The local politics of policy mobility: Learning, persuasion, and the production of a municipal sustainability fix

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Abstract

This paper draws on the concept of a 'sustainability fix' – a political discourse that allows development to proceed by accommodating both profit-making and environmental concerns – to analyze how municipalities muster support for development in the face of worries about negative environmental impacts. The case of Whistler, British Columbia, a tourist resort with an official orientation toward sustainable development, illustrates the politics of balancing economic and environmental commitments. The paper deepens the sustainability fix concept by addressing first how such a fix is achieved through the assemblage of local and extra-local resources, specifically 'imported' policy models that direct attention to certain definitions of problems and legitimate specific types of policy solutions. Second, it addresses how the politics of municipal policy-making is about more than contention and how it involves the sort of ongoing and broadly-defined learning that has been largely undertheorized in the local politics literature. A key point of the paper is that local politics and policy-making are always also extra-local in various ways. They involve a local politics of policy mobility. The paper concludes by expanding on this premise to show how Whistler's model of sustainability planning has recently been circulated to other municipalities with similar social, economic, and environmental conditions.

Introduction

> *[The 2010 Winter Olympic] Games provided Whistler with an opportunity to showcase itself as a global leader in advancing sustainable initiatives. As a partner, Whistler brought its commitment to sustainability to the Games and collaborated on initiatives and projects that contributed to making the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Games the most sustainable games in history"* (Whistler 2010, 44-45).

This passage is from *Living the Dream* (2010), a report published by the Resort Municipality of Whistler, British Columbia, in the wake of the 2010 Winter Olympics. The report reviews the municipality's strategic objectives as 'Host Mountain Resort' (Vancouver co-hosted the Games) and identifies the legacies of the mega-event by highlighting what the municipality and its non-governmental partners identify as their successes as hosts. "Accelerating our journey toward sustainability" (ibid, 44-51) was a key strategic objective of the Games and Whistler's role in them. It is Whistler's officially defined aim of achieving sustainability that is our focus.

The goal of environmental, social, and economic sustainability epitomizes Whistler's self-image as an environmentally responsible, collaboratively planned, and growth-managed municipality – an image that can be traced back to development controls instituted in 1989 (Gill, 1997, 2000; Gill & Williams 2011). Whistler is a mountain resort that attracts a high-end, international clientele. It is located 120 kilometers north of Vancouver and has a mixed population of permanent residents, visitors, and service workers. The seasonal nature of the local economy means that its population fluctuates considerably however, Whistler's "yearly daily average population equivalent" is counted at 26,780 (Whistler2020, 2011). The town has been incorporated as a 'Resort Municipality' since 1975, and like other municipalities in British Columbia, has an elected mayor and council, a local government bureaucracy that is responsible for providing infrastructure, law enforcement, and safety services, as well as legislating and enforcing land use and development (Whistler, 2011). These service and planning responsibilities are central to the municipality's orientation toward sustainability, given

its economic dependence on outdoor and wilderness tourism, an industry noted for its heavy impacts on the environment (Saremba & Gill 1991, Leiper 1997; Gill & Williams 2006; Buhalis 2000). Indeed, a key reason for the original incorporation of Whistler was the growing fear of tourist-oriented, uncontrolled growth after the opening of the area's first chair lift in 1965.

Whistler's history has subsequently been marked by a number of influential planning strategies intended to protect its economically essential surrounding environment (Table 1). These strategies have also been characterized by a gradually strengthening commitment to collaborative planning shaped by and responsive to resident concerns about development, housing, and environmental degradation. Since the late 1990s, these efforts have been explicitly couched in terms of 'sustainability,' a currently dominant master signifier (Davidson, 2010) in planning circles and in environmental activism that motivates and encapsulates a wide array of concerns about, and proposed solutions to environmental, social, and economic problems.

This orientation toward sustainability in policy is not purely technical, however. Rather, it is also an ideological and political framing of the municipality's past, present, and potential futures. Our starting point is the proposition that planning and development in Whistler over the last fifteen years have been characterized by an attempt to construct what While et al. (2004) call a 'sustainability fix' – a spatially and historically contingent organization of economic interests, institutional capacities, and political positions that allows development to proceed despite economic and ecological crises and in the face of growing popular concerns about the state of the environment.

While Whistler is by no means a large municipality, its local politics and policy-making have long been influenced by the sorts of interconnected economic and environmental concerns that While et al. (2004) discuss in the context of larger urban regions. The municipality is a single industry town with little diversity in its permanent population, but because its tourism industry and much of the population rely heavily on the surrounding environment for their economic survival, the politics of sustainability and entrepreneurialism are always sharply in focus. Furthermore, as an incorporated municipality, its politics and practice of planning mirror those of other places in fundamental ways. Yet, it is important to note that Whistler is unusual in some ways as

its local policy-making has been largely free of explicitly *contentious* forms of politics, for reasons we will discuss below (Gill & Williams 2011). These factors, in combination, make Whistler a particularly clear case through which to expand further on the notion of the sustainability fix, although one that can only be generalized carefully.

In this paper we both unpack and deepen the notion of the sustainability fix by identifying two elements of the politics of municipal sustainability that are crucial to its construction. The first is the role of 'imported' policy models, practices, and expertise in allowing local governance coalitions to focus on certain problems, to propose a specific range of solutions, and, thus to construct, legitimate, and maintain political support for a particular approach to development. 'Local' sustainability fixes are, we argue, always also 'extra-local' in their construction and legitimation. Our second, related, argument is that the economic, institutional, and political coordination necessary for the successful construction of a locally-workable sustainability fix benefits from and necessitates an ongoing practical and participatory learning endeavor that has largely been undertheorized in studies of local politics. We suggest, following McFarlane (2006, 2011), that the shift toward municipal sustainability is *a political process of knowledge translation*, discursive framing – including the powerful framing of certain problems and policy responses as largely technical rather than political (Rose, 1999) – and the 'education of attention' (McFarlane,2011) through the practical training of a wide range of residents.

This paper draws upon seven months of fieldwork in Whistler in 2007-2008 and subsequent tracking of Whistler's planning activities. During that time, twenty-nine semi-structured interviews were conducted with key actors in Whistler's policy-making communities, including residents, community activists, and business operators. Key topics in these interviews explored the everyday mundane practices of business and municipal operations and the ways in which policy was constructed. They also covered interactions between the public and private sector as well as interviewees' understandings of and attitudes toward policy-making, sustainability and local politics. This information was supplemented by thorough readings of key policy documents, other ancillary texts, newspaper accounts, and websites.

The next section discusses the literatures on sustainability fixes, on mobile policies, and on urban learning in order to frame an exploration – in the subsequent section – of two related ways that Whistler's orientation toward sustainability has been governed and advanced through persuasive politics and social learning activities. These are: the learning and adoption of a certain model of sustainability, developed by an external consultant in consultation with local actors, and the use of indicators to focus attention on certain definitions of governance problems and associated solutions. These actions facilitate the ongoing enrolment of the general population into the sustainability-oriented governance model through training and learning activities. The paper concludes by asking what work does an idea like 'sustainability' do in the politics and practice of (extra-)local policy-making? We argue that the case of Whistler shows that 'sustainability' is about *mobilizing*, in the sense that it moves people to action, that it helps discussions and political deliberations move on (in McClennan's [2004] sense of a 'vehicular idea'), and that it allows municipal actors to circulate their particular model of sustainability policy to other localities in a way that further enforces its importance in contemporary municipal policy circles.

Fixing, mobilizing, and educating: Local sustainability initiatives in critical perspective

In order to better understand the case of Whistler and what it says about the wider context of municipal sustainability policy and politics, we draw upon three literatures: on the sustainability fix, on policy mobilities, with a focus on what we conceive of as the local *politics* of policy mobility, and on the role of knowledge and education in urban policy-making and politics.

The politics of environmental governance: Sustainability as fix

Contemporary work in urban political economy/ecology critically examines the rise of sustainability discourses in the politics of local and regional governance and policy-making (While et al. 2004, Brand 2007, Hodson & Marvin 2007, Huber & Currie 2007, Kear 2007, Krueger & Gibbs 2007, While et al. 2010). For While et al. (2004, 551), an "environmental 'cut'" into the question of local and regional governance, "can provide a

range of theoretical and empirical insights into urban entrepreneurialism, the changing context for urban politics and, to some extent, the social contradictions of urban environmental regulation." They argue (ibid. 2004, 552) that the recent importance of environmental management in urban governance results from the confluence of numerous pressures, including: "economic imperatives" to revalorize urban space through clean-up efforts, reduce business costs by using resources more efficiently, and to market cities as clean and livable; "regulatory drivers" such as financial incentives from other levels of the state to 'green' the city and legal dictates to mitigate negative environmental externalities; and public pressure to reduce 'carbon footprints' and aid in the mitigation of climate change. Yet, crucially, they argue, these demands are only part of the picture. Forces that seem to pull in the opposite direction from those above also condition municipal commitments to sustainability: a neoliberal political economic and ideological context that demands and rewards "ecologically unfriendly" development, urban entrepreneurialism, and continual increases in economic growth rates while restricting local finances and, therefore, the public sector's ability to regulate or direct investment and development.

Municipal leaders are compelled to seek a balance between these seemingly divergent forces and have done so by selectively integrating environmental goals into their governance frameworks. They have, then, attempted to institute a relatively stable and stabilizing 'sustainability fix' (cf. Harvey, 1982) in order to maintain a delicate equilibrium between capitalist growth imperatives and environmental limits and their associated political pressures. As While et al. (2004, 551) put it,

> [t]he historically contingent notion of a 'sustainability fix' is intended to capture some of the governance dilemmas, compromises and opportunities created by the current era of state restructuring and ecological modernization… [we interpret] sustainable development … as part of the search for a spatio-institutional fix to safeguard growth trajectories in the wake of industrial capitalism's long downturn, the global 'ecological crisis' and the rise of popular environmentalism.

The incorporation of sustainability preoccupations and principles into local governance is fundamentally political from this viewpoint. Sustainability in its many and divergent guises is a goal, concept, or ideology that can be turned to numerous persuasive purposes and can, therefore, play a crucial role in solving, deferring, or redirecting conflicts between local environmental activist groups and business interests. In order for a sustainability fix to function successfully in this regard, at least two factors need to work in combination: an active, responsible, and environmentally-conscious citizenry, including members of the business community, and a local state commitment to some form of public participation in planning and related decision-making. We suggest that detailed case study analyses of how these factors operate in different municipal and regional contexts can offer valuable insights into how governments and citizens create local ideologies surrounding sustainability and how, in turn, those ideologies drive the fundamentally political process of policy-making.

Fixes and flows: Mobile policies as political and practical resources
By examining how sustainability planning is used as a political/ideological fix as well as a framework for addressing real, pressing environmental and economic concerns, we seek to offer a view of how local sustainability coalitions focus attention on certain problems of governance, on particular proposed solutions, and, in doing so, attempt to stay coherent and effective while managing disagreements and divisions within their ranks and questioning from without. Whistler's case suggests that the 'importation' of ideas, best practices, and policy models is one way in which local sustainability fixes are constructed and legitimated.

Recent critical geographical work on the inter-local circulation, mutation, and adoption of policies offers insights into the way that certain policy models, or 'best' practices, act as both practical and political resources for municipal policy actors (McCann, 2008, 2011a, 2011b, Forthcoming; Peck and Theodore, 2010; McCann and Ward, 2011). This literature suggests, among other things, that municipal policy-making is characterized by a tension between the *bespoke* and the *prêt a porter*. On the one hand, there is political pressure on policy-makers to develop *tailored*, locally specific policy 'solutions' to local problems – responses that are generated through local partnerships

with private business and through participatory consultations with local residents. On the other hand, there is a simultaneous structural pressure towards efficiency, speed, and predictability in the adoption of policies. This imperative toward 'fast policy' (Peck, 2011) leads local policy professionals to look for sure bets – policies that have been deemed by trusted contacts, professional authorities, and the policy consultancy industry, to have been successful elsewhere and that seem easily accessible in packaged, readily consumable, and mobile form. Policies that are, in other words, *off-the-rack*. (Our allusion to the fashion industry is intentional since it can be argued that local policy is increasingly at the mercy of fashion, as one fad seems to yield to another at increasing speed, leaving local policy actors scrambling to keep up and to distinguish themselves from competitor municipalities [McCann and Ward, 2010]).

This tension is managed through an extrospective orientation in local policy-making, one in which policy actors of all types, not just politicians and policy professionals like planners but also members of local business communities and activist groups motivated by issues like environmental sustainability, 'scan' globally for policy models that can be expected to yield success and that can be molded to local conditions and expectations (Peck & Tickell, 2002; McCann, Forthcoming). They look, in other words, for policies that can be helpful practically, but also politically. Thinking through the politics of local environmental governance in the context of policy mobilities offers an opportunity to deepen both our understanding of the implementation of specific sustainability fixes and also to expand on the relationship between policy mobilization and local politics.

Policies 'imported' from other places by local policy professionals or provided in packaged form by policy consultants arrive with an imprimatur of excellence, world-classness and track-record, wrapped in layers of awards, and glowing write-ups, provided by a range of mediators and authorities (McCann, 2004, Forthcoming). They are, then, politically powerful in at least four ways. First, at a general ideological level, the most popular of them are conditioned and legitimized by commonly-held and unquestioned beliefs about the efficacy of partnership governance, participatory planning, and sustainability through 'market mechanisms' – what Bourdieu and Wacquant (2001, 1-2) call "commonplaces … undiscussed presuppositions … [which] owe most of their power

to convince to the prestige of the place [institution, think-tank, or consultancy] from whence they emanate." Second, and more specifically, mobile policies act as discursive frames that focus thinking on certain definitions of what the key local governance problems are and also direct attention to a specific realm of possibility in which solutions might be sought or constructed. Therefore, other definitions of the main problems and the best solutions are left outside the conversation to the point where they can hardly be raised in public discussion without drawing ire or derision due to their seeming backwardness, idealism, impracticality, or incomprehensibility.

Third, policies that are developed in one context can only be made mobile if some technology is employed to make them comparable and commensurable (Larner and Le Heron, 2002, 2004). The specificities and contingencies of their provenance need to be polished away in order to make them move smoothly to other situations. The process of creating equivalence where it may not apparently exist is a powerful one. It takes expertise and generally involves a familiarity with specialized, technical, conceptual, or abstract language, and/or with calculative techniques like indicators or benchmarking. They are central to a process of translation which "involves creating convergences and homologies by relating things that were previously different" (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2000, quoted in McFarlane, 2006, 293). As Rose (1999, 36-37) argues, these sorts of "intellectual techniques" are "modes of objectifying, marking, inscribing and preserving otherwise ephemeral and subjective visions. … [They] make things stable, mobile, durable, comparable." Thus, indicators and related "inscription devices:" maps, charts, tables, diagrams, and, we would add, PowerPoint slides – the professional policy transfer agent's stock-in-trade – render the political processes 'merely' technical and, thus, they are, for Rose, "little machine[s] for producing conviction in others" (ibid. 37).

Learning sustainability through collaborative decision-making
Work on urban policy mobilities has, at its core, a concern with broadly defined forms of teaching and learning and with the circulation, mediation, and application of knowledge (Theodore and Peck, 2000; Peck and Theodore, 2001, 2010; McCann, 2004, 2008, 2011a, 2001b, Forthcoming; Ward, 2006, 2007, 2011; Clarke, 2009; McCann & Ward, 2010, 2011; Peck, 2011; Robinson, 2011). Furthermore, as we have indicated in the previous

section, learning in this literature is generally understood in terms of power and politics, particularly regarding how expertise, and truth claims are deployed by transfer agents and various other 'experts of truth' (Rose, 1999).

This understanding resonates with a key modality of the politics that surrounds municipal policy-making: a politics of persuasion and coalition-building in and through which long-term and effective consensus is established over the definition of key problems and specific rationalities and technologies through which problems will be addressed. It involves social learning or public education to gain widespread agreement on the broad parameters of acceptable policy needed to address environmental concerns and economic development imperatives, for example. The question, then, is not only how policy is 'made up' on the ground by drawing on circulating models (Ward, 2006), but also how the local political ground is prepared for new policy in and through the learning, adoption, molding, and implementation of a local version of a globally mobile policy. This is an element of policy-making that has yet to gain direct critical attention in the policy mobilities literature and it is one that can be usefully viewed through the lens of municipal sustainability initiatives.

For Colin McFarlane (2011, 360), learning is "a political and practical domain through which the city is assembled, lived and contested," but one "that is often neglected in work on urban politics and everyday life – marginalized as a background noise to the stuff of 'real politics.'" Learning here is not only about formal schooling, but also the knowledges produced and reinforced through everyday life and through the participation in a wide range of political activities. While, as McFarlane notes, learning has tended to be taken for granted, rather than critically unpacked in studies of urban politics and governance, a reading of the most influential theories of urban politics revels its central, if somewhat 'black-boxed,' presence.

For example, urban regime theory (Stone, 1989; Stoker, 1995; Mossberger, 2009) conceptualizes local governance as the coalition-based management of social complexity by mobilizing and coordinating resources and blending interests and capacities. This involves the formation and long-term maintenance of a regime – a set of networked cooperative relationships among governmental and non-governmental actors who recognize their mutual interests and dependency – that holds and uses strategic

knowledge and resources. In it, cooperation is learned through interaction among elected officials, policy professionals, business interests, and community groups, who coalesce around certain policy preferences. These preferences – e.g., for sustainability policies – are, as Stoker (1995, 61) suggests, about learning: "Policy preferences do not simply exist; rather … they have to be formed … developed within the dynamic of the political process."

This underlying regard for the importance of learning in urban governance and politics is also evident in discussions of urban citizenship, participation, and democracy. Lowndes (1995, 170), for example, argues that, "[e]xperience in local politics affords important opportunities for developing 'citizen capacity' in a practical, psychological, and experiential sense" while a large and influential Habermasian literature on deliberative democracy in planning is founded on knowledge- and capacity-building through participation or, as Purcell, puts it in a critical review, collaborative planners "believe that democratic debate should play a *constitutive* role in people's preference formation … They want citizens to reason together toward a shared definition of the problem and agree as a whole on the right solution" (2008, 47, his emphasis).

McFarlane (2006, 2011) offers useful concepts for addressing the heretofore acknowledged but undertheorized role of learning in urban policy-making. He argues that learning involves three "interrelated ongoing processes" (2011, 365): (1) translation, the always incomplete and multiple practice through which actors mediate relationships among and knowledge of objects near and far (policies and places, for example); (2) coordination, whereby various structures and objects – such as diagrammatic models, certification processes, or websites – are used to organize discussion about policies, for example, and therefore facilitate translation and learning; and (3) the 'education of attention,' an embodied, practice of shaping one's perception of "for example, policy, not just through organizing data into representations or imaginings – i.e., not just through translation and coordination – but by 'hands-on' training" (ibid, 365). In the remainder of the paper we will draw on these concepts, to explore the development of Whistler's sustainability fix. We will show how the education of attention toward a sustainability fix in the municipality involves the education of attention through direct training of large

numbers of employees and also the indirect *entraining*, or bringing along, of local residents toward a greater environmental sensibility through a range of discourses.

Learning and making sustainability policy in Whistler, British Columbia

Fixes have the ability to utilize and produce tools of engagement for actors within local political coalitions. By examining how sustainability policies are mobilized in Whistler, we argue that everyday practices such as training, problem solving, indicator creation, measurement, and story telling involve the utilization of specific and often unnoticed forms of learning, or educating attention, that construct, legitimate, and propel specific policy models through and across scales.

Learning/mobilizing from elsewhere

Before addressing policy mobilization in Whistler, it is important to briefly ground the case in its particular planning history. As noted above, Whistler's unusual lack of contentious politics is grounded in its development as a completely planned community and a long-term municipal commitment to consultation in its planning process (the success of which is, maintained in great part by its demographic homogeneity). This is not to say that the municipality has evolved without conflict. Exponential population growth in the mid-1980s led to a growing demand for affordable housing, a quality school system, and fears of unmitigated growth causing environmental damage. The emergence of non-governmental organizations, such as AWARE (Association of Whistler Area Residents for the Environment) are testament to the gravity of these debates (Gill & Williams 2011). The government, however, was quick in its response. In 1990 the planning department implemented innovative 'Living Room' planning meetings to give residents more participation in the planning process that they demanded (Gill 1996, 2000).

The meetings also served as the first attempt to address the relationship between the environment, community and the economy – three 'pillars' of sustainability defined as crucial to Whistler's planning process. Table 1 shows Whistler's planning history over the past twenty years. There are two significant outcomes of this history: First, the gradual emergence and long-term consolidation of sustainability as a rubric and goal in

Whistler's planning process and, second, by 2000, planning processes in Whistler had become characterized by a positive working relationship among stakeholders. In this context, it is unsurprising that by 2000, local political and business elites were seeking to further enforce and also brand Whistler as an environmentally responsible, economically vibrant, and collaboratively planned municipality by looking to adopt a model policy framework that had proven successful elsewhere. "The mobilization of favored models and preferred practices presupposes, and in fact requires politically structured fields of ongoing 'experimentation' … [and] ongoing and 'grounded' forms of institutional-ideological restructuring" (Peck, 2011, 21), such as the long-term orientation toward growth management in Whistler.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Whistler's adoption of The Natural Step (TNS) framework for sustainability in 2000 moved the municipality decisively forwarding a particular direction. TNS is the product of a global management and planning consultancy firm that promotes its particular vision of sustainability and associated planning tools to governments, corporations and other institutions through the sale of its software programs, educational materials, professional training seminars, and expertise (James & Lahti, 2004; TNS.org, 2011). According to TNS, a municipality or organization can plan its way toward sustainability by focusing on individual responsibility and four core principles: that fewer natural resources should be mined; that fewer new materials and refined minerals be produced; that less environmental degradation should occur; and that people should not be "subject to conditions that systematically undermine their capacity to meet their needs" (TNS.org, 2011). TNS epitomizes the tension between the bespoke and the prêt a porter to which we referred above. On the one hand, institutions that purchase TNS services receive a tailored product: they learn from trained experts who speak TNS' language of 'systems management thinking' (TNS Canada, 2010) in a place-specific way (its client cities include Madison, Wisconsin, Santa Monica, California, and Dublin, Ireland). Yet, TNS is somewhat off-the-rack since its general principles and approach transcend the specificities of its individual clients and it seeks to market itself broadly – a

point illustrated by its attempts to represent itself as user friendly through various tools such as its YouTube channel, devoted to explaining and selling its form of sustainability, complete with testimonials from politicians, government technocrats, and industry leaders.

The education of attention towards TNS discourse and principles in Whistler since 2000 has served two related purposes. First, it has allowed the local government to adopt a language of externally validated expertise regarding environmental and other forms of planning – a language that lent its promoters a powerful persuasive advantage locally, and a significant degree of credibility further afield – for example, in the eyes of the International Olympic Committee and the Vancouver-Whistler Olympic Organizing Committee. Second, the adoption of TNS language allowed the local government to embark on a widespread campaign of public education and training in order to build the general support that the current sustainability policy framework enjoys.

The local politics of policy mobility frequently involves the repeated dissemination of a creation (or importation) myth. Such a myth frames the education of attention around sustainability in Whistler. Local knowledge about TNS' adoption in Whistler revolves around such a story, enshrined on the municipality's website and in information and promotional materials for The Natural Step Canada. It centers on TNS founder Dr. Karl-Henrik Robert's family vacation to the resort:

> Karl-Henrik's first visit to Whistler was in the winter of 2000, when he came for a snowboard holiday and also gave a few talks around town about the TNS framework. Life is about timing, and the timing was right! Whistler had always been proactive around the environment and other forward-looking issues, yet never defined its efforts in a formal definition of, or framework for, sustainability. In fact, some local leaders were at that time seeking some way of communicating and engaging with the broader community about sustainability issues – and as luck would have it, they found their solution in Dr. Robert's presentations (Whistler2020.ca 2011).

Later that year Whistler's municipal council adopted the TNS framework and began to use it to guide its planning process. There was no consideration of alternative models, nor was there public outcry against the adoption of TNS. This is not surprising as it was presented by the council to a relatively homogenous public as unambiguous, tailored, and inclusive, and also environmentally, economically, and socially comprehensive, characteristics that fit into pre-inscribed values previously outlined by the community.

This narrative is powerful because it does important persuasive political work. It suggests that there was little contention around the municipality's sustainability focus and that there is an agreement among experts about what principles are important in sustainability-oriented planning. The choice of The Natural Step was, therefore, 'natural' and fortuitous, according to the official narrative. However its adoption was also politically strategic because TNS principles resonate with local business priorities in a municipality dominated by the tourist economy. Indeed, when Robert visited Whistler in 2000 he spoke to some of the town's most powerful economic actors, including the Whistler-Blackcomb's CEO and key managers at the Fairmont Chateau hotel (Whistler's two largest employers).

The enrolment of local businesses of all sizes into a coalition around sustainability goals was crucial for the ongoing success of the municipality's planning model. This coalition-building developed through learning and training of employees and eventually the wider population. Whistler-Blackcomb, the Fairmont Chateau Whistler, Whistler Foto Source (a local business) and AWARE, the primary local environmental activist group, became officially designated 'early adopters' of TNS and spearheaded the participatory planning process. Engaging and empowering early adopters of TNS had multiple political effects. First, it reinforced a powerful political-economic hierarchy in the town, second, the municipality was able to position itself as a coordinating mediator by training and legitimating a set of non-governmental experts in TNS practices, and, third, by involving AWARE from early in the process and by building on existing alliances that had emerged through the 'Living Room Meetings' and other collaborative planning mechanisms, it was able to create broad consensus around the definition of Whistler's environmental and economic priorities.

Translating sustainability: Creating indicators, knowledge, & leaders

In 2004, the municipal council enshrined TNS more formally in local policy by voting to adopt Whistler2020, a comprehensive three-volume planning framework for the community (*Whistler2020*, 2005) which is seen to be "essentially … a vision, … a plan, and … a process, made up of stakeholders" (Interview, municipal employee 1, 2007). Whistler2020 is, according to mayor Ken Melamed and his manager of sustainability initiatives, Ted Battiston (2007, 4), the municipality's

> highest level policy document and strategic plan. [Whistler] is integrating Whistler2020 into all organizational decision-making. To do so, the TNS sustainability principles and Whistler's vision of success are used to define the ultimate end goal, and actions are identified to move the resort community in that direction.

Battiston & Melamed's (2007) words indicate an ongoing effort to persuade local residents and businesses of the merits of Whistler2020 and TNS – to create a 'commonplace' language.

A key element of this persuasive, educational, and participatory planning process was the creation of indicators. In 2004 Whistler's council formally adopted sixteen categories outlined in Whistler2020 that focus Whistler's sustainability planning initiatives. Sixteen community task forces, spearheaded by TNS early adopters, were formed to produce specific indicators for each category (Szpala, 2007.) The task forces are voluntary and comprised of community members, business leaders, activists and members of the municipal government. In the first year, over 150 people participated in the task forces and 'lead organizations' – many of whom were again TNS 'early adopters' –accepted 103 of the 142 indicators proposed.

Indicators are particularly powerful because of their intrinsic 'ordering capacity' and their tendency to "reduce the complexity of experience to a single comparable, quotable, calculable number" and to be used as "'automatic pilots' in decision making, [which] … transform the thing being measured … into its statistical indicator and displace political disputes into technical disputes about methods" (Rose, 1999, 205). In

this regard, the creation of indicators is another example of learning as a politics of participation that directs and focuses attention. By developing their own indicators of success, powerful actors in Whistler not only have control over policy outcomes, but also place the municipality in the position of sustainability expert and teacher.

The municipality tracks a wide range of measures, from the amount of waste diverted from the landfill to the number of crimes reported. Attitudes and perceptions about Whistler, and also resident satisfaction with formal and informal learning opportunities are also tracked (Whistler2020, 2011.) Annual measurement of a standard set of indicators requires government employees to be trained to understand each indicator while, we would also suggest, the annual repetition of the measurement processes educates the population on the key priorities of the local 'sustainability coalition.' Much of the data comes from an annual survey conducted in Whistler for the express purpose of measuring the 104 indicators. Each year, the results are made public through the Whistler 2020 website, in an accessible 'scorecard' format.

One sustainability indicator – food diversion from the local landfill – offers insight into the educational and political aspects of the indicator process by showing how the concerns of specific businesses were 'scaled up' to the level of municipal sustainability policy in a way that, as While, et. al. (2004) argue, addresses environmental issues while supporting the profit goals of the private sector. The focus on food waste diversion began through the initiative of a large hotel.

> You know a hotel this size, like any other big operation makes enormous amounts of waste. We need to divert the products that were captured in the kitchen and other outlets from each other… We adopted a plan in the kitchen based on what we know … That was a major turning point for us because all that wet waste is diverted from the landfill … dollar wise it is substantially cheaper … Waste and organics is 24,000 - 34,000 kilos a day. This leads to a 25% reduction in our landfill cost. This is all based on weight. Organics weighs a lot of money. (Business Official 4, 2007).

The practice of food waste diversion at the scale of a single hotel had such an affect on landfill diversion that when a local hotel association representative was assigned to sit on the Materials and Solid Waste Task Force for Whistler2020, he utilized his own knowledge and experience to successfully advocate that this measurement become one of the strategies proposed for the municipality as a whole. What was once the idea of a single hotel became a citywide, city-mandated practice monitored annually and celebrated as a successful sustainability indicator. The creation of the indicator focused attention and subsequently action on a specific concern by developing a discourse that encouraged broad attention to the problem and framed it as a general concern, rather than that of a specific sector of local business (McFarlane, 2006).

The translation of TNS into a locally workable form of knowledge and policy through the Whistler2020 planning process rested upon both the 'buy-in' of business leaders and also a similar commitment from the wider population. Through the engagement of local business leaders and prominent activists, the municipality was able to reach consensus around sustainability planning practices. This also had the affect of redirecting environmental concerns and possible conflict into formalized governance practices. The politics of this case is thus found in mundane practices, informal conversations held, for example, at a local coffee shop or pub, and concerted efforts at collaborative planning. This ongoing participatory education process focuses attention on certain clearly defined problems and policy solutions. A great degree of political agreement has been achieved around a specific definition of sustainability – a sustainability fix.

Training 'sustainable subjects'

While the local sustainability fix relies on the participation and consent of the local population as a whole, its everyday operation involves the work of local municipal officials, business leaders, and their respective employees. Therefore, sustainability knowledge has been codified, instrumentalized, and operationalized on the ground through training. This form of education of attention, or learning through applied on-the-ground practices is evidenced in the attitudes of government and private sector staff alike. As one municipal employee puts it: "education on all fronts, whether it's the residents,

visitors, local businesses, even ourselves … we need to oversee the information people are receiving" (Municipal employee 2, 2007). The continuous training of employees in Whistler is a task that takes up a considerable amount of local businesses' and the municipality's time. There are, on average, 3,000 seasonal workers residing in Whistler in any given season (Whistler, 2011). Most are foreign, coming to Canada on yearlong work holiday visas, working for one season and then taking the remaining six months to travel (Whistler, 2011). Therefore there is an almost complete turnover of workers, a substantial resident population, every six months.

Given that the successful implementation of sustainability initiatives in Whistler is dependant on individuals engaging in specific actions, like proper recycling, the ongoing training of staff in sustainability goals and practices is crucial. "It's imperative for us to make sure that new staff are educated because they're the ones who make it successful… I mean we reinvent ourselves every three or four months here" (Business Official 4, 2007). This ongoing training is no easy task: "we actually got fifty online learning tools [from TNS] and we trained fifty people [on] what they could do … We do a training session for all the new workers who come here… even management. We have fifty stations, computers that people sit at to take the [TNS] tutorials" (Business Official 1, 2007). Training tools provided by TNS ensure that workers in Whistler are learning the correct form of sustainability, in line with TNS principles – i.e., the organization's definitions of problems and appropriate solutions – and with Whistler2020's indicators and goals.

While on-the-job training in sustainability practices is clearly a central occupation for employers in Whistler, the training of 'sustainable subjects' is not limited to the workplace. Rather, workforce training serves as a 'mediating structure' (McFarlane 2011 to organize and coordinate the translation of TNS principles and Whistler2020 goals to the town in general as trained workers take the way they think and act in relation to the environment and economy beyond the workplace. Furthermore, while local residents who are not employed by the municipality or the major local businesses are not directly trained in sustainability, they are nonetheless *entrained* toward a greater commitment to sustainability through the informal education entailed in inscription devices like the annual indicator survey. Whistler's sustainability fix is predicated on a repetitive process

of directed, informal learning that reinforces a particular sustainability discourse. Consequently, individual actors in Whistler – government employees, residents, consultants – become 'sustainable subjects' invested in furthering the success of Whistler2020.

By unpacking how people are trained to understand and support sustainability in a certain way, we highlight how particular ideas surrounding politicized concepts, such as sustainability, become naturalized, celebrated, and mobilized in local political arenas. In turn, this understanding is based on an acknowledgement that local sustainability discourses did not simply appear in government and business one day. To ensure the success of the TNS mobilization, a learning regime was put into place. It, in turn, set off its own chain of policy mobilizations. The importation, adoption, and transformation of TNS into Whistler2020 altered local planning practices and helped shape local ideologies of sustainability and governance in Whistler. The seemingly mundane task of developing a planning model to resolve political tensions has had long-term effects in the community.

Moving on: Sustainability as a vehicular idea in the politics of municipal policy-making

In this paper we have argued that the case of Whistler's importation and translation of The Natural Step sustainability framework into its Whistler2020 planning process extends and deepens both While et al.'s (2004) conceptualization of the sustainability fix and also ongoing discussions of policy mobilities by detailing the local politics involved in developing environmentally-oriented public policy. We show how the development of policy 'fixes' and the adoption of policy models from elsewhere are ideological as well as technical practices that, in combination, necessitate certain forms of education, learning, direction, and training that partially constitute, build upon, and serve the interests and future visions of particular coalitions of policy actors. In Whistler, the education of public attention to a clearly defined set of governance problems and solutions through the deployment of persuasive narratives, structured forms of participatory planning, carefully chosen and constructed indicators, benchmarks, metrics, and so on, had powerful political effects. It allowed local businesses to integrate existing corporate practices into

municipal policy and to define and legitimate a specific version of sustainability and success. Crucially, this politics also permitted certain environmentalists to support the project by incorporating their concerns and proposed solutions into a locally-workable 'coalition vision' of municipal sustainability.

Following McFarlane (2011, 361), we argue that learning is essential to this local politics of sustainability and policy mobility. "As a process and outcome learning is actively involved in changing or bringing into being particular assemblages of people-sources-knowledges," he argues. "It is more than just a set of mundane practical questions, but is central to political strategies that seek to consolidate, challenge, alter and name new urban worlds." The practical processes of learning are *mobilizing* both in the sense that they tend to involve the translation and transportation of ideas and models and also in the sense that they move institutions and groups of people to act in specific ways. Policy learning and policy-making are, therefore, inherently political.

> Learning … refers to a process involving particular constituencies and discursive constructions, entails a range of inclusions and exclusions of people and epistemologies, and *produces a means of going on* through a set of guidelines, tactics or opportunities (McFarlane, 2011, 361 our emphasis).

It is to this provocative notion that learning produces a means of *going on* that we turn in the remainder of this paper. Sustainability is powerful as a vehicle for moving political discussion and policy-making practice onwards, first in terms of the 'introspective' politics of policy-making in a specific place and then in terms of the 'extrospective' politics of mobilizing the 'Whistler model' of sustainability policy to other localities (on 'mundane' co-learning toward sustainability, see E. Le Heron et. al. (2011) and on these forms of politics, see McCann, Forthcoming).

What does the role of an signifier like sustainability accomplish in the politics of (extra-)local policy-making? As we have suggested, sustainability is a goal that municipalities can strive to reach through policy-making and it is also an ideal that legitimates certain definitions of problems and solutions. In this regard, it is also what

McLennan (2004, 435) calls a 'vehicular idea.' In an argument that resonates with McFarlane's, McLennan proposes that,

> vehicular ideas emerge as ways of problem-solving and 'moving things on'. Anyone who wants to get from A to B, for whatever reason, can therefore usefully embrace certain sorts of ideas as 'vehicles' for doing so, whatever their other differences with fellow-travellers.

Vehicular ideas of this sort are powerful in part because of their mutability and the space they allow for coalition building. "There is an ineliminable vagueness and 'mobility' about these ideas," he continues.

> "[B]ecause their significance can change with context, and they can be 'owned'… by different parts of the user network…they serve as inclusive umbrellas under which quite a range of advocates can shelter, trade and shift their alignments and allegiances… Unlike 'final' moral and theoretical vocabularies, vehicular ideas are recognized to have multiple interpretations, and a limited shelf life. They serve to make things happen at a particular time, after which their time may be up" (McLennan, 2004, 435).

In applying this concept to urban creativity policies, Peck (2011, 26) argues that vehicular ideas "function as facilitative frames, working around blockages, disarming opponents, enabling new projects to move forward. … They imagine and help to realize reorganized policy networks, constructed around reoriented means and ends." Mobilizing the concept of sustainability, then, not only keeps interest groups engaged in learning but it also prepares the ground for policy experimentation and importation. New languages are learned, new perspectives become relevant, new experts produced. The utilization of vehicular ideas like sustainability allows sometimes sudden breaks in policy direction to appear almost seamless, natural, and inevitable, or alternatively, mask the fact that not much beyond the surface has changed.

Peck also notes that "Vehicular ideas … are constructed for travel. … [T]hey are

formulated with purposive ambiguity/mutability (rather than as a fixed template), so as to move swiftly and smoothly between policymaking sites, and to lubricate new (or rebadged) initiatives in distant locales." (ibid., 26). This leads to the second aspect of our argument that the practical processes of policy learning are *mobilizing*: they often involve and facilitate the circulation of ideas and models among localities in ways that influence local politics and policy-making both at the supply side and the demand side.

While Whistler's governance coalition acted initially as a demand-side adopter of the TNS framework, recently it has become a supply-side circulator of its particular model of sustainability policy. In 2008 the municipality began to export its brand of sustainability by opening the Whistler Centre for Sustainability as a non-profit organization with a fee-for-service branch – an "enterprising non-profit" (Whistler Centre for Sustainability, 2011.) Its mission, like that of TNS and the local Olympic organizers, is to "Accelerate the journey towards sustainability" (ibid). One of its founding responsibilities, overseeing the implementation and measurement of Whistler2020, places the Centre in a position that is both a part of the local state (as policy administrator) and outside of the state (the Centre is currently acting as a consultant for thirteen other resort towns in British Columbia.) The Centre is assisting other governments to develop sustainability indicators and a related monitoring system. It has also developed relationships with the Alberta Urban Municipality Association and Ecotrust Canada. Moreover, during the 2010 Winter Olympics, the Centre hosted a series of "TEDx" talks focused on tourism and sustainability (TED, 2011). The popular TED talk series showcases experts who give twenty-minute pubic lectures on, as TED's (apt) tagline puts it, "ideas worth spreading." The lectures are then put online for a general (ideally, global) audience. This aspect of the Centre's work suggests an interest in 'policy boosterism' – the marketing of local policies to a wider practitioner constituency and also general audience (McCann, Forthcoming). By hosting its own series of TEDx talks, the Center, in partnership with the municipality, leveraged Whistler's Olympic spotlight to further its own image as a hub for innovative tourism and sustainability policy beyond the local context, to provincial, national, and global scales.

Here we encounter an extra-local politics of policy mobility, not distinct from but, rather, a constitutive part of the 'local' politics upon which most of our discussion has

focused. The Whistler Centre acts as a mediator that facilitates the travel of sustainability as a vehicular idea. Through its consultancy work it educates attention. At one scale, it attracts attention to Whistler from elsewhere and, at another, it orients discussion and learning about sustainability in other municipalities to the principles and measures that worked (practically and politically) in Whistler – ones that are presented as successful in part because they were met with little contest in the municipality. Thus discussions about the future in these places are directed and channeled by the stylized Whistler model and by related narratives of that municipality's experience in sustainability policy. At the same time, back in Whistler, the municipality's growing extra-local reputation – exemplified, for example, by an ever-lengthening list of awards (Table 1; Whistler 2011) – can be argued to further reinforce and legitimate the model as a 'best' practice and, therefore to contribute to the long-term maintenance of a municipal sustainability fix.

That the municipality has in this sense 'moved on' or away from an introspective position to focus on development through consultancy is not to say that its own policy has provided an entirely successful solution to issues facing Whistler. A perusal of its local newspaper still turns up weekly letters to the editor from residents troubled by affordable housing and development issues – a problem that has still not been fixed in the last three decades. Even in relatively homogeneous Whistler, then, contentious politics is inherent to planning but it would clearly be a mistake to look only for contention and, thus, ignore or downplay powerful processes of persuasion, consensus-building, teaching and learning when defining the politics of policy-making.

In concluding their discussion on the sustainability fix, While et al. (2004, 566) argue that much more still needs to be known about the relationship between economic and environmental imperatives, on the one hand, and the "local politics of nature and the environment," on the other. In this paper we have suggested that an attention to both the circulation of policy ideas and models and also to the role of education and learning in policy-making can shed important light on how municipalities mobilize sustainability. While Whistler's planning experience cannot be directly compared or generalized to other municipal contexts without careful attention to local contingencies, we suggest that the case prompts further questions and potential avenues of research.

Space does not allow an extensive discussion of these possibilities but, at the least, further inquiries into the local politics of policy mobilities can benefit from nuanced tracings of the multiple ways in which place-making is negotiated, municipalities fashion themselves into models of best-practice, and how the relative absence of contention adds value to the municipality's position of expertise. What, alternatively, would a local politics of learning look like in a situation that was indeed characterized by overt contention? Regarding environmental policy specifically, how does sustainability as a construct promote or rework current planning regimes in different places? For example, how might the work of E. Le Heron et. al. (2001) on co-learning and capacity-building around sustainability goals factor into an understanding of the multiple politics and potentialities of environmental planning? Also, further studies of the local politics of policy mobility have the potential to benefit from conceptual engagements that focus on post- and anti-political understandings of technical and entrepreneurial municipal practices, chart power relations in and among cities, and take into account resistance to urban entrepreneurial trajectories. These questions point to the various ways that local policy-making, like the environment itself, is political.

Table 1: Whistler's Planning History, emphasizing the emergence of its current sustainability orientation.

Date	Action
1987	Association of Whistler Area Residents for the Environment (AWARE) formed
1989	Bed Cap Unit (a planning tool used for growth management that limits the number of beds in a given area) implemented by the Municipality
1990	Conflict between residents & municipality over affordable housing and quality schools Living Room Meetings begun
1991	First Annual Municipal Survey administered
1992	AWARE successfully lobbies municipality to take on recycling program
1993	Municipality presents first Comprehensive Development Plan; Official Community Plan updated
1994	Municipality implements Growth Management Strategy
1997	Residents express concern over monopoly due to Intrawest's purchase of Whistler Ski Hill Municipality runs Visioning exercise; produces *Whistler 2020: Charting a Course for the Future*
2000	The Natural Step (TNS) formally adopted by the municipality
2001	Whistler Blackcomb, Fairmont Chateau, Whistler Foto Source, & AWARE become TNS 'Early Adopters'
2002	Municipality Introduces Whistler's Comprehensive Sustainability Plan (*Whistler: Its our future*) based on TNS systems conditions
2003	Municipality adopts the Comprehensive Sustainability Framework *Whistler2020*
2004	Municipality adopts Volume II of *Whistler2020* and 16 strategies (categories) for measuring sustainability
2005	*Whistler2020* Task Forces for each of the 16 strategies formed *Whistler2020* wins first prize in United Nations Sponsored LiveCom Awards for Planning for the Future Municipality wins silver medal in United Nations Sponsored LiveCom Awards for most livable community Municipality wins Willis Award for Innovation for *Whistler2020*
2006	Over 150 people participate on Task Forces; 73% acceptance rate of recommended actions
2007	*Whistler2020* website awarded Willis Award for Innovation from the Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators for tracking and reporting progress on sustainability initiatives Municipality receives the provincial government's inaugural Green City Awards for leadership & sustainability.

2008	Whistler Centre for Sustainability founded; the centre takes over responsibility for implementing *Whistler2020* Municipality receives SmartGrowth BC's Smarty award in the People category for *Whistler2020* community task forces Municipality designated one of the ten most environmentally friendly workplaces in Canada.
2009	Whistler Centre for Sustainability spearheads The Resort Collaborative initiative, bringing Whistler's brand of sustainability to 13 other resort communities in British Columbia Municipality wins Federation of Canadian Municipality award for Sustainable Communities Municipality wins Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators Environmental Award
2010	Whistler Co-hosts 2010 Winter Olympic & Paralympics Games – highlighting Whistler's sustainability initiatives Municipality wins Canada's Greenest Employer Award by Canada's Top 100 Employers project

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