

CLARESHOLM

Building a Sustainable Community

Cory Armfelt and Maina Waiguru

Many features of the development of the Municipal Sustainability Plan (MSP) for Claresholm, Alberta, are firsts: the key characteristic is a steering committee of 11 residents who guided the process, independently of the town council. Alberta's current municipal planning activities generally limit decision making to councils and senior municipal administrators. But, Claresholm's project provided a genuine opportunity for grassroots contributions to the MSP.

The funding is also a first. In 2005, under the federal gas tax agreement, the Alberta government received \$477 million from the federal government for municipalities. In 2007, the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association (AUMA) selected Claresholm, a town of 3700 located 104 kilometres south of Calgary, as one of five rural communities to develop an MSP based on sustainable growth initiatives. The AUMA developed a guidebook, and organized workshops to help the municipalities chart a course in sustainable planning.

Defining Sustainability

Claresholm's MSP defines sustainability as "A systematic concept, inter-relating the environmental, economic, social, cultural, and governmental aspects of local municipal development, affecting every level of organization from the local neighbourhood to the entire planet." Within these areas, the Municipal Sustainability Plan Steering Committee (MSPSC) set goals spanning the next 15 years.

Cory Armfelt, MCIP, ACP is based in Lethbridge, Alberta and specializes in land use planning projects. He was the project manager, lead facilitator and co-author of the Claresholm Sustainability Plan.

Maina Waiguru is a sustainability specialist in Calgary, Alberta. He has an M.Sc. in environmental engineering and sustainable infrastructure and specializes in integrating sustainable design principles and concepts. Maina and Cory both work for AECOM Canada (formerly UMA Engineering).



The Porcupine Hills west of Claresholm provide a distinctive backdrop for the continued development of the community. The water tower is an important sense-of-place feature within the surrounding agricultural setting. *Photo by Doug Bowman, Archer Photoworks, Claresholm, Alberta.*

The cornerstone of the planning process was "The Natural Step" course, a backcasting methodology that involves starting from a description of a successful outcome, then working backwards on how that might be achieved. Stakeholders are encouraged to "dream big" while at the same time recognizing their community's current realities and reconciling the differences with practical planning actions to reach the desired outcomes.

The idea is to build a framework for community decision making by creating a vision for the town and developing descriptions of success from baseline information. The training was taken by the MSPSC, council, and senior municipal administrators in March 2007. Further sustainability workshops, sponsored by the AUMA, were held for the same participants during the spring of 2007.

The MSPSC, whose members represent a wide variety of Claresholm recreational and professional organizations, then worked on defining success for potential community programs in preparation for a major community meeting. This open house was designed to brainstorm possible actions within the five pillars of sustainability: economic, environmental, cultural, social and governance. The residents rotated around tables focusing on each of the pillars. Led by a planner in each area, they discussed the current reality for each description of success, and ranked their choices for action planning. Because the residents were encouraged to “dream big,” inevitably some of the resulting ideas were too grandiose for such a small community. For example, a suggestion of a municipal wind farm, which would need a partnership with a large energy provider, was deferred to the 15-plus years action planning category. Similarly, a desire for a theatre remains one of the longest term goals for a proposed mixed use area to be developed from a former rail line corridor.

Another challenge was explaining why certain concepts were categorized into particular pillars. For instance, the planting of street trees was included under Cultural, rather than the Environmental section, because it was felt that they represented community pride in the town’s streetscapes more than environmental benefits.

A long-term plan to relocate Highway 2 (Queen Elizabeth 2 Highway) so that it no longer runs directly through the town is central to Claresholm’s planning. Within the next five to 10 years, a highway bypass is expected to be located about 800 metres from the downtown area.

Another significant issue is an abandoned parcel of industrial land previously occupied by a railway line. This 42-acre area has now been rezoned as mixed-use property for medium- to high-density retail and residential development, and a centre to consolidate municipal, police, and utilities’ offices.

Forming Strategies to Meet Goals

Following the open house, the MSPSC and municipal administrators spent two months reviewing the information generated by the public discussions. The suggestions were considered for their potential economic return and future investment, as well as flexibility for future community leaders who may inherit the programs. The overall goal was to select realistic strategies that would help the community progress towards its goals of sustainable development.

The backcasting results were displayed in the MSP in an easily understandable table format, setting out the descriptions of success, current realities and action plans for each of the five pillars, ranging from 0-5 years, 5-15 years and 15-plus years. For example, under the Environmental pillar, making recycling and composting the norm for all residents was defined as success for dealing with materials and solid waste. Four limitations to this goal, including the lack of recycling by some businesses, made up the “Current Reality” section. Planned actions were identified in the 0-5 years and 5-15 years sections, with an ultimate objective of expanding a blue box recycling program to all residents.

The Economic pillar table included strategies to attract sustainable industry, and promotion of Claresholm’s regional facilities, such as an agriplex for equestrian expertise. The agriplex’s activities would be helped by redesigning the commercial area around it, to boost the services provided to users of the horse facility.

Claresholm is part of the Calgary Health Region and has several healthcare facilities. A designation of some of these facilities as a centre for excellence in rural health care could help fill a provincial need for training of health professionals in this area. The training and retention of health care professionals would provide economic and social benefits to the town.

The Social pillar findings focused on the large population of seniors, need for affordable housing and improved family resources. As a result, an Attainable Housing Committee is now working on ways to develop more housing for existing residents and new workers coming to Claresholm.

Plan Adoption and Implementation

In early 2008, the Claresholm council was given the MSP to review and committed to supporting its environmental-friendly programs. The municipality is now implementing the actions set out in the document and monitoring their progress. For example, the town’s water treatment plant plans to start using solar energy; the arena is installing energy-efficient lights; and sustainable practices will be incorporated in new construction and renovation of existing community facilities.

Claresholm received a rewarding, unexpected economic benefit for its transformation to sustainability just as the planning process was being completed. In a bad news/good news scenario, a major employer left the town. However, that loss was quickly replaced by a Calgary company manufacturing green building products. The company saw Claresholm as a town that was actively working towards sustainability – as an excellent fit – and took over the recently vacated land and buildings. It was a fitting outcome to the intensive year of work by planners and the citizens of Claresholm to turn this rural community towards a new direction. *MW*