

Integrating Climate Change into Municipal Official Plans

Introduction

1. Local decisions about growth management significantly influence the amount of energy used and have energy, greenhouse gas (GHG) and cost implications for local governments, businesses, institutions, and residents.
2. The direction that governs local decisions about land use and community energy needs are laid out in Municipal Official Plans. Impacts of climate change on a community should be considered when planning for growth and infrastructure.
3. An Official Plan (OP) is a policy document that guides both short-term and longer-term development within a community. It applies to all lands within the municipal boundary and the policies within it provide direction for the size, location and types of land uses, provision of municipal services and facilities and preparation of regulatory by-laws to control the development and use of land.

Background

4. The principle of integrating climate change into municipal decision-making has been identified as a policy direction at the municipal, provincial and federal level. However, many municipalities are seeking additional guidance to better understand how to put this into practice.
5. Many municipalities have passed Climate Emergency Declarations and have set science-based GHG reduction targets of 30 – 50 % by 2030 and net-zero by 2050. One of the avenues identified to integrate climate change into the municipal decision-making and service delivery was integrating climate change into OPs.

Research Highlights

6. Clean Air Partnership convened municipal staff from sustainability, planning, climate change, energy and public health departments to understand commonalities and differences in perspectives across municipalities and departments. Key outcomes from the workshop are listed in points 7 - 9 below:
7. OPs could serve as an educational opportunity for highlighting the connection between land use, growth management and the GHG emissions associated with the community's chosen land use.
8. OPs should define climate change and highlight the importance of climate change as well as the significance of integrating climate change into OPs. An OP should also highlight the actions that the municipalities would take and the reporting requirements.
9. There was some differentiation in perspective between planning and climate staff relating to the level of detail on climate change commitments and actions that should be integrated into OPs. Some key questions worthy of municipal discussion include:
 - Does the inclusion of details of climate action commitments into OPs lead to an increase in implementation support?
 - Will addition of more details create a risk of requiring OP amendments when climate action commitments get updated?
10. Even with the inclusion of climate change language into the OP, a detailed Climate Action Plan addressing the local circumstances of the community needs to be developed to integrate climate change into municipal decision-making.

11. Detailed Mitigation and Adaptation Climate Plans outline the municipal targets and actions to reduce GHG emissions or improve the climate resilience of their community.
12. Municipal Planning and Climate Change staff need to discuss the pros and cons of different levels of detail reading the plan for inclusion into OPs.
13. In the [Planning for Climate Change InfoSheet](#), the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing identified incorporating climate change policies into the OP as a key planning act tool to support climate action. These policies can complement other municipal programs and initiatives that address climate change and reduce GHGs.
14. Municipal OPs provide an opportunity for climate change education within the planning department, across the municipal departments and within the council. Drafting the OPs require public consultation which provides an opportunity for climate education within the community as well.
15. For two-tiered jurisdictions, upper-tier municipalities (such as counties and regional/district municipalities) deal with broad land use planning issues that concern more than one local municipality. All upper-tier municipalities have their own OPs and have the power to approve local OPs.
16. There is a requirement that the local municipality's OPs need to align with the Regional OPs. Therefore, there is an opportunity for Regional OPs to provide guidance and direction to their lower-tier municipalities regarding climate change integration as well as other planning direction for climate change implementation.

The process of integrating Climate Change into Municipal Decision-Making

17. If the municipality does not yet have Council direction to develop a Climate Action or Community Emissions Plan, then the OP should state that the municipality will develop one that will commit them to:
 - Undertake an energy and GHG emissions inventory;
 - Set a GHG reduction target;
 - Develop a plan that outlines actions that the municipality and its stakeholders have prioritized for implementation;
 - Identify indicators on progress made towards actions and/or emissions reductions;
 - Develop a monitoring and reporting framework for the plan and the timeframe associated with progress reporting; and
 - Develop a time frame and process for plan evaluation and update.
18. If the municipality does not yet have Council direction to develop a Climate Adaptation Plan, then the OP should state the direction to develop such a plan. The plan should include:
 - The context and rationale for why the municipality needs to address climate change adaptation and resilience.
 - The scope the plan- will it focus on departmental/corporate wide/ community/sector-specific actions
 - A plan identifying the actions to be undertaken to mitigate risk and vulnerabilities and build resilience to climate changes impacts;
 - Monitoring and reporting framework in place for the plan and the timeframe associated with progress reporting; and
 - Timeframe and process for the plan evaluation and update.

19. However, if a municipality already has a council approved Climate Mitigation/ Adaptation Plan then the climate change integration into appropriate sections of the OP could include any of the following:
- Prioritized municipal climate risks and actions identified in Climate Action Plan(s).
 - The monitoring, evaluation, progress reporting and Plan update schedule.

Municipal Implications

20. Municipal OPs provide overarching guidance on integrating climate change into municipal decision-making. Specific departmental Plans must contain the actionable climate change policies and actions that will reduce emissions, advance resilience, and provide transparency and accountability regarding how the municipality is addressing climate change.
21. Municipal staff across all departments and municipalities have recognized that while integrating climate change into OPs is essential, it is only a starting point. To support municipal climate action implementation, climate change needs to be incorporated into various municipal implementation plans.
22. To advance that goal, Clean Air Partnership is developing an accompanying Climate Change Integration Consultation Guide to provide some preliminary questions for municipal staff to discuss and understand the climate implications and opportunities associated with the various municipal implementation plans.
23. As these climate change integration conversations take place in Ontario municipalities, Clean Air Partnership will facilitate municipal sharing related to approaches and the rationale for the selected approaches across municipalities.

Related Webinars and Further Reading

24. Clean Air Partnership's [Integrating Climate Change into Official Plans and Municipal Decision-Making](#) Primer
25. [The Model Standard of Practice for Climate Change Planning](#) by Canadian Institute of Planners
26. [Clean Air Council's Bringing Climate Change into Official Plans Primer and Workshop Summary](#)