



Dialogue for a Sustainable and Prosperous Edmonton:

Output Report

Edmonton, Alberta | May 2012





The Sustainability Transition Lab

The Natural Step Canada believes that truly sustainable solutions to our communities' challenges will only be found via innovative multi-stakeholder collaboration. As such, with the support of the Catherine Donnelly Foundation, we are developing a unique new program, the Sustainability Transition Lab, which blends our own experience working on sustainability-driven innovation with the best of theory and practice in multi-stakeholder change processes. Our aim is to enable groups to move to deeper levels of understanding of common challenges, and build the commitment, capacities, and relationships for significant and lasting change through collaboration.

The Dialogue for a Sustainable and Prosperous Edmonton described in this document is one of a series of prototype Sustainability Transition Lab projects being launched in 2012.

Introduction

In December 2011, The Natural Step Canada conducted a series of interviews with influential thinkers, actors, and citizens in Edmonton to both uncover Edmonton's deepest challenges and discover the highest potential that they'd like to see for their community. Common themes emerged.

Residents in Edmonton and its surrounding communities evidently love their city. They care deeply about the many things that make it a special place to live and want to see Edmonton continue to thrive and develop. Many are also concerned that the region's prosperity is vulnerable to fluctuations in global markets and intricately connected to a non-renewable resource base. As they look to the future from a viewpoint of today's prosperity, Edmontonians have a great opportunity—and responsibility—to consider what can be done today to set the stage for sustainable prosperity.

A project emerged as a follow-up to those initial interviews, aimed at exploring the potential for a multi-stakeholder collaboration to address the challenge of aligning efforts toward sustainability and prosperity in Edmonton. To date, the project has featured:

- Further interviews with a range of influential thinkers and community stakeholders.
- Participation in, and a review of output generated through, the City of Edmonton's stakeholder consultations for its economic development strategic plan, *The Way We Prosper*, and its environmental sustainability plan, *The Way We Green*.
- Gathering a group of stakeholders for a dialogue around aligning sustainability and prosperity in Edmonton.

This report contains outcomes and lessons learned through the process, as well as a summary of the outcomes of the dialogue session, which was held on May 1, 2012.



The dialogue

With a tone of hope and connection, and a bias toward common sense and action that appears to be reflective of the broader culture in Edmonton, participants in the dialogue:

- Collectively identified key challenges related to Edmonton’s long term sustainability, resilience, and prosperity.
- Identified and explored ideas for high-leverage entry points to address some of the identified challenges.
- Laid the groundwork for further collaboration.



Participants introduce themselves: Why does the topic of sustainability and prosperity matter to you?

Dialogue participants

Participants included representatives from:

- Alberta Innovates
- Alberta Professional Planners Institute
- Alberta Urban Municipalities Association
- ATB Financial
- Christenson Developments Ltd.
- Climate Change Central
- Enmax
- Greater Edmonton Alliance
- Incite Marketing
- ISL Engineering and Land Services
- Kouri Berezan Heinrichs
- Live Local
- Municipal Climate Change Action Centre
- NovaNAIT
- Populus Community Planning
- Servus Credit Union
- TEC Edmonton
- The Alberta Real Estate Foundation
- The Catherine Donnelly Foundation
- The City of Edmonton
- The Emerald Foundation
- The Federation of Canadian Municipalities
- The Landmark Group of Builders
- The Social Enterprise Fund
- The University of Alberta
- VisiV Incorporated

Challenges

In small groups, participants explored the following question:

What are the most critical challenges we face in Edmonton in terms of achieving sustainability, resilience, and prosperity?

Following a sharing and grouping exercise, the group identified six interrelated themes in response to the question. The themes are:

Short-term addiction

Edmonton’s economy is tied to a boom/bust mentality associated

“Let’s get out of this boom-bust cycle. We don’t want to be 35 years down the road with nothing to show for today’s prosperity.”



with a heavy dependence on the energy industry. The current dominant mindset emphasizes the economy over environmental and social considerations, rather than viewing them in an integrated manner. As well, the main focus of decision making is on the short term.

Measurement

The measures and indicators that tend to be the subject of public attention generally do not include social and environmental considerations. This includes signals such as prices, regulatory frameworks, and market structures. It also relates to a general lack of sustainability thinking in governance and decision-making processes, which manifests itself (among other ways) in economic development priorities that haven't adequately considered sustainability.

Leadership vision and values

There is a perceived need for a clear vision for sustainability in Edmonton and leadership at many levels aligned with that vision. This ranges from political leadership, citizen leadership, and leadership from people in roles of authority, to individuals being willing to change their habits and behaviour. There is a sense that a strong vision and leadership are necessary ingredients in overcoming systemic resistance to change, particularly in a place that does not have the same types of constraints (e.g., physical, economic) that may otherwise drive behaviour change.

Inclusion and place building

Many communities within the city are disconnected from the rest of the community and from the economic opportunities of today's prosperity. There is a need for deep public participation and engagement to help build a sense of place and pride in the city. Currently, there are social inequalities that create barriers to community engagement.

Flourishing neighbourhoods

There is a desire for neighbourhood-scale development that is designed for people rather than automobiles and a feeling that urban sprawl is a driver for some of the most significant sustainability challenges in the community. A focus on mixed land use, smart growth, and local economic development is needed to design neighbourhoods at a scale that is more comfortable for people and treads more lightly on the planet, while providing a built form that allows local businesses to flourish. While Edmonton has some examples of this, the current dominant development patterns are not aligned with this vision.

Innovation and momentum

Edmonton has emerged as a national leader in many aspects of sustainable communities (e.g., waste management). These are



Participants discussing the challenges related to Edmonton's long-term sustainability and prosperity.

"Let's look into the future through the eyes of future citizens... If we give a hoot about our economy, then we better take this stuff seriously."



strengths that can be better leveraged to drive economic development, improve the city’s brand, and attract the skilled workforce we need. There are numerous high-profile opportunities for leadership and innovation that can be leveraged, including major redevelopment projects like the proposed downtown arena, the municipal airport re-development, and The Quarters. It is unclear whether the culture and processes exist to support and capitalize on these innovation opportunities.

Two challenges were placed in the centre of the themes to reflect their relationship to one another:

- **Balance and feedback:** The challenge of creating feedback mechanisms that enable us to adapt and evolve in a way that helps us stay in balance.
- **Create habitats for true dialogue:** The challenge, in a busy economic environment, of setting aside space for people to connect over what is truly important to them, to enable honest conversations about the challenges we face, and to access the support to develop solutions.



Participant David Faber grouping themes and challenges.

The many challenges identified and articulated are larger than any one organization can tackle—including the municipal government—and the root causes are complex. Through this exploration of challenges, the systemic nature of the links between sustainability and prosperity came to light, and some high-leverage entry points for change were identified.

High-leverage ideas

Through an Open Space¹ process, the group gathered around the question:

What ideas, explored together, do you feel are high-leverage entry points to address these challenges?

Participants put forward ideas and small groups formed around these topics to further develop the best ideas. Conversations were hosted on the following topics and questions:

“Let’s get un-stuck from the way things are currently done.”

- How do we use the Alberta Advantage to move to a low carbon future?
- What roles should universities and colleges play to promote/develop a sustainable community?
- How do we engage 825,000 Edmontonians?
- Sustainable consumption: Can we use our consumer habits to make our neighbourhoods more sustainable?

¹ Open Space is a meeting format in which participants create and manage their own agenda of parallel working sessions around a central theme of strategic importance. For more information, see: <http://www.openspaceworld.org/cgi/wiki.cgi?AboutOpenSpace>.



- What kind of measurements can we develop to monitor where we are, our progress, and where we end?
- How do we link sustainability to individual and community health policy outcomes?
- What rules need to be changed to make sustainable solutions the default ones?
- How can sustainability be a driver to attract talent/labour to Edmonton?
- Let's map Edmonton's values!
- How do we change our culture/identity to better adapt to our current and changing climate?
- Who wants to work on neighbourhood-based green home retrofits with "C Returns"?²



Open Space conversations about high-leverage ideas.

The conversations were lively and, for many, connecting with others over questions of mutual interest was a highlight of the session.

Key learnings

Through the interviews, dialogues, and consultations of this project and others related to it (e.g., *The Way We Prosper*, *The Way We Green*), there has been acknowledgement of key issues and challenges, some initial exploration of underlying causes, a recognition of the tremendous opportunities, and a sharing of ideas with others who want to make change. At the May 1 dialogue, a diverse group came together to work on an agenda of mutual importance. Coming out of the session, there is a sense that people want to contribute to the solutions and harness the collective skills and energy for meaningful action.

The following are some key learnings and observations by The Natural Step Canada arising from the process so far:

- One of the main challenges facing Edmonton from an economic development perspective is the need to attract, develop, and retain highly qualified, trained, and skilled workers.
- Edmonton has a brand challenge. For a variety of reasons well documented in *The Way We Prosper* consultations, the city is not seen nationally or internationally as a desirable place, despite the fact that the people who live here love it and experience a high quality of life.
- There is an emerging belief among a range of stakeholders that sustainability can be and should be a key part of Edmonton's desired brand promise. This is one of the recommendations coming out of *The*

² C Returns is a non-profit group dedicated to greening homes and buildings across Edmonton. For more information, see: <https://creturns.com/>.

Way We Prosper and is consistent with the principles and direction already adopted by the City in *The Way We Green*. For this promise to be credible, it must be authentic.

- There is a real opportunity for credibility in this effort in Edmonton, given the extent of leading sustainability projects and infrastructure, and the willingness of the City and other community partners to lead on this, as evidenced by the adoption of *The Way We Green*.
- Young people need a strong voice on this topic. For a city brand promise focused on sustainability to be authentic, the effort must connect with young people to help partners understand the sustainable Edmonton that young people would like to inherit and that will make it an attractive place for others.
- Some of the most significant sustainability challenges facing the city are related to sprawl, density, and the built environment.
- Neighbourhoods are a strong and emerging focus of the sustainability conversation. They are at the intersection between sustainability, community, and lifestyle. The City of Edmonton has numerous high-profile and high-impact development projects coming in the near future (e.g., redevelopment of the municipal airport, The Quarters, downtown arena project, and possible development of elements of the river valley), which afford the City an excellent opportunity to develop world-class sustainable neighborhoods in Edmonton, thereby showcasing its commitment to sustainability and helping to shape an image of the city as a sustainability leader.
- The community has planning fatigue and wants to focus on innovation and action.



Participant Darwin Park presenting his idea during the open space session.

Where do we go from here?

There is clearly a large group of stakeholders in Edmonton who feel a sense of responsibility to future generations and want to see leadership in making sure that today's prosperity is used to set the stage for tomorrow's prosperity. In fact, we believe that the general public is clamouring for a better, more mature approach to aligning economic development and environmental sustainability priorities in general—in contrast to the polarizing way it is being handled by many public officials and the media.

"We need to tell a different story altogether."

The Natural Step Canada will be consulting our partners and participants in the dialogue, as well as other stakeholders, to reflect on the work done and explore further collaboration on the next steps. The enthusiastic response to, and participation in, the dialogue suggests to us that there is a desire for stakeholders in Edmonton to collaborate on this topic. We will be exploring whether there is sufficient interest and energy to channel that desire into a more focused Sustainability Transition Lab project.

If you are interested in being a part of this emerging collaboration, please contact: Karen Miller, Sustainability Advisor, The Natural Step Canada, 613.748.3001 x238, kmiller@naturalstep.ca.



the edmonton story

A poem by Beth Sanders, harvested at Paul Byrne Hall, MacEwan University, Edmonton, May 1, 2012

extracting maximum benefit
 from good
 fortune
 biased
 toward common
 sense and action

dialogue starts
 here
 exploring
 opportunities
 responsibilities
 responsible progress
 in time

sustainability is a
 given
 implemented
 invested
 reaching far
 enough for discomfort
 at the intersection
 of sustainability
 of prosperity

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Acknowledgements

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Alberta Ecotrust Foundation
 Edmonton Economic Development Corporation



Appendix: List of Attendees*

- Vern Albush, Servus Credit Union
- Jim Andrais, City of Edmonton
- Mark Anielski, Anielski Management Inc.
- Mary Beckie, University of Alberta
- Jane Bisbee, Social Enterprise Fund
- Patrick Bohan, ENMAX Corporation
- Anna Bubel
- Dora Bundgaard, Alberta Real Estate Foundation
- Lewis Cardinal
- Hunter Cardinal, Youth Representative
- Fiona Cavanagh, University of Alberta
- Jen Cherneski
- Donna Chiarelli, Federation of Canadian Municipalities
- David Faber, VisV inc.
- Karina Farr, Servus Credit Union
- Kamren Farr
- Adam Gagnon, ENMAX Corporation
- Peggy Garritty, ATB Financial
- Bob Hawkesworth, Municipal Climate Change Action Centre
- Randy Heaps, ISL Engineering and Land Services Ltd.
- Don Iveson, City of Edmonton
- Laura Jeffreys, Greater Edmonton Alliance
- Linda Keyes, City of Edmonton
- Brian Kjenner, ATB Financial
- Simon Knight, Climate Change Central
- Ted Kouri, Incite Marketing
- Noami Krogman, University of Alberta
- Shabir Ladha, Kouri Berezan Heinrichs
- Karen Leibovici, City of Edmonton
- Pong Leung, The Natural Step Canada
- Margo Long, Incite Marketing
- Bijan Mannani, Landmark Group of Builders
- Stuart McKellar, ATB Financial
- Karen Miller, The Natural Step Canada
- Reza Nasseri, Landmark Group of Builders
- Eric Newell, Climate Change and Emissions Management Corporation (CCEMC)
- Chad Park, The Natural Step Canada
- Darwin Park, Catherine Donnelly Foundation
- Jessie Radies, Live Local
- Sheryel Raymes, Link Communications
- John Rose, City of Edmonton
- Beth Sanders, Populus Community Planning Inc.
- Emmy Stuebing, The Emerald Foundation
- Bev Therrien, Productivity Alberta
- Allan Warrack, University of Alberta

**NOTE: This list may not be complete.*