

Athabasca Watershed Council

Strategic Planning Meeting—Summary of Discussions and Strategic Direction for 2019 Work Planning

Introduction

On November 16th, 2018, the Athabasca Watershed Council Board of Directors and staff met for a regular board meeting which included a 2-hour workshop intended to help the BOD set some strategic directions, to be included in a revised rolling three-year strategic plan, and possible annual work plans. The AWC invited Dave Mussell from Alberta Environment and Parks, Strategy Division, Community Engagement Branch to facilitate this workshop.

Presentation Notes Summary

Dave gave a short presentation summarizing some of the essential history and distinctive features of the Water for Life policy and its implications for WPACs. A version of this presentation is appended at the end of this report. Key points that Dave raised in this section included a reminder of the major deliverables WPACs are responsible for under the W4L policy (state of the watershed report, integrated watershed management plan (IWMP), and on-going education and outreach in the basin to support IWMP implementation). He also addressed the vision and mission identified by the AWC

Mission and Vision of the AWC

We reviewed the mission and vision of the AWC. The statement of the organization's purpose and aims on the splash page of its web site could be easily understood to be its vision and mission. The web site should be updated to reflect the current board-approved vision and mission statements, as they appear in the annual report and the latest strategic plan.

From the AWC web site: "We are a Watershed Planning and Advisory Council (WPAC) working in partnership with the Government of Alberta, stakeholders, and indigenous peoples to achieve the three goals of the Water for Life strategy. We work to build relationships, share information, and inform the planning and policy decisions that affect the Athabasca River watershed. Our vision is that the Athabasca River watershed is ecologically healthy, socially responsible, and economically sustainable.

From the 2017-2019 3-year Strategic Plan and 2017-2018 Annual Report: "Our Vision: The Athabasca watershed is ecologically healthy, diverse, and dynamic. Our Mission: The Athabasca Watershed Council promotes, fosters respect, and plans for an ecologically healthy watershed by demonstrating leadership and facilitating informed decision-making to ensure environmental, economic, and social sustainability."

Challenges

Following on the discussion of vision and mission, the group addressed the key challenges that must be considered by this WPAC if it is to accomplish its vision. The following table summarizes the results of this discussion.

Challenge	Implications for AWC
Low membership numbers	Membership-level involvement is important from a governance standpoint. Members are vital to the organization, providing input and direction through General Meetings, and through sectoral representation. Also give the organization a presence in communities and regions throughout the watershed.
Lack of recognition / awareness / connections with people	Board members observed that there is little awareness of the existence of the AWC and even less awareness of its mandate as a community-based advisory and planning organization. This adds a burden of communication work to any event organized in a community, and means that many prospective members are likely simply unaware of the AWC.
High staff turn-over	High staff turn-over in the AWC has impeded progress on W4L objectives including ongoing education and engagement, building stronger constituency representation on the BOD, and inconsistent management of organizational business on behalf of the BOD.
Inconsistent 2-way communication with municipalities	Municipalities are a key constituency within the Athabasca basin and are a critically important partner with the AWC in the implementation of forthcoming watershed or sub-watershed plans. As such, municipalities require frequent communication and updates, and need to be incorporated into AWC's work plans.
Misalignment between the Water Act, and the Public Lands Act	This is a system-level challenge external to the AWC per se, but one that nonetheless affects the work of the organization. This misalignment contributes to complexity and poor oversight and inconsistent regulation of (especially) lakeshore-sited developments.
Geographic expanse of the watershed	This is primarily a logistical challenge which adds significant cost to the organization's operations. Implications besides costs are that board members have great distances to travel to attend meetings.
Make-up of board (diversity of representation)	The present BOD make-up and breadth of representation is stronger now that it has been in previous years, in part because of the presence of committed Indigenous members. There may be gaps however in some sectors, particularly some industries and balanced geographic representation. This needs to be further studied.
Broad range of issues affecting the Athabasca watershed	The Athabasca basin is highly diverse ecologically and economically, with a number of industries and concentrations of human development that are unevenly distributed throughout the basin. The diversity of these issues and their strategic importance to the Alberta economy present a significant challenge to the AWC to engage meaningfully considering other challenges such as staffing, budget, and representational issues.

Authority (or lack thereof)	The AWC has a mandate to develop plans that guide development decisions in the Athabasca Watershed, but these plans are advisory (voluntary and non-regulatory). This means there is less certainty that an IWMP will be adopted and successfully implemented in the Athabasca basin.
Technical capacity / skill on staff	AWC needs greater capacity in its staff complement to address technical planning issues and initiatives. The AWC is going into a phase of work that will feature more technical content (the IWMP), and additionally, needs to raise awareness of residents in the watershed about issues identified in its State of the Watershed report and documents.
Financial sustainability / certainty / security	The work of the AWC would benefit from a larger budget which would enable the hiring of additional staff, striking contracts with external service providers, and organizing events. Funding has been tight, and Provincial support has been late in being released. This causes delays and cancellations in planned work.

Strategic Question

Dave then posed the question, **“Setting aside your board and sectoral perspective and adopting that of the general public, what would you expect to be the attributes (characteristics, qualifications, reputation, etc.) of an organization that is recognized as a legitimate and authoritative source of watershed advice, guidance, and knowledge?”** He then invited BOD and Staff to identify key attributes of this kind of organization as it might be seen by the public. Quick assessments were offered as to what the implications of these suggestions were, and whether or not work could be undertaken by the AWC to build those attributes into an annual work plan.

Attributes Discussion

The Board of Directors provided opinions on the attributes they thought the public would normally expect of an organization bearing the mission and vision of the AWC. The following table summarizes the discussion. The facilitator gathered these attributes and discussion notes and organized them into themes. The themes are identified and described below:

Theme	Related Attributes from Strat Plan Discussion	Notes and suggested actions
Credibility: AWC is known as a credible authority on Athabasca watershed issues.	Evidence-based state of the watershed knowledge	SOW information is acquired from peer-reviewed sources, accepted science methodologies, etc.
	Qualified technical capacity on the staff signals a commitment to providing authoritative SOW information	Currently lacking: Board and / or ED to hire qualified natural science background staff to help develop, maintain, and extend SOW knowledge, and convey it to decision-makers and the public.
	Relevant: the AWC is well-informed, and demonstrates foresight and situation awareness	AWC maintains current information about the state of the basin and new issues. Suggested action: undertake an economic

	relative to watershed issues.	assessment of the Athabasca watershed's contribution to the Alberta economy. Reach out to media sources when watershed issues arise, offer interviews, background information, informed commentary.
	Record of effective action	AWC known for taking effective action and getting positive results.
	Unbiased, neutral, balanced, inclusive	SOW information is science-based (as above); does not choose sides, lets the evidence determine position rather than stakeholder perspectives. Continue to release bias-balanced, evidence-based communication and education materials.
	Traditional ecological knowledge	TEK includes Indigenous knowledge, and other forms of knowledge derived from various peoples' experience on the land apart from formal science-based inquiry and research. TEK is understood to fill in some knowledge gaps that Western-style science does not address. Action: Look for creative and proactive ways to integrate TEK in communication and education initiatives.
Recognition: AWC is widely recognized in the watershed, residents are familiar with its mandate and aims.	Effective communications	Staff to revise / refresh current communications plan, seek board approval and participation of plan and event schedule. Develop an engagement strategy that targets key constituencies in basin including Indigenous communities, municipalities, and industry.
	Professional-quality	Staff (with board support) establish and maintain high production values in all communication resources including print, web, video, presentations, events.
	Responsive: quick to respond to communications, direction and guidance from stakeholders	Relates to communications and engagement plans: Staff to ensure received information and member news is referenced in periodic communications, newsletters, web site, etc.
Representation: AWC demonstrates balanced representation of Athabasca communities and interests in its	AWC is inclusive, welcoming of diverse backgrounds, interests, and perspectives.	Balanced and diverse representation is the single-most important attribute and role for a WPAC generally, a key aspect of their structure and governance. Board and Staff to explore caucuses as a means of getting better representation and information flow

membership and on its BOD.		<p>from key constituencies, starting with a municipal caucus. Establish terms of reference for same.</p> <p>Board and staff to regularly review board make-up, advise on persistent or occasional gaps in representation, and actively recruit members and directors to close those gaps when necessary.</p>
	Collaborative: works well with others	<p>AWC BOD and Staff continue to foster a “safe space” for dialogue among members with differing perspectives and backgrounds; facilitate constructive, respectful dialogue and joint initiatives.</p>
Effectiveness: AWC develops a reputation for organizational effectiveness and professionalism.	AWC make efficient use of financial, material, and human resources.	Suggested by Dave, agreed by board as important. NO action suggested. ED to review.
	AWC demonstrates trustworthiness and accountability in use of publically or privately-sourced money.	Stakeholders, constituencies, and general public expect that an organization funded in part with taxpayer-sourced money will demonstrate high levels of accountability, and will show how the work supports initiatives that are clearly in the public interest and consistent with the WPAC mandate. No new work plan actions suggested.
	Makes strategically wise, well-researched and defensible decisions	<p>Board and staff to develop and revise annual work plans and rolling strategic plans to reflect current priorities and member input while referencing existing work plans, modifying as necessary.</p> <p>Business processes should be tightened and improved where possible to increase accountability and reduce risk / uncertainty.</p>
	AWC documents its actions and communicates	Continue to publish accurate and complete annual reports and periodic newsletters.

Priority Work Plan Direction

All four themes identified during the discussion and subsequent analysis are important to the health and sustainability of the AWC, and all should be addressed in a development of a revised 2019 – 2022 rolling strategic plan, as well as in annual work plans derived from the strategic plan.

Appendices