



Marleen Morris & Associates
shaping the future

Town of Okotoks Social Wellness Framework

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1. Executive Summary

Social wellness is one of three components of community sustainability, integrating and overlapping with economic and environmental sustainability. The Town of Okotoks has embraced a commitment to a sustainable future, which is embodied in its Vision Statement:

In the year 2030, Okotoks is a leader in sustainability, driven by an involved, connected and creative community. Through visionary leadership, citizens are engaged in maintaining a safe, caring and vital community that honours our culture, heritage and environment.

In January 2010, the Town of Okotoks embarked on a process to develop a Social Wellness Framework. Working with the Social Wellness Framework Steering Committee, Marleen Morris & Associates designed and implemented a process that included:

- A literature review undertaken to explore the range of definitions and approaches to social wellness. The review focused on the academic literature on the subject, as well as on plans and reports from other jurisdictions.
- A review of past reports undertaken for and by the Town of Okotoks in order to ensure that the Social Wellness Framework considered related priorities and directions.
- An environmental scan to provide a profile of the demographic characteristics of Okotoks and insight into the types of pressures and opportunities it is facing in the coming years.
- A survey of Okotoks residents to obtain feedback about priorities with regard to the seven components of community social wellness and to gauge how well they feel Okotoks is doing on those priorities. This research included a survey designed specifically for youth (ages 13-19).
- An inventory of programs and services that have an impact on social wellness. This included the identification of the extent and nature of unmet demand for programs and services.
- Focus groups with a broad cross-section of residents including youth, young families, seniors, the business community and new immigrants to probe more deeply the seven aspects of social wellness.

The process to develop the Social Wellness Framework has resulted in:

- A set of indicators that may be tracked over time to monitor and report on the state of social wellness in Okotoks.
- A framework for action on social wellness that includes recommendations to address the issues and concerns related to social wellness.
- A clear understanding of community values with respect to the aspects of social wellness identified.
- A map of programs and services offered in Okotoks that have an impact on social wellness, including the nature and extent of unmet demand for programs and services.

Social Wellness and Sustainability

The concept of social wellness and sustainability operates at two levels: at the individual level and at the level of the community. Social wellness implies that the basic needs of residents are being met and that individuals enjoy a satisfactory level of wellbeing. In addition, it requires resources and capacity at the community level to support the collective actions necessary to protect its natural resources, plan for and weather changes in the economic environment and rebound from adversity. As such, a framework for social wellness and sustainability requires a focus on both individual values and community resources. The components to be addressed by the Social Wellness Framework, as outlined in the Request for Proposals, set the foundation for the development of a comprehensive approach to social wellness. The components identified were:

- Playing: leisure activities, arts and culture, parks, sports, recreation;
- Working: employment and the supports required for it, income, volunteerism and unpaid work, job skills and training;
- Learning: formal and informal education, literacy, skills training, lifelong learning;
- Moving: movement of people and goods by various modes of transportation (public and private), and the associated infrastructure;
- Engaging: public processes for a civil society, accessibility of and opportunities for people to provide input into decisions that affect them;

- Living: shelter and housing, individual health and well-being, personal safety, the fulfillment of basic needs for all; and
- Sense of place: community identity, history and heritage, public art, public spaces, and community events.

Research Findings

The community consultation conducted for this project resulted in a rich body of data and information, which was analyzed to identify the values and issues related to social wellness. The analysis conducted allowed the values and issues to emerge from what was heard from the people of Okotoks through the surveys and focus groups. This analysis yielded the following findings:

- Sense of community: For many, the sense of community found in Okotoks defines the town and its people. Three key elements are core to this identity: a sense of neighbourliness, access to natural spaces, and a vibrant downtown core.
- Children and youth in Okotoks: People in Okotoks place a high value on and are concerned about children and youth in the community. Their hope is to see children and youth provided with opportunities to explore their interests and potential and be positively engaged in the community.
- Working and the economy: There is both high value and significant concern regarding working and the economy in Okotoks. People expressed a desire to have a diverse and vibrant economy and business sector; one that includes a strong professional and financial sector and a wide range of career-oriented job opportunities.
- Cost of living: This was identified fairly consistently as an issue and concern in Okotoks. Many families and individuals are struggling financially, due in part to the costs of housing and commuting, and the higher than average number of children in each family. This is making it difficult for them to take advantage of community programs, as most of these have a cost attached.
- Transportation: The lack of public transportation emerged as an issue primarily from seniors, youth, and low-income residents, and was recognized as a concern even by those who travel by automobile and are, therefore, not directly impacted. A public transportation service within Okotoks was seen as an immediate need by all groups, while

seniors expressed a need for improved service to travel to medical appointments in Calgary. Commuter service to Calgary and the surrounding area is not an immediate concern, but indications are that it will become an issue within the next ten years.

- **Growth:** Community growth is a concern for people in Okotoks and the issue has the potential to become highly divisive. For some, the quality of life in Okotoks is tied to maintaining the population cap that limits the number of people living in the town; others believe that the town can maintain the quality of life and grow beyond the population cap at the same time.
- **Access to health services:** There is a high value placed on access to health services and support, and residents feel that Okotoks is doing well in this regard. There is, however, insufficient capacity in a number of program areas, all of which serve vulnerable populations, as well as a shortage of family physicians in the community.
- **Seniors:** There are a number of issues facing seniors in Okotoks, which given the age profile of community will grow in significance over the next ten years. These concerns are related to the availability of a full range of housing and support options in Okotoks and the lack of public transportation.

A Social Wellness Framework for Okotoks

The community consultation and background research for this project informed the development of the Social Wellness Framework for Okotoks. The function of this conceptual framework is to connect and bring coherence to the factors identified as playing a key role in social wellness in Okotoks. As well, the framework is a decision-making and planning tool that can be used by Council, administration, service providers and other community stakeholders.

The Social Wellness Framework for Okotoks is guided by four principles which form the foundation for six community values. These values come to life through the seven components of social wellness identified earlier. The Social Wellness Framework for Okotoks is consistent with and furthers the Vision for Okotoks.

The Town of Okotoks Social Wellness Framework is guided by four principles:

- Sustainability: ensuring that the decisions and actions taken today will not negatively impact the quality of life available to future generations.
- Engagement: enlivening and deepening the connection that residents feel for the community and other people in the community.
- Integration: understanding the nature and implications of the inter-relatedness inherent in all systems, and putting that understanding into practice.
- Diversity: encouraging and welcoming the involvement and contributions of all individuals and groups in the community, recognizing that while we are all unique we are also all alike.

These principles are the foundation for six community values:

- Personal growth: supporting education, lifelong learning and personal development.
- Natural environment: preserving the natural environment and adopting sustainable environmental practices.
- Sense of community: fostering connected and caring neighbourhoods.
- Economic vitality: providing a range of opportunities to engage in meaningful work that benefits the individual and the community.
- Social inclusion: providing the community infrastructure that allows all residents to meet their basic needs and be engaged in and make a meaningful contribution to the community.
- Health and wellbeing: supporting individuals and families to realize physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health and wellbeing.

These values come to life through the seven components of social wellness listed and described earlier: playing, working, learning, moving, engaging, living, and sense of place.

A Framework for Action on Social Wellness

The rich body of data and information that emerged from the research can be utilized by organizations throughout the community to take action to improve social wellness. The Framework for Action on Social Wellness in Okotoks, however, focuses on those actions that will have multiple impacts

across more than aspect of social wellness. The Framework for Action on Social Wellness consists of fourteen recommendations for action.

Develop programming and make funding available to strengthen the sense of community at the neighbourhood level.

Given that a sense of community and neighbourliness are at the heart of the town's identity, it is recommended that programming be developed and funding made available to strengthen the sense of community at the neighbourhood level. This programming should focus on bringing neighbours together in a way that fosters the formation of ongoing relationships.

Continue to include neighbourhood parks in the design of new communities.

Neighbourhood parks play a key role in fostering a sense of community in Okotoks and are ideal venues for delivering the programming recommended in the previous section. Although there is currently a strong commitment to planning for neighbourhood parks in the design of new communities, this recommendation has been included as a reminder of the important role that they play in making Okotoks a desirable place to live.

Continue the commitment to preserving and providing access to natural spaces.

Access to natural spaces, particularly through the trail and path system is a key factor contributing to the sense of community that exists in Okotoks. This, along with neighbourliness, provides the foundation for the community's identity. Although there is currently a strong commitment to preserving and providing access to natural spaces, this recommendation has been included as a reminder that this factor plays an important role in making Okotoks a highly livable and desirable community.

Make available a wide range of after school programming for students.

People in Okotoks are very supportive of engaging children and youth in positive activities that foster health, wellbeing, and creativity, as well as a connection to the community. At the same time, they are concerned that many children and youth, in the period between the end of the school day and dinner, are neither with a parent or other adult or involved in a community program. It is recommended, therefore, that a wide range of

after school programming be made available with the goal of engaging as many students (grades 1-12) as possible.

Make after school programming financially accessible for all students.

Despite a high median household income, the community consultation suggests that many families in Okotoks may be financially stretched and the children, therefore, unable to participate fully in community programs. The purpose of this recommendation is to ensure that all students in Okotoks, especially those from families that are struggling with cost of living issues, are able to participate in the after school programs and activities proposed in the previous recommendation. Making programs and activities financially accessible would mean that they would either be free of charge or a subsidy would be available to those who need it.

Develop strategies that provide reduced costs for enrolling in multiple recreation, sport and cultural programs.

In exploring further the impact that being financially stretched may have on families living in Okotoks, it was recognized that many are forced to make difficult choices when it comes to enrolling children in recreation, sport and cultural programs. This recommendation, to offer a discount for multiple enrolments for recreation, sport and cultural programs in Okotoks would allow families and individuals to stretch their budget and participate in more programs and activities than would normally be possible.

Increase programming for preschool aged children.

Data from the program and service inventory, as well as input from the community consultation identified insufficient capacity in the area of programming for preschool aged children. At the same time, research has shown the importance of early childhood education and development, and the significant benefits that children realize when they are involved in playing and learning with other children. The objective of this recommendation is to increase the amount of programming available for the preschool age group.

Develop a strategy to attract one or more niche business sectors to Okotoks.

There is significant concern with the lack of career-oriented job opportunities available in Okotoks, and the predominance of retail and service positions. Youth particularly are concerned about this and many indicated that they expect to have to leave Okotoks to pursue a career. The lack of strong professional, career and financial sectors in Okotoks means that a large segment of the population is commuting to Calgary and other communities to work. The purpose of this recommendation is to attract and establish one or more niche business sectors in Okotoks. This would not only diversify and strengthen the local economy, but would also enable more people to work, as well as live in Okotoks.

Consider and further community social wellness when developing and implementing strategies to maintain a vibrant downtown core.

It is known that plans have been developed and efforts are underway to maintain a vibrant downtown core. The input gathered during this project would support those initiatives. A vibrant downtown core contributes to creating a sense of community through being a 'community hub'; a place that draws residents and visitors alike. It would also serve to create an environment that would attract new businesses to Okotoks. The purpose of this recommendation is to ensure that community social wellness is considered in the development and implementation of strategies to maintain a vibrant downtown core.

Consider and further community social wellness in the development and implementation of the transit feasibility study.

There is significant concern about the lack of public transportation in Okotoks. The groups most affected by the absence of public transportation are seniors, those with mobility and health challenges, youth, and low-income residents. The Town of Okotoks is in the process of conducting a transit feasibility study to assess the demand for a local transit service as well as an inter-city express service to Calgary. This recommendation is intended to encourage the Town of Okotoks and the transit consultant to consider the social wellness implications of a public transportation service.

Monitor community housing needs and develop land use, sub-division and housing plans that will address those needs.

Housing emerged as an issue from several perspectives and all age groups. Generally speaking, there exists a perception that the cost of housing in Okotoks is high, and that the town lacks a range of housing options. Currently, the key issues are lack of affordable or entry level housing and housing with support services for seniors. The purpose of this recommendation is to ensure that through land use, sub-division and housing plans, the range of housing available in Okotoks addresses community housing needs. Given that housing issues will likely change over time, this recommendation also includes the development of a framework for monitoring and assessing housing need in the community on an ongoing basis. The framework should include existing, as well as proposed residential stock, as existing housing stock is usually less expensive.

Address the critical gaps in health services.

People in Okotoks place a high value on access to health services and support. While there is overall satisfaction with this aspect of social wellness, the research for this project identified insufficient capacity in a number of programs that serve vulnerable populations in the community. In addition, input from the community consultation would suggest that there is a shortage of general practitioners in Okotoks, which has made it difficult for new residents to find a physician. This recommendation suggests that a community effort, led by those organizations and individuals involved in health care and those who require these services, be mounted to address the gaps in health services identified.

Develop specific strategies and consider and further opportunities to address issues identified by youth (e.g. working, housing, engagement, transportation, and post-secondary education).

While most youth indicate that Okotoks is a great place to live, many expect to move away after high school graduation to pursue an education and develop a career. For older youth and young adults there are no opportunities in Okotoks: no post-secondary education, no career-oriented jobs, and no appropriate and affordable housing. Retaining older youth and young adults in the community would be beneficial for both the family and the community. The purpose of this recommendation is to encourage the

retention of youth and young adults in the community through an ongoing effort to identify and address the factors that work against this.

Develop a framework and strategies to nurture multiculturalism in Okotoks.

Community concern about multiculturalism is very low at this time, undoubtedly a reflection of the demographics of the current immigrant population; the vast majority of immigrants living in Okotoks have come from the United States or the United Kingdom. This situation, however, is beginning to change, and there are an increasing number of immigrants arriving from Asia. This recommendation, to develop a framework and strategies to nurture multiculturalism in Okotoks, would allow the town to be prepared for new immigrant populations and able to adapt more quickly and seamlessly to changing demographics.

Social Wellness Indicators

In order to track progress and reveal where the reality of life in Okotoks may be departing from the vision for social wellness, a series of indicators were developed. The indicators correspond to those aspects of social wellness that the residents of Okotoks rated as 'most important'. Effort was made to identify methods of data collection that are economical and not overly labour intensive. Where new data collection is suggested, indicators have been framed so as to be aligned and comparable with data being collected in other jurisdictions or at larger geographies. Taken together, the social wellness indicators will monitor the state of social wellness in Okotoks.

Playing

- Percentage of the population participating in parks and recreation programs.
- Percentage increase in the number of free/low cost recreation, events, and celebrations relative to the increase in population.
- Percentage of the population indicating 'very satisfied' with (a) community programming; (b) outdoor recreation facilities; (c) indoor recreation facilities; and (d) cultural and historical services.

Working

- Percentage of the population considered to be low income.
- The difference between the average employment income and 'living wage' income.
- Degree of diversity in occupations in the labour force.
- Employment rate – adult and youth.
- Percentage of the population that lives and works in Okotoks.

Learning

- High school graduation rates.
- Percentage of respondents indicating 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with the school system.

Moving

- Percentage of the population indicating 'very satisfied' with parks and pathways.
- Percentage of the population rating pedestrian and road safety 'very good'.

Engaging

- Percentage of the population indicating a 'strong' or 'somewhat strong' sense of belonging to the local community.

Living

- Percentage of the population with a regular medical doctor.
- Percentage of the population indicating 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with their life.
- Percentage of the population rating community safety 'very good'.
- Percentage of the population in 'core housing need' (i.e. spending 50% or more of their gross household income on housing).

Sense of Place

- Hectares of green field development.
- Percentage change in hectares of green field development.
- Percentage of the population who report knowing their neighbours well.