



Engaging the Hotel Industry on Decarbonization

Toolkit for Municipal Governments

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The Situation

Canada's \$100 billion tourism industry must decarbonize to protect the natural treasures it depends upon.

Significance of hotels sector

Across Canada, \$100 billion was spent on tourism in 2024. Just in BC, tourism contributed \$9.7 billion to annual GDP and employed over 125,000 people. Hotels are especially important in small towns and tourism is a growing sector in many rural areas wishing to diversify away from volatile natural resource dependence.

Tourism is inherently tied to our incredible wild spaces and outdoor recreation. It depends on a stable climate and abundant biodiversity, snowy winters and mild summers. Climate change is an existential risk, as rising temperatures will increase visitor impacts, degrade the environment, increase wildfires, and risk devastating floods. Hotels have every reason to invest in climate action.

Opportunities for hotel operators

For hotels, decarbonization is a chance to switch to more comfortable, cost effective heating sources. Canada's hotels are associated with over 2 million tonnes of CO₂ emissions a year, largely due to hot water use and space heating and cooling.

The big opportunity is switching away from furnaces and boilers to electric heat pumps. Heat pump technology generates both hot and cold air, is much quieter, and operates incredibly efficiently. Better insulation and other energy efficiency measures can reduce electricity demand, making the switch even more cost effective.

After decarbonizing, hotel guests will enjoy quieter and more comfortable accommodations. In a heat dome or smoky wildfire season, hotels can be refuges—conditioned air can literally save lives. Many guests also appreciate (and will pay for) hotels supporting sustainable tourism.

This isn't just an opportunity on paper. The historic Fairmont Royal York in Toronto, ON was retrofitted with heat pumps, deep lake water cooling, and smart technologies. By 2023, the hotel had removed 80% of operational emissions, an annual reduction of 7,000 tonnes CO₂.

By the numbers

Tourism is Big Business

Whistler, BC receives 3 million visitors a year; 30,000 visitors can stay in 150 hotels and chalets.

Collingwood and Blue Mountain, ON receive 2.5 million visitors a year.

Banff, AB receives 4 million visitors a year; up to 40,000 people visit in 24,000 vehicles a day.

The ski industry employs 40,000 Canadians.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions of Hotels

The Chelsea Hotel in Toronto, ON is the country's single largest hotel. In 2022, it reported 4,900 tonnes CO₂ emissions, or 8.7 kg per guest night (slightly higher than the regional average).

Parkside Hotel & Spa is a 126-suite hotel in Victoria, BC. For 2025, it reported 784 tonnes CO₂ emissions, 57% of which is tied to natural gas.

Climate Impacts on Tourism Industry

Banff, AB's alpine meadows have shrunk 33% since 2001 due to climate change. (J. Farr et al., 2025).

BC is projected to lose over a month of ski days at the current pace of climate change. (D. Scott, N. Knowles, 2024).

Former Olympic Winter Games host cities Vancouver, BC and Calgary, AB will no longer be viable hosts within 50 years (protectourwinters.ca).

Why Engagement?

While they have limited policy levers to regulate hotel decarbonization, municipal governments are well-positioned to convene hotel operators and to coordinate a community-wide effort.

Role of municipal governments

While many hotels have longstanding efforts directed at water conservation and waste reduction, there have been fewer steps taken on decarbonization.

Municipal governments can play a crucial role by putting decarbonization on the agenda, convening hotel operators in a sector-wide conversation, and developing resources and education tailored to the local industry. In a room full of competitive rivals, the municipal government has a unique role to play in creating shared understandings and shaping a shared direction of action.

Given what policy levers are available to municipal governments, for most, this kind of engagement and capacity building is the best step forward.

Municipal governments can also:

- Initiate a focus on decarbonization by setting community-wide greenhouse gas emissions targets (through an official community plan or climate plan).
- Require energy and emissions benchmark reporting for hotels. This can be established through bylaws or as a voluntary program.
- Provide incentives for operators to retrofit their hotels. Possibilities include discounts on energy audits, low-interest loans, property-tax deferrals.

Each of these levers will be more effective if they are designed with input from hotel operators.

Purpose of this guide

This guide lays out an easy process to start engaging hotel operators on decarbonization.

It's for municipal staff who have identified their tourism sector as a potential actor in community emissions reductions, but without practical steps planned to achieve reductions. Engagement is the first step toward figuring out what those practical steps should be.

Who should read this guide

For tourism-oriented municipalities to hit their community climate goals, it's crucial to involve hotel operators in decarbonization.

This guide will assist municipal staff in tourism-intensive communities in BC, Alberta and across Canada, including staff in:

- Environment & Sustainability
- Economic Development
- Energy Management
- Tourism Development

1. Understand the Community

Before starting engagement, take the time to understand precisely who you are trying to reach, what to offer them, and how to do it.

Who should be involved?

Build a map of stakeholders and key contacts. This will provide a thorough understanding of the social networks, active organizations, key people, impacted groups, and receptive audiences within your hotels community.

- Document the hospitality associations, tourism agencies, hotel operators and key staff such as general managers, engineering and maintenance staff.
- This “map” could be a spreadsheet, a database, a chart, a whiteboard and sticky notes—showing key individuals, groups, or organizations, and how they connect.
- It’s not just a list of names. Work to characterize each contact’s level of interest, influence, expertise, connection, and priority.

Do you need project funding?

Add potential funders to the network map, those who might contribute or could connect you to funders such as utility providers.

What are their motivations and needs?

Develop an understanding of the stakeholders’ values, interests, and needs.

- Start with research, conversation with municipal staff, and conversation with members of the hospitality sector.
- Later, you may circulate a survey to broaden and solidify your understandings.
- Ask about values and interests to understand where you may have common ground between the industry’s goals and decarbonization.
- Ask about needs (frustrations, ambitions, challenges, opportunities) to understand where you can shape the project to help advance the stakeholders’ own goals at the same time.
- Get a sense when would be a good time to schedule activities, and if there are seasonal or professional constraints to take into account.

What is the lay of the land?

Make sure you understand the current state of the hotel sector, its climate efforts, and its relationship with the municipality.

- How many hotels are decarbonized already, how many have started, and how many remain?
- Has an initiative like this already been tried and did it succeed or fail?
- What attitudes toward the municipality will hotels bring into the engagement?

2. Reach out to Key Actors

Engagement is most effective when it leverages trusted networks. Connect with key actors in the community who can build partnerships, activate social capital, provide long-term support, and authentically reach new audiences.

Using the network map, identify the key people you want on your side to make the project a success. Be sure to include groups that may often be overlooked, and groups that could be blockers or champions.

Start inviting these contacts to participate in personal meetings or small groups to discuss the project. Show them how it would benefit the hotels, explain the role of the municipality, and ask for insight on how they think decarbonization is best pursued and where they are in their journeys so far.

Building strong relationships

Invest in relationships: connecting personally, leave your phone off, focus on listening and building trust.

Be transparent: explain what you're hoping to accomplish and how they fit in.

Be flexible: let people connect in ways that suit their needs, comfort level, and availability. Schedule outside of tourism peak times.

Report back: show respect and commitment by keeping people in the loop with timely updates.

Recruit the local association

Your local hospitality association or chamber of commerce could be a valuable starting point. This will give the initiative legitimacy right off the bat. While they may act as an intermediary at first, later activities will let you build your own contact list.

Hire a consultant if needed

If your discovery phase shows the hotel sector is skeptical of the municipality, you may benefit from hiring a consultant to lead the engagement process. They may enjoy greater trust as a third-party expert and can bring deeper technical knowledge than you may have in the local government. The downside, of course, is added cost and issues around intellectual property.

Find a champion!

It might happen that you come across a stakeholder who is especially enthusiastic, well-respected and connected. This is your champion! Rely on them to help increase participation.

A values-based invitation

It will be hard to break through if you only speak your own language of greenhouse gas emissions and electrification.

Instead, focus your communication on the values and interests you identified as core to hotel staff, operators and owners. Things like:

- Enhancing guest comfort
- Protecting attractions and natural areas from extreme weather
- Lowering operating costs and insulating against rising energy prices

If you have a champion, ask them to optimize the language used to reach their peers.

3. Engage the community

Drawing on the insights and contacts you've developed, pick a method to start engaging with the wider hotel community. Choose what makes sense based on their readiness to decarbonize. Return and choose new, deeper methods to add as the project progresses.

READY TO DIALOGUE

MOVE TOWARD SHARED UNDERSTANDINGS AND AGREED DIRECTION OF EFFORT.

Awareness raising Create chances to speak with stakeholders and put decarbonization on their radar.

- Network at a trade show or chamber meeting
- Give a guest presentation.
- Set up a display at hand out info
- Pass around a short survey
- Mail-out an info package

Focus groups or interviews Invite stakeholders to a structured meeting to collect feedback. Provide refreshments and ask a third-party to lead the process. While you learn about stakeholders' values and concerns, they are also learning about decarbonization and possible solutions.

Education Equip stakeholders with accurate, up-to-date and localized knowledge about decarbonization.

- Include instruction on financial and other co-benefits of decarbonization.
- Consider hiring a third-party expert to develop and deliver the education.
- Package as a webinar series, a short handbook, a series of case studies, or a speaker presentation.
- At any point in engagement, you may realize a knowledge gap is blocking stakeholders' ability to commit to further action. New educational resources could help get back on track.

READY FOR CAPACITY BUILDING

CLARIFY HOW TO PURSUE DECARBONIZATION AND COLLABORATE FOR SUCCESS.

Workshops Deeper, more technical learning happens in workshops—but workshops are also about stakeholders visualizing their own path forward.

- An educational workshop let's participants learn better through Q&A and active discussion.
- A sandbox workshop lets participants get hands-on and comfortable with tools (e.g. ENERGY STAR Portfolio Manager).
- A site visit lets participants see a real-world example and can stimulate pragmatic questions and ultimately inspiration.

Peer networks Keep momentum rolling by facilitating a network where stakeholders can continue meeting and collaborating without the framework of an education series. Ultimately, engagement is about making space for stakeholders to build relationships with each other. When hotels are committed to decarbonization, stakeholders will benefit from regular opportunities to share experiences, discuss challenges, and collaborate.

Coaching Give individual stakeholders personalized advice to help on the last step toward implementation.

Whistler workshops: a model for engagement

Based on its climate goal to reduce emissions 50% by 2030, the Resort Municipality of Whistler engaged its large hotel industry on decarbonization. This led to a series of increasingly deeper workshops with hotel participants that has continued over three years. This education-focused engagement has generated deeper commitments, including feasibility studies and an established peer network.

Discovery

Hired Prism Engineering a consulting firm with expertise in climate action implementation.

Approached the Hotel Association of Whistler, the local industry group for advice.

Conducted a survey of hotel managers to assess knowledge and interest in decarbonization.

Decided on workshops as the best engagement method based on stakeholders' interest

Logistics

Made a budget and fundraising plan.

Secured funding from BC Hydro and internally (LGCAP).

Made a marketing plan

Contacted 56 stakeholders in 18 hotels, primarily through the hotel association.

Signed up 28 hotel staff (including general managers, engineers, and operations managers).

Workshops

Delivered ½-day workshops with Prism Engineering.

1. Introduction to decarbonization in hotels and potential funding programs.
2. Intro to energy benchmarking and the ENERGYSTAR Portfolio Manager.
3. Site visit of Delta Hotel, identifying opportunities.
4. Vendor presentations on emerging technologies.
5. Site visit of Four Seasons Hotel, identifying opportunities.

Collected feedback and adjusted curriculum after each workshop.

Extension

Free coaching provided by Prism Engineering to help individual hotels identify opportunities.

Feasibility studies created roadmaps for specific retrofits (funded by BC Hydro and CleanBC).

Peer network launched to provide knowledge-sharing venue among engineers and maintenance staff.

Whistler's changing role

At the extension stage, Whistler is no longer directing activities. Instead, municipal staff are facilitating where needed and cheering from the side!

4. Sustain Relationships

The next steps will emerge from the hotels community.
Now it's up to you to simply ensure the relationships are sustained.

Municipal government's role 2.0

The local government stepped into this space to convene hotel operators and coordinate a wide-ranging decarbonization effort. In the course of engagement, your activities helped build capacity for hotel operators to move from awareness of the issue to action.

If all went well, the local government's role can now change. It's no longer about actively coaching and educating, and more about being a resource to the industry.

Incentives and opportunities A local government incentive program could encourage hotels stay invested in decarbonization. Incentives could focus on energy evaluations or feasibility studies to keep momentum rolling forward.

Peer network facilitation It might be beneficial to have local government staff or a consultant manage a hotel operators peer network. Someone skilled in network facilitation could ensure meetings happen regularly, source appropriate resources, and help members collaborate effectively.

Further Reading

Reducing emissions from hotels in Whistler starts with engagement and collaboration

Read a narrative case study of the Resort Municipality of Whistler's "Carbon Reduction at Your Hotel" workshop series, developed in partnership with Prism Engineering and BC Hydro.

[🔗 Read the case study](#)

ENERGY STAR® Portfolio Manager

This is a key tool for tracking and comparing the energy use of buildings in Canada.

A benchmarked score can fairly assess how a property's energy use measures up against similar properties considering the climate, weather and business activities.

[🔗 View benchmarking for hotels](#)

Building resilience: City-hotel collaborations for future-proof destinations

This report from Systemiq and C40 explores the potential for city governments and the hotel industry to collaborate on mitigating emissions and adapting to climate impacts.

[🔗 Download the report](#)