

imagineCALGARY

Where Sustainability Meets Strategic Planning

Linda Spencer

When the imagineCALGARY project was undertaken, it was intended as a means of identifying matters that were important to Calgarians, and to help in creating a sustainable future for the community. None of the organizers involved at the time had any idea that it would grow to become the largest community consultation process of its kind anywhere in the world, or that it would develop into a cornerstone for strategic planning throughout the City of Calgary.

Back to the Future

imagineCALGARY traces its roots back to 2005, when Calgary Mayor Dave Bronconnier raised the idea of engaging citizens in a review of how they felt about their city, and where it was headed. The project was quickly mobilized as a strategy to engage citizens in developing ways to manage the record-breaking growth in which the city was enmeshed, all with an eye to a more sustainable future.

The imagineCALGARY initiative saw more than 18,000 Calgarians participating in a variety of roundtable dis-

cussions, focus groups, meetings, and presentations. By sharing the hopes and dreams that were important to them, and from a perspective of a larger system where everyone and everything is connected, these individuals helped create a vision for the Calgary of the future.

“The imagineCALGARY process was really about giving Calgarians a say in the kind of place they want their children and grandchildren to live in,” says Owen Tobert, City Manager. “By identifying things that will be important over the next 100 years, we were able to develop strategies to create a sustainable future for the community.”

In-depth discussions with five citizen-based working groups identified high impact intervention points in Calgary’s built environment/infrastructure, social, economic, governance, and natural environment systems. From there, community targets emerged to help refine and focus efforts over the next 10-30 years.

Planning for Sustainable Growth

The end result of this comprehensive consultation process – the

imagineCALGARY plan For Long Range Urban Sustainability – was completed in 2006. Since its release, the plan has been honoured with awards from both the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities.

David Watson, Calgary’s General Manager of Planning, Development and Assessment, says the imagineCALGARY plan is proving to be a valuable asset, not just for issues of sustainability, but also for gauging the priorities of Calgarians. “Whenever we embark on any planning projects, the imagineCALGARY plan gives us insight into what our citizens want and need,” Watson says. “It’s a valuable tool for us when we are making decisions, particularly around sustainability, that will affect future Calgarians.”

Priorities for the Future

In many ways, the plan’s biggest asset – its comprehensive nature – may be its greatest challenge. Initially, many imagineCALGARY partners were overwhelmed by the scope and breadth of the plan.

“One of the keys to the imagineCALGARY plan is to not be intimidated by its scope,” Tobert



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Target Areas

Priorities		Applicable Targets	Examples
Success of our citizens	Setting the stage for Calgarians to thrive and have full and rewarding lives by providing a variety of opportunities and support to members of the community, while attending to higher risk populations.	By 2036, 90 percent of people living in Calgary report that they participate in active lifestyles. By 2036, all Calgarians have the option of spending less than 30 percent of their gross family incomes on housing.	Enhance roads and pathways for biking and walkability. Design communities to promote walking opportunities. Expedite processes for housing developments that are innovative and provide affordable housing. Promote construction of energy efficient buildings that will reduce homeowners' utility cost over the long term.
Health of our rivers and watershed	Taking a proactive role in addressing decreasing future water supplies and habitats to ensure this vital need is met in our community.	By 2036, per capita water consumption is reduced by 40 percent. By 2036, watershed health – as measured by loss of wetlands, water quality, non-compliance with pollution standards, in-stream flow and groundwater levels – improves.	Offer incentives (through taxes or meter charges) to decrease consumption. Implement community design that maximizes the use of recycled water. Control and limit nutrient loading to the river. Work to reduce or prohibit harmful pesticide use to acceptable levels for environmental and human health.
Climate change	Responding to this crucial global issue by developing Calgary in a resilient, sustainable way.	By 2036, Calgary's ecological footprint decreases to below the 2001 Canadian average of 7.25 hectares per capita. By 2036, we reduce the annual private vehicle kilometres traveled per capita by 20 percent.	Integrate land use and transportation planning to reduce vehicle dependency. Create designated bicycle lanes. Provide better transit service (increase capacity; increase service hours, security/comfort; improve LRT platform design; increase frequency; improve cleanliness). Increase use of transit only lanes.

says. “The plan has 114 targets that cover almost every conceivable sustainability issue and concern. It’s easy to get overwhelmed if you try to tackle the plan as a whole. The better approach is to review the plan and find those areas that are the best fit, and to incorporate them into your strategic planning. The idea is that organizations all across the community will identify their ‘piece’ of imagineCALGARY, and work towards achieving those sustainability goals. It’s that kind of commitment to the plan, and the accumulation of a series of strategic, focused gains, that will accomplish what imagineCALGARY set out to do.”

In 2007, the city went through an extensive review process to determine which of the 114 targets were applicable – and relevant – to the organization. “We ended up talking to a broad cross-section of employees and leaders at the city to ensure that we focused our energies on the right targets,” Watson says. “In the end, we selected three long-term focus areas and 22 supporting community targets as a means of concentrating our sustainability activities.”

The evaluation process was an important one for the city, encouraging an examination of how a municipal organization can best contribute to targets that are community-wide in nature.

The city will place emphasis on these three areas:

- ▶ success of our citizens;
- ▶ health of our rivers and watershed; and
- ▶ climate change.

“It’s really up to each organization or group to review the plan to see where they can have the most impact,” Watson says. “We need to remember that we don’t ‘own’ any particular target – we can all contribute to its achievement in our own way, by making the best use of our skills, experience and processes.”

imagineCALGARY and Strategic Planning

Even though the influence of the

imagineCALGARY plan is felt daily at many companies, organizations, and groups across the community, many Calgarians are unaware of the plan’s impact. “In many cases, the imagineCALGARY plan is providing a foundation for strategic planning,” Tobert says. “It’s not something that’s necessarily that visible, or that public, but the plan is helping to shape many elements of life in this city on a

daily basis.”

In recent months, the imagineCALGARY plan has been a cornerstone in the development of numerous strategic planning processes within the city. It provided a foundation for the PlanIt Calgary project, which is helping manage growth and sustainability across the community, and was also a key input into planning within Family and Community

Support Services, the transit oriented development smart growth principles and the Eco Footprint initiative.

“We don’t always use the words ‘imagineCALGARY,’ but when we are talking about sustainability issues in Calgary, the chances are good that the imagineCALGARY plan has played a key role,” Watson says.

As the city embarks on its latest business planning and budget coordination process, the imagineCALGARY principles are front and centre. The sustainability priorities, approved by council, are part of an evaluation and review process designed to ensure that corporate principles are incorporated and reflected throughout the plans.

The imagineCALGARY plan has generated additional value in its role influencing cross-collaboration across the organization, encouraging integration and consistency

through the structure and framework it provides. The sustainability priorities also served as a filter in the development of city council priorities, a key influence in corporate strategic and business planning processes.

In the future, the influence of the imagineCALGARY plan will continue to be felt in the area of public policy development, as a means to assess gaps and analyze existing policies and future needs.

Grassroots Support

The imagineCALGARY initiative was managed by the City of Calgary, but today is governed by 47 imagineCALGARY partner organizations, including the city. These partners have agreed to work towards the implementation of the plan’s targets. “What was once a city-led initiative has now evolved

into a truly community-based approach,” Watson says.

In 2007, the partnership adopted a governance structure for the imagineCALGARY initiative that saw the organization and day-to-day responsibilities of the group moving into the community. Three committees – Steering, Communications/Awareness and Collaborative Action – were established to provide a structure to organize and support the partners’ activities.

“By treating the imagineCALGARY plan as the groundwork for the future of the community, it has had a broad impact on planning across the entire city,” Tobert adds. “It provides a framework for strategic planning that is helping incredibly diverse and unique organizations work together toward a common goal – a sustainable future.” MW

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