

The second of ICMA's Community Sustainability Awards in the greater-than-50,000 population category goes to the city of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, and City Manager Simon Farbrother for the Environmental Strategic Plan.



SIMON FARBROTHER

Located in Canada's "Technology Triangle," the city of Waterloo, Ontario, has a robust knowledge-based economy that is largely

driven by two major universities, several major insurance companies, and many high-tech firms. As a result, the city has seen significant population and employment growth over the past several years and is, in fact, one of the fastest-growing mid-sized cities in Canada.

Waterloo also has long been committed to livability and sustainability. This commitment is partly due to the fact that 80 percent of the community's drinking water comes from groundwater aquifers, much of which are under existing urbanized areas or areas planned for future urban development. Further, surrounding Waterloo is some of the richest agricultural land in Canada—an important economic asset as well as a key factor in the area's future sustainability.

The challenge facing Waterloo in the future is growth. In the past, the community would accommodate population growth with new development at the edge of the city, but because this type of urban development contributes to poor air quality, threatens groundwater quality, encroaches on agricultural land, causes ecosystem fragmentation, and produces other negative impacts, a new approach was needed. In 2000, Waterloo began a multipronged program to ensure continued economic growth while

maintaining a sustainable and high quality of life. The foundation of this program is "Imagine! Waterloo," the community's vision for the future and the most comprehensive community consultation process ever undertaken by the city.

"Imagine! Waterloo" contains a number of linked initiatives, one of which is the Height and Density Policy, a long-range growth strategy that establishes a plan to accommodate all future growth within the city's existing boundary. This plan anticipates that the remaining undeveloped land within the boundary will be exhausted within the next decade and that all future growth will need to be accommodated through redevelopment and intensification.

As another part of the program articulated in "Imagine! Waterloo," the city consolidated its environmental goals into a strategic plan. This plan, which contains 24 strategic actions with specific implementation timetables up through 2012, has allowed the city to continue to meet growth demands on a limited land base while upholding principles of sustainable development. The Environmental Strategic Plan was initiated to renew the city's environmental commitment and consolidate previous initiatives into one integrated planning framework; guide and prioritize both existing and new environmental initiatives in three specific phases with an implementation schedule; and address the community's vision for the environment as identified in "Imagine! Waterloo."

After formal ratification by the city council, the plan went into effect



Stream rehabilitation is one example of Waterloo's efforts toward achieving environmental sustainability.

in May 2002. A team of key personnel representing various city departments was formed to oversee its implementation and report regularly to the council and the city's corporate management team. The city's development services and public works departments contribute approximately \$5 million annually in operating and capital budgets to fund work identified under the plan.

The first three years of Waterloo's Environmental Strategic Plan have produced significant achievements in sustainable community development, including the following:

- Sustainable buildings: Through solar energy and green rooftop projects, the city is demonstrating options for environmentally responsible energy. It has invested more than \$550,000 to promote the "greening" of city hall and has constructed 10 solar homes at a value of \$3.75 million.
- Brownfield redevelopment: Eighty percent of the city's downtown core, which was once industrial/commercial, has been transformed into retail and residential use. Thirty-five hectares of formerly contaminated land have been remediated, and two treatment systems have been installed to enhance groundwater quality.

(Continued on page 24)

- Trails master plan: Beyond the economic advantages of increased tourism and recreational activities, an expanded network of trails supports a more dense urban form and a smaller urban footprint as well as providing a way to promote environmental education and awareness.
- Watershed monitoring and environmental lands acquisition strategy: The city has purchased more than 140 hectares of mature woodland. Under its Urban Forestry and Laurel Creek Watershed Monitoring Program, the lands will be protected over the long term through public ownership and management. Approximately 26 percent of Waterloo's entire land base is being maintained as greenspace, which enhances property value.
- Transportation initiatives: As part of its effort to demonstrate ways to reduce pollution and provide fuel-efficient alternatives, the city requires biodiesel to be used in all off-road diesel-equipped vehicles, and it is applying traffic demand management concepts. Other initiatives have included an anti-idling campaign, hybrid cars, and smart-car parking.
- Urban intensification policies: To achieve better air quality, reduce automotive/energy use, lessen pressure on greenfield lands, and increase live/work opportunities, city policies and rezoning regulations require intensification while minimizing the impacts on adjacent residential neighborhoods. Eight hundred new apartment units have been constructed in targeted areas, and another 800 are being planned.

Waterloo's achievements have largely been due to the city's willingness to take a leadership role in consolidating the desires of the community into a plan and establishing a timeline by which to establish priorities, measure progress, and keep the

community motivated. Beyond that, the involvement of participants from all sectors of the community was crucial in scoping the environmental initiatives and promoting buy-in. Finally, the plan provided a vehicle for collaboration among various disparate groups and enabled the city to harness the talents of the community.

Because of the Environmental Strategic Plan, the city of Waterloo has received the Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators' Award for Environmental Excellence and has been endorsed by Ontario's minister of the environment. Such recognition has helped the city demonstrate the value of municipally based environmental efforts for all concerned.