

STRONGER TOGETHER: WHY CIRCULARITY NEEDS COLLABORATION

Partnership and cross-pollination are helpful tools to advance circularity in Canadian communities. Here's how the City of Guelph and County of Wellington have done just that.

Municipalities don't exist in isolation—they're part of regions and communities whose residents and visitors interact both within and across boundaries. So when it comes to developing circular economies, it makes sense that there are plenty of opportunities for different local governments to work together on joint initiatives.

One example is the County of Wellington and the City of Guelph. These adjoining entities have a history of cooperation on a number of fronts, and for good reason. "Our people are the same people," says Justine Dainard, smart cities project manager for the County of Wellington. "I live in Guelph and work for the County, and a lot of people live in the County and work for Guelph. There's a flow-through all the time."

But how have Guelph and Wellington County, with help from CCRI, managed to turn that flow-through into joint circular initiatives that are achieving results for climate change *and* the community? Here are their tips for success.

WHAT IS THE CCRI?

The Circular Cities & Regions Initiative (CCRI) was created and 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. Its aim is to advance circular economy knowledge-sharing and capacity-building in Canadian communities and regions of all sizes.

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FIND COMMON GROUND

One key part of creating a successful partnership is choosing the right issue to partner on. For Guelph and Wellington County, that issue turned out to be food systems. Wellington County is rural and agricultural; Guelph, while urban, is home to food processing companies and an agricultural university. So it seemed natural that they chose to submit a joint pitch for Infrastructure Canada's 2017 Smart Cities Challenge. The result? In 2019, they were awarded \$10 million for the regional circular food economy project Our Food Future, which launched in 2020.

Co-applying for programs such as this isn't easy, Dainard says. "You're trying to find one answer, when really there are two halves of an answer in all the application questions." What it takes, she adds, is "long meetings" where both partners bring their wants and needs to the table and then "carve stuff away to find what's left in common."

So when Wellington County and Guelph decided to apply to join the second CCRI cohort, they had practice working together—and existing common ground to build upon. "But it did take some work," Dainard says.

RECOGNIZE THE BENEFITS

There are many reasons to cooperate on circular economy initiatives, Dainard says. To start with, having a lot of aligned policies with neighbouring municipalities—the upcoming Green Development Standard is one example—"creates a better economic and functional flow." But working together also helps make everything work better, she says. "It creates this massive economy of scale."

Cooperation also "amplifies the scale" of what municipal partners can ask for, she adds—and means you're not competing for the same funding or other incentives. Plus, there's a time savings from meeting with external partners together, rather than individually. "We're all part of the same conversation."

Ultimately, the goal with collaboration is to capitalize on each other's abilities and on shared values and goals. Start with existing alignments in strategy and move forward from there, Dainard suggests. For instance, "we both have strategies that speak to climate-focused solutions," she says. "So that's a good driver."

BE COGNIZANT OF CHALLENGES

"We are very different corporate entities," says Dainard of the two municipalities. "Even the corporate cultures are extremely different." This means that despite the benefits of working together on circular initiatives, there can be challenges as well, plus an unavoidable doubling of effort at times—like writing two separate reports for leadership and councils. She notes that processes and speeds can differ, as well as the flexibility of coworkers to lend time and expertise to the venture.

Dainard's counterpart at the City of Guelph, Vivian DeGiovanni, also points out that despite a close relationship and shared history and projects, it's inevitable that two different municipalities will be at different stages on their circular journeys. That can sometimes make working together difficult, she says—"but not insurmountable."

There are pros and cons to every partnership, and recognizing them up front can help participants navigate the more difficult parts of the shared journey in order to achieve the benefits that come with joint ventures. And that might take time and effort, Dainard cautions. "If two entities are going together as a region for the very first time, it probably needs a year of relationship-building before entering a project or a cohort," she says. "And you need some internal champions to help you get through that."

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—Justine Dainard

TAKE ADVANTAGE OF OPPORTUNITIES FROM CCRI

Wellington County and Guelph had been working together on their Our Food Future project for a couple of years before they decided to apply to be part of the second CCRI cohort. They had a great deal of circular economy experience, but with a focused scope. Joining a cohort seemed like a logical next step to expand their circular journey, Dainard says—an opportunity “to look inward and try to get our own corporate cultures to catch up with what we were offering outward,” such as using procurement as a lever to advance circularity goals.

While Guelph in particular was quite a bit ahead of other cohort participants in their circular journey—they already had a circular framework and roadmap in place—they still found a great deal of value in the peer-to-peer process and facilitated workshops, DeGiovanni says.

For instance, while she and her colleagues already had plans to expand circular economy knowledge within various city departments, “speaking with other cohorts helped us to solidify ideas and approaches.”

One very real challenge that CCRI helps with, Dainard says, is connecting local solutions with global ones. “When you’re tackling super complex problems like climate or equity—which is tied to climate—it only works if it’s a place-based solution, because the symptoms of the problem express themselves differently everywhere,” she says. “Part of what CCRI is able to do is connect the big problem to place-based solutions and make sure that everybody’s aligned, but doing it their way—which is hugely powerful.”

