



Governing Sustainable Municipalities

Johnson Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy

Executive Summary



Municipalities in Saskatchewan play a key role in the advance of social, economic, and environmental sustainability initiatives. Saskatchewan has 766 municipalities with different levels of preparedness, facing diverse facilitators and barriers that affect sustainable development. It is therefore necessary to determine the specific factors that promote or hinder the conception, development, administration, and communication of municipality-level sustainability projects, policies and plans. **Policymaking is an important tool for sustainable development, but it must accommodate the unique characteristics of local communities in order to be truly effective.** In that spirit, the Governing Sustainable Municipalities (GSM) project was designed to help municipalities achieve their sustainability targets by identifying obstacles and potential avenues for advancement, cultivating communities of practice, and increasing the focus on municipal sustainability. The project was designed to answer four key research questions:

- What is the current state of municipal preparedness for sustainability?
- What are the key facilitators of and barriers to sustainability in the municipal sector?
- How can municipal sustainability initiatives engage underserved groups, particularly Indigenous peoples, racialized peoples, members of the LGBTQ2S+ community, and people with disabilities?
- What strategies can help us to move forward with municipal sustainability in its broadest context?

Methods and Findings

To address these questions, the GSM team combined quantitative and qualitative approaches to assess municipal sustainability issues in Saskatchewan. For the quantitative assessment, we created a policy index to assess the state of policy development in 48 purposefully selected municipalities. The municipalities were scored according to the development of policies, programs and plans in the areas of economic, social, and environmental sustainability. The quantitative data showed that cities score highest of sustainability policy development, followed by northern, small urban and finally rural municipalities. For the qualitative assessment, we collected data in roundtables, focus groups, and a forum. We spoke with 92 municipal representatives and other stakeholders, discussing issues of capacity,

inclusion, skill needs, and facilitators and barriers to success. The qualitative data revealed that Saskatchewan municipalities differ significantly but share a core group of common experiences relating to factors that facilitate and hinder municipal sustainability initiatives, as well as additional factors that are relevant on a local context or unique to individual municipalities. Overall, we found Saskatchewan municipalities are aware of the importance of municipal sustainability. Having a committed and forward-thinking council is crucial to building a strong foundation. Although the uptake and implementation may not always be straightforward, effective and visionary governance can provide a solid base for developing new or enhanced policies and plans.

Key Lessons

- ***Lesson 1: Saskatchewan municipal governments take a (relatively) balanced approach to sustainability, with municipal categories strongly influencing the level of preparedness.***

Our assessment of a purposively selected sample of municipalities revealed that Saskatchewan municipal policies, plans, and programs reflect a relatively balanced approach that takes into consideration the economic, social, and environmental aspects of sustainability. Levels of municipal preparedness for sustainability vary considerably by municipal size, with small urban and rural municipalities having less developed sustainability planning than cities.

- ***Lesson 2: Official community plans matter.*** Our research showed that one key factor influencing the level of municipal sustainability planning is the presence or absence of an official community plan (OCP). These are growth management blueprints that allow municipalities to set development and maintenance goals for available land and resources and establish how these resources are to be used. OCPs are not required by legislation but they can provide a framework for zoning bylaws, which are required by legislation. In our sample, municipalities with clear evidence of publicly available OCPs have more sustainability policies, plans and programs than municipalities without an OCP. This suggests that municipal OCPs serve as a comprehensive policy framework that can promote sustainable development.

- ***Lesson 3: Fiscal and labour/skills capacity places limits on municipal sustainability planning.***

We listened closely to the voices of municipal representatives at our roundtables, focus groups,

and forum. An overarching issue was longevity and survivability in the face of fiscal pressures and skills shortages. There is a clear tension between the maintenance costs of traditional services that meet local needs and expectations to advance sustainability programs, particularly for smaller and rural municipalities with limited budgets and declining tax-based funding due to depopulation. Municipalities also raised concerns about human capacity and employee retention, specifically a lack of experienced administrators. There is a desire for municipal sustainability but uncertainty about staff availability to achieve it.

- ***Lesson 4: Collaboration and partnership are seen as necessary for sustainability.***

Municipal representatives reported a desire to share responsibilities with neighbouring municipalities and engage in partnerships while maintaining reasonable local control over decision-making. Increased regional (inter-municipal) and community collaboration was frequently identified as a key strategy that helps Saskatchewan municipalities to overcome some of their funding challenges and to achieve sustainable development. However, many respondents noted that collaboration can be limited to municipalities in close geographic proximity, and some voiced concerns about balancing collaboration and partnership with the need to understand local contexts. Despite a long-standing and well communicated provincial government policy of discouraging forced municipal amalgamation, for some, the potential benefits of increased collaboration continue to be overshadowed by the fear of mandatory (provincially imposed) consolidation.

Saskatchewan Vision of Municipal Sustainability

Our research suggested that Saskatchewan's vision of municipal sustainability is based on local collaboration to establish and realize authentic community plans for economic, social, and environmental longevity. This vision emphasizes three elements: longevity, balance, and local understanding.

- **Longevity: the survivability of municipalities is paramount.** We heard a lot of concerns about municipal finances, fiscal responsibility, and asset management. The ability to maintain services and meet local needs was seen as the starting point for discussions of sustainability, although this can involve difficult planning decisions about future capacity. A successful vision of Saskatchewan municipal sustainability requires local needs to be met in the face of demographic changes and economic challenges.

- **Balance: local interactions between the three pillars of sustainability must be appreciated.** We regularly heard that economic, social, and environmental sustainability must be present for municipal sustainability to succeed. Some proposed that the three areas should be evenly balanced or intertwined. Others said one area of sustainability was foundational and supported the others. All participants felt that each area required attention for true municipal sustainability.

- **Local understanding: sustainability must be locally defined and situated.** There was considerable interest in municipal sustainability strategies designed as a collaborative effort between stakeholders or developed locally to ensure meaningful planning.

Recommendations to Advance Saskatchewan Municipal Sustainability

- **Recommendation 1: The municipal sector should hold sector-wide conversations about local economic, social, and environmental longevity.** Municipal governments should share information about strategies and best practices to create community plans. Municipal associations play an important leadership role as conveners. This may take the form of sessions at annual conferences and regional or other meetings. This could lead to a provincial summit on local economic, social, and environmental longevity, conducted in partnership with the Government of Saskatchewan and key stakeholders such as economic development authorities, community organizations, and environmental organizations.

- **Recommendation 2: Municipal governments should create or update their official community plans to establish frameworks for local economic, social, and environmental longevity.** Authentic locally defined community visions will help to advance municipal sustainability. A common vision and long-term planning provide the necessary foundation. Local meaning should underpin work towards longevity because this will help to establish a collective vision of sustainability. Community strengths and community pride can boost cooperation within municipalities, build resiliency with strong economic, social, environmental foundations, and make municipalities more attractive to residents. Municipal councils can act as leaders to advance

their community's wellbeing by initiating and developing planning processes that incorporate community engagement, including consultation with underserved populations.

- **Recommendation 3: Saskatchewan municipal associations should foster municipal capacity and understanding by collecting and sharing information about success stories and best practices in sustainability and/or inter-municipal cooperation.** Municipal associations play a critical leadership and convener role within the provincial municipal sector. SUMA, SARM, and New North are trusted by their memberships and are in touch with their members' initiatives. They also have the organizational strength that individual municipalities lack. The associations are well positioned to share information with their members. Working in partnership with academic researchers, SUMA, SARM, and New North also have the potential to initiate original and locally grounded research on collaboration and best practices in Saskatchewan municipal sustainability. The Saskatchewan Municipal Awards program could be the foundation of a larger effort in this regard.
- **Recommendation 4: The municipal sector, in partnership with stakeholders and the Government of Saskatchewan, should develop a strategy to support training and education initiatives designed to increase municipal governance skills.** This strategy should help to assemble the necessary resources, consultation, and expertise on economic, social, and environmental sustainability and inter-municipal cooperation and collaboration.
- **Recommendation 5: Saskatchewan's post-secondary institutions should work collaboratively with the municipal sector to identify and address skill needs.** Our research identified many

post-secondary programs related to municipal governance and/or sustainability. These should be aligned with municipal sector needs by considering accessibility beyond the main cities and ensuring that programs emphasize both knowledge and real-world skills in their learning outcomes. Cooperation was identified as a key opportunity to advance municipal sustainability. Willingness and also governance skills are required for the initiation, development and maintenance of cooperative inter-governmental relationships. These skills development programs could be launched in partnership with Saskatchewan post-secondary institutions via extension programs, executive education programs, and/or micro-credential programming.

- **Recommendation 6: The Government of Saskatchewan and Government of Canada should create substantial and accessible funding incentives for inter-municipal cooperation.** For grant and funding programs that engage or impact municipal governments, higher-level governments should prioritize projects that include inter-municipal partnerships. Given the need for local autonomy, these incentives should allow for municipal self-determination by ensuring room for innovation and flexibility in the structure of such collaborations.
- **Recommendation 7: Existing Government of Saskatchewan and Government of Canada funding programs should prioritize community projects with sustainability outcomes.** For the Government of Saskatchewan, this would include amending the Targeted Sector Support Program to include sustainability initiatives as a priority. For the Government of Canada, this would include providing municipalities with better support and more clarity on how to apply for funding from programs such as the Canada

Community-Building Fund (formerly known as the Federal Gas Tax Fund). Existing programs should also be assessed to address barriers to access, particularly the often burdensome administrative requirements.

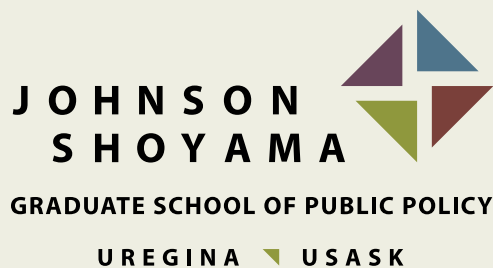
- **Recommendation 8: Municipal governments should make full use of their existing fiscal tools to support their local economic, social, and environmental longevity.** These tools include legislatively established mechanisms such as regional planning districts, development levies, servicing agreements, and local tax tools. Many of these are poorly understood and/or applied unevenly or inappropriately at the local level.
- **Recommendation 9: The Government of Saskatchewan should create strong incentives for municipalities to have an official community plan or another policy framework that creates a balanced approach to local economic, social, and environmental longevity.** OCPs or other policy frameworks could play a key role in Saskatchewan's municipal sustainability. The government has

OCP templates that should be reviewed to ensure that they deliberately and explicitly incorporate longevity, balance, and local understanding.

To assist municipal governments in creating or updating their OCPs, the provincial government should consider providing funding and other support such as training and access to experts.

- **Recommendation 10: The municipal sector, in partnership with stakeholders, the Government of Saskatchewan, and the Government of Canada, should develop a strategy to consolidate information and resources about programs, strategies, tools, legislation, and regulations related to municipal sustainability.** Given the capacity issues in many Saskatchewan municipalities, it can be challenging for municipal governments to stay on top of provincial and federal regulations that affect them. We frequently heard that it can be challenging to identify and apply for the support available to municipal governments. Consolidating information would help municipalities to understand the requirements of the provincial and federal governments.

The future of sustainability in Saskatchewan requires sustainable municipalities. The results of the GSM project and the corresponding recommendations should help municipalities to achieve sustainability targets now and in the future.



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For more information on the Governing Sustainable Municipalities project, please visit www.jsgs-gsm.ca.



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