

Sustainability Discussion Paper

What is sustainability?

The concept of sustainability was first introduced in ***Our Common Future*** (the Brundtland report) commissioned by the United Nations in 1987 in preparation for the 1992 Earth Summit (UN Conference on Environment and Development) and in recognition of concerns about world population growth, air and water pollution, ozone depletion, climate change, deforestation, declining genetic diversity and desertification. It focused on six policy areas - population, energy, food security, industry, loss of species and genetic resources and human settlements - and was the first major report to recognize the need to balance economic, social and environmental needs (the original three-legged stool).



The report defined sustainable development as “... *meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.*”

Our Common Future recognized that:

- Current efforts to maintain human progress and meet human needs are unsustainable;
- The Earth is one;
- We are hampered by institutional rigidities and compartmentalized concerns; and
- We are not taking a holistic approach.

Our Common Future resulted in a new, fresh perspective and a realization that things had to change. Roundtables on Environment and Economy were set up at senior levels of government to educate the public, organizations and governments about sustainability. The federal Roundtable, NRTEE, can be found at <http://nrtee-trnee.ca>.

The principle of sustainability is such a good idea that it has been packaged and repackaged in many different forms, including healthy communities, new urbanism and smart growth. In addition, the number of “legs on the stool” has increased as municipalities and organizations realize that there are other considerations that warrant equal attention. Additional pillars of sustainability have included culture, financial and governance.

At the City of Oshawa, we have identified five Council goals that have been aligned under five pillars of sustainability. As we work on these goals and recognize the interrelationship between the pillars, we will become a more sustainable Oshawa. Council's goals are as follows:



Sustainability isn't...

Sustainability isn't just a catch phrase – “Sustain” is an active verb that requires both action and process. It means, *“to support, bear, endure without giving way or yielding.”*

Sustainability isn't a destination – it's a journey, driven by innovation, commitment and a hope for the future.

Sustainability isn't about finding the “right” answer – it's about working collaboratively together to find a variety of actions and solutions that are constantly changing and evolving along the way.

Sustainability isn't just about preserving resources for future generations – it's also about inclusiveness and balancing the needs of all aspect of our society today and tomorrow.

Why have we based our new Oshawa strategic plan - *From Vision to Reality, An Action Plan for a Sustainable Oshawa* - on the principle of sustainability?

On March 7, 2011, Oshawa City Council approved five goals to guide it during the current term of office and directed staff to use these five goals to develop a new strategic plan based on the principle of sustainability.

Building sustainability into all of our decisions and actions is the greatest challenge of our time. For the very first time in human history, we are beginning to grasp that we operate within a finite system. Technology, rising populations, demand for goods and services, dwindling natural resources and our increasing dependence on fossil fuels and demand for consumer goods are literally changing the face of the planet.

Challenges at the municipal level including downloaded services from senior levels of government, limited revenue sources, infrastructure deficiencies, an aging and more diverse population, and a growing expectation for public engagement have also been front and centre.

Municipal government is the level of government closest to the people and the most accessible. It is where development takes place, where environmental and social issues are felt, and where a range of important services are provided. Both Council and the city administration have recognized that it is not possible to continue business as usual in many areas. The time has come to embrace the principle of sustainability, and to change and improve upon what we do and how we do it.

From a municipal perspective, the challenge is to provide all citizens with safe, comfortable livelihoods that can be financially supported, does not compromise the quality of life or development prospects of current and future generations, and does not undermine the environment.

What do sustainable decisions or policies look like?

The City has already embarked on the sustainability journey. For example:

- Partnerships within the public sector and between the public and private sectors are helping to realize cost efficiencies and spread scarce resources further.
- Brownfield redevelopment and restoration is cleaning up contaminated lands and intensifying our community.
- Right-sizing the City's fleet of vehicles (including hybrids, bio-diesel and bicycles) is reducing fuel consumption and costs, greenhouse gas and other emissions.
- Electronic communications is reducing resource consumption and waste.
- Preserving our prime agricultural areas and supporting community gardens is helping to make us more resilient.
- Preserving our creeks and river valleys, woodlots and the Oak Ridges Moraine will ensure a more stable, diversified natural ecosystem.
- The City's energy conservation program has generated cost savings and reduced our carbon footprint.

For further examples, go to **Corporate Sustainability Profile**.

Moving forward

The underlying theme of the concept of sustainability is one of responsible stewardship. We have all heard the phrase “think globally and act locally”. It requires developing a mindset that financial, economic, social, environmental and governance considerations are on equal footing. It requires a long-term, and not a short-term, focus.

Sustainability calls for a new set of principles to live by, as follows:

- Anticipate and prevent (crises management is bad economics);
- Think globally, act locally;
- Broaden public input into decision-making;
- Do more with less;
- Live within our means; and
- Shift focus from quantity to quality.

As Oshawa continues on the sustainability journey, we will need to work with these principles and:

- Balance and integrate financial, economic, social, environmental and governance considerations and decisions;
- Think and act differently;
- Make smart decisions about how we live, design our communities and invest in infrastructure;
- Be proactive and manage risks so that our city becomes more resilient; and
- Make decisions with all facets of society and future generations in mind.

A sustainable future cannot be secured without local governments.

"A society grows great when people plant trees whose shade they know they shall never sit in."

Greek Proverb