

Taking Climate Action: powers, tools & strategies for local governments

There are many ways local governments can influence and promote positive climate action at the local level. Here’s an overview of options and opportunities – some conventional, some more creative.



TOOL: LAND USE PLANNING DOCUMENTS

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

New Brunswick’s Community Planning Act defines the types of land use planning documents communities of all types and sizes must or may have. Such documents offer communities the opportunity to incorporate a wide range of principles, aspirations and goals relating to energy, sustainability and climate action.

DOCUMENT	DETAILS
<p>Land use plans (mandatory for all)</p> <p><i>Reference: Community Planning Act, Sections 21-52</i></p>	<p>By law, every community must have a land use plan (a Municipal Plan for municipalities; a Rural Plan for all other entities) that outlines the community’s overall goals relating to land use and future development. Land use plans set parameters for how future growth will be managed, so they can be used to embed principles and policies relating to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emission reduction • Energy efficiency • Densification, sprawl avoidance and priority areas for development • Increased use of public transit • Preservation of biodiversity • Green spaces • Active transportation • Renewable energy • Solid waste reduction <p>and more.</p>
<p>Secondary Plans (optional for all)</p> <p><i>Reference: Community Planning Act, Sections 21-52</i></p>	<p>Secondary Plans enable local governments to create a more detailed plan for a particular part of their community, such as a neighbourhood or an underdeveloped area. Secondary Plans can be used to achieve specific objectives such as the redevelopment of a brownfield, the densification of an area to increase the feasibility of public transit, or the development of alternative energy systems.</p>

IMPORTANT TO KNOW

New Brunswick's **Statement of Public Interest Regulation**, enacted in 2023, impacts land use planning across the province:

- The Regulation establishes a **provincial land use planning framework** for the first time
- It identifies **five key priority areas** for land use planning: 1) settlement patterns; 2) agriculture; 3) climate change; 4) flood and natural hazard areas; and 5) natural resources
- For each of the five areas, it establishes **policies which must be complied with in every local land use plan in the province**. (The policies are minimum standards; local governments may choose to exceed them.)

Local governments must comply with the Regulation, but they can also point to it for legal (and potentially political) support of their planning initiatives.



TOOL: LAND USE CONTROLS

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

New Brunswick's Community Planning Act authorizes local governments to pass a variety of by-laws to manage land uses in accordance with community objectives. Such by-laws offer local governments the opportunity to incorporate a wide range of standards, principles and goals relating to energy, sustainability and climate action. Note that Rural District Advisory Councils do not have the authority to pass by-laws, but may have options available through their Rural Plan or Regional Service Commission.

OPTIONS TO CONSIDER	DETAILS
Zoning by-laws <i>Reference:</i> <i>Community Planning Act, Sections 53-61</i>	Zoning by-laws are very effective tools for defining how land may or may not be used in a community. In addition to setting standards for factors such as building height, size and end use, they may also be designed to promote sustainability priorities already identified in the community's land use plan, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mixed-use development and higher density neighbourhoods• Parks and other natural spaces
Subdivision by-laws <i>Reference:</i> <i>Community Planning Act, Sections 74-90</i>	Subdivision by-laws provide comprehensive direction over how parcels of land may be subdivided and developed. They may also be enhanced to promote sustainability priorities already identified in the community's land use plan and by-laws, through considerations such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Efficient street and lot layout• Stormwater retention and drainage

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Water conservation • Very high efficiency standards such as net-zero or net-zero ready <p>As ‘greenfield’ developments, subdivisions offer tremendous sustainability opportunities.</p>
<p>Development Charges by-laws</p> <p><i>Reference: Community Planning Act, Sections 91-94</i></p>	<p>Development Charges by-laws allow local governments to impose fees on new developments to cover some or all of the capital costs of extending municipal infrastructure. Fee structures can be designed to complement sustainability priorities already identified in the community’s land use plan, such as higher densities and mixed-use developments.</p>
<p>Incentive or Bonus Zoning by-laws</p> <p><i>Reference: Community Planning Act, Sections 95-98</i></p>	<p>Incentive or Bonus Zoning by-laws are tools by which local governments may relax certain by-law requirements for developers in return for a public good or benefit. (For example, a developer may be given an exemption from a height restriction in return for constructing additional affordable housing units.) Incentive or Bonus Zoning by-laws may also be designed to complement sustainability priorities already identified in the community’s land use plan.</p>



TOOL: POLICY TOOLS, STRATEGIES AND BEST PRACTICES TO PROMOTE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Here are additional approaches that have been used successfully elsewhere to promote sustainable development. Note that some may require amendments to land use plans.

OPTIONS TO CONSIDER	DETAILS
Expedited development applications	Under this approach, development applications that meet a local government’s established sustainability objectives may be given priority in the approval process. The promise of an accelerated approval incentivizes developers to include the local government’s priorities in the project.
Sustainability checklists	A local government may develop a checklist of sustainability priorities, and then offer developers incentives based on how many of those priorities will be incorporated into projects. The checklist could include priorities such as energy efficiency, water conservation, mixed usage, renewable energy, green spaces and more. Incentives could include options such as expedited applications, by-law exemptions or reduced fees.

Site plan control	Site plan control is a tool local governments can use to ensure that certain requirements are met before a site is developed. In addition to typical development requirements, site plan controls can also include standards for energy efficiency, water conservation, renewable energy, green spaces, outdoor lighting and more.
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TOOL: OTHER OPPORTUNITIES

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Here are additional possible actions and approaches local governments may wish to take to help achieve their sustainability objectives. Note that some may require amendments to land use plans.

OPPORTUNITY	DETAILS
Property Assessed Clean Energy (PACE)	<p>Under Property Assessed Clean Energy programs, residents can receive low-interest loans from local governments or a third party to enable them to carry out energy efficiency upgrades to their property. Loans are secured by the property, protecting the local government or third party's investment; and residents repay over time in accordance with an agreed-upon payment schedule.</p> <p>PACE programs help residents overcome hesitation about making longer-payback investments, and energy savings generated are often more than enough to cover loan payments. PACE programs are offered in several NS municipalities to cover investments such as heat pumps, solar panels and insulation. Several NB municipalities are investigating the possibility of offering PACE programs in the future.</p>
Secondary suites	<p>A secondary suite (sometimes called a granny suite) is a separate living unit created within a single-family home. Secondary suites are essentially apartments, with their own entrance, kitchen, bathroom and living area. Allowing them can encourage higher density neighbourhoods, which can help make collective initiatives such as public transit, car sharing or district heating systems more feasible.</p>
Grid-scale renewable energy projects	<p>Grid-scale renewable energy projects can help communities attain their sustainability goals, as well as have a measure of control over their energy destinies. Options include wind farms, solar farms, solar installations on municipal parking lots and more. Local governments may opt for full ownership, or engage in partnerships with First Nations, businesses or community groups.</p>

<p>Strategies to reduce transportation emissions</p>	<p>Local governments can help reduce transportation emissions by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorporating electric vehicles into their own fleets, and using them to educate residents of the benefits • Encouraging carpooling and ridesharing (including via dedicated social media groups) • Enabling and promoting the establishment of car sharing services • Encouraging employers to establish remote work policies • Establishing free carpool or park-and-ride lots at the end of transit routes • Offering free or reduced transit fares on a pilot or permanent basis (such as to students) • Encouraging businesses to offer incentives to their employees for sustainable commuting • Assessing parking infrastructure and fees through a sustainability lens, and implementing changes as necessary • Developing more and better walking and cycling infrastructure
<p>Strategies to encourage electric vehicles</p>	<p>Local governments can encourage the use of electric vehicles by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Installing charging stations in municipal parking lots and other strategic locations • Offering free EV parking and/or charging on a temporary or permanent basis • Launching promotional campaigns • Collaborating with businesses or business organizations to encourage EV adoption • Offering a streamlined permitting process for the installation of new chargers • Requiring that new developments have chargers or be charger-ready
<p>Strategies to support sustainable local tourism</p>	<p>Local governments may wish to encourage local tourism operators to take advantage of industry-led sustainability programs like the Hotel Association of Canada’s Green Key Global program.</p>
<p>Strategies to support sustainable local agriculture</p>	<p>In communities where agriculture is a dominant economic sector, local governments may wish to develop initiatives to support farmers in their emission-reduction activities and help them access provincial and federal programs.</p>

When it comes to climate action planning, the uniqueness of every community means there is no ‘one size fits all’ approach. However, the above tools and strategies, combined with sound planning, creativity and persistence, can help local governments achieve ambitious emission reduction goals.