

# build a sustainable community – the Maple Ridge experience

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ask most any company or institution and they'll know what it means to go "green," whether a six-person office choosing a low-carbon-footprint copier or a university planning a sustainable conference centre. But often, the prospect of setting up a sustainability program or project can be daunting, and stands in the way of achieving greener goals. As unwieldy as any sustainability plan might seem, however, even the largest can be broken down into simple steps.

## Establish the need

"The first step is establishing the need," says Jim Rule, chief administrative officer for the District of Maple Ridge, which has marked the 21<sup>st</sup> century with several municipal projects that incorporate sustainability initiatives. "The District of Maple Ridge had undertaken some significant and award-winning on-the-ground projects around 'smart' growth development and environmental projects, such as stream mapping and a unique tree planting program designed to help fight climate change. But there was a sense that we could be doing more and needed a co-ordinated approach."

## Build on what you have

The second key step is to build on what you already have. "Nobody wants to adopt a 'flavour of the month' concept," said Rule. "One of the biggest mistakes people make is that they go in assuming that nothing has been done. A benefit to building on what you already have is that the all-important 'buy-in' comes more naturally and broadly when stakeholders can see how this fits in with established direction and adopt it into the existing culture and business operations."

## Create a vision

Creating a compelling vision is critical. It not only creates an overriding goal, but can help keep sustainable practices at the top of the daily agenda. This is important as clients and citizens begin to demand sustainable practices.

"From the municipal side, the citizens really are ahead of us on this issue. They're looking to us for leadership in this area," said Rule.

## Ensure a balanced approach

While it's great to have a vision and set goals of best practices, if they don't fit within a concrete, workable business plan, or if they compromise social well-being, they're not likely to last long. Ensure you have a balanced approach to creating your sustainability plan.

"If the entire sustainability plan focused only on environmental protection, imagine what might happen if we lost sight of other valuable community building blocks such as housing, business and industry," said Rule. "We'd also run out of money. The roads and water and sewer lines would deteriorate, people would find it difficult to commute and we'd have to cut back on social programs. A sustainable community is one that looks after environmental, social and economic issues."

## Develop the program

Once the program moves into the development stage, initiatives should be examined for strengths and weaknesses in order to set direction for the future. In Maple Ridge, the end result is a program of 19 new initiatives that managers have since built into their business plans for 2008.

Two of the more ambitious plans in Maple Ridge involve the development of 1,000 acres in Silver Valley into a showcase residential community, while for

industrial development an additional 300 acres at another location is being considered. In both areas, best practices in sustainable development will be incorporated from start to finish, including the consideration of geothermal heating and water retention.

"Where sustainability is built in at the planning and design stage, the payoffs are much more significant than retrofitting later on," Rule noted. "We have a real opportunity and a responsibility to build these areas into world-class examples of sustainable development."

## Evaluate

Once a program is set up, maintain regular evaluation to make sure it is on track.

While it might seem overwhelming for a small or medium business to consider devoting so much time to sustainability initiatives, Rule says there's no reason not to. "We're no different than a business," said Rule.

"You should identify a 'champion' or team that will continually promote sustainability and encourage others to do the same. Get the organization to apply sustainable practices in all its business areas. Any organization can do that. It adds work, but we don't take people out for six months so they can just work on the initiative. Our team enjoys its role because members get to see different parts of the organization.

"It's another hat that people put on, along with their regular job," said Rule. "It gives better input, and the product is more accepted at the end of the day.

"A sustainable community enhances the quality of life of its citizens and is able to attract and retain successful businesses. Local government builds communities from the ground up – so they have an opportunity to do it right," concluded Rule. **H2**