

Circular Cities and Regions

BUILDING THE CASE FOR CIRCULARITY

Start by seeing how much you've already done. Then, make plans for where you'll go.

Canadian municipalities and regions are making great strides in taking action against climate change. And as they work on their climate action plans, one thing has become clear: a thorough plan to reduce emissions and build stronger, more resilient local communities must include circular economy principles.

Circularity takes things further, though, with a holistic solutions framework that allows local governments and partners to deepen and accelerate progress on interrelated issues like climate change, biodiversity loss and waste while supporting job creation and economic development, too.

For many, the term “circular economy” is a new one. But it's built on familiar ideas like reuse, repair, recycling and zero waste—and it would be a rare community that didn't already have many of these actions in place already.

The Circular Cities & Regions Initiative (CCRI) was created to help local governments expand their understanding of circular economy principles and build them into their planning and operations. A team effort developed by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities' Green Municipal Fund, the National Zero Waste Council/ Metro Vancouver, the Recycling Council of Alberta and RECYC-QUÉBEC, the CCRI aims to advance circular economy knowledge-sharing and capacity-building in Canadian communities and regions of all sizes.

The CCRI's offerings include webinars, facilitated workshops, peer networking, coaching and one-on-one support to inspire, connect and enable local governments to take the lead in Canada's circular economy transition. One key aspect of this? Building broad support for circularity by inviting all members of the community to participate and get on board, from elected officials and other municipal staff to business owners and the general public.

A COLLABORATION OF



Here's how two municipalities have found success in building the case for circularity, with examples and tips to help others move their circular economy plans forward, too.

RECOGNIZE YOUR ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The City of Mississauga started building circularity into its climate action plan in 2018, says Diane Gibson, the city's supervisor for environmental sustainability. They were unsure at the time how it would fit into their mandate, so the goal was broad: simply to explore what a circular economy could mean for the municipality.

A couple of years later, when they began participating in CCRI workshops, Gibson and her colleagues realized they were already doing a lot of the things that contribute toward a circular economy. "We were so much further ahead than we thought," she says.

Working with their CCRI facilitator to identify existing efforts that align with circular economy principles—like Mississauga's zero-waste policy—meant that the team felt invigorated by their momentum, and ready to do more. "CCRI started the discussion, and then it spread, and then all the teams were on board," Gibson says. One person, she says, "has become an expert in climate change and circular economy because he became engaged in the workshop."

BUILD 360° ENGAGEMENT

Circularity is for everyone—not just municipal sustainability staff. The trick is to highlight how developing a circular economy can benefit the whole community: how it's a tool to solve problems and create opportunities. Mississauga, for instance, began its circularity initiatives by thinking about what its offerings could provide to the community. "It was not so much what homeowners and residents could do, but what we could give them as a service," Gibson says.

Across the border in Quebec, the City of Sherbrooke's Synergie Estrie project began as a waste management initiative, but it quickly became clear that it was an economic development initiative as well, aimed at encouraging businesses to shift toward circular principles in their operations. It took

a lot of communication efforts to explain the project and its benefits, but they were well worth it, says Antoni Daigle, the city's project officer for waste management. In fact, Sherbrooke's efforts led to enough trust from stakeholders to allow for experimentation on projects like a repair café and sharing employees across different organizations.

One key to success is to figure out how to integrate people's needs and wants with circularity goals, and to get various groups on board by tapping into their particular motivations. This involves reaching out to everyone: elected officials, municipal staff, businesses and residents. "Communicate as much as you can about the advantages and opportunities of a circular economy and that it's more than just waste management," Daigle suggests, and talk to lots of different people so "they can see the opportunities." One factor that helped Daigle and his colleagues was participating in relevant CCRI workshops to create a circular economy roadmap for the community. "It was the first time that everybody was working together cross-sector to share priorities, challenges, vision and next steps," he says.

START A SNOWBALL EFFECT

Once you've taken stock of existing projects and past successes and started communications and outreach efforts, it's time to move forward on new initiatives. One way to enable buy-in from stakeholders is to build on past achievements they've supported—to go where the energy is, in other words, rather than trying to create interest from scratch. In addition, creating signature projects—attention-getting initiatives that a wide range of community members will care about—can help drive interest and motivation.

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One example? Mississauga's Hazel McCallion Central Library, which reopened in late 2023 after two years of renovations. Early on, when they realized they had a huge amount of materials they no longer needed or could use, the library team launched an initiative to leverage the city's existing surplus asset tool to avoid sending things to landfill. Their efforts worked so well (more on that below) that teams on other projects are now trying to duplicate their success. The central library project "was so large," Gibson says. Now others are saying, "Oh, we can do it—we don't have half as much stuff as they do."

THINK BIG

When Gibson and her colleagues were planning waste diversion targets for the central library renovation, they decided to think big. The goal they set? To get the amount of materials sent to landfill as close to zero as possible. They could have gone with a number that seemed more realistic, she notes, like diverting 75 percent of waste. But the more ambitious target worked in their favour, as it removed the wiggle room inherent in lesser goals. "When you have a really ambitious goal like that, it gets people really thinking outside the box," she says.

Not only are big, hairy audacious goals more likely to get people engaged in circular economy projects, but they have the potential to end up with better results

too. Slightly missing a target of 100 percent waste diversion will still result in a highly successful diversion rate of close to 100 percent—90, say, or 95. That's a lot higher than what you would likely reach aiming for 50 or 75 percent.

MEASURE AND REPORT

Gibson knew that Mississauga's central library renovation was a huge opportunity to get more people on board with the city's circular economy goals. The challenge was how they should leverage the project to boost and maintain engagement and make people feel like they're part of a growing movement.

The answer they came up with? A comprehensive measurement system that Gibson could then use to report back on waste diversion successes. "We rented a huge industrial scale," she says, and all diverted waste was weighed before being sent away—eventually resulting in an infographic she was able to promote upon project completion, with data like "40,635 kg of paper sent to recycling" and "3,084 kg of donated books." And while many items were recycled or donated, others were reused within the municipal system, such as furniture being sent to other library locations. Weighing everything diverted helped prompt solutions, she says. People would say things like, "No, we can't let that go—it's heavy, it's going to ruin our diversion rate."

MAKE EVERYONE A CHAMPION

There will probably be one person, or a small group of people, who kickstart a community's journey toward a circular economy. But it takes a village to really get things moving. Tapping into the enthusiasm of everyone involved can help spread the word and deliver progress.

In Sherbrooke, for example, circularity champions have come from a variety of places. Elected officials, to start with, have both believed in the Synergie Estrie project and given it the space and time to flourish—to the point where more than 100 companies have signed on since 2018. Participants, too, have led the way in championing circular economy principles, Daigle says. Local business Café William, for instance, was the first Synergie Estrie member to exchange resources with another business by providing its used jute coffee sacks to local tree growers to serve as weed-suppressing ground cover.

Not only did this reduce the café's waste output, but it reduced the growers' need to purchase new materials as well.

In Mississauga, Gibson says, one team that has been instrumental in sharing the message of circularity has been procurement. As that group makes its policies more sustainable and works toward a corporate-wide focus on circularity, they're using the process as an opportunity to spread the word. "They've become a champion in sustainability and the circular economy," Gibson says. "None of them are experts, but they're able to speak enough on it to get people engaged."

Ultimately, she says, circularity champions need to come from everywhere—which means education and communication are key at every step of the way. "It's not one person who can drive this," she says. "It really is everyone understanding what their role is, and how they can contribute."

