

Proposal for Recommending Improvements to the PPR 2030 Plan Update Process

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Abstract

The Pikes Peak Area of Council of Governments (PPACG), Peak Alliance for a Sustainable Future, and the City of Colorado Springs are planning to update the Pikes Peak Region 2030 (PPR 2030) sustainability plan. This plan will bolster existing and encourage new efforts for communities, businesses, and organizations to become more sustainable and resilient. My project will focus on three areas to improve the PPR 2030 plan. The first two come from my partners, who have expressed the need to enhance implementation monitoring and stakeholder engagement. I have added a third focus area of aligning the regional sustainability plan goals with United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs). I will use the PPR 2030 plan, scholarly literature, and case studies to inform my recommendations. A regional sustainability plan can assist communities in efficiently managing public services, comprehensively assessing long-term performance, and proactively addressing issues arising from rapid urbanization. This plan could encourage agencies, businesses, and organizations to coalesce around common sustainability goals.

Keywords: regional sustainability planning, sustainable development, implementation monitoring, stakeholder engagement, United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs), Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs)

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Introduction

Communities are considering other factors beyond economic growth to improve wellbeing (Irwin et al., 2017). They are beginning to explore the interdependencies among the economy, environment, and society (Mischen et al., 2019; Irwin et al., 2017; Smetana et al., 2015). Regional policymakers are pursuing sustainability and resilience planning to better inform their decisions (Irwin et al., 2017). Irwin et al. (2017) define sustainability as improving the wellbeing of residents through the “maintenance of natural, manufactured, and human capital and other community assets over the long-run” (p. 277). Resilience is the “short-run recovery and adaptation to negative external shocks” (Irwin et al., 2017, p. 277). These planning strategies can assist policymakers in preparing for shocks and stressors such as economic (e.g., recessions), social (e.g., pandemics, racial unrest), and environmental (e.g., wildfires, extreme weather) (Irwin et al., 2017). Regions can become more sustainable and resilient through leveraging their understanding of complex systems and societal costs to improve their responsiveness to community needs (Irwin et al., 2017).

Regions are facing a multitude of complex issues emerging from the rapid growth of metropolitan areas and the coalescence of cities and towns (Wheeler, 2009). Sustainability planning can provide a useful framework to more effectively address these problems. Regions play a vital role in maintaining a high level of mobility between communities. As cities expand, residents have longer distances to commute for work, household, social, and recreational purposes (Wheeler, 2009). Another complex issue involves conflicts over land and resources as the region rapidly grows. For example, exurban sprawl (1-40 acres/house), which are low-density subdivisions with lot sizes of one acre or more, puts a strain on resources such as water, forests, and farmland (Wheeler, 2009). Regions struggle to balance equity and economic competitiveness. They can work with communities to address problems such as environmental justice, concentrations of poverty, and disparities in tax base and opportunity (Wheeler, 2009). Also, regions can play a critical role in tackling other social and community issues. For example, the growth of an area could have negative impacts on a city or town's sense of place and local traditions (Wheeler, 2009). Lastly, regions face difficult decisions with regard to economic development. For example, they can encourage the protection of downtown areas, neighborhood centers, and local businesses (Wheeler, 2009).

Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) are becoming more interested in sustainability planning. These federally mandated agencies have evolved over the years, from long-range transportation planning to addressing multi-modal and air quality issues (Barbour, 2020). MPOs are also responsible for protecting civil rights and engaging stakeholders and the public (Barbour, 2020). They developed closer relationships with local governments to improve pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure (Barbour, 2020). In the 1990s, federal and state reforms granted MPOs more authority and flexibility (Barbour, 2020). However, they experienced reductions in funding and stricter environmental standards (Barbour, 2020). These constraints spurred MPOs to develop performance objectives for improving transportation and measuring emissions (Barbour, 2020). Some of these agencies have discovered benefits from integrating environmental and land use strategies into their transportation plans (Barbour, 2020). MPOs that

have adopted this broader approach have reported positive impacts on the economy, social equity, and natural environment (three E's) (Barbour, 2020). Also, they can more effectively manage state and federal mandates and address public and stakeholder concerns and interests (Barbour, 2020). Overall, MPOs that have taken an integrated approach have become more efficient in managing their expanding responsibilities.

Communities are expanding performance evaluation beyond public service delivery to include environmental and social metrics (Rajaonson and Tanguay, 2019). Rajaonson and Tanguay (2019) define sustainability as development that integrates social, economic, and environmental dimensions to meet our current needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs (p. 985-986). In regards to the economy, regions should support local businesses, invest in infrastructure, and provide essential public services (Rajaonson and Tanguay, 2019). They can use indicators such as the cost of living and the unemployment rate to measure performance (Rajaonson and Tanguay, 2019). To improve social wellbeing, communities should seek to equitably support all residents, including their culture and lifestyles. They can use metrics like safety, affordable housing, and health and education services (Rajaonson and Tanguay, 2019). In terms of the environment, regions should preserve natural areas, biodiversity, agriculture land (Rajaonson and Tanguay, 2019). Also, they should reduce pollution, waste (resource efficiency), and land degradation. Regions can use environmental indicators such as air, water, and soil quality, along with acres of parks and open spaces (Rajaonson and Tanguay, 2019). Communities should also improve their understanding of the spatial interaction between cities to determine if a policy decision has a negative, positive, or neutral impact.

Wheeler (2009) discusses five reasons for regions to develop a sustainability plan. The first is to think about long-term growth and decline of the region with time horizons of 50 or 100 years from now (Wheeler, 2009). Planners need indicators that they can use to forecast future development trends (Wheeler, 2009). Secondly, sustainability plans challenge elected officials to think holistically about the interconnections of economic, social, and environmental issues (Mischen et al., 2019; Irwin et al., 2017; Smetana et al., 2015; Wheeler, 2009). This practice will involve the integration of planning, perspectives, and scales (between municipalities) (Wheeler, 2009). The third reason is to understand better that there are limits to growth and opportunities to improve the quality of communities (Wheeler, 2009). The fourth reason for regional sustainability planning is to maintain a sense of place (Wheeler, 2009). This consideration involves protecting ecosystems, historic architecture, and cultural practices (Wheeler, 2009). The fifth and last reason to conduct a regional sustainability plan is to encourage other municipalities to engage in the process actively (Homsy et al., 2019; Wheeler, 2009). They all should feel a moral responsibility for the future of the region (Wheeler, 2009).

My proposal involves a regional sustainability plan called Looking to our Future: Pikes Peak Region 2030 (hereafter referred to as the PPR 2030 plan). This region is located in Southeastern Colorado, named after a 14,115-foot mountain, and is one hour south of the City of Denver by car. The PPR 2030 plan uses the El Paso and Teller Counties to define the Pikes Peak region (PPACG, 2012). The Pikes Peak Area of Council of Governments (PPACG) led the planning process for two years from 2010 to 2012 (PPACG, 2012). PPACG represents 16 counties and municipalities with a board of directors comprised of elected officials from counties

(voting), cities and towns (voting), and military installations and key agencies (non-voting) (PPACG, 2020). The purpose of the PPR 2030 plan was to establish high-level sustainability stretch goals for El Paso and Teller Counties (PPACG, 2012).

The PPR 2030 planning process involved seven PPACG staff and overseen by a consensus committee comprised of 24 members from various organizations, including elected officials (PPACG, 2012). Over 100 individuals representing military bases, elected officials, local governments, education institutions, and the business community contributed to the PPR 2030 plan (PPACG, 2012). PPACG created task forces for each of the following ten issue areas: 1) Agriculture; 2) Arts and culture; 3) Built and natural environment; 4) Economic development; 5) Education; 6) Energy; 7) Health; 8) Materials management and procurement; 9) Transportation; and, 10) Water quantity (PPACG, 2012). The PPR 2030 plan included a one-month public comment period that received 20 comments (PPACG, 2012).

The consensus committee presented a final version of the plan to the PPACG Board of Directors. However, support for the regional sustainability plan had diminished. Three new members joined the Board and lacked an opportunity to review the PPR 2030 plan (Barber M., personal communication, April 29, 2020). Also, support dwindled among the members that were involved in the planning process (Barber M., personal communication, April 29, 2020). The consensus committee decided that there was not enough support from the Board to continue advocating for the adoption of the PPR 2030 plan (Barber M., personal communication, April 29, 2020).

The non-profit organization Peak Alliance for a Sustainable Future (PASF) was formed to encourage cities, businesses, and organizations to voluntarily pursue the goals in the PPR 2030 plan. PASF, along with Green Cities Coalition (GCC) and the Pikes Peak Environmental Forum (PPEF), organized monthly presentations and site tours to highlight regional sustainability efforts. On average, approximately twenty people are in attendance at each of the three public events per month. In 2016, PASF invited cities, organizations, and businesses to complete a survey to assess each of the ten issue areas in the PPR 2030 plan. They took the survey results and drafted the 2016 Pikes Peak Regional Sustainability Report. In 2019, PASF partnered with the PPACG and the City of Colorado Springs to begin the process of planning an update to the PPR 2030 plan.

The overall goal of my project is to provide my partners with an improvement plan ahead of an updating process to Pikes Peak Region 2030 (PPR 2030) sustainability plan. My partners are Peak Alliance for a Sustainable Future (PASF), City of Colorado Springs, and the Pikes Peak Area Council of Governments (PPACG). I will use the PPR 2030 plan, scholarly literature, and case studies to inform my recommendations. My partners have requested that I focus on implementation monitoring and stakeholder engagement. I have chosen to include a third focus area of aligning the regional sustainability plan goals with the United Nations (n.d.) Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs). My first goal is to develop at least five best practices for improving the implementation monitoring of a regional sustainability plan. Secondly, I will identify at least five strategies for improving stakeholder engagement in the planning process. My third goal is to devise at least one strategy for aligning the regional sustainability goals with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs).

Methods

I have devised three strategies for developing recommendations to improve the Pikes Peak Region 2030 (PPR 2030) sustainability plan. First, I will conduct an in-depth review of the PPR 2030 plan and gather insights from my partners. I intend to interview Mary Barber, Chair of the Board of Peak Alliance for a Sustainable Future, to learn about the past planning process and ongoing implementation efforts. Next, I will reach out to Samantha Bailey, Environmental Planner with Pikes Peak Area Council of Governments, to discuss her ideas for improvements to the plan. Lastly, I will connect with Ryan Trujillo, Director of Support Services with the City of Colorado Springs, to understand how the PPR 2030 plan will influence strategic planning for the largest community in the region. This deep understanding of the PPR 2030 plan and the needs of key partners will provide a robust framework for my project.

My second strategy is to analyze scholarly literature to identify best practices for the three focus areas. I review journal articles and books using the keywords: regional sustainability planning, sustainable development, implementation monitoring, stakeholder engagement, United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs), and Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs). Several articles are from the *Journal of Sustainability*, *Journal of Cleaner Production*, and *Journal of Regional Studies*. For books, I have found useful information from the *Regional Research Frontiers – Vol. 1* (2017) edited by Randall Jackson and Peter Schaeffer, *Transportation, Land Use, and Environmental Planning* (2019) by Elizabeth Deakin, and *Stakeholder Engagement and Sustainability Reporting* (2019) by Marco Bellucci and Giacomo Manetti. These articles and books will provide the most current literature on the topic of regional sustainability planning.

I plan to review several regional sustainability plans as case studies for my third strategy. The first is Thurston County and Puget Sound Climate Adaptation Plan, which received the American Planning Association's 2018 Award for Excellence in Sustainability. The second is the City and County of Denver's 80 x 50 Climate Action Plan. This community, the largest in the state, shares many of the same issues found in the Pikes Peak region. The third comes from a rapidly growing nine-county San Francisco Bay Area and is called Plan Bay Area 2040. These case studies will provide ample insights into how regions with similar challenges are planning for sustainability and resiliency.

Deliverables

I will deliver to my partners a report containing recommendations for improving the PPR 2030 plan. This document will identify best practices for the three focus areas. For implementation monitoring, I will identify several options for metrics, assessment, tracking and reporting, and future planning. For stakeholder engagement, I will discuss organizing a planning committee, strategies for community outreach, and selecting engagement tools. Lastly, I will provide a framework for aligning the regional sustainability plan goals with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs). In addition to the improvement plan, I will present to my partners an overview of my recommendations.

Timeline

March 22, 2020

- Brainstorm capstone project ideas
- Write an outline for the top three ideas

March 29, 2020

- Write description of project
- Review literature on regional sustainability plans
 - Identify and briefly summarize at least ten scholarly articles

April 5, 2020

- Create project timeline
 - Steps
 - Benchmarks
 - Deadlines

April 12, 2020

- Draft introduction
 - Develop SMART Goals
 - Write background information

April 19, 2020

- Write proposal body
 - Introduction
 - Goals
 - Timeline
 - Methods
 - Deliverables

April 26, 2020

- Draft Full Proposal
 - Incorporate feedback from peers

May 3, 2020

- Receive feedback from peers on introduction, body, and full proposal
- Final Proposal
 - Incorporate feedback

May 8, 2020

- Create a 10-15-minute video presentation of the proposal
- Send presentation to partners
- Receive feedback from partners

May 31, 2020

- Review goals, objectives, and timelines with partners
- Conduct a review of the Pikes Peak Region 2030 plan, including the planning and implementation process
- Utilize the review for developing outlines for the three focus areas: implementation monitoring, stakeholder engagement, and alignment with UN Sustainable Development Goals
- Ask for any additional information and resources

June 7, 2020

- Review the literature on implementation monitoring
 - Peer-reviewed articles
 - Case studies using other regional sustainability plans
 - Interviews of planners from other regions
- Identify the best practices for implementation monitoring
 - Metrics
 - Assessment system
 - Tracking and reporting
 - Future planning
- Organize recommendations into an implementation monitoring plan

June 14, 2020

- Review the literature on stakeholder engagement
 - Peer-reviewed articles
 - Case studies using other regional sustainability plans
 - Interviews of planners from other regions
- Identify best practices for stakeholder engagement
 - Planning committee
 - Strategies for community outreach
 - Engagement tools
- Organize recommendations into a stakeholder engagement plan

June 21, 2020

- Review the literature on incorporating the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into regional and city planning
- Identify strategies for integrating the SDGs into the Pikes Peak Regional 2030 plan
- Organize the most promising strategies into SDGs alignment plan

June 28, 2020

- Incorporate all three plans into one rough draft
- Provide a draft of plans to partners to obtain their feedback

July 5, 2020

- Incorporate feedback into the plans
- Produce a final draft of the plans

July 12, 2020

- Create a presentation of the plans
- Present the plans to partners

Due to the Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic, all of my work will take place at home and online. I will coordinate meetings and receive feedback from my partners via phone, email, and video conferencing. I will present an overview of my work through a pre-recorded video.

Conclusion

For my capstone project, I will deliver a report containing recommendations for improving the Pikes Peak Region 2030 (PPR 2030) sustainability plan. This report comes as regional stakeholders prepare to update the plan. My partners are Peak Alliance for a Sustainable

Future (PASF), City of Colorado Springs, and the Pikes Peak Area of Council of Governments (PPACG). I will use the PPR 2030 plan, scholarly literature, and case studies to inform my recommendations. My partners have requested that I focus on implementation monitoring and stakeholder engagement. I have chosen to include a third focus area of aligning the regional sustainability plan goals with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs). My first goal is to develop at least five best practices for improving the implementation monitoring of a regional sustainability plan. Secondly, I will identify at least five strategies for improving stakeholder engagement in the planning process. My third goal is to devise at least one strategy for aligning the regional sustainability goals with the United Nations (n.d) Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs).

The Pikes Peak region could discover the many benefits of having an improved sustainability plan. Communities can become more sustainable and resilient through improving their understanding of the interdependencies among the economy, environment, and society (Irwin et al., 2017). They can more effectively address a multitude of complex issues that are emerging from rapid urbanization (Wheeler, 2009). The Pikes Peak region can more efficiently manage its responsibilities as a Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) (Barbour, 2020). They can gain a more comprehensive understanding of performance in the region through the inclusion of social and environmental parameters (Rajaonson and Tanguay, 2019). The Pikes Peak region can conduct long-term planning, better understand resource limits, and foster a sense of place (Wheeler, 2009). A regional plan can encourage agencies, businesses, and organizations to coalesce around common sustainability goals. The largest city in the region, Colorado Springs, plans to adopt the goals in the new plan.

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