

Budgeting to Make Plans Work or Working to Make a Budget?

An Overview of Multi-Year Budgeting

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[1] Introduction

Many Canadian cities or municipalities have implemented – or are in the process of implementing – integrated multi-year capital and operating budgets. This approach has been recommended by various organizations and associations, such as the Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA), as a better way for municipal governments to plan and allocate resources.

In Canada, the approach to multi-year budgeting at the municipal level varies considerably. For example, some cities, such as Calgary, have adopted fully integrated business plans that are supported by multi-year capital and operating budgets. Others, such as Regina, have adopted multi-year capital plans, but annual operating budgets. Finally, the Regional Municipality of York in Ontario, has recently adopted multi-year capital and operating budgets, but these are not linked to a corporate business plan.

Despite these variations, cities and municipalities in Canada are increasingly adopting the fully integrated framework. For example, in late 2015, the City Councils of Edmonton and London (Ontario) adopted integrated, multi-year capital and operating budgets that are linked to business plans and performance measures. The City of Toronto is in the process of adopting a similar approach.

There are several reasons why cities and municipalities in Canada are utilizing this approach for planning and budgeting. A few of the most prominent are: (1) the integration and alignment with long-term development plans and strategic plans; (2) flexible allocation of resources over time to accomplish goals/objectives; and (3) more efficient use of time and resources as the organization is not in “perpetual budget mode”.

These, and other benefits, were formally recognized by the Government of Alberta. In 2015, the Alberta Legislature passed *Bill 20, the Municipal Government Amendment Act*. One important element of this legislation is the requirement that municipalities in the province must prepare multi-year capital and operational plans (or budgets).¹ The legislation still requires the approval of annual budgets, but in the context of a multi-year framework.

As such, the purpose of this document is to provide an overview of a fully integrated multi-year business plan and budget framework that may be useful and beneficial to the City of Saskatoon in achieving its long-term goals. To do so, this document is organized as follows:

- Section 2 describes what a multi-year budget is and, in general terms, how it works.
- Section 3 addresses some of the advantages and disadvantages of multi-year budgeting.
- Section 4 provides a brief overview of the City of Saskatoon’s existing business planning and budgeting framework.

¹ See The Legislative Assembly of Alberta, *Bill 20, Municipal Government Amendment Act, 2015*, accessed from http://www.assembly.ab.ca/ISYS/LADDAR_files/docs/bills/bill/legislature_28/session_3/20141117_bill-020.pdf. This section of the Act will come into force in the fall of 2017, once regulations are developed.

- Section 5 offers a jurisdictional scan, illustrating how other selected Canadian cities have adopted fully integrated, multi-year budgets.
- Section 6 concludes by providing a summary of multi-year budgeting and offers an approach that the City of Saskatoon could adopt in deciding to travel down this path.

[2] What is Multi-Year Budgeting? A Conceptual Review of the Models

As briefly noted in the introductory section, multi-year budgeting can take various forms. However, for the purposes of this document, a multi-year budget includes the integration of capital and operating budgets, adopted together, over the course of a budget cycle. Therefore, frameworks that use multi-year capital budgets and annual operating budgets in the budget cycle are excluded from this definition.

According to the literature, there are two main types of multi-year budgets that coincide with the description in the previous paragraph: (1) the classic multi-year budget; and (2) the rolling multi-year budget.² The distinction between these two types is subtle, but important.

The classic multi-year budget is a document that has detailed expenditures and anticipated revenues for two or more budgetary periods (years) where the document is adopted at one time. Once the multi-year budget is approved, minor adjustments are made at the end of each budget year to reflect any changes in fiscal conditions.³ However, there is no need to approve budgets annually in the multi-year framework under this model. This model is used in various American cities and states, where legislation permits the practice.

The rolling multi-year budget is a document that contains detailed expenditures and anticipated revenues for two or more budgetary periods (meaning years), but each spending plan is approved individually each year.⁴ The way this model works is that the Administration tables a multi-year budget with Council. Council then deliberates on the entire package and adopts the multi-year budget, but also approves the budget for the upcoming year. In subsequent years, there is no new budget tabled, but adjustments are made to the existing multi-year plan.

For example, assume the Administration tables a three-year budget with Council in December 2018. Council then deliberates on the entire three years and has the ability to amend the spending plans based on its priorities/goals, etc. At the conclusion of the deliberations, Council will adopt the multi-year budget for the years of 2019, 2020, and 2021.

However, Council will approve only the Budget for 2019, which takes effect on January 1 of that year. Rather than tabling a whole new budget with Council for the 2020 year, all that would be tabled with Council are any adjustments that need to be made to the original plan that Council adopted in December 2018. Council would then adopt the necessary adjustments and approve the budget for 2020. It would follow a similar process for 2021. Once the 2021 budget is

² See, for example, Salomon Guajardo, "An Elected Officials Guide to Multi-Year Budgeting," (Chicago: Government Finance Officers Association, November, 2006) 17.

³ See *ibid*, 23.

⁴ See *ibid*, 22.

approved, the multi-year budget cycle restarts and another three-or four-year budget is prepared and then ultimately adopted.

The rolling multi-year budget is commonly used in many Canadian cities, such as Calgary, Edmonton, and London. The primary reason for this is that municipal enabling legislation in Canada still requires cities (and or municipalities) to approve annual budgets. However, this does not mean that cities/municipalities cannot adopt multi-year budgets. They are permitted to do so as long as they approve an annual budget each year.⁵

[3] Advantages and Disadvantages of Multi-Year Budgeting

The preceding section of this document addresses multi-year budgeting from a conceptual perspective. It provides the two models that are used in various North American jurisdictions. However, that section did not address some of the advantages and disadvantages of multi-year budgeting. This section briefly addresses the main advantages and disadvantages with respect to multi-year budgeting, as found in the literature. It will also provide some mitigation strategies to address the disadvantages.

Before doing so, however, a major issue that emerges in the multi-year budgeting process needs to be addressed: dealing with election years. If done correctly, a multi-year budget will straddle election years.

For example, if a City Council is elected in four-year terms, let's say in October of 2016, and the term runs to October 2020, ideally, a four-year budget cycle would then take effect on January 1, 2018 and continue to December 31, 2021. The lag time in the budget cycle gives a newly elected Council the opportunity to educate itself, coordinate its priorities, and direct the Administration to implement various initiatives. Similarly, because the budget cycle will overlap with the next election, a new Council will not be "thrown" immediately into making major budgetary decisions weeks after an election.

Thus, the advantages of this process are as follows:

- Majority of new Council members appreciate the opportunity to learn the business and set strategic plans before approving a budget.
- New Council has opportunity to set direction for its term.
- Council not "thrown into" budget immediately after election.

However, the perceived disadvantage with this approach is that it may be more difficult for a new Council to effect budgetary change immediately following an election. This assumes that the new Council has a strong understanding of the budgetary challenges and opportunities of the city/municipality.

As section five describes, those cities that have adopted multi-year budgets ensure that they do in fact straddle election years for the reasons listed above. The rest of this section will now turn

⁵ See for example, section 291 of Ontario's Municipal Act and Alberta's proposed Bill 20.

to address some general advantages, disadvantages, and mitigation strategies with respect to multi-year budgeting.

3.1 Advantages

According to research conducted by the GFOA, the advantages of multi-year budgeting far outweigh the disadvantages.⁶ These include:

- Significant savings in Council and Administration time, as they are not spending half of the year on the budget.
- Potential to redeploy staff to other functions.
- Enables Council to implement multi-year vision which flows through business plans to be incorporated into the operating budget.
- Encourages a focus on achieving longer-term plans, goals, and objectives.
- Improves financial management and long-range strategic planning.
- Better alignment with (infrastructure) funding from other orders of government and to plan projects.
- Provides a better link between capital and operating investments and activities.
- The longer-term view is said to produce better and more thoughtful budgets.

3.2 Disadvantages

The GFOA lists the following as the primary disadvantages with multi-year budgeting.

- Discomfort with forecasting longer-term revenues and expenditures.
- Publishing of potential property tax increases.
- Additional effort required for implementation.
- Perceived loss of flexibility in making budgetary decisions.

3.3 Mitigation Strategies

Many of the disadvantages identified above may be addressed through various mitigation strategies such as:

- Amending existing financial and budget policies and procedures.
- Producing, monitoring, and updating socio-economic outlooks/forecasts.
- Adopting an extensive public engagement process to obtain public input.
- Establishing a budget review process for ensuring compliance with budget policies, processes, and targets.

⁶ See note 2, page 18, and Barry Blom and Salamon Guajardo, "Multi-year Budgeting: A Primer for Finance Officers" (Government Finance Review) 2000, accessed from [https://rockmail.rockvillemd.gov/clerk/egenda.nsf/d5c6a20307650f4a852572f9004d38b8/8b550fa29dc798b085257a5b0068b406/\\$FILE/AttachA_Primer_Multi-YearBudgeting.pdf](https://rockmail.rockvillemd.gov/clerk/egenda.nsf/d5c6a20307650f4a852572f9004d38b8/8b550fa29dc798b085257a5b0068b406/$FILE/AttachA_Primer_Multi-YearBudgeting.pdf)

If one assumes that the goal of multi-year budgeting is to provide better alignment with various strategic or long-term plans of the City, then the disadvantages are relatively minor when analyzed in the context of a longer-term vision.

The next section of this document will provide a brief overview of the City of Saskatoon's budgeting framework. The City does not use a multi-year budget at the moment, but the time may be right for consideration and implementation.

[4] The City of Saskatoon's Existing Budget Framework

Enabling legislation requires cities in Saskatchewan, including Saskatoon, to pass a budget each year. More specifically, section 128(1) of the Saskatchewan *Cities Act* prescribes "a council shall adopt an operating and a capital budget for each financial year".⁷ Section 128(2) restricts a City Council from billing for property taxes in a financial year, unless it has adopted a capital and operating budget for that year.

Finally, the legislation also prescribes that a City must balance its operating budget each year. In other words, operating expenditures must match operating revenues when Council approves the operating budget. At the end of the year, the budget may be in a surplus or deficit, but it must be balanced at the time Council approves the budget.⁸

Despite these legislative requirements, nothing in the legislation restricts the City of Saskatoon (the City) from adopting a multi-year budget framework, so long as it passes an annual capital and operating budget each year. In fact, as the next section of this document acknowledges, cities that have adopted a multi-year budgeting framework follow this process.

Nevertheless, the City currently approves its capital and operating budgets annually. The capital and operating budgets are linked to, and passed together with, the City's annual Business Plan (in December). In other words, each year, City Council approves the annual Business Plan and Budget. The Business Plan lays out the projects, programs, and services that the City hopes to accomplish over the course of the year, while the capital and operating budgets provide the resources to support the Business Plan.

Over the past six years, the City's approach to budgeting has evolved substantially. In 2011, the City implemented major changes to its planning and budgeting process to create a framework which would allow the City to be more adaptive and responsive to the changing dynamics in the city, the province, and the country.

This evolution has been driven by the need to become more strategic in making capital investments, more responsive to the service delivery requirements of the community, and to become more efficient in the use and allocation of resources. Indeed, the impetus for this change was driven by the:

- input of the community, through the "Saskatoon Speaks" Community Visioning project;

⁷ See, the Queen's Printer, Saskatchewan, "The Cities Act". Accessed from <http://www.qp.gov.sk.ca/documents/english/Statutes/Statutes/c11-1.pdf>.

⁸ See *ibid*, section 129(3).

- direction of City Council and its priorities;
- adoption of the City's 10-Year Strategic Plan;
- ability to measure performance and achieve targets; and
- desire to control expenditures.

The City's approach to business planning and budgeting continued to evolve in 2016. Although the above factors figured prominently in building the 2016 Business Plan and Budget, they were supplemented with an unprecedented focus on education, awareness, and public engagement.

Despite this evolution, one of the major drawbacks with the City's existing approach to budgeting is that it is difficult to determine the longer-term impacts of decisions made in previous years. The City's focus on the repair of its aging infrastructure, improving service delivery, and building new amenities, cannot all be achieved in one single year or budget; it requires a multi-year approach to reach the desired levels of success.

Cities in Canada have started – or are starting – to recognize this by implementing fully integrated, multi-year business plans and budgets. The next section of this document will address how a few cities in Canada have adopted multi-year business plans and budgets.

[5] The Frameworks in Other Jurisdictions

This section provides an overview of the multi-year budget frameworks and processes used in three Canadian jurisdictions: Calgary, Edmonton, and London. While it is beyond the scope of this document to go into great detail on the processes used in these cities, it will provide a general, high-level overview on how they approach multi-year budgeting. The City of Calgary is included in the analysis because it has the most mature process in Canada. The City of Edmonton is included in the analysis because it started its process midway through Council's electoral term. Finally, the City of London is included because it offers a perspective from Eastern Canada, and has adopted a fully integrated multi-year business plan and budget (four-year cycle).

5.1 The City of Calgary

Calgary, along with the City of Lethbridge, is the most experienced jurisdiction in Canada with respect to multi-year budgeting. Calgary City Council approved its first multi-year business plan and budget in 2004, effective for the 2006-2008 budget cycle. It then repeated the process for two subsequent three-year budget cycles (2009-2011 and 2012-2014). Calgary's three-year budget cycle coincided with the three-year electoral terms of City Council, but with a one-year lag. In other words, the City's multi-year business plan and budget came into effect in the second year of Council's three-year term.

In 2012, the Government of Alberta amended the *Municipal Government Act* to allow municipal elections to occur every four years, beginning with the 2013 municipal elections. As a result of this change to Alberta's municipal election terms, the City of

Calgary undertook reforms to its multi-year business plan and budget process by extending the budget cycle to four years.

In November 2014, the City of Calgary adopted its first four-year business plan and budget, called Action Plan, which runs from January 1, 2015 to December 31, 2018. However, because legislation requires an annual budget to be approved, Council also passed the 2015 operating and capital budget at the same meeting.

Calgary's four-year budget cycle follows the one-year lag from Council's four-year electoral term – as it did under the three-year cycle. Although Council's term ends in 2017, the multi-year business plan and budget runs to the end of 2018. This alignment allows the new Council to make adjustments to the business plan and budget for the 2018 year, but does not require the tabling of a new budget or an extensive education process for newly elected councillors.

Calgary City Council has adopted a "Multi-Year Business Planning and Budgeting Policy" that outlines the process and key deliverables.⁹ According to the policy, Calgary begins each budget cycle with an extensive public engagement exercise. It supplements this exercise with education and awareness about the multitude of issues, challenges, and opportunities the City will need to address during the budget cycle. However, it does not do any significant public engagement on the budget in the intervening years of the budget cycle.

Calgary's process allows Council to make annual business plan and budget adjustments in the budget cycle. According to the City's Action Plan Summary document, "this is done to allow City Council and Administration to respond to emerging events and unexpected issues (economic, demographic, financial), and maintain the integrity of four-year plans and budgets."¹⁰ Calgary's multi-year budgeting policy limits the adjustments to the following circumstances:

- External factors such as provincial or federal budgets, or changes imposed on pension plan contributions or WCB payments (for example).
- Adjustments to the operating impacts related to capital project adjustments.
- Unforeseen changes to economic forecasts affecting costs, service demand volumes, or revenue projections.
- Council-directed changes to priorities, or results shown in performance reporting, that cause: (a) requests to carry over operating variances, and/or (b) business plan amendments that require budget changes.

Special emphasis is placed on what is termed "mid-cycle" adjustments. The mid-cycle adjustment occurs in year two of the budget cycle, and year three of the Council term (in a four-year cycle). This mid-cycle adjustment includes an updated review of key planning documents, such as a socio-economic outlook, and opportunities to revisit

⁹ See. Council Policy CFO004, Multi-Year Business Planning and Budgeting Policy for The City of Calgary.

¹⁰ See, Action Plan Summary, <http://www.calgary.ca/CA/fs/Documents/Action-Plan/Approved/Action-Plan-2015-2018-Summary-Approved.pdf>. XXIX

Council priorities and citizen engagement. This adjustment will enable changes to the second half of the cycle, if necessary.

Notwithstanding the fact that Calgary has a multi-year budget process, it still provides annual accountability reports, such as a Corporate Annual Report and Audited Financial Statements, as required by provincial legislation. This annual reporting helps the Administration and Council in making more informed decisions in the annual adjustment process.

5.2 The City of Edmonton

After several years of adopting multi-year capital budgets and annual operating budgets, the City of Edmonton elected to adopt a fully integrated multi-year budgeting process in 2015. According to the Mayor of Edmonton, the City adopted this approach because "...multi-year budgeting is going to allow us to make better long-term decisions and get better value for money, engage the public more effectively – while still having the flexibility to make adjustments as situations emerge".¹¹

The City of Edmonton's process draws significantly from the Calgary model, but it starts with a three-year cycle (2016-2018). Following the next civic election (in 2017), the City of Edmonton will transition to a four-year budget cycle, beginning with the 2019 budget year.

As both Calgary and Edmonton are governed under the same legislation, Edmonton's process matches that of Calgary's in that the City will still have to pass an operating and capital budget each year, although it may adopt a multi-year budget. Nonetheless, according to the City of Edmonton, the primary reason for transitioning to a fully integrated, multi-year budget is to "...allow for greater integration between the strategic decisions and the operational impacts, as well as showing how an operational decision made in any given year has implications in future years".¹²

Like Calgary, Edmonton began its process by undertaking an extensive public engagement exercise to obtain input from the community on projects, services, and programs. Edmonton has also built in an annual adjustment process.

The annual budget adjustment review process includes an opportunity for Council to deliberate and approve an adjustment to the multi-year budgets or make adjustments based on changes in strategies. Edmonton provides some circumstances as to what may trigger major adjustments to the approved multi-year budget:

- External factors such as provincial or federal budgets, or changes imposed by legislation.
- Adjustments to reflect operating impacts related to the implementation and completion of capital projects.

¹¹ See, "City moves towards multi-year budget plan," CBC News, retrieved from: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/city-moves-towards-multi-year-budget-plan-1.2762512>.

¹² See City of Edmonton, Multi Year Budgeting Council (City Council, September 10, 2014) 1.

- Unforeseen changes to economic forecasts affecting costs, service demand volumes, or revenue projections.
- Council-directed changes to priorities, policies, and programs.¹³

Similar to Calgary, Edmonton will also provide annual reporting on its performance report to “discuss what the programs and services were able to achieve during the year, along with how these achievements measure against the expectations”.¹⁴ The information collected from the annual reporting will be used to inform the annual adjustment review process and forthcoming business planning cycles.

5.3 City of London

In March 2016, the City of London adopted its first ever multi-year budget (four years) for the 2016-2019 budget cycle. According to the Mayor of London, the City adopted this approach because it links:

*directly to Council's four-year strategic plan. It will allow us to both identify our priorities for this term and align them with the resources needed to execute on them...This process will help us plan better for the short, medium and long term. It is another step we are taking towards creating a more open and forward-looking local government.*¹⁵

London has adopted a very similar approach to that of Calgary and Edmonton, in that it begins with extensive public engagement and has a built-in annual adjustment process. According to the City of London, the annual adjustment process will provide Council with flexibility to adjust the budget for legislative reasons, or special circumstances that require funding and resource adjustments. More specifically, the City of London restricts the adjustment process to the following circumstances:¹⁶

- Changes to Council priorities that impact the delivery of services.
- Changes from external factors, such as federal and/or provincial policies that impact the budget, insurance premiums, and pension plan contributions.
- Unanticipated changes to economic forecasts and financial markets.
- Changes to the assessment base.
- Changes to the operating budget as a result of capital project adjustments.

Clearly, with minor distinctions, the three cities have very similar rationale, and have adopted very similar approaches to multi-year budgeting. Each is fully-integrated, focused on achieving long-term goals, and emphasizes public engagement and flexibility to make necessary adjustments. As the next section explores, perhaps it is time for Saskatoon to travel down this path?

¹³ See *ibid*, 3.

¹⁴ See *ibid*

¹⁵ See City of London, “City Officials Table 2016-19 Multi-Year Budget,” obtained from <https://www.london.ca/newsroom/Pages/Table-2016-2019-Multi-Year-Budget.aspx>

¹⁶ See City of London, 2016-2019 Multi-Year Budget Document, Executive Summary 17. Retrieved from <http://www.london.ca/city-hall/budget-business/budget/Documents/Executive%20Summary.pdf>

[6] Conclusion: A Path Forward for Saskatoon?

The intent of this document is to provide an overview of multi-year budgeting. In particular, the focus was to provide a general, high-level overview of:

- What a multi-year budget is.
- What its advantages and disadvantages are.
- Where they are used.

The document illustrates that fully integrated multi-year business plans and budgets can be very useful in terms of helping cities achieve long-term, strategic objectives, and more short-term operational improvements. If implemented correctly, the advantages of a multi-year budget are significant, while the disadvantages are minimal.

As section five illustrates, the City of Calgary has the most mature process of all Canadian cities. And while it may be difficult to say how successful Calgary's approach is, the model continues but keeps evolving, regardless of the changes to City Council. The cities of Edmonton and London have followed Calgary's lead, and they too have adopted fully integrated multi-year business plans and budgets.

So, has the time come for Saskatoon to follow this approach? If so, when and how?

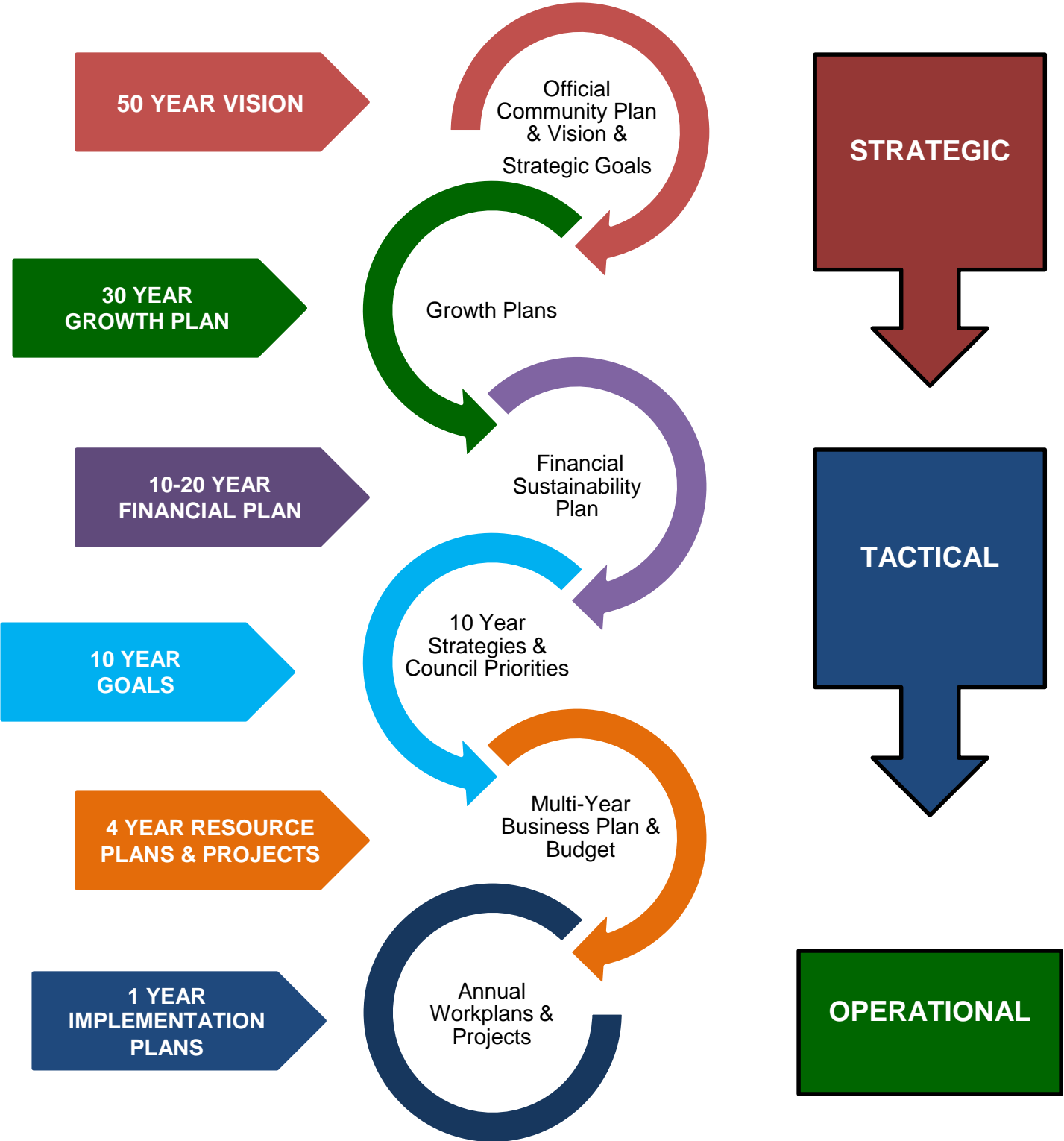
As section four addresses, the City of Saskatoon's approach to budgeting has evolved considerably since 2011. Since that time, Council has adopted several long-term plans, such as the Community Vision, Growing Forward, the Ten-Year Strategic Plan, and a long-range financial plan. Because of this focus on long-term strategic objectives, coupled with the fact that funding (infrastructure) from federal and provincial governments has become more long term, and predictable, the City finds itself at a budgetary crossroads. As a result, it may be time for the City of Saskatoon to seriously consider implementing a fully integrated multi-year business plan and budget.

Appendix 1 shows how this approach to planning and budgeting would align the other longer-term plans of the City. As the graphic illustrates, there is an inherent linkage between the long-term vision of the community, and the day-to-day operational plans of the Administration. Today, that link is somewhat broken, but by 2019 it could be easily fused together.

As the City of Saskatoon considers moving to a multi-year business plan and budget, the natural questions are: When? And how? Appendix 2, attempts to answer this by providing a visual process that starts in 2016, and extends to 2025, covering two budget cycles.

Because considerable development time will be required for implementation, it is likely that the City of Saskatoon could implement a multi-year business plan and budget effective for January 1, 2019. Much like Edmonton, the first budget cycle will be three years in duration (2019-2021) to straddle the election year and the second cycle would be four years in duration (2022-2025).

**APPENDIX 1:
THE STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK
ALIGNMENT WITH LONG-TERM PLANS**



May 16, 2016

Appendix 2: Proposed Implementation of Multi-Year Business Plan and Budget

