship between planning process and other municipal documents. As an overview, Figure 3:2 provides a brief timeline of Strathcona County’s sustainability planning experience.

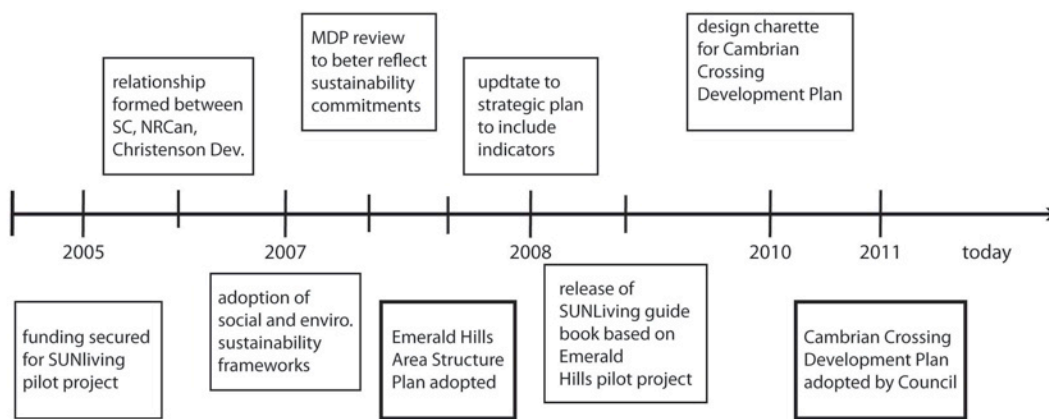


Figure 5:2 Timeline of Strathcona County’s Sustainability Planning Experience

The basis of Strathcona County’s approach to sustainability is found in its Three Sustainability Frameworks. Based upon the triple bottom line approach, not dissimilar to the 3 E’s described by Saha and Paterson (2008), the county developed social, economic,



and environmental sustainability frameworks. The social and environmental sustainability frameworks were adopted in 2007, and the economic sustainability framework in 2011. Forming capstone policies in the Strategic Plan, the frameworks provide strategic direction for decision making in the County. Social sustainability for Strathcona County translates into being a “safe and caring community whose residents enjoy opportunities for healthy lifestyles” (Strathcona County, 2009, p. 4). As an environmentally sustainable community the County commits to practicing sound environmental stewardship (Strathcona County, 2009, p. 6). And moving towards economic sustainability pushes the community to “foster an economy which benefits residents, businesses, and industry” (Strathcona County, 2009, p. 6). 2008 saw an update to the Strategic Plan to draft indicators to help measure the progress of the plan towards sustainability planning goals.

In 2007 Strathcona County revised its Municipal Development Plan to better reflect the community’s commitment to sustainability. The revision incorporated the four principles of the Natural Step and the SUNLiving approach to new neighbourhood development into the plan. Together the three sustainability frameworks of the strategic plan, the revised MDP, and the defined planning processes form Strathcona County’s community development perspective. Sustainability is named as the core guiding principle for plans and projects of Strathcona County’s Planning and Development Services department.

In addition, Strathcona County follows the Sustainable Urban Neighbourhood (SUN) Living Process to drive new community development. SUNLiving is a series of five steps that guide a planning project from conception to implementation ensuring that sustainability remains at the core of every development decision. The process, envisioned and headed by Natural Resources Canada, was piloted with the Emerald Hills Urban Village neighbourhood development project located in Strathcona County. Beginning in 2002 Natural Resources Canada recognized an emerging vision to extend their building and technology research mandate to the sustainable built environment, and thus hired Will Mayhew to help define its vision (Interview, 2010). In 2003 a working relationship was formed with Strathcona County through the Centre in the Park project, a move that

laid the foundations for later work on the SUNLiving process. By 2005 funding was secured for a SUNLiving pilot project titled Sustainable Urban Neighbourhoods (SUN) - Moving Sustainability Mainstream, under the restructured Sustainable Building and Communities group at Natural Resources Canada and with the mandate to move sustainable neighbourhood development from research into the real world (Mayhew, Interview, 2010). Recognizing the opportunity to move the municipality's commitment to sustainability forward, a partnership coalesced in 2005 around the Emerald Hills pilot project including Strathcona County, Christenson Developments, and Natural Resource Canada's Sustainable Building and Communities group. The SUNLiving Pilot Project grew into a private-public-partnership focused on adopting the holistic community development framework on a 120 hectare, 1000 residential mixed-use site within the urban centre of Strathcona County (Strathcona County, 2010f).

SUNLiving is a decision-making framework to guide sustainable new community development. The process draws from numerous sustainability frameworks, bodies of knowledge, and approaches, such as The Natural Step or Integrated Design Process, distilling them into a single, inclusive approach. Comprised of five steps, SUNLiving moves communities through broader principles of sustainability to specific goals and articulated target strategies and actions (Mayhew & Campbell, 2008, p. 15). Working with the idea of One Planet Living, "the possibility of enjoying a high quality of life while lowering our ecological impact to a one planet footprint" (Mayhew & Campbell, 2008, p. 5), the process is characterized by collaborative engagement, and provides municipalities and stakeholders with a range of decision support tools (Mayhew & Campbell, 2008, p. 15). The application of the framework builds a detailed work plan, with steps of how to get there laid out in the handbook developed following the Emerald Hills pilot project. At the heart of the process is collaborative engagement which occurs through activities such as development of sustainable neighbourhood principles and themes, goal-setting workshops, charrettes, and integrated design workshops all completed with a variety of stakeholders (Mayhew & Campbell, 2008, p. 17-18).

One of the strongest aspects of the SUNLiving process is the equal weight it places on fostering long term sustainable living along with sustainable building and development practices. This acknowledgement of the *lived* aspects of sustainability is key for municipalities across Alberta, and everywhere, to actually embody the sustainability tenants they aspire to. SUNLiving emphasizes planning and design choices that both enable and foster sustainable living and quality of life. Recognizing that the built environment can enhance well-being and social interaction while also making sustainable living attainable and practical, SUNLiving also encourages public and private partners to engage community members through a range of social and educational initiatives to augment physical infrastructure (Mayhew & Campbell, 2008, p. 6). The attention paid to sustainable living is based on an understanding that it is at the neighbourhood scale where public goals are transferred to private interests and that any neighbourhood plan “require(s) committed, positive resident buy-in and participation.” (Mayhew & Campbell, 2008, p. 6)

Emerald Hills Urban Village was the SUNLiving pilot project and Strathcona County’s first firm foray into sustainable neighbourhood development. The project is currently in its first stage of development with town-homes, condos, duplexes, and commercial space for sale. Following the success of the collaborative process facilitated by SUNLiving, Strathcona County initiated the Cambrian-Strathcona Joint Planning Initiative together with the Cambrian Group of Companies to develop another sustainable neighbourhood within the boundaries of the Sherwood Park Urban Service Area (Strathcona County, 2011a). A design charrette was held in January 2010 with local landowners and key stakeholders, the results from which were refined into the Cambrian Crossing Development Plan which was adopted by County Council in early 2011 (Strathcona County, 2011a). As evident by the above projects, Strathcona County’s effort to embody and apply its sustainable development principles into the County’s planning processes through the SUNLiving process has been positive.

With the decision making tools it offers and the framework for project development it provides, SUNLiving makes a compelling case for neighbourhood scale sustainability.

While use of the process has been limited to new neighbourhood development there is clear potential for its application to established community redevelopment and revitalization. There is however much headway to be gained at the neighbourhood scale. Designers of the processes argue that “it is at the neighbourhood scale that sustainable development and sustainable living converge and sustainable neighbourhoods can be implemented”(Mayhew & Campbell, 2008, p. 7).

## **5.2 Cochrane History and Background**

Cochrane is located at the base of Big Hill nestled in the Bow River Valley. A community noted for its western heritage, it is surrounded by a mixed farming area and has been a long-standing service centre for the rural population (Town of Cochrane,2004). Named after Senator Mathew Henry Cochrane, founder of the Cochrane Ranche, the town had a brief industrial base prior to World War I, and has maintained its deep rooted connection to the rural population, a strong contributor to the community’s sense of community and character (Town of Cochrane, 2004). The past decade has seen the celebration of the towns centennial in 2003, and a steep rise in population, up to 15 424 in 2009. Community members, town council and administrators are now working to manage the growth while maintaining the small town hospitality the community celebrates.

The growth in population has contributed to a thriving economy, predominately based in construction, retail, agriculture and business services. 900 companies are licensed in Cochrane and there is an expansive home based business sector (Cochrane & District Chamber of Commerce, 2010). The community boasts a strong work/life balance due to short commute times within the town limits in comparison to neighbouring Calgary, and easy access to recreation. However, many of the working residents commute to Calgary to work in the city, illustrated by the multiple commuter bus trips between the two daily, with plans to develop a regional transportation system connecting Calgary to Cochrane and the Bow River Valley underway (Cochrane & District Chamber of Commerce, 2010). Cochrane is dominated by single detached dwelling homes, with the vast majority of residents being home owners (Town of Cochrane, 2009a). The population grew 5.26% in

2009, and 3 846 of the full-time employed worked outside the community (Town of Cochrane, 2009a).

The pace of growth and its effect on transportation systems are major concerns for community members. According to a community survey, while residents have a high regard for the Cochrane community and the quality of life it provides, they are split as to whether the current pace of development is “necessary to maintain a sound economy and a high quality of life” (Town of Cochrane, 2005). Of particular concern are traffic congestion and safety on the highway routes to Calgary and preserving the river valley and natural areas (Town of Cochrane, 2005). The call for town council and administration to effectively manage growth coincides with sustainability planning principles.

#### *5.2.1 Cochrane’s Sustainability Planning Experience*

A newly elected mayor and town council in 2007 brought vision and leadership to Cochrane, and initiated the process of creating the Cochrane Sustainability Plan (CSP). The new mayor proposed that in light of the substantial growth in recent years it was time to “reconnect with the evolving community” (CitiesPLUS, 2009). After securing funds from the Federation of Canadian Municipalities’ Green Municipal Fund, the Alberta Municipal Sustainability Initiative (MSI) and Municipal Sponsorship Program, in 2008 the town of Cochrane launched their sustainability plan with the approach *Think long term. Look at the whole. See the connections.* (CitiesPLUS, 2009). Figure 5:3 shows a brief timeline of Cochrane’s sustainability planning process.

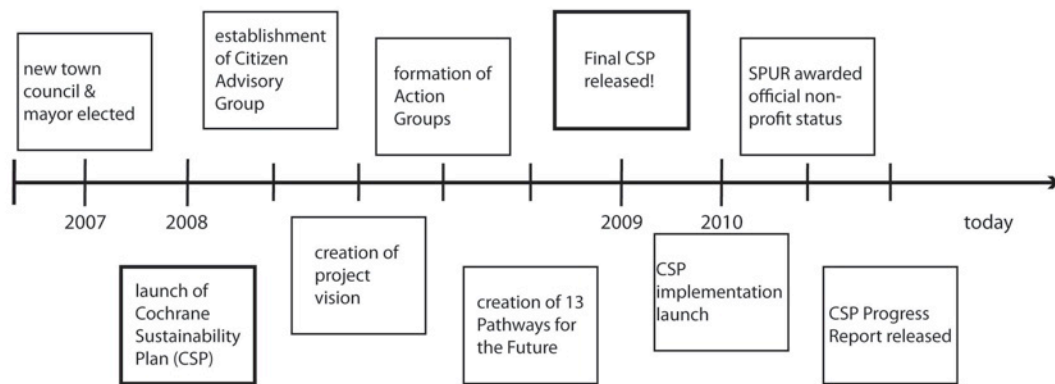


Figure 5:3 Timeline of Cochrane's Sustainability Planning Experience

The first step in the eleven-month process was establishing a twelve member Citizen Advisory Group (CAG) to provide leadership throughout the planning exercise. The CAG was responsible for approving an engagement plan, sustainability principles, developing an implementation framework, and with citizen input, forming a long term community vision (Town of Cochrane, 2009). Citizen engagement mechanisms included a variety of community events and meetings, and the CSP Website (Town of Cochrane, 2009). Citizens engagement centred around four guiding questions:

1. What do you value about Cochrane?
2. What changes would you most like to see?
3. What are your hopes and dreams for Cochrane in the next 50 years?
4. How can you help make this happen?

Residents were encouraged to host visioning sessions at home by inviting their neighbours over for a 100-mile BBQ, to take the kids out for a treat at the local ice cream shop, or conversing as a household around the four guiding questions and sending responses back to the town through a visioning form (Town of Cochrane, 2008). The four-month visioning process saw 489 citizen and visitor responses being sent to the CSP team. After interpreting citizen input the CAG created a vision that highlights a strong commitment to the town's western Canadian foundation, a small-town atmosphere and connections to surrounding nature and landscape (Town of Cochrane, 2009).

From this vision, the next stage in the process was forming voluntary Action Groups, again consisting of citizen representatives. The Action Groups were charged with "providing clarity for action towards the vision for the community" (Town of Cochrane, 2009). An intense six-month process saw 64 individuals contribute over 700hrs of work to produce 13 Pathways for the Future. The Pathways for the Future are an integration of the work of the six Action Groups that each focused on a key community systems: the built environment, culture, economic, natural environment, governance, and social (Town of Cochrane, 2009). Together the 13 pathways provide an integrated approach to action in the community, with each pathway consisting of a description of success, a description of the current reality, and a range of targets (Town of Cochrane, 2009).

The CSP document was finalized on May 25, 2009 and is now being used by Town staff to develop future planning documents and amend existing ones. Following what is being described as a community-led process, residents are encouraged to remain engaged with the implementation of the plan. Citizen participation in plan implementation has been facilitated through an Implementation Launch at the Cochrane High School in 2010, and the creation of Sustainability Partners Utilizing Resources (SPUR). In 2010 SPUR was awarded official non-profit status, and as stated in the 2010 Cochrane Sustainability Plan Progress Report (Intelligent Futures), has already awarded grants to 10 community groups or organizations working towards some aspect of the 13 Pathways. In addition to the work of SPUR, Cochranites have the opportunity to engage with CSP implementation through three avenues: as a Sustainability Champion, Sustainability Ambassador, or as a Citizen of Sustainability. Community businesses, organizations, groups, and institutions agree to

work towards the Pathways and the CSP Vision as Sustainability Champions, individuals contribute towards collective actions that achieve the Pathways as Sustainability Ambassadors, and individuals or households can declare to adopt daily actions that work towards the CSP vision as a Citizen of Sustainability (Intelligent Futures, 2010).

The 2010 Progress Report provides an account of movement on the targets of each of the 13 Pathways for the Future. The most impressive movement has been toward Pathway 2, *we are a socially responsible and empowered community*. In 2010 the total number of declarations from all three categories described above was 56, an increase of 600% from 2009, surpassing the target of an increase in declarations by 500% from 2009, evidence that community ownership of the plan is growing (Intelligent Futures, 2010). The only other pathway to have positive movement in 2010 was Pathway 2, *we treat water as a precious resource*. Daily water use per a person decreased by 8 liters from 2009 levels, inching the community towards the target of lowering per capita water use by 15% from 2008 levels (Intelligent Futures, 2010). For the other ten Pathways eleven targets saw the gathering of baseline data, and two targets saw negative movement away from the targets (Intelligent Futures, 2010). Overall the CSP is making progress towards its vision. It is important to recognize that the timeline of the CSP is up to 60 years for some targets. The fact that only one year into implementation a target has been met and two have seen positive progression towards them is encouraging. The incredible effort being put into facilitating community ownership of the plan will undoubtedly help with future progress. Sustainability planning in Strathcona County took a very different form but has also experienced some great successes.

### **5.3 Comparing and Contrasting the Strathcona County and Cochrane Experiences**

The following section will compare and contrast the sustainability planning experiences in Cochrane and Strathcona County. The heart of the comparison draws from key informant interviews conducted with municipal planners, decision-makers, professional consultants, and citizens. Admittedly the bulk of the interviews were with planners, and thus the stories of sustainability planning being told are primarily from the perspective of professionals. While it was not in the scope of this research, much more work can be done



to better gather citizen perspectives on the development of sustainability planning in Alberta, especially in regards to citizen experiences with municipal engagement efforts.

The sustainability planning experiences of the two communities the comparison focuses on are at very different scales, one a high level document applied community wide, and the other a process to guide sustainable neighbourhood development. However through analysis of the key informant interviews it became apparent that many of the factors that led to success were shared between the communities. The intent of the case study analysis is to provide a more detailed account of two successful sustainability planning processes in Alberta, to highlight the key factors of success and lessons learnt that may be of use for other communities and for the further development of sustainability planning in the province. Saha and Paterson (2008) note that case studies of cities classified as innovators with sustainability planning have provided scholars and practitioners with a deeper understanding of local government sustainability initiatives (p. 21-22). Unfortunately much of this research has focused on cities in the United States, this research provides an account of two such innovators from the Albertan context. The comparison will first focus on factors for success and then explore challenges the two case study communities faced.

### *5.3.1 Key Factors for Success*

#### Process Design

The experience of the case study communities makes a strong case for Albertan municipalities to invest in participatory process design for their sustainability planning efforts. Appropriate and effective process design was cited as contributing to strong relationships between stakeholders, and increased understanding of the planning issues at hand. Interviewees expressed that effort put into process design enabled an openness to ideas and understanding (Architecture Consultant, Emerald Hills Urban Village). In regards to citizen participation impacting the completed plans, the charrette process used in Strathcona County was cited as not only pushing citizens to contribute but empowering them to give specific and direct feedback to proposed plans for the Cambrian Crossing Development Plan (Senior Planner, Strathcona County). The format allowed for feedback

and also provided the opportunity for designers and planners to respond to feedback and show responses in the plans themselves.

*The charrette process is actually a really powerful tool, that we find. When you go through that and you work through issues and you can see and identify the targets and measures of what you are trying to achieve in a particular development and you apply that through a charrette process..I think that is amazing, that really builds capacity.*

***Associate Commissioner of Infrastructure and Planning, Strathcona County***

Key aspects of the participatory processes in Cochrane and Strathcona County were flexibility and responsiveness. While the approaches themselves differed, Strathcona County predominately using the charrette as an engagement mechanism and Cochrane building community ownership through Citizen Advisory and Action Groups, both approaches were participant centred and dialogue based. Many interviewees noted that the high quality dialogue enabled through the participatory process laid the ground work for a high quality final product, be it a community sustainability plan or a neighbourhood design (Architecture Consultant, Emerald Hills Urban Village). Intentional process design also supported other key factors such as development of a common language and understanding, and strong relationships and the building of trust. In the words of one interviewee from Cochrane:

*The plan is like the tip of the iceberg for us, all that process is everything that matters.*

***Lead consultant, Cochrane Sustainability Plan***

### Relationships & Trust

For both of the case study communities high quality end products were important outcomes, but they recognized that the process provided an opportunity to produce more than that, it could foster strong relationships and trust between citizens, stakeholders, and the municipality. This trust was developed not only between participants and planners but

also between different municipal departments, aiding corporate attempts to better integrate sustainability principles across municipal operations.

*I loved the fact that social was considered from the beginning...there is actual value being seen now in what we do. From that relationship building there is more collaborative things happening.*

***Social Development Liaison, Strathcona County***

Citizen participants interviewed from Strathcona County noted that negative citizen experiences with the County in the past brewed skepticism and mistrust towards new engagement efforts by the County (Citizen Participant 1 & 2, Strathcona County). A similar context was the backdrop for the sustainability planning process in Cochrane. However, according to the lead consultant in Cochrane, naming building of trust as one of the desired outcomes of the process and taking care to respond to citizen feedback helped to rebuild relationships between the Town and citizen participants.

*The behind the scenes rationale was to do it ... the how we did it in a way that would build trust in the community, and especially between the community and the municipality. Because there had been prior to that starting a lot of things that had eroded that trust...We realized that that was going to be an important outcome, was increased trust. And so we actually didn't make that explicit I think until [a Town planner] did a presentation at the boot camp we had. And so we had some members of the citizen advisory group there and [one of the members] came up after and said 'I didn't realize that this is why we are doing it. This all makes sense now'.*

***Lead consultant, Cochrane Sustainability Plan***

Effective sustainability planning according to interviewees from both communities is really about building relationships. For it is these relationships that future planning efforts build upon and nurture implementation of design and plans. Which is important considering that results from the environmental scan indicate that communities often engage in multiple sustainability planning types, and that the nature of sustainability planning necessitates long term time frames for implementation.

## Commitment

The third factor of success upon analysis of the key informant interviews is commitment at multiple scales to sustainability planning principles and ideals. For both case study communities there was not only commitment from the municipalities themselves but also from stakeholders and citizen participants. In Strathcona County the commitment from all parties involved in the Emerald Hills Urban Village planning and design process laid the ground work for ongoing relationships through plan implementation in the form of an integrated design team. This ongoing commitment to the project was cited as a major achievement of the process by one interviewee.

*We have this integrated design team for Emerald Hills, that is not always the lead developer, like the owner of the company, but at least one of the project managers ... and architects and consultants are there. I think my inspiring moments are whenever that group gets together and we say 'hey lets sort this out together'. Rather than sometimes you sway a bit away from it and then come back. And it is probably the mentality of the charrette coming back out, everyone saying, 'lets all sit around with this plan and figure out a solution'. And I find those moments to be really inspiring.*  
**Senior Advisor of Sustainability and Infrastructure and Planning, Strathcona County**

Commitment to the process is not only important for parties directly involved in the specific project but also across municipal departments if community sustainability is to be achieved. Strathcona County's work to establish Three Sustainability Frameworks according to one interviewee played a direct role in ensuring that social sustainability was considered from the beginning in the Emerald Hills Urban Village design.

*All decisions now are being made based on the three pillars, so social, economic, and environmental. Typically it used to just be the financial piece of it. What's it going to cost, what's the bottom line. But now it looks at all three impacts on a decision. The social sustainability framework was the first that came out throughout Strathcona County. It took a lot of education within the community and within the departments themselves. Because historically it was 'well that's social, that's family and community services that has nothing to do with us.' So it was educating departments that it really does have an impact in what each department is doing. And so I think that momentum*

*is going and it is definitely being encouraged from the top down and the bottom up to include all three.*

***Social Development Liaison, Strathcona County***

Clear commitment from the municipality to live up to their sustainability aspirations was often cited as a key factor to the success of the planning process. In particular deep commitment from Strathcona County to both sustainable development and to fostering sustainable lifestyles amongst community residents elevated the process to do something different (Architecture Consultant, Emerald Hills Urban Village). In Cochrane much effort was put into identifying community groups and citizens who were already active in promoting sustainability when inviting individuals to join the Citizen Action Groups. Through this process 75 citizen volunteers remained engaged throughout the process, contributing not only to the drafting of the 13 Pathways to Sustainability that shape the Cochrane Sustainability Plan, and also to the development of community ownership of plan implementation. While the case study communities differ in the degree of community ownership and direct citizen involvement in their process, Cochrane focusing on wide citizen participation and Strathcona on deep stakeholder engagement, both process were built upon commitment at multiple scales.

**Common Language & Understanding**

As discussed earlier, there is no single definition for sustainability and the abstract nature of the concept can be a barrier to citizen engagement. Recognizing this both case study communities put great care into developing a common language and understanding at the outset of their sustainability planning exercises. According to one stakeholder in the Strathcona County process this time allowed those involved to get past the buzz words and dig deeper into the issues at hand (Architecture Consultant, Emerald Hills Urban Village). To aid common understanding of the intentions and goals of the process the case study communities also developed short catch phrases. Strathcona County continuously returned to “doing the right thing for the right reasons” throughout their process, and Cochrane to “Think big. See the connections, Think long term”. The lead consult for the Cochrane Sustainability Plan noted that by the end of the process citizen participants were repeating the phrase to him whenever they came up against a road block or challenge.

*So we coined the catch phrase ‘Think long term. Look at the whole. See the connections.’ And within a couple months, really throughout this process you just sort of have these little wins that you kind of go, okay, this indicates we’re on the right path. So within the first couple months of that I was hearing that back from the citizens advisory group. Sort of reminding me at times, so this is what it is all about, we have to see the connections. Whether it was who else to engage or those sorts of things.*

***Lead consultant, Cochrane Sustainability Plan***

Time put into developing guiding principles and a clear vision for the sustainability planning project also helped establish a common understanding of the scope and scale of the process for all involved. In Cochrane the Citizen Advisory Group’s major task was to develop a vision for the plan based on citizen feedback at the outset of the process, and the First Step of the SUNLiving process involves stakeholders developing a project mission statement which informs the drafting of a project vision (Mayhew & Campbell, 2008, p. 18). The sustainability coordinator for the Emerald Hills Urban Village process claims that attention paid to the development of a common understanding through things like drafting a project mission statement results in a project having a better chance of succeeding (Sustainability Consultant, Emerald Hills Urban Village Pilot Project). Another contributing factor to establishing a common language is process design. One citizen participant from Strathcona County had this to say about the establishment of a common understanding through the charrette for the Cambrian Crossing Development Plan:

*If what I sensed was true, they were successful on that account.*  
***Citizen participant, Strathcona County***

#### Outside Facilitators and or Coordinators

The final factor for success that emerged through analysis of the key informant interviews was hiring of a sustainability or project coordinator for the planning process. Both case study communities hired a consultant to work with municipal planning staff and

stakeholders to lead them through the sustainability planning process. The consultant for Strathcona County described his role as coordinator for all the stakeholders involved Strathcona County, the four developers, consultants hired by the developers such as architects, Federal government partners Natural Resources Canada, and funders (Sustainability Consultant, Emerald Hills Urban Village Pilot Project). In the role as coordinator the consultant was able to ensure that all involved stayed on track as they moved through the SUNLiving steps and to keep the process grounded in the sustainability principles and project vision. Intelligent Futures was hired as the lead consultant to develop the Cochrane Sustainability Plan, coordinate the Citizen Action Groups, and design the final report. Hiring of an outside consultant supported the development of trust between the community and the Town in light of negative experiences in the past through the Municipal Development Plan review, it also provided some guidance to staff working on the plan through the design and implementation of the planning process.

*It was the right fit for us, and I think that was one of the key successes ... it wasn't necessarily the experience of the consultant, it was how we felt we had a relationship with him. We felt we trusted him, we could be honest with him and he could be honest with us. And we didn't feel like he was just there for another job, he actually cared about the job. And that made a huge difference.*

***Past Long Range Planner, Town of Cochrane***

While hiring of an outside consultant may not always be necessary, at the very least communities should consider assigning a point person that is responsible for keeping all involved in the planning process on track and inline with established sustainability goals and principles. Whenever multiple participants are involved in a process there are going to be various agenda's and understandings at the table, having an identified person or group charged with helping all stakeholders through the process can help the navigation of these agendas and retain focus on the identified goals.

### *5.3.2 Common Challenges*

#### Fostering Sustainable Lifestyles

A theme that came up in many of the key informant interviews was the challenge of fostering sustainable lifestyles. The literature review that framed the research identified that what separates sustainability planning from other areas of practice is the importance of citizen participation to facilitate the adopting of lifestyle habits in order for full implementation of sustainability goals. Despite all their efforts to establish strong relationships with stakeholders and remain true to sustainability principles, Strathcona County still struggles to communicate the sustainability aspects of the Emerald Hills Urban Village to new residents.

*You have to create these places for these people who are moving in. There are probably 25 families on site right now and you have to create a place for them to walk, you have to start creating these spaces or they'll never get what it is they're buying into. It is difficult in that way for us because we wish it would happen faster. We see it and we go talk to the guy in the show home and he has no idea this is a sustainable community and he's running the show. He has no idea this is a special community, that they will have a sustainability coordinator on site to help them be water wise, to be electricity wise, and say to them all the reasons why they are living there, and they're not telling that to people. So that is frustrating for us.*

**Senior Planner, Strathcona County**

To help bridge this gap Strathcona County is discussing hiring a sustainability coordinator to work with new residents of Emerald Hills. The lead consultant for the project described the process of facilitating sustainable lifestyles as consisting of two parts: 1) engaging people in the planning process itself, and 2) engaging residents once the development has been built (Sustainability Consultant, Emerald Hills Urban Village Pilot Project). Following a different approach, Cochrane has put a great deal of effort in establishing community ownership of the community's sustainability plan through a citizen led organization called Sustainability Partners Utilizing Resources (SPUR). SPUR operates at arms length from the Town and is contributing to implementation of the plan through granting funding to groups with initiatives relating to the 13 Pathways to Sustainability. Regardless of how sustainable lifestyles are supported in a community it takes long term commitment and investment. But, as one of the interviewees put it:



*You can have the most sustainable development in the world, that's only half the picture. People have to actually live in this community, people have to understand what it means to live in a sustainable community and be part of that .*

***Associate Commissioner of Infrastructure and Planning, Strathcona County***

#### Coordination of Plans & Policies

A second challenge faced by the case study communities, and something that was alluded to in the environmental scan, is the coordination of the different types of sustainability plans a municipality may have. The results of the environmental scan showed that many communities engage in more than one type of sustainability planning, and the case study communities are no different. Strathcona County has the Three Sustainability Frameworks and sustainability principles included in both its strategic and municipal development plan. Cochrane has the Cochrane Sustainability Plan and is in the process of updating its strategic plan to reflect the vision created through the sustainability planning process. The working relationship between these various documents can be a challenge, but is a crucial part of enabling communities to live up to their sustainability aspirations and commitments. To work through this challenge Strathcona County has positioned the three pillars as a launching pad for sustainability within the community (Associate Commissioner of Infrastructure and Planning, Strathcona County). Working from this launching pad ensures that all aspects of sustainability have a place at the table for any process.

*The support of the three pillars all working together. It has affected all of our decision making, and it should, it should have a strong influence on what we do.*  
***Social Development Liaison, Strathcona County***

Connecting the Sustainability Frameworks to the SUNLiving planning process is one way Strathcona County ensures that their different sustainability plans and policies are integrated. Having a range of voices at the table to speak to the various sides of sustainability further ensures that processes are holistic, and that actions across the municipality are synchronized.

### Awareness

Analysis of the case study interviews showed that perhaps the greatest challenge for communities is raising awareness of sustainability planning efforts and issues among the general public. The two citizen participants that were interviewed from Strathcona County had little to no awareness of the sustainability aspects and intentions of the Cambrian Crossing Development Plan (Citizen Participant 1 & 2, Strathcona County). In the case of Cochrane the difficulty of garnering awareness and interest from the general population was understood from the outset. To face this challenge the consultant and planning team committed to making the planning process as valid as possible and ensuring engagement opportunities were as accessible to citizens as possible (Past Long Range Planner, Town of Cochrane, Lead consultant, Cochrane Sustainability Plan). Awareness of sustainability planning efforts and long term planning issues was cited as a major barrier to citizen participation by respondents to the environmental scan as well, suggesting that this is an area that needs considerable work in Alberta. In relation to the first challenge of fostering sustainable lifestyles, awareness seems like a logical first step to supporting citizens with the adoption of new lifestyle habits. Without higher awareness to garner community ownership of and commitment to sustainability plans will remain a major challenge and hurdle for full implementation, as in the words of one interviewee:

*We're laying a foundation, we are doing a lot of pathfinding for those that will follow. But ultimately it has to be the community that puts that program. You can't put together a sustainable living program and then say ok, this is how you live. It has to be them that do it, the residents of the community.*

***Sustainability Consultant, Emerald Hills Urban Village Pilot Project***

### 5.4 Concluding Comments

Many of the above challenges and factors for success, summarized in Table 5:1, are interrelated and connected. For example appropriate process design supports the building of a common language and understanding, which when citizens are involved, can foster commitment to adopting sustainable lifestyle habits. Neither case study community has achieved every factor of success, nor solved every challenge. They do however provide some insights into how Albertan communities may begin to move past the inherent road

blocks of sustainability planning. The final chapter will present some conclusions and recommendations for the further development of sustainability planning in Alberta's small to medium sized communities, and in particular how communities can better engage their citizens in the process.

<b>Case Study Communities</b>	<b>Key Factors for Success</b>	<b>Common Challenges</b>
Town of Cochrane	Process Design	Fostering Sustainable Lifestyles
Strathcona County	Building Relationships & Trust	Coordination of all Sustainability Plans & Policies
	Commitment at Multiple Scales	Awareness of Sustainability & Long-Term Planning Issues
	Creating a Common Language & Understanding	
	Hiring of an Outside Facilitators or Project Coordinator	

Table 5:1 Summary of Case Study Key Factors for Success and Common Challenges

## Chapter 6: Conclusions & Recommendations

### 6.1 Overarching Findings

The objective of this research was to get a clearer picture of the development of sustainability planning and degree of citizen participation in Albertan communities. The intent was not to evaluate which plans and processes were best, but to uncover and share the province's emerging story of municipal sustainability. The framework of analysis that guided the research placed the project within a set of drivers, a policy context, and an area of focus. The framework recognizes the impact of global trends around the concept of sustainability, evolutions in understandings of and expectations for citizen participation, and the influence of planning trends on the practice in Alberta. The opportunities and incentives for pursuing sustainability planning provided by the provincial and federal governments was considered the policy context for planning activities at the municipal scale, the area of focus for the research.

To answer the research question - what is the status of citizen participation in the development of sustainability planning in Alberta, considering the process and the output? an environmental scan of sustainability planning across the province and two case studies were conducted. This two-pronged approach allowed for both an extended study area of a diverse but comparable set of communities, and a more in-depth look at the experiences of two communities that have achieved success with sustainability planning.

The story that emerged from both the environmental scan and the case studies is that not only are Albertan communities pursuing sustainability planning, but they understand and are responding to the unique citizen participation needs of this area of planning practice. However, while communities for the most part aim to provide meaningful opportunities for citizen participation they are encountering significant challenges along the way. Some Albertan communities are innovating with sustainability planning approaches and participation methods in response to these challenges, but there is much opportunity for

supporting further development of what is a young area of planning practice in the province.

Early in the research process an equation was created to help conceptualize the different forces and influences at play, see Figure 6:1. At the heart of the equation is a head of spinach inspired by the Arnstein(1967) quote “the idea of citizen participation is a little like eating spinach: no one is against it in principle because it is good for you” (p. 216). The spinach represents the conflict between the impulse that citizen participation is a good thing and the reality of addressing wicked problems. Responses to the environmental scan questionnaire and the key informant interviews of the case studies echoed this conflict.

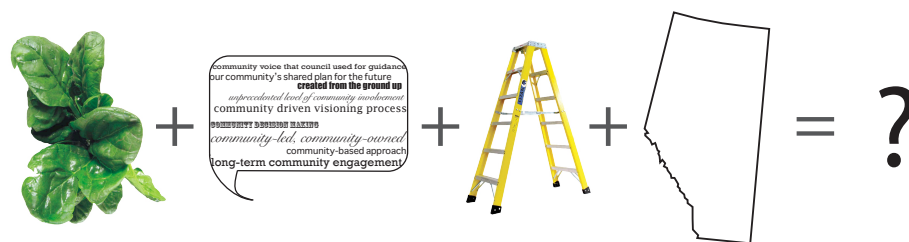


Figure 6:1 Research Equation

This final chapter will present some of the challenges specifically associated with incorporating citizen participation into sustainability planning cited by environmental scan communities. Through comparing the cited challenges with key factors for success identified through the case study analysis a set of concluding thoughts have been crafted. Finally, a number of recommendations for how to further develop participatory sustainability planning in Alberta based off the results of this research will be shared. The conclusions and recommendations put forward keep in mind the unique challenges of sustainability planning cited during the environmental scan and raised through the case studies. As, in the words of one key informant interviewee, sustainability planning is a different beast compared to other areas of planning.

## **6.2 Challenges with Citizen Participation**

From the very beginning of this research it was acknowledged that citizen participation in sustainability planning encompasses a broad range of challenges. This is the spinach in the equation - knowing that something is good for you, or that it is a good thing to do, but the actual doing of it being the hard part. Similar to sustainability plan types, a typology of citizen participation challenges was identified through the environmental scan. The most cited challenges include the abstract nature of sustainability concepts, and the difficulty some citizen have engaging with long term planning issues; citizen trends such as apathy, transient populations, lack of citizen understanding, and low turn out to engagement events; and challenges related to process design. This section provides a description of the typology of challenges communities faced integrating citizen participation into their sustainability planning processes.

### *6.2.1 Typology of Participation Challenges*

The participation aims expressed by respondents to the environmental scan questionnaire suggest most communities want to include citizens in decision making in some way. Intentions aside, citizen participation involves groups of people trying to communicate what they care about and what they want for their communities, not an easy task. Figure 6:2 illustrates the prevalence of the different typologies that emerged during analysis of the

collected data. No community experienced every single challenge, and many communities experienced a variety of challenges.

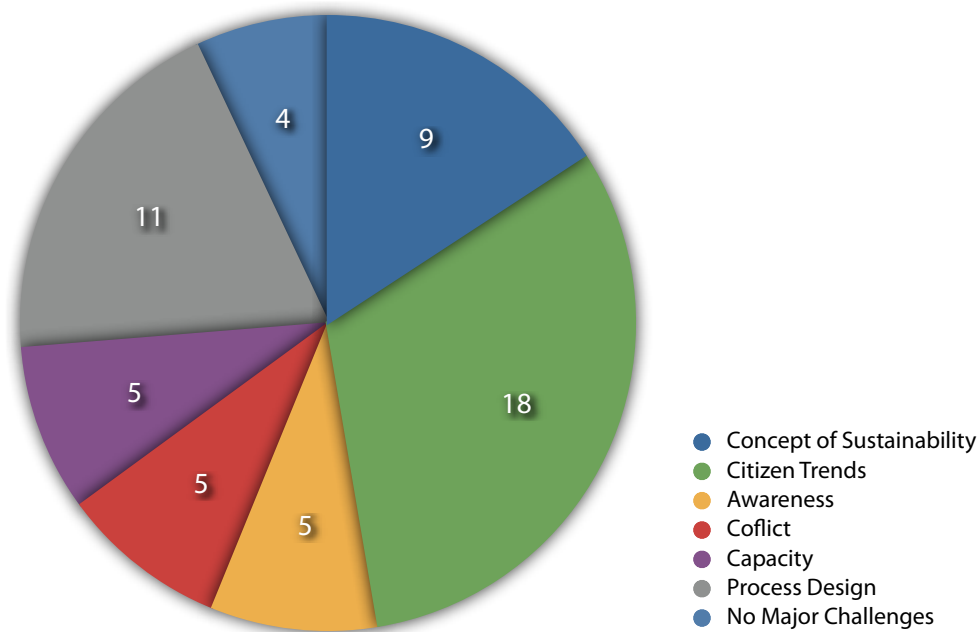


Figure 6:2 Citizen Participation Challenges Cited by Environmental Scan Communities

### Concept of Sustainability

Respondents to the environmental scan cited that one of the major challenges they faced incorporating citizen participation into their sustainability planning was the nebulous nature of the concept of sustainability. As previously discussed, sustainability can be a difficult concept for citizens to engage with. While the overarching aims of a more ecologically sensitive, equitable, and vibrant way of life are easy things to support, the specifics of how communities form these aims into a lived reality is less clear. Additionally, sustainability planning operates on a long term time frame, as such the effects of decisions made today are often not apparent to citizens for many years. Thus, when citizens are asked by planners or municipal decision makers to express their thoughts on presented sustainability plans or to contribute to the formation of these plans it can be a challenge for them to clearly articulate their reactions and express their values.

### Awareness

Connected to the nebulosity of sustainability is the lack of awareness amongst citizens of long-term planning issues. On the one hand the concept and timeline of sustainability plans make it difficult for citizens to connect how planning affects their daily lives, and on the other hand there is a lack of awareness that decisions are being made about community sustainability. Four respondents to the environmental scan cited awareness of planning issues in general as a major challenge to incorporating citizen participation into their sustainability planning processes. They expressed concern about citizen awareness of planning activities in their municipality, about what planning aims to accomplish, and how they can contribute to the processes. As a contributing factor, one respondent noted that insuring effective marketing of citizen participation events was a challenge for her community. Awareness of planning issues acts as a barrier to effective citizen participation as it can result in a divide between citizens and the planning decisions that affect their lives.

### Citizen Trends

The skills and insight from citizens can be a challenge to gather in the face of citizen trends like apathy or citizen demographics such as a prevalence of young families or a transient population. These two trends often manifest in low turnout to engagement processes, a significant challenge according to respondents to the questionnaire. Three respondents cited citizen apathy as a major challenge they faced in their experience with participatory sustainability planning. Eight others cited low turnout as a major roadblock to successful and meaningful citizen engagement processes. Three respondents noted citizen demographics as a contributor to challenges with participatory planning. Communities that have younger residents, many with young families, and/or a highly transient population have great difficulty garnering satisfactory turnout or interest in citizen participation opportunities. Additionally, two respondents noted that a lack of a democratic culture, referring to an environment where citizens are regularly asked to and regularly participate in decision making, contributes to the frustrations around citizen participation. On the other hand, communities that offer participatory opportunities regularly have found that citizens can experience engagement fatigue. Two respondents



described situations where citizens claimed they neither have the time nor energy to participate in multiple engagement exercise one after the other.

### Conflict

As discussed earlier, citizen participation is inherently an unpredictable activity (Turnhout, Van Bommel, & Aarts, 2010). Despite efforts put into preparation, process design, and public education planners can never predict how exactly citizens will respond to the issues at hand. Polarized public response to planning issues and decision making can sometimes lead to conflict, conflict between participating citizens and municipal planning departments, or conflict between groups of citizens. Five respondents to the environmental scan questionnaire listed conflict as a major road block to their efforts to incorporate more citizen participation into their sustainability planning. These communities are attempting to make appropriate decisions when there is a near fifty-fifty split between community members on issues related to sustainability planning. This is an example of the complexity of participatory planning, once citizens are invited to share their thoughts and ideas decision makers can not be guaranteed that a simple direction will emerge from the discussion.

### Capacity

The challenge of conflict management can be directly related to challenges regarding capacity when delivering and designing participatory planning processes. Five respondents described concerns around the ability of municipal planning staff to design and lead citizen participation. Making reference to a lack of time and money to invest in the design and management of these processes, and a sense of a lack of options in regards to participation mechanisms. Without appropriate training and knowledge about how to plan for, design, and manage participation processes planners and municipal staff are less able to prevent or manage citizen conflict, and other inherent challenges with citizen participation. Insufficient time and money to prepare for participatory processes exacerbates the situation. A lack of capacity, both of expertise and finances, hinder the potential of Albertan communities to provide their citizens with meaningful participation opportunities.

### Process Design

The culmination of many of these challenges manifests in the complex task of participatory process design. Eleven of the respondents to the environmental scan questionnaire referred to challenges related to process design when asked about some of the road blocks they encountered in their experience with participatory sustainability planning. Respondents discussed the challenge of overcoming uncertainty with processes, gathering quality input from citizens, ensuring a breadth of feedback, designing adaptive processes, and providing a variety of participation mechanisms. All of these challenges relate directly back to process design and insuring planners have the time and support to provide effective and meaningful avenues for citizen participation.

### No Major Challenges

Despite the range of challenges respondents encountered in their participatory planning experiences, there were some communities that had no major challenges to cite. Four of the questionnaire respondents expressed that they experienced few major challenges nor strong opposition to their sustainability planning efforts.

The results of the environmental scan show the most common challenges around citizen participation relate to citizen trends - how to overcome apathy and engage citizens in long term planning issues? While the difficulty of catching the attention of citizens is acknowledged, a question remains - is it that citizens are disinterested or are communities not reaching out to them in appropriate ways? The second most common challenge experienced by communities relates to process design, which raises questions about the support planners receive for their efforts to better design citizen participation processes. This research aims to evaluate to what degree citizen participation impacts completed sustainability plans, the responses from environmental scan communities suggests that challenges exist in getting citizens to participate in the first place. If it is difficult to get citizens to show up, and planners lack support in providing appropriate and effective participation mechanisms when they do, how can communities expect to cultivate the commitment to lifestyle change required of citizens to move their community towards

sustainability? A comparison of the above challenges with the key factors for success identified through the the case studies provides some insight into finding answers to these and other questions.

## 6.2 Conclusions

The challenges with citizen participation cited by the environmental scan communities do not differ significantly from the common challenges the two case study communities faced. Both groups of municipalities struggled to raise awareness of their sustainability planning activities amongst citizens and with the complex task of fostering sustainable lifestyles. What the experiences of Canmore and Strathcona County offer are steps to moving beyond these barriers.

While the approaches to sustainability planning between Cochrane and Strathcona County differ in scale and focus, they took some common actions that contributed to their success. These key factors are: investment in process design; commitment at multiple scales, but especially from the municipal decision makers, to sustainability principles and planning activities; the development of a common language and understanding of how sustainability is defined in their context through participatory processes; and working with outside facilitators and coordinators to guide and support sustainability planning. Considering these factors, first expressed in Chapter Five, alongside the participatory challenges cited during the environmental scan reveals some patterns and paths forward.

Table 6.1 presents groups of the participation challenges with related key factors of success from the case studies. A set of conclusions were derived from the relationship between the challenges and key factors, shared in Table 6.1. A description of the conclusions is below. Many of the challenges and key factors overlap and are interrelated. For example, the ability for a process to support the development of a common language is dependent on sufficient investment in process design, which can be a result of municipal commitment to sound sustainability planning. The grouping of key factors and challenges has been done to provide some clarity on where Albertan communities can take action to improve their participatory sustainability planning practices.

<b>Participation Challenges</b>	<b>Key Factors</b>	<b>Conclusions</b>
Capacity Process Design Citizen Trends	Process Design Outside Facilitators/ Coordinators	In order to respond to citizen trends and effectively engage citizens in sustainability planning investments must be made in process design and facilitation.
Conflict	Commitment	Citizen interest and engagement to community sustainability can only take processes so far. Municipalities must demonstrate leadership through clear commitment to sustainability principles and related planning efforts.
Concept of Sustainability Awareness	Common Language & Understanding	The unique characteristics and participation needs of sustainability planning require processes that cultivate common understandings and foster commitments to necessary lifestyle shifts.

Table 6.1 Comparison of Participation Challenges with Key Factors for Success

### **1. Investment in Process Design and Facilitation**

*In order to respond to citizen trends and effectively engage citizens in sustainability planning investments must be made in process design and facilitation.*

Intent to engage citizens in planning processes alone is not enough. The experiences in Cochrane and Strathcona County demonstrate that participation goals, methods, and approaches should be considered as early on as possible. Thought must be given to who should be involved, why, and how. Both case study communities also had clear time lines and direction for their participatory processes.

*We purposely took our time at the beginning, made sure the process was meticulously planned out, but we wanted to make sure it was adaptable and flexible. We knew things would come up along the way.*

**Past Long Range Planner, Town of Cochrane**

To support their process design and facilitation along the way both Cochrane and Strathcona County worked with consultants. While planners may hold lots of expertise, they are not necessarily skilled facilitators. Hiring consultants or trained facilitators to support processes can go a long way to ensuring success according to Hotovsky (2006). In addition to facilitation the case study communities also utilized consultants to manage their sustainability planning projects and act as a touchpoint between stakeholders.

As part of the process design communities should consider conducting formal evaluations of their participatory efforts. Laurian and Shaw (2009) have noted a severe lack of evaluation of participation efforts across the planning profession. The results of the environmental scan suggest that planning practice in Alberta mirrors this trend. How will communities fully benefit from citizen participation efforts if they are not reviewing the effectiveness of their processes? A clearer understanding of what worked and what did not could greatly benefit future participatory endeavors. Strathcona County, as an example, is conducting a full review of engagement efforts across all municipal activities. The successful experience with the Emerald Hills Urban Village charrettes sparked the evaluation initiative.

## **2. Municipal Commitment to Sustainability Planning**

*Citizen interest and engagement to community sustainability can only take processes so far. Municipalities must demonstrate leadership through clear commitment to sustainability principles and related planning efforts.*

Respondents to the environmental scan and key informants from the case studies all mentioned the unique characteristics of sustainability planning. The unique characteristics and participation requirements of sustainability planning can make it difficult to establish clear policy direction as it builds upon accountability on multiple

scales. By demonstrating leadership through commitment to sustainability principles and planning processes municipal decision-makers can help overcome these barriers.

*Where Cochrane is starting to lag a little bit is municipalities putting the tools in place to make the shift from status quo development to a sustainable type of development and a new way of doing things. Even in engineering standards and road standards and things like that. They're not there yet. They're being asked to go there but it is like turing a huge ship.*

**Past Long Range Planner, Town of Cochrane**

One way to demonstrate their commitment is for municipalities to coordinate between the different types of sustainability plans they have. The environmental scan found that many Albertan communities have engaged in multiple types of sustainability planning. Such a variety of plans can contribute to an opaque planning landscape for citizens and developers to navigate. Clarifying how different sustainability plans and policies work together would make municipal commitment and approaches to sustainability more understandable and easier to work with for stakeholders. It could also send a clear signal to citizens and developers which direction planning in the community is going. Strathcona County's council has made a public and strong commitment to sustainability, and are currently in the process of aligning their set of sustainability plans and policies.

### **3. Cultivating Shared Understanding and Commitment to Sustainable Lifestyles**

*The unique characteristics and participation needs of sustainability planning require processes that cultivate common understandings and foster commitments to necessary lifestyle shifts.*

A perennial challenge cited throughout this research has been the nebulous nature of the concept of sustainability. The lack of a clear single definition can result in municipalities, citizens, and stakeholders entering into a planning process with multiple definitions. Until clarity is established around where a community is trying to get to, it can be hard to move forward. Both case study communities cited the importance of building relationships and trust throughout the planning process. Part of establishing these factors in Cochrane and Strathcona County was the creation of a common language around sustainability through

effective participation methods. These methods, based in multi-way communication, also fostered commitment to and understanding of the importance of adopting the day to day habits that move plans from paper to reality.

### **6.3 Recommendations**

Each community that was looked at during this research is at its own stage of development with sustainability planning and citizen participation. It was noted in the Chapter Four how environmental scan communities took place-based approaches to sustainability, many adopting a number of methods and tools to make them work in their contexts. The comprehensiveness of the chosen strategies was often a reflection of where the community at large is at with their understanding and commitment to sustainability. Comparatively, key informants from both case study communities noted the positive impact of existing citizen groups and public support of sustainability principles played in their sustainability planning processes.

The following recommendations recognize that no two communities in Alberta can or will approach sustainability planning in the same way. They do suggest four areas where action can be taken to further develop the practice of sustainability planning across Alberta. Based on the results and conclusions from the environmental scan and case study analysis the recommendations also identify steps municipalities, with support from upper levels of government, can take to improve the incorporation of citizen participation in sustainability planning throughout the process and reflected in the finished plans.

- 1. Support and investment in the development of process design and facilitation within communities.**
- 2. Increase municipal leadership around clarifying and committing to place-based understandings of sustainability.**
- 3. Continue to innovate participation methods and approaches to foster the development of sustainable lifestyles.**

#### 4. Provide more opportunities for information sharing between communities.

A common response during data collection was how sustainability planning is different to other areas of practice. Compared to for example the drafting of an MDP, sustainability planning requires a different kind of planning goal and engagement with citizens. Because it is not just about roads and infrastructure investment, it operates on a longer time scale and with a deeper relationship to the daily choices of a community. If followed, the above recommendations will enable Albertan communities to build from their current experiences with and understandings of sustainability.

### 6.3 Final Thoughts

Alberta is still in the early stages of developing sustainability planning as an area of practice. The environmental scan found that most plans have been adopted and created only within the past six-ten. The practice of sustainability planning is at a point in the province where technical details and plan structure can change and be updated as the approaches mature. The environmental scan also found that there are gaps between the comprehensiveness of plans from different communities, and differing degrees of citizen participation. Nonetheless, the positive processes that have built trust, commitment, and healthy relationships between citizens, planners, decision-makers, and stakeholders provide building blocks for the maturation of sustainability planning across the province.

*Lots of communities did a sustainability plan just for the [provincial] Municipal Sustainability Initiative MSI funding, and that's the only reason they did a so called sustainability plan. There was actually no community engagement, or very little community engagement for a lot of those initiatives.*

**Past Long Range Planner, Town of Cochrane**

*The Cochrane model is a good reflection of how it can be. If [the Cochrane process] is here, a lot it is sort of happening here [lower level]. My concern is that it stays there. Like it was a way to get money and that is the end of it. But there are lots of places taking it to heart so to speak.*

**Lead Consultant, Cochrane Sustainability Plan**



Despite gaps in comprehensiveness it is clear that Albertan municipalities are stepping up to the sustainability plate. Initiative is coming from different places in different communities. In the case study communities, where a more mature relationship to sustainability planning is present, support and drive is coming from administration, municipal government, and the community at large. In other communities it is individual planners that are moving sustainability initiatives and ideas forward. Regardless of where it stems from, across the board municipalities are taking sustainability into their own hands.

*We've got wonderful leadership in Alberta in terms of sustainability planning and our citizen involvement. Of course it ranges through different communities, but the intent is there. It may not always be really well done, but there are examples of it being extremely well done. And I think that is something to move towards.*

**Past Long Range Planner, Town of Cochrane**

To build upon this initiative and support further development of sustainability planning in Alberta there is need for further research. This project set out to get a clearer orientation to the landscape of sustainability planning across the province and was necessarily limited in scope and attention. More research into citizen experiences with participation methods, plan implementation, improving provincial and federal support of municipal initiative, and regional integration of sustainability plans would go a long way in knitting together the patchwork of practice that has been created.



Figure 6:3 Alberta's Patchwork of Sustainability Planning

In almost every community that was looked at for this research a new vision has been articulated sometime over the past decade. And most communities are beginning to move towards these visions. But, if you take a bird's eye view of the communities what you predominately see are development patterns that are generally considered unsustainable. You see lots of single family detached homes in low density, car orientated neighbourhoods. What this research provides is support for excitement about how that view may begin to change over the next decade. As communities settle into these new visions they have drafted for themselves and live out the commitments to sustainability principles they have made.

This research was sparked by a belief that citizens are willing and able to engage in decisions about the environment they live in. In a belief that citizens are holders of important and beneficial knowledge about their communities. This motivation is nested within a deep recognition of the challenges embedded within both transitioning communities into sustainable lifestyles and incorporating meaningful citizen participation into planning processes.

What was found is an overarching sense that the intent has been set and that there is lots of opportunity to learn from the successful experiences within the province of Alberta. There is still much work to be done, but the momentum towards a more participatory sustainable planning practice is gaining speed. The place-based approaches to sustainability planning can be knitted together to show a clear shift in direction across Alberta towards more participatory planning that is concerning itself with the long-term vitality of our communities.

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## Appendixes

### Appendix 1: Environmental Scan Questionnaire

1. What is your name? Which municipality do you work in? What is your position within/relationship to the municipality? For how long have you worked in this capacity?
  
2. Is the municipality currently involved in sustainable community planning (Integrated Community Sustainability Plan ICSP, Municipal Sustainability Planning MSP, Community Sustainability Plan, new Municipal Development Plans with a sustainability focus, etcetera)? If so what is the status of the plan?
  
3. What is your role/relationship to sustainable community planning within the municipality?
  
4. Has the municipality received federal or provincial funding for sustainable community planning efforts? If so from which funding programs?
  
5. Was a consultant hired to work specifically on the plan? If so from which firm?
  
6. Did the municipality follow a particular methodology/program to frame and/or move through the planning process (such as The Natural Step, AUMA MSP, Federal ISP)?
  
7. Has citizen participation been specifically expressed as part of the sustainable community planning process in the municipality? Is there a specific citizen participation goal/aim?
  
8. Have you been directly involved in any citizen participation processes related to sustainable community planning? In what capacity?

9. How prevalent is citizen participation to your work and to sustainable community planning activities in the municipality?

10. Which citizen participation methods were utilized during the planning process (public hearings, world cafés, citizen advisory boards, town halls, web-based feedback, etcetera)?

11. Have there been any formal evaluations of citizen participation processes?

12. What have been some of the major challenges of incorporating citizen participation into the planning process?

13. Do you have any other related comments?

## Appendix 2: Environmental Scan Recruitment Script



ENVIRONMENTAL | UNIVERSITY OF  
DESIGN | CALGARY

I am a master's student in the Faculty of Environmental Design, University of Calgary and am carrying out a study on citizen participation in sustainable community planning in Alberta.

The purpose of the project is to understand the status of citizen participation in sustainable community planning in Alberta and develop an evaluation framework that will link the participation process to the output, in this case the completed plans. In short, the aim is to gain a better understanding of what is being done in Alberta in regards to citizen participation, and what we are getting as a result of those processes.

Would you be willing to participate in this study by consenting to respond to questions regarding this matter provided over the phone or through email for at most 45 minutes?

Kind regards,

Researcher  
Kate G. van Fraassen  
[kategvf@gmail.com](mailto:kategvf@gmail.com)

Supervisor  
Dr. Sasha Tsenkova  
[tsenkova@ucalgary.ca](mailto:tsenkova@ucalgary.ca)

### **Appendix 3: Key Informant Interview Questions**

Questions for Planning and Municipal Professionals, Key Citizen Participants, and Consultants:

1. What is your name? Which community do you represent? What is your position within/relationship to the community? (Are you a professional planner, citizen, or a consultant).
  
2. At which stage did you get involved in your community's sustainable planning process? Are you still involved? What was your role?
  
3. In your opinion, what was the goal of the sustainable planning process in your community?
  
4. What were some of the major achievements of the planning process? What do you think were the key factors that lead to these achievements?
  
5. What is already happening in your community that made it possible for people to get involved with and benefit from this planning process?
  
6. Where do you see your mark on the finished plan? What made it possible for those involved to impact the final product of the process?
  
7. Looking at your entire experience with the planning process, tell me about a time when you felt most involved or excited? What about the design of the planning process helped make this a peak experience? (It might be leadership, structures, rewards, systems, skills, strategies, and/or relationships).
  
8. What trends and changes do you see in the world outside of your community that excite you and give you a sense of confidence in the possibilities for a future planning practice in Alberta that is more sustainable and participatory? Do you have any other related comments?

## Appendix 4: Case Studies Key Informant Recruitment Script



ENVIRONMENTAL | UNIVERSITY OF  
DESIGN | CALGARY

I am a master's student in the Faculty of Environmental Design, University of Calgary and am carrying out a study on citizen participation in sustainable community planning in Alberta.

The purpose of the project is to understand the status of citizen participation in sustainable community planning in Alberta through the collection of practice stories. The focus is on the process and the output, in this case the output being the completed plans. In short, the aim is to gain a better understanding of what is being done in Alberta in regards to citizen participation and sustainability planning, and what we are getting as a result of those processes.

To that end, following the completion of an environmental scan of small-medium sized communities in Alberta engaged in sustainable community planning, two communities have been selected for a case study analysis. Your community has been selected in light of its success and innovation in the subject area. Your participation is sought due to your professional expertise and/or involvement in your community's sustainable community planning process.

Would you be willing to participate in this study by consenting to respond to questions regarding this matter provided in person or over the phone for approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour? You will be provided with a copy of the questions ahead of time, and the interview will be recorded. Your participation will make a contribution to the progression of participatory sustainable planning practice in Alberta.

Kind regards,

Researcher  
Kate G. van Fraassen  
[kategvf@gmail.com](mailto:kategvf@gmail.com)

Supervisor  
Dr. Sasha Tsenkova  
[tsenkova@ucalgary.ca](mailto:tsenkova@ucalgary.ca)

## Appendix 4: Consent Form



ENVIRONMENTAL | UNIVERSITY OF  
DESIGN | CALGARY

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**Name of Researcher, Faculty, Department, Telephone & Email:**

Kate G. van Fraassen, Faculty of Environmental Design, 403.256.5960,  
[kategvf@gmail.com](mailto:kategvf@gmail.com)

**Supervisor:** Dr. Sasha Tsenkova, Faculty of Environmental Design, University of Calgary

**Title of Project:**

Evaluating Citizen Participation in Sustainable Community Planning: the Alberta story

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This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. If you want more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study.

**Purpose of the Study:**

The purpose of this research is to tackle the question: what is the status of citizen participation in the development of sustainable community planning in Alberta, considering both the process and the output? To answer the research question an environmental scan will be conducted, focusing on what small-medium sized Albertan communities have done and are doing in regards to sustainable community planning, with particular focus on the participatory aspects of the processes. From the results of the environmental scan two community case studies will be selected to gather practice stories of innovative approaches to participatory sustainable community planning in Alberta, and



to delve deeper into what is working well and how to support further improvement of planning practice.

The primary objectives of the study are:

- 1) To consider the role of citizen participation in sustainable community planning throughout the process and as reflected in the finished plan.
  
- 2) To better understand the status of citizen participation in sustainable community planning in Alberta through an environmental scan and two community case studies in order to make recommendations of how to strengthen the processes and promote further progress of planning practice in the province.

You have been identified as a possible participant in this study due to your professional expertise and/or involvement in a sustainable community planning process in Alberta.

#### **What Will I Be Asked To Do?**

Your participation is sought due to your professional expertise and/or involvement in a sustainable community planning process in Alberta. Participation would involve answering a set of questions, which would require approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour of your time. Responses will be collected in person or over the phone where necessary, interviews will be recorded in order to aid with analysis. Your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time, in which case records of any information collected from you to date will be retained but no further information would be collected.

#### **What Type of Personal Information Will Be Collected?**

Responses to the questions will be considered public and you may be identified as a source in the Master's thesis document.

#### **Are there Risks or Benefits if I Participate?**

You should expect no risks by participating in this study.

#### **What Happens to the Information I Provide?**

Participation is completely voluntary; you are free to discontinue participation at any time during the study. Data collected will be kept in a locked cabinet only accessible by the researcher and her supervisor. The data will be stored for two years on a computer disk, after which, it will be permanently erased.

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**Signatures (written consent)**

Your signature on this form indicates that you 1) understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this research project, and 2) agree to participate as a research subject.

In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from this research project at any time. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Participant's Name: (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Name: (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Questions/Concerns**

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/or your participation, please contact:

Kate G. van Fraassen  
Faculty of Environmental Design  
250.231.4177 [kategvf@gmail.com](mailto:kategvf@gmail.com)

And, Dr. S. Tsenkova (Supervisor)  
403. 220.2155 [tsenkova@ucalgary.ca](mailto:tsenkova@ucalgary.ca)

If you have any concerns about the way you've been treated as a participant, please contact the Senior Ethics Resource Officer, Research Services Office, University of Calgary at (403) 220-3782; email [rburrows@ucalgary.ca](mailto:rburrows@ucalgary.ca).

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference. The investigator has kept a copy of the consent form.