

## Community Connections

A list of broad social goals has been established as a starting point for the sustainability plan. To achieve these (and environmental and economic) goals, the City and the community have been working for some time to develop and implement a Social Development Strategy. The Strategy complements the sustainability plan in that it focuses on the actions that meet at least one of the Sustainability Plan's goals. This document summarizes our performance, and highlights the links between goals, actions and root causes.

### Description

Community connections broadly refers to the bonds and connections that start at an individual level and are reflected in a community level in arts, culture, recreation, heritage, and the multitude of other things. Together, these create identity, a sense of place, and a strong community. It refers to the linkages that Prince George residents have with each other and the wider community.



A formal element of community connections, civic participation can be measured through volunteerism, charitable donations, and voter turnout. Recreation, on the other hand, is a broad term to cover activities undertaken during an individual's free time for positive mental and physical therapy, relaxation, satisfaction or amusement.

Arts and culture is also important, as it is often thought of as the "fourth pillar" of sustainability - the arts refer to a wide variety of artistic endeavors including examples such as: performing arts, visual arts, media arts, literary arts, and heritage arts. Culture embodies the values, ideas, and other symbolic meaningful systems that are transmitted and created by a group of people.

### Status and Trends

Prince George has a strong level of social capital and community connectedness. This extends beyond the city itself to the entire northern region, because Prince George is the central hub for northern BC. The creation of the University of Northern BC is an example of local and regional community connectedness in action.

Civic participation is arguably one of Prince George's greatest strengths. The degree to which citizens are engaged in the decision-making process is a vital part of social sustainability, and indeed, democratic society. Civic participation is integral in the ways people interact with each other and society at large, and in building social capital. Robert Putnam, respected researcher and author, describes social capital as the social networks and interaction, both formal in

informal, and the norms of reciprocity they bring. This includes everything from political meetings to informal “block parties”.

Since the 1950’s the level of social capital in communities has gradually declined. With the rise of individualism, the development of technologies (like television) that compete with more interactive pastimes and urban forms that tend to segregate rather than link, our society has become more privatized and most indicators of social capital point to a decline in social cohesion. Ties to family and friends, political involvement, civic associations, and membership in trade unions are all decreasing. Research points to extremely strong correlations between vibrant social networks and childhood development, safety, education, income, economy and public health. It cannot be doubted that strong social capital is an integral part of strong, healthy communities – public policies which support the creation of social capital will also be creating more sustainable communities.

The City of Prince George also has a strong role to play in developing a healthy arts and culture sector, recognizing the benefits that this area has on improving quality of life, building social capital, and supporting the economy. In conjunction with its membership in The Creative City network, the City has developed a plan to provide direction and resources to the cultural sector, as well as address some of the gaps. These include the fact that facilities are spread sparsely throughout the region, with a notable lack of concentrated cultural activity in downtown Prince George. Moreover, First Nations art and culture is not well represented in the community.

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**Of the potential measures listed below, which should we use to measure and communicate progress? Would you rather use another one? Why?**

Community connectedness is traditionally measured through the following means:

- **Volunteerism:** Percentage of population who volunteer
- **Altruism:** Amount of money donated to charity annually
- **Voter turnout rate**

However, social capital is broader in scope and is less easy to quantify. Suggested include the percentage of the population who:

- Read a newspaper daily
- Take part in an activity at a recreation centre
- Attend a political meeting/write a letter to their political representative/are members of a political party
- Attend church or informal club at least once a month
- Are members in formal associations, such as service clubs, professional bodies or trade unions
- Entertain at home at least once a month
- Know the names of their neighbours

## Questions for Consideration

- How can Prince George encourage more involvement from sectors of the community who usually do not participate in civic life, i.e. the “silent majority”? How can we encourage more participation of youths, seniors, ethnic minorities, Aboriginal people?
- How can Prince George encourage more arts and culture in its downtown core?
- Local arts and cultural venues have been criticized for not being more collaborative in their approach to marketing and planning. Is this environment of “competition and near animosity” (Towards a Cultural Plan, 2004) changing? Has the Cultural Plan improved coordination in recent years?
- In what ways can the City of Prince George create recreation programs that meet the changing needs of its residents and build more community connections?
- What are the current gaps in recreation that need to be filled? Are there any populations or groups who are being left out of programming?