

# Climate Change in Sustainability Planning in Canadian Cities

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## Introduction

The prevalence and focus of municipal sustainability efforts have been studied in the U.S. (Portney 2013) and, to a lesser extent, in Canada (Wheeler, 2000; Yanarella, 1999). Some municipalities in Canada are developing distinct plans focused specifically on sustainability, but there has not been an analysis as to why they are developing these standalone plans and what initiatives the plans include. Furthermore, municipal climate change planning and sustainability planning are sometimes conflated in analysis (Saha, 2009), but it is not clear if they are combined in practice. To address these questions, this study reviewed fifteen Canadian cities' sustainability plans to determine whether the municipalities are using sustainability plans to address climate change.

## Methods

This study analyzed the content of a set of fifteen sustainability plans developed by Canadian cities with populations over 50,000. The cities included in the study were: Lethbridge, Prince George, Saint John, St Albert, St John's, Kamloops, Kingston, Markham, Calgary, Victoria, Moncton, Ottawa, Sudbury, Charlottetown and Montreal. The sample of sustainability plans was identified using the University of Alberta's Canadian Sustainability Plan Inventory and the online Share the Wheel database. While sustainability principles can be employed in a range of local government plans, this research focused on plans that included 'sustainability' in either the title or subtitle. A discourse analysis was conducted on the fifteen sustainability plans.

## Literature Cited

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Wheeler, S. M. (2000). Planning for Metropolitan Sustainability. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 20(2), 133–145.  
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## Research Summary

This study reviewed fifteen Canadian cities' sustainability plans to determine whether municipalities are addressing climate change using a sustainability planning process. The study found that thirteen of the fifteen sustainability plans mention climate change somewhere in the document. In most cases, the inclusion of climate change is limited to one specific category of action focused on climate change responses, the majority of which emphasize climate change mitigation rather than adaptation. Some of the plans do reference climate change as a motivating rationale for the sustainability planning process. Overall, **sustainability plans are largely not being used by Canadian cities to comprehensively address the urgent threat of climate change**. Stakeholders, industry and municipalities can use this analysis of existing sustainability plans to inform their own municipal sustainability and climate change planning processes.

## Findings

### What is Included in Canadian Cities' Sustainability Plans?

The fifteen Canadian cities' sustainability plans analyzed in this study include a wide range of objectives and actions spanning across environmental, economic and social initiatives.

- The **social** category often includes cultural actions targeting initiatives like arts and heritage and, although factors like poverty and homelessness are the target of some actions, the sustainability plans do not focus on equity or justice rationales.
- Many **environmental** actions are stressed in the plans and they focus on water, air, climate, natural space, waste, and green energy.
- The **economic** actions do not significantly challenge existing economic development, but instead propose the addition of some environmental considerations to new economic development.
- Overall, thirteen of the fifteen plans mention **climate change** somewhere in the document.

### Climate Change as a Rationale for Sustainability Planning

- Six of the fifteen plans include climate change in the rationale to explain why the sustainability plan was created.
- Most of these six place climate change in a list of global threats (e.g. peak oil, economic instability, resource scarcity, rising fuel prices) to convey a discourse of multiple macro threats that are increasingly challenging the municipality.
- These six plans include initiatives to address climate change; most initiatives focus on climate change mitigation, but two plans also include climate change adaptation initiatives.

### Climate Change Response as a Proposed Action

- Seven plans mention climate change somewhere in the document other than in the rationale for completing the plan.
- In those cases, the plans include climate change response (mostly greenhouse gas mitigation) as a type of action.

## Conclusions

Sustainability plans are largely not being used by Canadian cities to comprehensively address urgent climate change threats.

### Climate change is one of several challenges motivating cities to complete sustainability plans.

In the plans, cities describe a confluence of global or regional challenges that require a local response with a long-term, forward-looking framework. The majority of the cities that mention climate change in the plans limit its inclusion to one specific category of action focused on climate change responses, which principally emphasizes climate change mitigation over adaptation. However, some plans do highlight climate change as a central threat and weave climate change response discourses through the discussion of many different initiatives.

Sustainability planning appears to **provide a forum for motivated cities to pursue actions that would drive economic, social, and environmental improvement in their cities** and guide decisions using a longer-term outlook. Ambitious plans stress enabling governance and partnerships to extend the authority beyond that of the municipality alone. However, sustainability plans are also used uncritically to re-brand existing practices as sustainable. Furthermore, **climate change is not comprehensively addressed by the majority of the studied sustainability plans**.

## Recommendations

- Use a sustainability planning process to build a vision for the municipality, not rebrand existing practices.
- Incorporate climate change mitigation and adaptation into all long term municipal planning documents, including sustainability plans.

## Further Information

For additional information on this study including expanded findings, please contact Laura Tozer at [laura.tozer@mail.utoronto.ca](mailto:laura.tozer@mail.utoronto.ca).

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