

2013 TLG Case Study Submission

Title: **Inspiring Change – The Innisfil Strategy of Citizen Engagement**

Case Study Category: Community Building

Jurisdiction: Town of Innisfil, Ontario, Canada

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Would you like the application to be considered for an Innovation Award? **Yes.**

Would you like the application to be considered for our Rapid Fire Session? **Yes.**

Synopsis

i. Intent of the Project

The Town of Innisfil submits a case study “Inspiring Change – The Innisfil Strategy of Citizen Engagement” for consideration at the 2013 Transforming Local Government Conference. In 2010, Town Council adopted the *Inspiring Innisfil 2020*, a community-based strategic plan that reflects the collective vision, values and priorities for Innisfil’s future. The intent of the plan is to build a unique Innisfil identity, encourage long term sustainable planning and facilitate positive community development through a multi-faceted citizen engagement model. Historically, Innisfil has been viewed as a collection of smaller isolated communities forced together through amalgamation with no focal centre. Significant portions of the Town have historically been annexed by a larger urban municipality without adequate consultation. The most recent annexation occurred in 2009, resulting in the loss of approximately 2300 hectares. Also, a significant amount of growth pressures are occurring in the community, given the proximity of the Town to the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), resulting in a shift in the demographic pattern as many new neighbourhoods are being built. With the planned influx of new residents it has become clear that a shared community vision and long term planning will become even more critical to the long term well being of the community. In response to these changes, Council took the initiative to undertake this ambitious project to truly engage residents and business owners, and to develop a much more comprehensive strategic plan. The plan intended to address a number of key questions:

1. What do we value as a community?
2. What kind of community we wanted to be in the future?
3. What is our plan to make that happen?

The plan was named *Inspiring Innisfil 2020* to reflect the intent of inspiring changes and transforming the organization and the community by the end of 2020. Town staff developed a multi-faceted citizen engagement strategy to encourage public participation in the strategic planning process. A variety of media channels, such as internet website, social media and newspaper advertising, were utilized to ensure that residents have different ways to contribute their ideas. In addition, a consulting team was hired to collect comments and opinions through surveys, open houses, focus groups, and interviews.

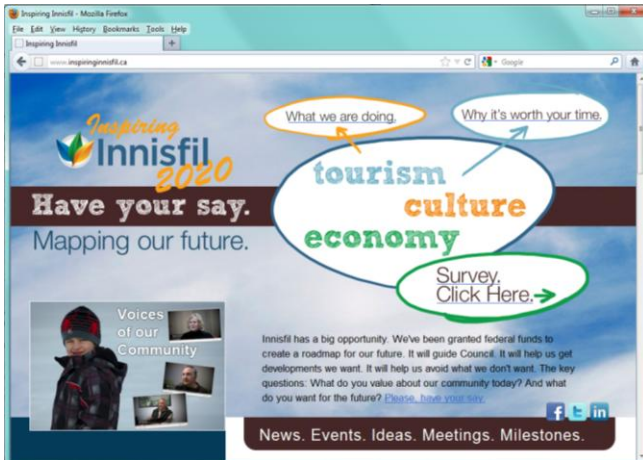
In July 2011, Council adopted the final *Inspiring Innisfil 2020* report which incorporated input from residents, Council members and staff. Community, tourism, culture and economy are identified as the four priorities that will make the vision to reshape Innisfil into “*the place to be by 2020*” a reality.

ii. Innovative Characteristics

Town staff has worked closely with the consultant in adapting the best practices and practical uses of citizen engagement methods in order to facilitate citizen input in the strategic planning process. We used a number of traditional methods such as stakeholder summits, public forums, focus groups and one-one-one interviews to gather critical input. What makes our community engagement strategy unique is that we made the process as interactive as possible and relevant to the community.

Online community engagement and social media played an integral part of developing *Inspiring Innisfil 2020*. Our website www.inspiringinnisfil.ca encouraged a variety of government-community interactions and information sharing through online surveys, blogs, facebook, Youtube, twitter and LinkedIn. Residents could follow local new stories of the strategic planning

process on the website. All the promotional photos and videos were produced locally, which captured Innisfil residents and local landmarks that people could relate to.



Identifying local champions for *Inspiring Innisfil 2020* was one of the key elements for success. Through reviewing community outreach event photos, staff identified frequent visitors and invited them to attend focus groups and interview sessions to gather more in-depth input. Amongst these active participants, we successfully recruited both formal and informal community leaders who are passionate about the project, willing to promote its benefits to others, to put energy into the project in the early stages and to stay

committed to the process over a lengthy time. In particular, two long-time and well-connected Innisfil residents, the President of the Greater Innisfil Chamber of Commerce Business and the Past President of the Ontario Marine Operators Association, provided tremendous support and created momentum in the community about the strategic plan.

Art Contest titled “My Innisfil Is...” invited students from a local high school to depict what their Innisfil would look like in 2020 using a variety of creative art forms. The submissions included mixed media, photography, paintings, drawings, poetry and media arts, which all spoke to the needs of youth, their ideas for the future of Innisfil and a representation of how they would like Innisfil to grow.

“A Dream With A Deadline: Turning strategy into action” a book by Jacques Horovitz and Anne-Valérie Ohlsson that was the recurring theme in our strategic planning workshops. We reinforced the idea that a dream must be clear, concise and inspiring, yet achievable. What makes *Inspiring Innisfil 2020* unique is that we define our vision, supporting strategies and behavior on a single-page house model. Laying out a community’s plan for the next 20 years on one page is much tougher than simply compiling data into lengthy strategic plans and situational analysis documents that end up collecting dust on the shelf.

Inspiring Innisfil 2020: Council/Staff Priorities v.2. Updated May 18 th , 2011 Council Meeting.			
The place to be by 2020.			
Improve our quality of life dramatically.	Make Innisfil a desirable destination.	Make arts, culture, and heritage major community assets.	Help all businesses succeed here.
Create an Innisfil identity that unites the town.	Hire a Culture and Tourism Coordinator.	Grow arts and culture substantially through policy development, annual funding, and promotion.	Make economic development the No. 1 priority by funding and hiring an Economic Development Officer.
Develop an urban core by 2020 at Alcona.	Boost tourism by forming at least three bold new cooperative partnerships.	Support the preservation and promotion of Innisfil's heritage with policies and funding.	Develop three major initiatives to help existing businesses succeed (and expand), with some emphasis on agri-business.
Make sure the town is financially stable by 2014.	Promote the year-round benefits of Lake Simcoe, doubling its economic impact by 2013, while improving its environmental health.	Create at least two cultural events, and promote all major events in Town and tourism publications.	Persuade businesses and professionals to choose an Innisfil location rather than commuting.
Create new networks - physical, digital, and person-to-person - to better connect residents and businesses.			Create three bold new initiatives to recruit entrepreneurs and small business.
Supporting Behaviours			
Trust Above All * Bold New Ideas * Leadership That Aims Higher * One-Step-Ahead Planning * Unified Hard Work			

iii. Costs

Early in 2010, Innisfil applied to the Southern Ontario Development Agency, an agency of the Canadian federal government, for funding to pay for studies related to economic development. The assistance from the federal government enabled us to embark on a comprehensive strategy for the Town that captured community development, economy, culture and tourism. The money was used to finance the studies, hire consultants, and later, implement some of the recommendations.

Consultant information:

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iv. Challenges

The biggest challenge in implementing the citizen engagement strategy was in gaining citizen confidence that their participation in the strategic planning process would contribute to actual outcomes by government. Some residents were skeptical about the whole community engagement process. The overall government-community relationship in Innisfil was negative based upon some bitterness which arose during an annexation process which saw a significant portion of the community lost to a neighbouring city. It was a challenge to re-establish an effective relationship with residents. There was a sense of mistrust and frustration that the voices of the community would not be considered. There was a perception that government has its own agenda and the aspirations of the community would not be taken seriously. For Innisfil, there had not been a track record of long term community planning and some failed to see the value of investing in such an exercise. There was a feeling that the money could be put to better use if it contributed to enhancing existing municipal services instead, rather than undertaking a strategic planning initiative.

v. Citizen Outcomes

Once we overcame the initial public skepticism, the community engagement process helped us answer questions like “What’s our identity? What are our strengths and weaknesses? How can we implement positive changes?” in a way that benefited the Town and our relationship with the community. We have enhanced our outreach efforts through communication and obtained a better focus on the needs of the community. Since the implementation of *Inspiring Innisfil 2020*, the Town has successfully accomplished a number of significant goals. One of the major goals has been the empowerment of the community to take control of its future. In a very short time we have:

1. Created a unified identity for Innisfil through a branding initiative and adoption of a new corporate logo in March 2012.
2. The urban core of Innisfil was officially recognized by the Ontario provincial government as a primary settlement area in January 2012, a designation that supports economic development and population growth.
3. A citizen-based Committee successfully organized and ran the second annual Farmers’ Market this year.
4. The Innisfil Arts, Culture and Heritage Council has been formed after a thorough consultative process with the citizens of Innisfil.

We attribute our success to the philosophy from “A Dream With A Deadline: Turning strategy into action”, which emphasizes the need for clarity, brevity, inspiration while remaining realistic and attainable in strategic planning. We have developed a solid implementation plan for *Inspiring Innisfil 2020* that carries specific deadlines for each action item agreed by policy makers, staff and the public. It allows progress and success to be measured and reported. What makes us special is that we transform ideas and vision into action plans and positive results with a set of practical tools. The implementation plan advocates a shared vision that calls for commitment from the government and community. Council has made a solid commitment toward advancing the plan through thoughtful deliberations during the annual budget exercise, which links directly to those initiatives which are contained within the community strategic plan. Staff monitors the implementation progress and reports the results by utilizing a traffic light system that illustrates the current status of each initiative. (Red: lack of or no progress; Yellow: moving slower than anticipated; Green: advancing according to plan and on time) Progress reports are submitted to Council on a quarterly basis to ensure transparency and accountability.

vi. Applicable Results and Real World Practicality

Actively engaging citizens in community planning and policy development processes is a growing trend in municipal government. Our citizen engagement strategy has proven to be successful and we are confident that our methodologies can be adopted as best practices for other local governments. There are many small communities comparable to Innisfil that have experienced similar challenges such as boundary changes, demographic shifts and rapid urbanization. For many of us, community identity has become an issue and there has been an expressed desire to strengthen the sense of community identity within municipalities. A comprehensive community-based strategic plan and citizen engagement strategy could be instrumental in facilitating social cohesion, incubating tourism and economic development initiatives, fostering a sense of belonging and establishing a collective vision.

Presentation Style

- A short video explaining what inspired the Town to undertake a community-based strategic plan
- Conduct the Marshmallow Challenge to explain the importance of team collaboration, being inclusive of different perspectives, thinking outside of the box and identifying the assumptions in community planning process. It is critical that the plan gets tested early and often to avoid “crises” from happening.
Instructions for the Marshmallow Challenge: <http://marshmallowchallenge.com/>
- Powerpoint presentation outlining different citizen engagement strategies employed by the Town of Innisfil, successes and pitfalls, and lessons learnt for future improvements
- Handouts
 - o *Inspiring Innisfil 2020* House Model – highlighting key strategies, action items and supporting behaviors to achieve the community’s vision, “*The place to be by 2020*”.
 - o Traffic Light monitoring system to indicate the status of each *Inspiring Innisfil 2020* initiatives and how it measures performance.