

# Ahead of the Curve

How Leading Local Governments  
are Benefitting from  
Sustainability and  
Other Trends



February 2010

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## Proactive Leadership in Challenging Times

Local governments are called to perform a delicate balancing act on a daily basis. They must meet competing demands of developers to reduce red tape while citizens demand greater transparency, maintain and enhance amenities while managing the immense costs of infrastructure replacement, and grapple with intangible global changes like climate change and immediate local issues like poverty. As if this were not enough, local governments must also coordinate emergency preparedness for their communities and do battle in court when challenged – not an unusual occurrence.

Sustainable development – “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”<sup>1</sup> – is a defining challenge of our time, but it is also a promising approach to solving complex, interrelated issues. Indeed, leading local governments, from Whistler to New York and Albuquerque, have embraced sustainable development as a way to live up to the strong visions of their citizens. These leaders manage trends proactively, identifying them and then “getting ahead of the curve” in order to ensure development is sustainable in the long term. To illustrate the benefits of sustainable development, this white paper summarizes six trends affecting local governments, and highlights leadership responses in a key area of local government activity: development review and approvals.

## Sustainability and Other Trends

We are seeing six major trends in municipal management in the 21st century, including a move to adopt sustainable practices. Leading communities are taking on all of these, and are leveraging benefits through their response to each trend. These trends are described below.

### 1. A Drive to Sustainability

Now widely adopted, the concept of sustainability is increasingly driving local government action – in Canada for example, significant funding is tied to sustainable community plans. The most pressing of sustainability issues is climate change – it has become a leading driver of policy and regulatory change worldwide. Nevertheless, the core concept of sustainable development is an economic imperative – we must maintain the environment that supports us if we are to ensure lasting prosperity.

Practically, this imperative means using limited resources efficiently, and distributing benefits equitably. For communities struggling to compete in a global economy, the imperative is to adopt a proactive response (as noted above). Finally, for local governments, it means ensuring high social, economic, and environmental performance by managing community development. Leading municipalities are leveraging their policies, regulations, and their permitting and licensing processes to achieve this performance, while maintaining a competitive and prosperous economy.

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<sup>1</sup> UN Environment Programme. 1987. *Our Common Future: Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development*.

## **2. Mounting Fiscal Challenges**

The maintenance of roads, sewer, water and utility infrastructure systems is essential to the functioning of our communities. Every community in North America is facing a dilemma of how to pay for the maintenance of their aging and crumbling infrastructure – most notably in our highways and bridges, which were largely built in the 50's and 60's. Municipal property taxes are expected to keep up the pace of paying for operations and maintenance, yet all municipalities are struggling to make this work. When declines in municipal tax revenues occur – such as with the sub-prime mortgage crisis – this problem exacerbates fiscal vulnerabilities, and deferring maintenance further compounds the problem.

Communities that are integrating their planning, engineering, building, operations and maintenance are able to find efficiencies. What is cheapest today vs. what is the best value in the “life-span” of a municipal investment? Leading communities are considering the full life-span of infrastructure, and working to extend existing resources by reducing waste and using more efficient technologies and processes.

## **3. Public Demands for Accountability**

Trust in the government is at an all-time low by some measures. As a result, citizens are demanding more clarity about what local governments are doing, and how well elected officials are delivering on their promises. For example, Chicago recently adopted a performance management program as a means of ensuring accountability to its citizens.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, some senior governments are starting to require cities, towns and counties to regularly report “up” on performance. These demands are beginning to extend to details of development applications, with many local governments providing citizens and businesses access with web portals to apply and check status of permits and licenses. A few are even engaging in participatory budgeting processes, involving citizens directly with priority-setting and the resulting fiscal decisions.

## **4. Competition to reduce “red tape”**

Development is a long and costly process. Municipal managers that are clear in setting desired areas for growth, and fast processes for meeting regulations and amenities, are attractive places for the development community. Therefore, there is competition among municipalities to improve application processing efficiency and to reduce the ‘red tape’ factor. At the same time, however, citizens want to ensure public objectives are not ignored through speedy permitting processes. Leading municipalities are responding by using technology and internal processes to reduce permitting time while ensuring public objectives are achieved. In communities where the public has identified infill and redevelopment as priorities, leaders are also building public support in advance of development applications, making it easier to get approvals for these otherwise difficult and time-consuming projects.

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<sup>2</sup> see *Governing Magazine's Dec 2006 conference report on Managing Performance*.  
[www.governing.com/manage/pm/perf1006.htm](http://www.governing.com/manage/pm/perf1006.htm), accessed January 25, 2010.

### 5. A Greater Need for Risk Management

Defending legal suits is a serious financial and resource burden for local governments, making prevention a worthwhile investment. Efficiently meeting regulatory and process schedule requirements is essential to preventing costly challenges in the long-run. In planning processes, the most common legal challenges are procedural, where a public notification timing requirement was not met, or an upper tier agency referral was missed. To err is human, so effective tracking and information management systems that minimize errors are a valuable cost-saving tool for local governments.

### 6. Preparing for Emergencies

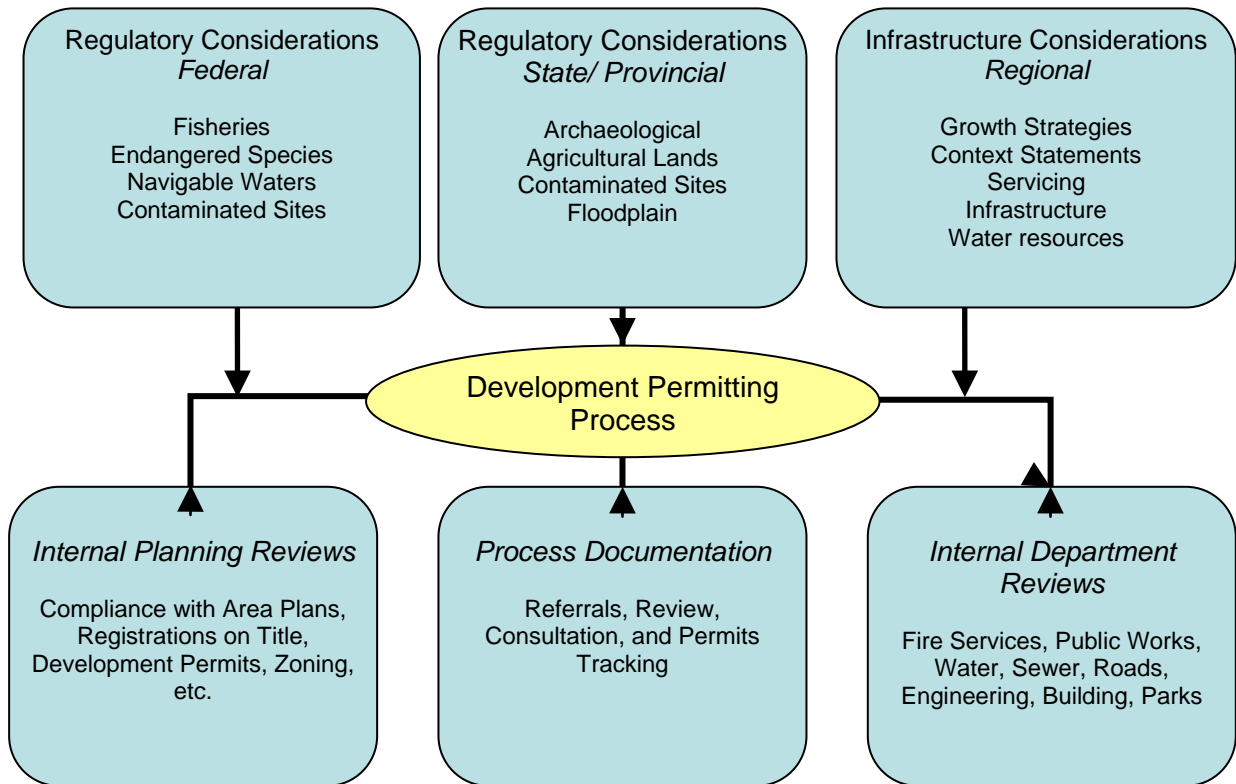
With natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina predicted to become more frequent, the importance of advance preparation is clear. Municipalities must have plans to deal with emergency storms, flooding, and other natural disasters. Physical response strategies will include gathering materials and shelter, as well as protecting essential municipal information. Many cities have implemented web-based cloud technology for data reliability, which means that in the event of an emergency the city would have access to its system and data from any internet connection.

## Development Review and Approvals

The development review and approvals process is a key part of how local governments manage land use, buildings, infrastructure, transportation and economic development in support of community objectives. These processes are complex, with local government as the centre or 'hub' of development approval information needs and expectations, so they require thorough internal and external agency reviews, as well as careful housing and organization of extensive information. Good review and approvals processes must meet the following needs:

- **Local government** staff need to communicate effectively with each other (between departments and with other nearby jurisdictions) on the application reviews.
- **Development applicants** need to know what stage their application review is in, and how long it will take to get approval.
- **Referral agencies** require compliance with regulatory conditions and measures.
- **Citizens** want to know that community values are retained, well managed and that good decisions are being made.

Accordingly, a land development application must be reviewed for many considerations, each of which requires tracking and documentation. While the specifics of reviews vary greatly from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, the chart on the next page shows in more detail the central role of the permitting process in managing requirements of the above audiences.



## Opportunities for Leadership in Development Review and Approvals

This section highlights key opportunities that the development review and approvals process offers to respond to the trends identified at the beginning of this brief.

### 1. Making Sustainability a Daily Consideration

The most innovative communities are incorporating sustainable development through a wide range of policies and regulations, for example: passive building design, citizen behaviour (car and bike sharing, public space walkable designs, recycling, and habitat conservation), transit-oriented development, neighbourhood-scale renewable energy utilities, and water conservation and reuse technologies. A key strategy is to consider buildings, streetscapes, landscaping, and infrastructure together to facilitate innovative, sustainable developments.

Every development application is an opportunity to ensure and track implementation of these policies and regulations. Because considering different systems together involves many different organizations (e.g. integrating planning, engineering, building, operations and maintenance can create efficiencies, saving money and energy), information tracking and timing for triggering actions is a critical part of embedding sustainability in the development management process.

## **2. Cheaper, faster, more resilient processes**

Leading local governments are working hard to streamline business and approvals processes. One common approach is leveraging software tools to make efficient use of time and resources (for example Waxhaw, NC has halved their response time for permit applications). This software is increasingly used to track timing and content of applications “at-a-glance,” and ranges from in-house, server-based systems to commercial web-based services. It can significantly reduce the staff effort required to manage the process, speed up approvals, and reduce exposure to legal risks by ensuring that all information is collected and communicated to the right people and in a timely manner. In addition, many local governments are turning to web-based “cloud computing” and off-site back-up systems to ensure they can continue to operate during and after emergencies.

## **3. Making Visions Real**

Mayor and Council are increasingly expected to show their constituents that their actions support their words. This accountability starts with high-level direction setting from Mayor, Council and senior staff, reflected in regular reporting on implementation of strategic plans and community land use plans. But it is during rezoning and development permit applications that citizens really experience the impact of policies, so communities are beginning to use “sustainability checklists” and similar tools to demonstrate that their policies are being implemented on the ground. In the future, we may see permitting software used to track these checklists, and to report the aggregate performance of applicants to senior management and Council. This enables them to show how well development is meeting community visions.

## **Case Study – Albuquerque, New Mexico**

An example of a leading community is Albuquerque, NM, where the City recently developed Albuquerque Green, a strategic sustainability plan for the whole community. The plan outlined how the City would meet commitments including the US Mayor’s Climate Action Charter and Architecture 2030 Challenge and many others, through an integrated approach to land use, transportation, buildings, open space, and other aspects of community development. Albuquerque reports its progress against goals in each area on a regular basis, and makes this information available to residents over the web.

This reporting requires, in some areas, integration of information from the development approvals process. For example, the City has one of America’s leading green building programs, encompassing Building Code updates to require higher energy performance and a strong incentive program to encourage green buildings, called the Green Path. Leveraging the local entrepreneurial culture, and recognizing business realities, the City’s incentives focus on reducing development costs for green building. They include financial incentives, reduced impact fees, recognition in City communications and advertising, and an expedited permitting process.

In the permitting process, developers of green buildings meeting certain criteria (e.g. LEED registration for commercial buildings) can apply to go through an integrated plan review process. With dedicated staff and plans routed to two sections at a time, permitting time is cut in half. The process is managed using a custom software application that helps staff to keep on top of permit progress, ensuring that the promised shorter permitting times are realized. Staff use the system to track the number and size of green building projects, with 1 million sq ft of green buildings permitted in 2008, representing 15% of all new construction. On-line reporting of Green Path progress, using this and other data, is in the works. Albuquerque will shortly have a system for green building that incorporates all three of the key opportunities identified above.

### **Case Study – Dawson Creek, British Columbia**

Dawson Creek is a town of about 11,000 in North central BC, and a Canadian leader in sustainability. Its new Official Community Plan (OCP) is built on a foundation of sustainability goals, and a conceptual plan aimed at achieving these by leveraging growth into more efficient patterns – while maintaining the community's identity and character. Implementation of the OCP includes sustainability checklists for different land uses. These will make clear the responsibilities of applicants, providing certainty as to expectations, and demonstrating sustainability demands transparently to the community. As these become integrated into management, the development approvals process will become one key to the community's success in achieving sustainability, to tracking progress, and to identifying new opportunities to accelerate this change.

### **Conclusion**

Local governments are facing significant demands in a rapidly changing world. Development review and approvals processes are a key local government tool for responding to these emerging demands. One key opportunity for doing so is the use of web-based software tools to improve costs, become more competitive, and reduce risks. Linked with this is the use of checklists and similar tools to ensure developments contribute to achieving community visions, and put communities on a sustainable path. Communities leaders in sustainability are increasingly looking to manage development processes in support of this objective, and are beginning to do so in innovative ways. We anticipate significant learning and evolution in this area over the next few years, creating the opportunity for new leaders to emerge.

## Resources

The following is a summary of tools and resources for further information.

HB Lanarc has developed a sustainability matrix to help communities achieve sustainability goals, and to coordinate integrated actions. Success requires collaboration between land use planners, transportation engineers, and building officials within a local government and the 8 Pillars Matrix shows the key areas and players for achieving broad sustainability goals. See [www.blanarc.ca/attachments/8pillars\\_matrix\\_HBL.pdf](http://www.blanarc.ca/attachments/8pillars_matrix_HBL.pdf)

Basic Gov is a web-based information and project management software for local governments that streamlines permit, inspection, code enforcement and planning processes. It manages and tracks planning information and project milestones. It also advances municipal accountability and transparency by giving citizens access to planning processes. See [www.basicgov.com](http://www.basicgov.com)

Waxhaw, NC is a small town that has realized substantial efficiencies through the use of BasicGov software. A brief case study is available at: [www.basicgov.com/docs/BasicGov-Customer-Success-Stories-Town-of-Waxhaw.pdf](http://www.basicgov.com/docs/BasicGov-Customer-Success-Stories-Town-of-Waxhaw.pdf)

Albuquerque, New Mexico is demonstrating leadership by making wise and innovative choices to advance Albuquerque as a sustainable community. See [www.cabq.gov/albuquerquegreen](http://www.cabq.gov/albuquerquegreen)

Information on Dawson Creek's efforts is available on their website at: [www.dawsoncreek.ca](http://www.dawsoncreek.ca)

Port Coquitlam has developed a sustainability checklist as a comprehensive assessment tool for evaluating projects at the earliest development stage. [www.portcoquitlam.ca/\\_shared/assets/Sustainability\\_Checklist2040.pdf](http://www.portcoquitlam.ca/_shared/assets/Sustainability_Checklist2040.pdf)

Basic Gov sponsored a paper on the topic of emergency preparedness planning for local governments. It can be found at: [www.basicgov.com/news/news-releases/2009/white-paper-disaster-planning-for-local-governments-sponsored-published-basicgov](http://www.basicgov.com/news/news-releases/2009/white-paper-disaster-planning-for-local-governments-sponsored-published-basicgov)

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