

Visioning Workshop Summary

York University Sustainability Strategy

Friday, February 10, 2017

8:30am – 3:45pm



Overview

On February 10, 2017, representatives of York University's President's Sustainability Council (PSC) hosted a workshop about the development of the university's Sustainability Strategy. The purpose of the meeting was to introduce the Sustainability Strategy process, review other institutions' strategies and plans, and facilitate discussion on potential visions, frameworks, and strategic goals and targets for York's Strategy.

Over 60 participants attended the meeting, including students, faculty, and staff (see Appendix A - Participant List). The meeting included a welcoming address from President Shoukri, an opening and acknowledgement of traditional territories by PSC Chair Martin Bunch (Faculty of Environmental Studies), and a keynote address from John Robinson, University of Toronto. The majority of the workshop was dedicated to interactive group discussions, where participants shared ideas for what could be included in the vision, framework, and strategic goals and targets. Participants shared feedback verbally during reports back and in writing using flip-chart paper, sticky notes, and dots. For more detail, see Appendix B — Meeting Agenda.

Ian Malczewski, third party facilitator with Swerhun Facilitation, facilitated, took notes, and prepared this Summary of the Workshop. This report summarizes the feedback shared in the meeting; it is not intended as a verbatim transcript. A draft of this summary was shared with participants for review before it was finalized.

Key themes

The following key themes reflect topics that emerged consistently through the workshop. They are meant to be read in concert with the more detailed summary of feedback below.

The Sustainability Strategy should include a priority on community. Across all the discussions, participants said it was important for the Strategy to foster community, a sense of place, and connections (both within York's community and to broader academic and neighbouring communities).

Health and well-being should be considered a key part of the Strategy. Many participants identified health and well-being as a potential core focus of the Strategy. Leveraging biophilic design, fostering an active transportation network, and addressing the specific needs of mothers and families were some suggestions on how the Strategy could prioritize health and wellness. This should also include mental health, and the strategy can be linked to the recently developed Mental Health Strategy.

The Strategy should help position York as an anchor institution. Many discussions focused on the potential for the Strategy to help position York as a cultural, academic, and economic anchor institution and bring it recognition as a leader in sustainability research and education.

The Strategy should consider the intersection of administration, targets, and curriculum. Many discussions highlighted the importance of aligning sustainability targets, curriculum, and administrative processes. For example, a target to incorporate experiential education across all faculty curricula would require over-arching leadership and administrative support.

Detailed summary of feedback

Participants shared feedback about three topics over the course of the workshop: ideas for what should be included in the vision for York's Sustainability Strategy, suggestions for what the "focus areas" of the strategy could be, and potential strategic goals and priorities for the strategy. This report organizes their feedback beneath these three topics below.

1. Feedback about the vision

Participants were asked to picture an idealized version of what a "sustainable York" would look like in 2050 and, based on that picture, share suggestions about what should be included in the Sustainability Strategy's vision statement. Participants shared both general suggestions about what should be in the vision and specific ideas to consider in the development of a vision.

General suggestions

Participants said that, generally, the Strategy's vision should encompass all York's campuses (both in the GTA and internationally). Each campus may have its own specific needs and goals, but a common set of principles could apply across all campuses. Participants also said there is a need to measure both quantitative and qualitative measures associated with the Strategy. There was a suggestion for the Strategy to be built with realistic, measurable goals that lead up to a desired vision and that, rather than wait until 2050, the Strategy could include 5-year targets that could be periodically revisited and revised.

Specific ideas to consider for a vision statement

In their groups, participants shared a range of a suggestions for what could be included in a vision statement for York's Sustainability Strategy.

Emissions, energy, carbon, and waste neutral (or positive). Several groups' visions for York in 2050 included a York that is neutral or even positive in terms of emissions generation, energy use, carbon use, water use, and waste generation. Suggested strategies to make that vision a reality included:

- Divestment from fossil fuel companies and investing in more green companies,
- Working towards having a net positive impact on ecological and human health,
- Having a campus served by completely emissions-free mobility (including transportation on, to, and from campus).
- Using technology to help reduce environmental impacts and footprints (for example, relying on new technologies to build more sustainable buildings). Participants also highlighted a need to maintain flexibility and adaptability since technologies can change.

Mental, physical health and well-being. Many groups said health and well-being should be included in the vision. York is already a leader in mental health, so the university already has a strong foundation to build on. One group pointed out that York has one of the lowest square

footage athletic spaces in Canada, so university might need to get creative by opening non-athletic spaces up for athletic use. Other suggested examples included creating spaces that improve physical and mental health (such as indoor greenery), prioritizing accessibility, and fostering an integrated bike network to promote mental and physical health.

Sense of community, place, and connection. Many groups felt that fostering a stronger sense of community and sense of place should be included in the vision as a key sustainability goal. Participants said that, in 2050, York should be an inclusive, positive place where people have a sense of pride and want to live, work, and study. Several said they wanted to see a York that better connects to its surrounding communities so it feels less “parachuted” into its environment, potentially through programming that welcomed families and children from nearby neighbourhoods. Finally, participants said that, by strengthening connections with other communities (including neighbouring communities, broader academic communities, and indigenous communities), York could continue to strive to improve access, build on teaching and research experiences, and get students out of the classroom to share and learn new things.

An anchor institution. Several groups felt that that vision should identify York as an anchor institution: a hub for economic, cultural, social, and environmental opportunities and innovation. One group described this future York as the “heartpiece” of a vibrant, desirable, healthy, safe space in the centre of the GTA. In terms of culture, participants said York could prioritize developing cultural centres like spaces for science fairs, public skating areas, community theatres, and spaces for socializing and studying. In terms of an economic focus, participants said York could give students employable skills, host small businesses on campus (operated by staff and neighbours), provide paid work on campus for students, and include an innovation incubator for local entrepreneurs (similar to MARS and the University of Toronto).

A leader in environmental sustainability and social justice. Participants described a future York where sustainability literacy is high amongst its student population, where sustainability research focuses on both local and global scales, and where York helps to increase the general knowledge and awareness of all people around environmental issues and impacts. This future York would take a permaculture approach to increase, protect, enhance, and restore biodiversity, mimicking the patterns of nature. York’s campus would be a “living lab” that creates pride and ownership among students, staff and faculty. Sustainability could be integrated into all first-year courses and all students could be given experiential education opportunities and/or co-ops. Participants also said York could include more research on how to eradicate poverty and provide underprivileged people with an opportunity to have a better life by providing resources, time, training, and leadership support.

Integrated, transparent, accountable decision-making. Participants said the York of the future should include a focus on democratic principles in decision making. Operational and academic research objectives could be integrated with curriculum and course work.

2. Feedback about “**focus areas**”

In small groups, participants discussed what they thought the “focus areas” for the Sustainability Strategy should be. They also suggested specific actions that would be an example of that focus area. Generally, participants’ suggested focus areas that fell into four categories: people

and community; operations, institutional, administration; education, curriculum, and teaching, and; physical environment.

People and community. Several groups identified people and community as a key focus area. By focusing on this area, the Strategy could help York become a place where people want to live, work, and study and empower people to collaborate with each other (both on campus and with the wider community). Participants suggested specific actions and strategies that would reflect focus on people and community including:

- Promoting more “family inclusivity” (with a priority on mothers and student mothers) by: encouraging more flexible work hours, eliminating requirements faculty/staff to have an office, building changing spaces in both men’s and women’s washrooms, creating more family and youth-friendly spaces; improving affordability and accessibility for childcare; providing children’s menus, promoting a more family-friendly campus, and promoting mental well-being and a sense of safety on campus.
- Developing a more integrated and active mobility infrastructure within and between campuses (to foster healthy community connections)
- Promoting more student-run businesses (to create a sense of ownership)
- Involving students in designing and building built and natural sustainability solutions.

Education, curriculum, and teaching. All groups suggested the Sustainability Strategy include a focus area about education, curriculum, and/or teaching. This focus area could help ensure students across all faculties are exposed to sustainability through experiential, place-based learning opportunities, giving York’s community a high level of sustainability literacy. One specific action participants suggested was to expose every undergrad student to sustainability through their curriculum.

Operations, institutional, administration. Participants suggested the Strategy should have an operational, administrative, institutional lens. A focus area emphasizing the role of York’s leadership would help create stewardship for the overall vision, could help influence decisions about how to allocate funds, and could help assess (both qualitatively and quantitatively) how successful sustainability actions are. Participants said this focus area could include actions focused on ensuring that decision-makers consider sustainability (for example, when making procurement decisions) and help to manage the goal of becoming a net positive campus in terms of energy, water, carbon, and waste.

Physical environment. Some groups identified the physical environment as a potential focus area for the Sustainability Strategy. Focusing on the physical environment could ensure that the strategy helps create a natural, inviting campus landscape that helps people feel more connected to York. Prioritizing the physical environment could help ensure the campus is adaptive, transformative, absorptive, regenerative, and resilient.

3. Feedback about strategic goals and targets

For the final discussion, participants suggested potential strategic goals and targets that could be included in the Sustainability Strategy. After the group suggested goals, participants placed dots to indicate priority goals or targets.

Participants identified the most priority on the following strategic goals and targets:

- New green buildings serve as an education tool and research opportunity. Each building's design considers mental health (potentially by using biophilic design principles) and both new and retrofitted buildings are living, regenerative buildings.
- York is 100% carbon neutral (or positive), producing/storing energy from renewable sources.
- Every student has at least one experiential education experience related to sustainability during their degree or has a pathway into sustainability through 1st year curriculum.
- York uses cutting-edge technology to advance on-campus sustainability (for example, using carbon sequestration).
- York is an anchor institution that supports social, economic, and educational opportunities.

Participants identified some priority on these strategic goals and targets:

- York has an integrated strategy to improve a sense of community / belonging at the university
- York has an integrated wellness strategy (with targets focused on staff retention, anxiety levels, number of sick days, and a "happy campus")
- York is a leader, advocate, and facilitator for public transportation and alternative mobility
- All food on campus has fair trade options; campuses have a local grocery store run and operated by community members
- York makes all its sustainability metrics (and reports) open and publicly-accessible

Other suggested strategic goals and targets included:

- A shift to having 25% of people coming to York on bicycles
- Decrease water consumption by 50% and use rainwater collection on 30% of buildings
- Remove financial barriers for students
- Have York ranked as a leader in sustainability education

Next steps

After the discussion, Ian Malczewski thanked participants for their feedback and committed to sharing a draft summary of feedback in the following weeks. Martin Bunch explained that the Sustainability Strategy Team would continue engaging with the York community in the coming months through focus groups, online surveys, and other tools.

Appendix A - Participant List

Shadiya Aidid
Nicole Arsenaull
Martin Bunch
Dhruv Chaudhary
Thanh Chu
Brad Cochrane
Michael Collingwood
Ravi de Costa
Zoi de la Pena
Peter Duerr
Jose Etcheverry
Carolyn Fasick
Dana Fountain
William Gage
Phil Garber
Nayel Halim
Mike Kenny
Junaid Khan
Tatiana Markina
Ijade Maxwell Rodrigues
Ross McMillan
Ian McVey
Yvette Munro
Anh Nguyen
Mary O'Brien
Andrew Plunkett
Bing Poon
Darryl Reed
Christina Renaud Milhomem
Kira Rigelhof
Kazi Rouf
Nitesh Sharma
Shahab Shokrzadeh
Bogdan Strafalogea
Nancy Sutherland
Christine Till

Appendix B - Meeting Agenda

York University Sustainability Strategy

Visioning Workshop

Friday, February 10, 2017

8:30am – 3:45pm

SSB N109

Proposed agenda

- 8:30 Registration and coffee**
- 9:00 Welcome address**
President Shoukri
- 9:10 Opening and overview**
Martin Bunch, Faculty Environmental Studies
- 9:30 Keynote address**
John Robinson, University of Toronto
Questions and answers
- 10:45 Break**
- 11:00 Discussion: vision**
1. What would you like to see included in the vision for York University's Sustainability Strategy?
- 12:15 Lunch**
- 12:45 Discussion: A framework for the Strategy**
2. What do you think the "focus areas" of York's Sustainability Strategy should be?
- 1:45 Break**
- 2:00 Discussion: strategic goals and targets**
3. Based on the discussion so far, what do you think some of the strategic goals and targets could be for the Sustainability Strategy?
- 3:35 Wrap up & next steps**
- 3:45 Adjourn**

Meeting purpose

To introduce the York University Sustainability Strategy, review other institutions' Strategies & Plans, and discuss potential visions, frameworks, and priorities for York's Strategy.

Please sign in

Please make sure to sign in to receive a draft summary of feedback shared in today's workshop.