

DIY: Municipal Economic Development Strategy, City of St. John's, NL

Abstract

There are myriad toolkits, frameworks, and guidelines available for designing an economic development strategy. The experience of the City of St. John's in taking a "do it yourself" approach to creating a strategic economic Roadmap offers valuable insights about process, alignment, context, and content. A national research project may have been the catalyst to a tri-level government discussion; however, commitment of staff and volunteers, their dedication of time, expertise and ownership to the process was fundamental to developing the economic development strategy and ultimately delivering on projects, programs, and services. This article will provide an overview of the process, findings, and insights in developing the Economic Roadmap 2021 and offer some reflections on refreshing the plan several years later.

"Roadmap 2021 was developed in partnership with key stakeholders and in consultation with the community. The City [of St. John's] took a hands-on approach – leading the effort but drawing heavily upon the wealth of knowledge and expertise from partners. [Roadmap 2021: Strategic Economic Development Plan, St. John's](#)

The Backstory

A confluence of research, and learnings about urban development agreements across Canada, led to a multi-level governmental discussion and a commitment to support the City of St. John's in designing an economic development strategy, Roadmap 2021.

- In the late 2000s the Conference Board of Canada's *Mission Possible Successful Canadian Cities* (Volume III, 2007) caught the attention of the City of St. John's, provincial and federal governments. Part of a comprehensive research program, there was no denying the Conference Board's rigor and findings however there was concern that the province's capital city, St. John's, was akin to a footnote in the analysis.
- About the same time senior staff from the federal economic development agency, ACOA-NL, was interested in exploring approaches to urban economic development. In regions throughout Canada urban agreements built on partnerships were capitalizing on and embracing innovation and creativity to create vibrant and economically viable cities.
- Key economic indicators for St. John's showed historically favourable labour force activity, uptick in wage earnings and growth in public and private investment and while some may have taken a laisse-faire approach, a history of a struggling economy told us that we needed to develop a plan.

Setting the Stage

The schemata below maps the planning process. At each point along the process the learnings and outputs were woven to complete the final strategy.

Scoping Conversations-Getting Us on Track

Where to start a DIY strategy? In preparation the city economic development staff organized one-on-one conversations with representatives from industry, research organizations, post-secondary students, marketing experts and government colleagues. We explored perceptions and discussed the realities about whether St. John's was lagging in the Canadian context. These conversations provided insight about the role and composition of an advisory committee (see below), the planning and consultation process, possible topics for the economic development strategy, general advice and importantly, areas of caution. The scoping conversations added a layer of validation to the process.

Secondary Research-Trending Topics

Secondary research set a good foundation. The economic development staff undertake a good scan of leading trends in municipal economic development, topical matters covering issues like population dynamics, innovation, place-based marketing provided guidance on topics that could be within scope of the planning process.

Defining the Partnership

St. John's council agreed that the development of the plan would be guided by an external advisory committee, chaired by a member of council – this is not unique and even when municipalities undertake an economic development planning process with the assistance of external consultants an advisory committee often guides the work. However, what was unique was the commitment of federal and provincial governments to commit staff in a partnership with the City of St. John's to support the planning, research, and content.

Committees

Engaged Advisory Committee

Approved by St. John's City Council, a small advisory committee of senior representatives from the governments of Canada and Newfoundland and Labrador, City of St. John's, Memorial University, private and arts sectors and youth guided the research and consultation process and provided validation, challenges, and recommendations for the economic development plan. Members were very engaged. In addition to participating on the committee, members would sometimes attend as observers at consultation sessions, arrange and chair meetings with various agencies or organizations all to ensure a comprehensive process.

Active Working Committee

The working committee, a dedicated team of economic development staff from three levels of government, owned particular responsibilities in the process. Each member brought their expertise to the committee whether marketing/communication experience, economic and data analysis, policy, program, evaluation experience or partnership development. This was a key differentiator – the expertise and commitment of staff from three levels of government cannot be

replicated in any other manner. When it came to implementing the plan's actions, we already had champions and knowledge brokers across the three levels of government.

Consultation and Dialogue

An external facilitator was hired and supported the community consultations and as needed, was an expert sounding board for the working committee. Even the best designed consultation plan will likely have inherent biases, and the facilitator provided an unprejudiced lens to the work. This was the only piece of work that was externally contracted.

In addition to the facilitated sessions, the Working committee members undertook a substantial number of consultations, one-on-one meetings, and conversations. The level of effort in terms of meetings and sessions demonstrated the level of outreach and consultation.

The population projection report brought insight about challenging demographics and the Working committee focused on having discussions with young adults – whether that was sitting with a group of students in a university setting or hosting a pizza party. The youth perspective being critical to the strategy's directions.

(This table provides an indication of the level of effort for the consultation process).

Level of Effort (consultations, reviews, meetings)	
Facilitated Consultation Sessions (with average 10 persons/session)	12
One-on-one meetings with organizations, agencies, key partners	18
City Council meetings	5
City Department meetings	10
Advisory Committee meetings	7
Working Committee meetings	25

Communications and Outreach

A dedicated web presence and blog provided the community with updates about the economic development planning process and enlisted contributions as we wanted to ensure, to the extent possible, that we captured the sentiment of the community.

Research

Jurisdictional Review – Learning from other Cities

A jurisdictional scan of six cities (national and international), offered insights about methodologies deployed, the content of the strategies, outcomes and lessons learned and helped the committees frame the planning process and identify opportunities and challenges to developing a plan for St. John's.

Alignment with Policies and Plans

In Canada municipalities have limited authority and we understood that to effectively implement the plan it would be important to have governmental alignment. The working committee took a

systematized process to reviewing provincial and federal policies and plans to ensure alignment and value add.

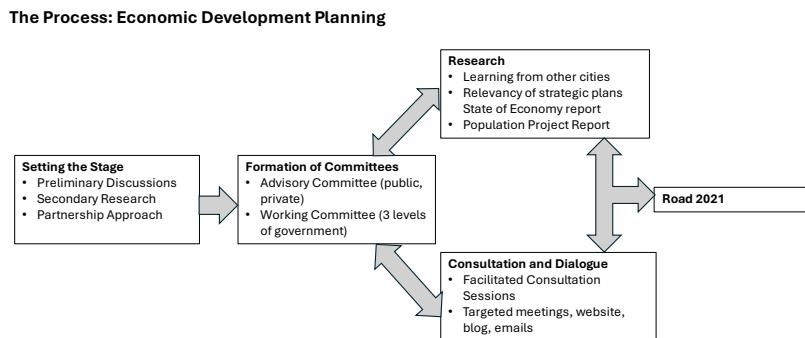
A similar review was conducted with the City of St. John's plans and strategies to ensure that the economic development directions were considered across municipal level programming and that recommended directions were collectively embraced.

Analysis (Population, State of Economy)

Two reports were developed and became legacy pieces for the City of St. John's. A population projection analysis was commissioned and an economic analysis, "State of the Economy" that presented a comprehensive historical and cross sectoral perspective. These resources have subsequently become core tools and are updated on a regular basis.

Roadmap Strategy Ownership

The partnership approach and collective ownership continued into implementation. The presentation of the draft strategy to St. John's City Council was led by one of the private sector advisory committee members, the public launch of the strategy was led by the youth representative of the advisory committee. Following the launch of the Roadmap the economic development team continued to nurture partnerships, met with partners, made presentations, and had discussions. Members of the advisory committee took ownership with implementation by creating opportunities and introductions and this was invaluable to gaining buy-in.



Future Considerations and Reflections

Some advice in taking a DIY approach.

Create the Time and Space

Know that a DIY will take focused and dedicated staff time. This may result in temporary reassignment of responsibilities for the duration of the process. Understand that the work of

planning, research, consultation, partnership building, action planning and writing is not just another project or program and requires dedicated time and space. The value in DIY, particularly with commitments from other levels of government is immeasurable and the collective ownership is central to implementation. There is a trade-off and balance in resources, money, and time. For the City of St. John's, the direct expenditures were insignificant however staff and volunteer time costs were substantial.

Complexities Bring Insight

Recognize the increasing complexities in economic development and bring disparate interests and expertise into one conversation. These conversations offer potential to explore undiscovered points of intersections, opportunities and highlight potential problems. The facilitated discussions we had in developing the economic Roadmap were themed by sector or interest.

Several years later however when we were undertaking a plan refresh, we were very intentional in hosting focused conversations among a broad cross-section of economic and community interests – we recognized the value in these complexities and wanted to explore their potential.

Think about a facilitated roundtable discussion with representatives from cultural festivals, construction industry, research, post-secondary institutions, and social enterprises focusing on key issues. They likely will not have been in a session talking about economic development opportunities in the community. The richness of the conversation and the knock-on effect of new insights was invaluable.

Engagement Protocols and Representation Considerations

Since completing the Roadmap governments at all levels have embedded engagement protocols in a more substantive manner and the tools and resources available to deploy consultation and engagement have increased. These protocols and the engagement teams can be an ally and resource in any consultation program.

Eight years into implementation the City decided to recreate an advisory committee for the purposes of reviewing the original plan and refreshing it into the next decade. When considering the membership of the advisory committee, greater attention was paid to ensure a more balanced and diverse representation of members.

Conclusion

A DIY strategy with dedicated multi-level governmental partnerships takes time, knowledge, patience, and commitment. There needs to be careful consideration to the extent of in-house resources required however in our experience the richness of the experience and the value of the partnerships was unmatched.

Bio

Elizabeth Lawrence, recently retired from over two decades as Director, Economic Development, with the City of St. John's, NL. During that time, she led a multitude of projects and programs ranging from tourism development to ocean industry-place positioning, post-secondary relations, and nurturing partnerships with other orders of government, industry, education sector. She holds a Masters degree in Development Economics from Dalhousie University and various training certifications in project management and strategic development. She is a champion for local economic development.

As this article was being written, Councillor Debbie Hanlon, chair (and cheerleader) of the advisory committee, succumbed to her heroic battle with cancer.