

Municipal World

municipalworld.com CANADA'S MUNICIPAL MAGAZINE

SEPTEMBER 2017 | \$7.95

ISSN 0027-3589

09 >



9 770027 358903

Measuring what matters most

– one community at a time



What matters most to the people in your municipality? How do you know? How do you measure it? How do you prioritize objectives and resources?

In 2014, Oxford County was asking similar questions as they developed their community sustainability plan. They hired a consultant to develop the plan and recruited 14 community leaders for the steering committee tasked with ensuring its current and future relevance. Over the course of 18 months, the consultant, the committee, and county staff worked with the community to develop a sustainability plan that broadened the traditional definition of the social pillar. “We wanted to recognize that community is everything from arts, culture, education, to the social fabric aspects,” says Oxford County CAO Peter Crockett.

While they focused on core sustainability concepts, they quickly realized they needed more data. “It became clear

that if we really want to do this, we need to establish the baseline and be able to measure it incrementally along the way,” explains Crockett. Unfortunately, while some economic development and health data was available, a gap existed when it comes to measuring aspects like people’s social lives, participation in leisure and culture, and democratic engagement. The Canadian Index of Wellbeing (CIW) was identified as a tool that could help fill this gap.

Canadian Index of Wellbeing

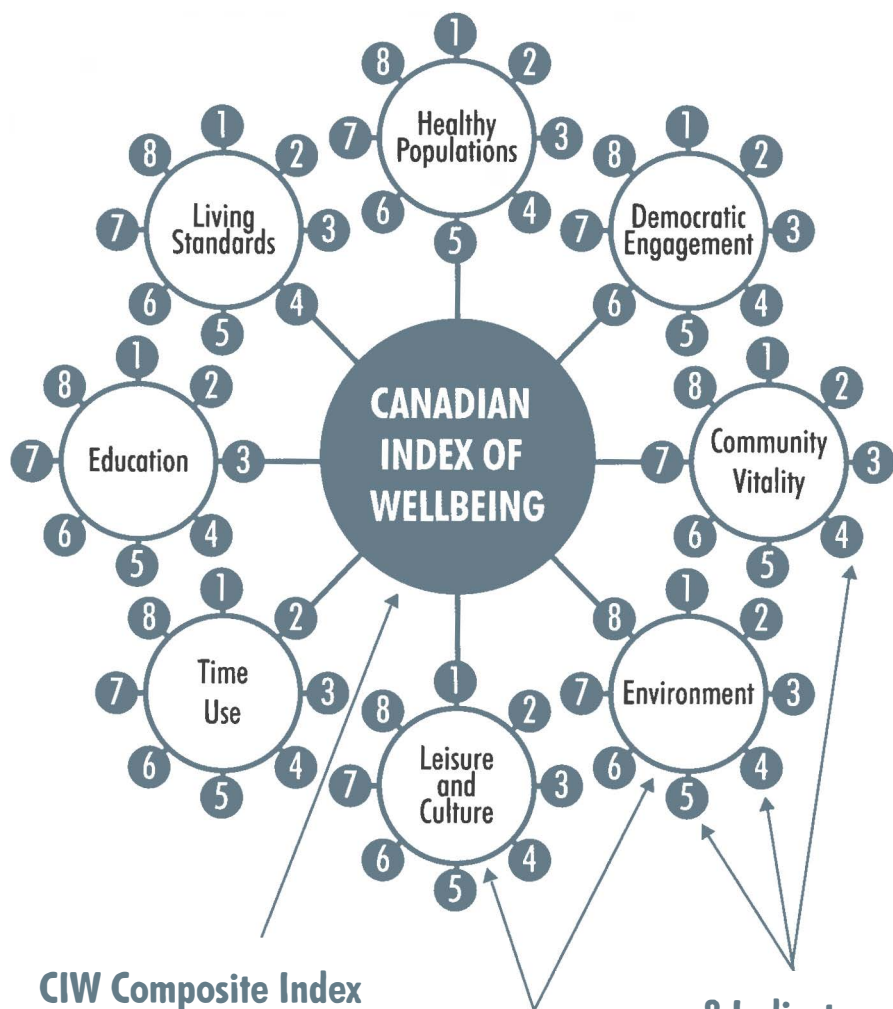
Located at the University of Waterloo, the CIW is a world leader in measuring quality of life. Its model for wellbeing stems from extensive consultation with Canadians about what matters most to them, and breaks wellbeing down into eight essential domains: community vitality; democratic engagement; education; environment; healthy populations;

leisure and culture; living standards; and time use. For Crockett, “the correlation between sustainability and the CIW is phenomenal.” The framework aligned with all aspects of Oxford’s sustainability plan and could provide the metrics they needed – now and in the future.

DOMINIQUE O’ROURKE, MA (Leadership) is a consultant, writer, and teacher. Principal of Accolade Communications, she helps private and not-for-profit organizations reach their objectives through strategic communications. Dominique’s areas of expertise include belonging, wellbeing, trust, communications, and all facets of public relations. Contact Dominique at <dominique@accoladecommunications.ca> or follow her on Twitter @DTORourke.

KAREN FARBRIDGE, Ph.D. is a member of the Canadian Index of Wellbeing’s advisory board. She is president of Karen Farbridge & Associates, consulting in areas of local sustainability, community energy, and stakeholder engagement. She also served as mayor of Guelph, Ontario for 11 years. She can be reached at <karen@karenfarbridge.ca>.

Figure 1
Canadian Index of Wellbeing (CIW)



CIW Composite Index
64 Indicators consolidated
into a single CIW average

8 Domains

**8 Indicators
in each domain**

Guelph, Ontario was the first community to use the CIW model in 2012. The city was looking for an integrated approach to inform sustainability goals, to explore social determinants of health, and to identify upstream solutions. As in any community, officials could see that despite significant costs and multiple system interventions, outcomes were sometimes poor – especially among people who are most vulnerable. They sought an approach that could identify important leverage points to allow them to focus on the root causes of critical social issues.

Measuring Local Behaviours and Perspectives

While perhaps better known for their national and provincial wellbeing indicator reports, the CIW also offers a customized

Community Wellbeing Survey that is executed in less than one year and has two components. The first is a valid, representative survey of the local population that captures residents’ perspectives and behaviours for each of the eight domains. For example, while the environment domain for the national index captures high-level data like greenhouse gas emissions, ground level ozone, and available farmland, the community survey asks people about their impressions of available greenspace and traffic congestion, whether they recycle, and whether they walk, bike, or take public transit.

“Compiling all that information gives a fairly clear snapshot of residents’ wellbeing across all eight domains. You can easily see where residents themselves have identified what’s going well and

what’s not going so well,” explains CIW director Bryan Smale.

After the community survey is completed, the CIW works closely with a collaborative of municipal and community organizations to identify specific issues of local concern and themes surfacing from the survey data that need further exploration. A second, customized report then provides deeper insight.

In 2013, the City of Kingston, Ontario chose to explore civic engagement as segmented by age, income, and geographic area. In 2014, Wood Buffalo, Alberta focused on sense of belonging to the local community, residency, and household type. The Oxford County research delved into community engagement, accessibility, quality of work, health behaviours and perceptions, and environmental concerns, which were further segmented by household income, age, living arrangement, length of residency, and location.

“It’s important for us to partner with the municipality and community organizations because they’ll understand the local context,” says Smale. “We don’t come in as experts to tell them what they need. We help them work through the information to address some of those issues and challenges that are central there and work with them to identify levers in the system.”

Providing New Insights

Gathering rich social and environmental data provides a fuller and more integrated picture of the true state of the community. For instance, when residents are asked to predict which factors make the biggest contribution to individual and community wellbeing, they typically identify living standards and healthy populations. However, the three domains that make the most significant contribution to quality of life are community vitality, leisure and culture, and time use. “That doesn’t mean the other domains are not making a significant contribution; rather, those three domains rise above the others in their importance,” says Smale.

In short, the surveys and reports provide a richer understanding of the factors that contribute to quality of life, the importance of and the connections between them. “It’s a matter of understanding that if we do X, we could affect A, B,



Rich data and analysis are only part of the equation. Real change happens through awareness, discussion, engagement, and broad community mobilization.



and C,” says Crockett. “The data set we have now helps us understand those correlations. We have a lot of work to do to be able to see how that plays out in the community, but it’s certainly a great starting point.” In his community, these deeper insights brought to light specific vulnerabilities for people who live alone, stressors for people living with young children, and the income threshold that triggered a substantial difference in quality of life. Crockett explains, “It takes more than being out of poverty to have opportunities for a higher quality of life.”

Leveraging Community Resources

Rich data and analysis are only part of the equation. Real change happens

through awareness, discussion, engagement, and broad community mobilization. When 90 percent of survey respondents in Oxford County say they have a personal responsibility to help protect the natural environment, it shows they care about where they live and understand the impact the natural environment can have on their wellbeing.

While the conversation linking wellbeing and sustainability is just beginning, it will generate ongoing support for the sustainability plan and buy-in for ongoing tracking, reporting, monitoring, and evolution of the plan over time. Now, community leaders and organizations are identifying what they want to do and when, what are the best leverage points, who will lead each initiative, and how

they will tackle challenges. For the future, the intent is to conduct local surveys in national census years to allow comparisons with other communities and to national survey data.

This shift to early and deep grassroots engagement and action is a critical element of long-term, successful outcomes. With declining budgets and ever greater needs, it has never been more important for municipalities to maximize resources, to understand residents’ priorities, and to engage them in creative solutions and collective impact. This represents a significant evolution from the top-down, siloed, industrial age municipal model to a people-centered model that uses wellbeing as the lens for decision making. **MW**