

# DEFENSIBLE DECISIONS *and* SUCCESSFUL OUTCOMES

## *A Case Study of the North Okanagan Regional Growth Strategy*

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**SUMMARY** *As planners, managers and politicians we know that good information is critical to high quality plans, defensible decisions and successful outcomes. We also understand that monitoring and evaluation (M&E) programs can and should contribute to this foundational information base. Yet, surprisingly, M&E programs are rarely undertaken and maintained successfully. It is our hope that by exploring M&E strategies, innovations and best practices, through the following case study from the Regional District of North Okanagan, we can contribute to more successful M&E program development across BC and Canada.*

**RÉSUMÉ** *En tant qu'urbanistes, gestionnaires et politiciens, nous comprenons que des données fiables constituent le point de départ de plans de première qualité, de décisions valables et de résultats fructueux. Nous savons également que les programmes de suivi et d'évaluation (SE) peuvent et doivent contribuer à cette base de données fondamentale. Il est donc d'autant plus surprenant que les programmes SE sont rarement mis en place ou maintenus avec succès. Comme le démontre l'étude de cas du district régional de North Okanagan, il serait souhaitable pour la Colombie-Britannique et l'ensemble du pays d'examiner les stratégies, les innovations et les meilleures pratiques en matière de SE afin d'assurer l'élaboration de programmes de suivi et d'évaluation plus efficaces.*





North Okanagan, BC. Photo courtesy of the Regional District of North Okanagan.

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**GROWTH AND CHANGE  
IN THE NORTH OKANAGAN**

The North Okanagan is a region facing challenges that are familiar to many local and regional governments in Canada. It is a region that includes small urban centres and extensive rural areas. Its cities are densifying while its rural areas are trying to maintain their agricultural and natural character. As the region grows and changes, planning decisions need to incorporate the varied needs and identities of this diverse part of Canada. To do this, planners and decision makers need to understand what is happening on the ground; they need to monitor.

When the Regional District of North Okanagan (RDNO) adopted its Regional Growth Strategy (RGS) on September 21, 2011, it had the opportunity to create an innovative monitoring and evaluation (M&E) program to track the outcomes of implementing the RGS and involve local people in the process. The RDNO partnered

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with EcoPlan International (EPI) and the University of British Columbia (UBC), with the support of the Real Estate Foundation of British Columbia, to develop an innovative, ongoing RGS M&E program. The program helps ensure that decisions are based on real information and evidence. It was designed to guide local and regional policy decisions and community development, increase understanding of complex regional issues, engage the public in regional planning and improvement, and promote transparency by measuring and communicating RGS progress. The M&E program is already showing positive

results. The RDNO is currently using the M&E data to develop its Regional Agricultural Area Plan, the Regional Employment Lands Action Plan, reviews of Electoral Area Official Community Plans and sub-regional parks planning. As well, the Regional District has made all M&E data available to member municipalities for use within their planning initiatives.

Developing effective M&E programs is difficult, yet critical to better planning, decision-making and more informed deliberation. As planners, we know this. Yet most of our time and resources are spent developing programs, policies and plans

with little left over to effectively monitor and evaluate these efforts. This project gave us the opportunity to take an innovative approach to M&E that can be applied in other regions. Using a combination of high-quality research, structured decision-making and a quality of life survey, we created a program that provides reliable, useful information, involves citizens in decision-making, and is sustainable in the long term.

### LITERATURE AND PROGRAM REVIEW

We began the project with a review of relevant literature and an examination of 21 comparable M&E programs across North America. This allowed the research team to learn from the experiences of other regions to improve the M&E process and quality of the indicators. Some of the key lessons learned are: select fewer, higher quality indicators; a central agency is needed to collect and maintain regional level data; indicators should monitor desired outcomes or goals; and, include benchmarks and targets where possible.

### PROGRAM DESIGN: LINKING MONITORING DESIGN TO PLAN/PROGRAM GOALS

A successful M&E program needs to collect data that are directly relevant to the goals of the plan and clearly specify linkages between monitoring indicators and the goals of the plan or program. Although

this sounds simple, our research identified many ‘indicator projects’ that did not achieve this at the outset, increasing the potential for special interest groups to ‘cherry-pick’ indicators that support their cause rather than having consistent data that provide insight, clarify tradeoffs and contribute to effective dialogue—all essential for good decision-making.

The RDNO designed its M&E program around the central policy themes and stated objectives of the RGS. This process was made easier by the specificity of the goals of the strategy itself. During the design process, the team conducted a gap analysis to ensure that all stated objectives of the RGS were addressed in the M&E program.

### INDICATOR SELECTION: STRUCTURED DECISION ANALYSIS

So how do we make sure we’re selecting good indicators? Selecting high-quality indicators that meet the needs of a variety of stakeholders and potential data users is a complex process that can affect the outcomes of the M&E program. For example, high-quality data must be available for the chosen indicators, the indicators must meet the needs of both elected officials and planners, data collection must be affordable, and the monitoring program and indicators must be clear and simple while maintaining data quality.

In order to objectively and transparently evaluate and select monitoring indicators,



FIGURE 1: Map of monitoring and evaluation programs and regional growth strategies reviewed in British Columbia, Canada, and the United States

the project team used a *structured decision approach* supported by decision analysis methods to guide indicator selection. Using decision software developed by EcoPlan and designed to support multi-stakeholder and multi-criteria analysis, the research team worked with groups to evaluate and rank indicators using a matrix of evaluation criteria (see Figure 3). While this increased the quality of the indicators and provided process transparency, it also helped stakeholders participate in the development of the M&E program in a meaningful way, increasing support for and commitment to the M&E program as a whole. In the North Okanagan, participating stakeholders included senior planners and elected officials from all RDNO communities and the diverse membership of the Intergovernmental Advisory Committee.

FIGURE 2: Gap Analysis Tool. How well do selected indicators address RGS goals?

POLICY AREA	GOAL	# OF INDICATORS	INDICATOR	INDICATOR DESCRIPTION
Water Stewardship	Protection and conservation of water resources	6	Water Use	Total water use per capita and by sector—water supplied by source; Amount (%) of reclaimed water used for irrigation
			Potable Water Safety	# of boil water advisory days (total), by water utility
			Groundwater Quantity	Percentage of Observation Wells that show declining water levels
			Surface Water Quality	Nitrates, Phosphates, Turbidity, Coliform
			Water Metering	% of Households, businesses and agricultural operations with water meters installed
			Source Water Protection	# of source water protection plans implemented

EVALUATION CRITERIA	MEASURES		
	HIGH	MEDIUM	LOW
Good proxy for a broader trend (or goal) it represents	Direct statistic of identified trend	Indicator is important aspect of trend (though one of many)	Tenuous connection to broader trend
Reliable data exists which may be obtained at reasonable effort and cost	Data available from respected institution free of cost and with little effort	Data is available for some cost and demands/ has limited availability	Data must be collected and analyzed for considerable expense/ does not exist
Actionable (Informs policy or action evaluation and change)	Indicator significantly affected by potential actions of RD and Local Governments	RD and LG actions have some effect on indicator	Indicator affected by forces outside RD and LG jurisdiction or influence
Easy to explain and understand	Self-evident; little explanation required	Some explanation required, but no special expertise needed to understand	Will present a challenge for non-experts to understand
Consistent with or comparable to broader (provincial) or local indicators	A common indicator used in other regions, cities, and the province	The same indicator, or something similar, is used by some areas	Rarely used anywhere else
Change is measureable and meaningful on a reasonable timeframe	Changes over short- to mid-term (5-10 years) are significant	N/A	Short- to mid-term change has no statistical significance; trends only visible over long periods
Consistent with RGS vision, policy and guiding principles	Directly related or with a strong connection to RGS principles	N/A	Tenuously connected to RGS principles; not clear how it relates

**FIGURE 3:** Indicator Evaluation Tool. Applying structured decision-making to indicator selection in order to arrive at fewer, higher quality indicators

### DATA QUALITY & ACCESS: INTEGRATING QUANTITATIVE INDICATORS WITH CITIZEN RESPONSE

In the North Okanagan, planners and decision makers often have to work with limited data availability and quality.

Unfortunately, this is a common problem, particularly in rural areas. Most M&E programs that deal with regional planning issues need to monitor a wide spectrum of indicators and therefore rely heavily on existing data.

Creating partnerships with organizations that generate relevant data is a

potential means to improve data quality and access. However, the majority of the data relevant to local and regional planning programs has traditionally come from the Statistics Canada Census. Unfortunately, the recent replacement of the mandatory long-form census with the voluntary National Household Survey has reduced the availability of reliable census data.<sup>1,2</sup> In the RDNO, 2011 census data were suppressed for two areas of the region due to poor response rates<sup>3</sup> and the non-response rate for the RDNO was 28.8%,<sup>4</sup> reducing the reliability of census data for the entire region.

In an attempt to address these data shortfalls, the RDNO produced a survey to measure citizens' perceptions of various aspects of their quality of life. Many survey questions were developed to address the stated objectives of the RGS, to allow for the integration of the survey responses with the quantitative indicator data. In addition to addressing critical data gaps, the quality of life survey involved residents in the M&E process and improved the capacity of the RDNO to measure quality of life. The RDNO partnered with several community and government organizations to deliver the survey, producing a high response rate and truly useful data.



## THE RESULTS OF THE M&E PROGRAM HAVE BEEN OF GREAT INTEREST TO LOCAL AND REGIONAL GOVERNMENTS

### M&E PROJECT OUTCOMES

The ultimate measure of the success of an M&E program is whether the results are used in program revisions and related planning processes. Currently, the RDNO is using the M&E data in several planning processes throughout the region. Additionally, the RDNO is working to produce plain-language summaries of the results, and develop an interactive website to allow for more in-depth data exploration and support greater exposure and impact than would typically be achieved

by producing only dense paper reports presenting M&E program results.

The integration of quantitative indicators and citizen perceptions has provided a more comprehensive portrait of RGS policy implementation priorities and successes, helping the Regional District maximize limited resources in RGS action planning. The results of the M&E program have been of great interest to local and regional governments, several B.C. Ministries, the Okanagan Basin Water Board, the development community, local stakeholders, and the public at large.



FIGURE 4: Quality of Life Survey

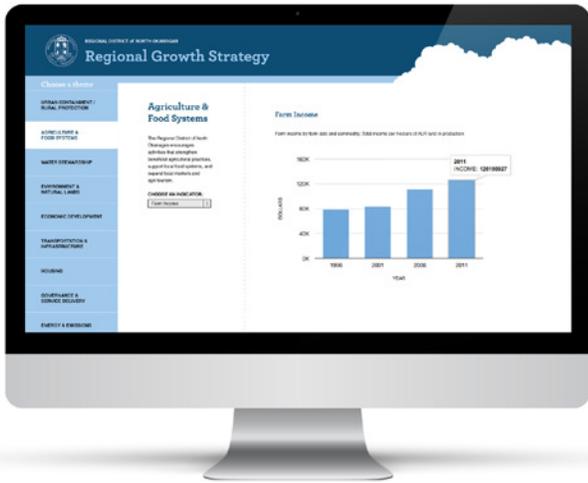


FIGURE 5: M&E Interactive Website

The RGS M&E program took an innovative approach to various aspects of program development and produced a series of practical planning tools and lessons learned that we hope may be applied to other local and regional planning initiatives. These innovations helped create a more robust and community-focused M&E program that will have real impact, now and in the future.

For more information on the process, tools or outcomes, please contact:

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For additional information on the project and associated tools, please visit: [www.ecoplan.ca](http://www.ecoplan.ca)

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