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CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT IN SUSTAINABILITY PLANNING: PATTERNS AND BARRIERS FROM HINTON AND WOOD BUFFALO, ALBERTA, CANADA

ABSTRACT

Canada's Gas Tax Fund is intended to support municipal sustainability initiatives, provided that each applying municipality formulates a form of Integrated Community Sustainability Plan. Both the federal and provincial governments made citizen participation an important requirement of the planning process for creating these sustainability plans. This article's goal is to describe the nature and challenges of citizen involvement in developing sustainability plans for rural communities in Alberta, Canada. Using the Town of Hinton and the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo as case studies, planners, public officials, and sustainability coordinators offered their perceptions of citizen engagement, including stages of involvement, participatory techniques, promoting factors, and challenges. Our results show that sustainability planning was broadly consultative, employed diverse techniques, and respondents welcomed the opportunity to provide input and support for the sustainability plans. Key challenges to citizen engagement included busy lifestyles, mobile populations, poor travel conditions, and citizens' lack of understanding of broader sustainability issues. The results indicate that sustainability planning is better understood as an extended process of social learning-simple consultation processes do not necessarily facilitate the deeper, long-term goals of sustainability.

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