



Town of Wolfville, circa 1900

## SUSTAINABILITY AS A WORK IN PROGRESS

Wolfville, Nova Scotia is situated in the Annapolis Valley, about 100 kilometres north of Halifax. Originally known as Mud Creek, the town was founded by the Acadians in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and incorporated as the Town of Wolfville in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Wolfville is home to Acadia University, and is widely recognized as one of the most attractive and progressive towns in Atlantic Canada.

The town has a permanent population of about 3,700, a number that roughly doubles when the university is in session. Wolfville operates on the standard Nova Scotia Town governance structure; a Mayor and six councilors are elected at large every four years. Day-to-day business is undertaken by about 25 administrative staff and overseen by the chief administrative officer and various department heads.

Creating a sustainable community does not happen overnight. Yet as Wolfville, Nova Scotia has discovered, patience, perseverance, and good coaching can create momentum for a new way of thinking.



## FOCUS ON SUSTAINABILITY

In 2002, an Acadia University student, Leon deVreede, came up with the idea of creating a Wolfville-based organization dedicated solely to rural sustainability. With the help of a small group of Acadia University professors, positive feedback from Wolfville's mayor and CAO, deVreede began the process of making his dream a reality. Within a few months, in 2003, the Centre for Rural Sustainability (CRS) opened its doors with a mission to identify and address issues particular to rural Nova Scotia from a sustainability perspective.

At roughly the same time, the town began to grapple with its own sustainability concerns. There was a growing sense within the corporate body of the town that Wolfville needed to address sustainability in more concerted ways than it had to that point. It was important for the town to be proactive rather than reactive to increasing pressures related to residential and commercial development. In part through conversations with the CRS, and in part through its own growing awareness, council realized that at a corporate level, they needed some sort of sustainability strategy. Further, it made sense that the new strategy should be developed on a timeline that would allow it to inform an upcoming re-write of the town's official Municipal Planning Strategy and Land Use By-law (collectively, "the MPS").

Although councilors were not clear on how best to proceed, their discussions were given a boost by an announcement by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities that it was launching a special Green Municipalities Fund (GMF) to support municipal sustainable development planning.

While some FCM legalities prohibited the CRS from applying directly for GMF support, the new Centre for Rural Sustainability developed a proposal on behalf of the Town of Wolfville that was ultimately successful. The GMF capacity-building grant allowed the CRS to provide sustainability-related education and training to town officials, which in turn supported the town's re-write of the MPS from a sustainability perspective.

## WOLFVILLE AND THE NATURAL STEP

In the spring of 2004, working alongside the CRS, the town created the Wolfville Sustainability Initiative (WSI), which was given the mandate of helping the town of Wolfville, its businesses, community members and municipal government minimize their respective ecological impacts while enhancing Wolfville's social and cultural uniqueness. To facilitate the process, the CRS invited The Natural Step (TNS) to introduce the TNS Framework to the town administrators and managers. The presentation was extremely well received and the Wolfville Sustainability Initiative invited The Natural Step back for further work with the town.

The first step was to provide training for top administrators and management, to familiarize them with The Natural Step Framework and generate political buy-in among the municipal leaders. With a small stipend from the town, deVreede and Callaghan engaged town managers and councilors in a series of TNS training sessions. As the managers' understanding of the Framework grew, they were asked to think of ways their departmental operations could be modified to bring them into closer alignment with the TNS sustainability principles. A number of ideas were generated very quickly and some were adopted by the town council, including:

- © purchasing and installing new LED Christmas lights;
- © adopting new practices that allowed all town meetings to be paperless; and
- © researching Public Works alternatives to salting roads in the winter.

The Natural Step is well grounded in science and provides a solid Framework for sustainability planning.

**EDITH CALLAGHAN**  
CENTRE FOR RURAL SUSTAINABILITY  
PROFESSOR ACADIA ACADEMY



Wolfville, a fair trade town striving towards sustainability.

Town council was also taught about the TNS Framework and how to apply it. Shortly thereafter, council adopted TNS as the official framework for sustainable development, agreeing in principle to explore how to make Wolfville more sustainable.

In the fall of 2005, the town struck the Sustainable Community Planning task force (SCP), a citizen's advisory group chaired by Deputy Mayor Robert Wrye. The SCP was charged with overseeing the re-writing of the MPS as well as guiding the Wolfville Sustainability Initiative. Karen Dempsey, a long-time Maritimer and a planner with a strong background in environmental planning, was hired to re-write the town's MPS based on The Natural Step Framework.

In 2006, the WSI embarked on a community visioning process. John Colton, Glyn Bissix and Edith Callaghan of the CRS held 25 "community circles" to gather input from a broad cross-section of Wolfville's population with the intent that the results would help identify areas for improvement in Wolfville's move toward sustainability and contribute to a sustainable vision for the town.

Some of the sustainability challenges that Wolfville has identified for itself through the community circles include the need to:

- Ⓞ address planning issues related to urban sprawl;
- Ⓞ create more pedestrian- and bike-friendly transportation areas and corridors;
- Ⓞ address paving concerns – much of the Wolfville proper is paved, resulting in wastewater management problems; and
- Ⓞ find the finances, personnel and time to implement sustainability strategies and actions.

Informed by both the information from the community visioning process and the collaborative work of Bissix, Callaghan and Colton, the SCP developed a sustainability declaration that is guiding the re-writing of the town's land-use bylaw and planning strategy. The declaration utilizes "backcasting"<sup>1</sup> from sustainability principles and is heavily informed by The Natural Step Framework.

Along with the Centre for Rural Sustainability, TNS has brought the town a different way of thinking. Sustainability is now part of the discussion when we do things. Five years ago that wasn't the case.

**ROBERT WRYE**  
DEPUTY MAYOR, TOWN OF WOLFVILLE

<sup>1</sup> Backcasting is a methodology for planning that involves starting from a description of a successful outcome, then linking today with that successful outcome in a strategic way

There is now a recognition and acceptance that sustainability means altering how we think about progress. The TNS Framework gives you that mental model to see the necessary interrelationships.

**KAREN DEMPSEY**  
TOWN OF WOLFVILLE

## LAST WORDS

Wolfville's sustainability work, as with any long-term endeavour, is an ongoing process that involves both challenges and successes. In 2008, the town was continuing to struggle with various issues, including:

- ⊙ Aligning the town council's diverse and occasionally divergent social and political interests
- ⊙ Capturing buy-in for the sustainability imperative from all sectors of the community
- ⊙ Finding ongoing funding for sustainability work
- ⊙ Developing ever-increasing competence in applying The Natural Step Framework in both a political context and on a day-to-day basis
- ⊙ Building the capacity of the Centre for Rural Sustainability. The CRS is Wolfville's major sustainability driver, but all of its members are volunteers with full-time jobs and families. This leaves limited time for them to dedicate to ongoing research and the implementation of sustainability-related actions and strategies.

Wolfville can, however, also celebrate multiple successes, many of which are directly related to the identification and development of opportunities arising from the town's interaction with TNS. For example:

- ⊙ Wolfville is now Canada's first certified Fair Trade Town



- ⊙ The ratio of sand-to-salt in the winter road mixes have been increased, thus diminishing the detrimental environmental effects associated with salting roads
- ⊙ Many of the town councilors have completed The Natural Step's eLearning course, building personal and in-house capacity
- ⊙ Most town and council meetings are now paperless
- ⊙ The Centre for Rural Sustainability recently completed a Community Vitality Matters survey. The survey is being used to develop benchmarks for assessing Wolfville's progress towards health and resilience. The survey has been heavily informed by the information gathered during the community visioning circles. Information from the survey is also intended to act as a baseline analysis of what the current state of health and resilience is in Wolfville
- ⊙ An Eco Fair was recently held in Wolfville, showcasing sustainability-related exhibits, an eco-couture fashion show, activities for children and presentations on the work of the SCP and The Natural Step Framework
- ⊙ An anti-idling bylaw was passed and Wolfville has eliminated the use of cosmetic pesticides in parks and open spaces
- ⊙ Perhaps most significantly, the MPS is being re-written from a sustainability perspective to ensure that sustainability principles become embedded into Wolfville's future planning documents and strategies.

Wolfville's continued progress along the road to sustainability involves a number of strategies and actions. The re-writing of the Municipal Planning Strategy and Land Use By-Law will be completed and legally binding in 2008. Anticipating the development of ever-more community sustainability champions, the town has asked the Centre for Rural Sustainability to train community members in The Natural Step Framework by running workshops and providing TNS eLearning course modules for members of the community.

In 2007, Wolfville also joined the Atlantic Canadian Sustainability Initiative, a regional program that is using TNS as a planning Framework to inform its participants of the challenges and opportunities of sustainability and move the region as a whole toward sustainable solutions. As part of program, Wolfville signed an agreement to undertake one specific sustainability initiative and, while that particular initiative is still being debated, it will no doubt constitute an important element of Wolfville's journey toward sustainability.

The Town of Wolfville recognizes that sustainable development requires a constant and equitable balance of environmental, social, cultural and economic factors in all decision making...

We will be guided in planning for sustainability by Wolfville's version of the Melbourne Principles<sup>2</sup> adopted by the SCP Task Force and the principles associated with The Natural Step (TNS) Framework.

### TOWN OF WOLFVILLE'S SUSTAINABILITY DECLARATION, 2007

Even while much of our work doesn't explicitly name TNS or the sustainability principles, our thinking is very much informed by The Natural Step Framework. We are looking for impact. And for that, you need to move from principles and a baseline. The TNS principles are the gold standard you check yourself against while moving forward.

**EDITH CALLAGHAN**  
CENTRE FOR RURAL SUSTAINABILITY  
PROFESSOR, ACADIA ACADEMY



Local youth become sustainability superheroes at Wolfville's Ecofair

### ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

[www.atlanticsustainability.ca](http://www.atlanticsustainability.ca)

This case study was written and researched by Sarah Brooks and edited by Bart Robinson and Sharon Boddy for The Natural Step Canada. Thanks to Edith Callaghan, John Colton, Karen Dempsey and Robert Wrye for granting The Natural Step interviews. Creative Commons Copyright 2008. Some rights reserved.



<sup>2</sup>The Melbourne Principles for Sustainable Cities, developed in Melbourne, Australia, were developed to assist cities that wish to achieve sustainable development objectives. The principles provide a simple set of statements on how a sustainable city would function and are intended to guide thinking and provide a strategic framework for action. Melbourne Principles for Sustainable Cities, [www.melbourne.vic.gov.au/rsrc/PDFs/MelbournePrinciples/MelbourneprinciplesEnglish.pdf](http://www.melbourne.vic.gov.au/rsrc/PDFs/MelbournePrinciples/MelbourneprinciplesEnglish.pdf). Accessed April 30, 2008. in a strategic way