

**Enabling conditions for community transition:
Concepts, cases and catalysts for change in Alberta and beyond**

PUBLIC REPORT

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Introduction

Rural communities are in transition. Forest-based communities in Alberta, for example, have witness more than 1,400 lay-offs in the forest sector, affecting the livelihoods of families and the sustainability of many rural and resource-based communities (Natural Resources Canada, 2009). Impacts from events such as BSE, the Mountain Pine Beetle, and the recent economic recession have resulted in other significant challenges for many communities across the country. In response to these economic challenges, governments and communities have responded with incentive programs, tools for community asset mapping and capacity building, and a wide range of resources and activities to enhance capacities and facilitate more positive community transition.

In this context of economic transition, there are communities within Alberta and beyond that are responding in positive ways to these economic challenges – accessing information, taking advantage of opportunities, building on local assets and resources, and forging a new future. Yet many other communities appear to be less willing and less able to respond in positive ways to the challenges they face.

In recognizing the diversity of community responses to the current economic climate, this study is focused on 10 case study communities that appear to be exemplary in terms of their response to recent economic challenges and have gained some reputation in wider circles for these successes. Some of the questions at the centre of this study are as follows: What are the conditions for more effective community transition? What are the required supports (internal and external) to assist communities in moving forward?

Accordingly, the objectives of this study are as follows:

- **Identify key characteristics of successful community transition, with a focus on cultural, social and economic attributes that are linked to successful transition**
- **Through a series of case studies, demonstrate the conditions for successful economic transition in rural communities**

This report documents the results of this study, with a detailed accounting of the stories that are associated with economic transition in 10 case study communities. In the following section, a strategic literature review is provided in order to gain insights into contemporary ideas and good practice in the field of community economic development. After this literature review, a section on methods describes our approach to developing the case study material. For the most part, these community stories were constructed through conversations with three to four leaders in each community and a review of available reports and web-based material.

Case study communities

- Pincher Creek
 - A case study of regional cooperation and the development of local wind energy and tourism.
- Battle River Railway
 - A case study of collaboration among smaller municipalities and cooperation among local agricultural producers to secure ownership of a local rail line.
- Grande Cache
 - A case study of successful economic diversification as a buffer against boom and bust cycles in the coal and forest commodity industries.
- Valemount
 - A case study community response to long-term decline in the forest industry. Valemount represents a community that has invested in long-term planning, service and infrastructure development.
- Drayton Valley
 - A case study of technological innovation in bio-products, with a focus on key relationships to industry and government.
- West Central Road and Rail
 - A case study of agricultural producers and a rural community initiative to gain access to effective rail infrastructure and grain handling in a remote region of Saskatchewan.
- Quesnel
 - A case study of the impact and response to the mountain pine beetle on a forestry-dependent community, with a focus on diversification efforts that were initiated by the economic development corporation within Quesnel
- Craik
 - A case study of a community that promotes the idea of “sustainable living” to entice people and businesses to the community.
- Revelstoke
 - A case study of community response to a dramatic resource bust, and maintaining balance after successful diversification of local assets.
- Ogema
 - A case study about the effectiveness of local vision and leadership to curb rural depopulation through new agricultural initiatives and an emphasis on the history and legacy of the community.

It is important to note here that with any story about community transition, there will be multiple and sometimes competing stories about the relative success of this transition – and these communities are no exception. At risk of limiting a more complete picture of community transition, we emphasize two aspects of community transition with (1) a focus on economic transition, and (2) a focus on the successes of each community.

This approach is warranted in part because the 10 communities were selected based on discussions with government and academic leaders, and several community development consultants. Through these initial conversations we identified these communities for their growing reputation and their successes of recent years. We also selected these communities because of the diversity in approaches that were taken to achieve a successful economic transition. Ultimately we hope that other communities might benefit from learning more about these stories of successful transition.

Summary of key findings

After completing these 10 community case studies, five specific themes emerged from our analysis. These themes draw together a series of common threads that appear to be crucial in successful economic transition.

- **Community leadership**
 - Elected leaders as well as lay leaders provided most of the impetus for successful economic transition
 - Uniformly in each community, one individual or a group of individuals stepped forward and got things moving
 - Corporate leadership was not as obvious in the case studies; at least it was not expressed in this way by people in these communities
 - Leadership was more active within civil society, working towards community development objectives
- **Planning and small steps toward economic transition**
 - In several cases, attempts to secure large-scale projects was not successful
 - Long-term planning and a series of smaller projects (incrementalism) lead to successful economic transition
 - Growing community capacity and confidence through smaller achievements is a strong theme in these case studies
- **Regional cooperation**
 - Building relationship within the region and with neighbouring communities was a key component of several case studies
 - Regional cooperation fostered confidence, the ability to speak with one voice to governments and industry, and organizational capacity to work through complex challenges within the region
- **Responding to unexpected development pathways**
 - In several case studies, small successes lead to big change in ways that were not necessarily expected
 - The ability to recognize unforeseen opportunities and build on strengths is a key attribute of community leadership
- **Differences in the local culture of community development**
 - Differences between types of economic activity (e.g., agriculture and forestry) and differences between provinces lead to different development strategies
 - As an example, British Columbia communities are more active in securing government grants and agricultural communities appear to have more access to private capital (local financial resources)

Ultimately, the real spark, the catalyst within these communities has to do with creative people and innovative ideas. These ideas often started small, and then they grew, as reflected in broader community involvement, into the ideas that are now recognized well beyond these communities.

Identifying and supporting community leadership and capacity building

A key idea that can serve as a focal point for this report has to do with local leadership and a certain kind of community capacity building. Ideas such as political capacity, local buy-in, effective local institutions, learning to work together, regional cooperation, civic engagement -- these concepts are at the heart of all of these case studies.

Leadership is a scarce commodity in many communities, but in many ways these case studies possess and reflect this rare asset through recent initiatives and a growing recognition of economic success. When there is leadership of this kind, it can change the dynamics of community behaviour in some important ways.

In economic terms, this kind of change can be described as a change in the utility function of individuals, as they see new opportunities to act in ways that maximize personal benefit but also contribute to the collective good of the community. In sociological terms, this is reflected in a more robust civil commons, where community members have opportunities to interact with each other in positive ways, envision and collectively own new ideas and goals, and then act on them together.

Community Case Studies

Town and MD of Pincher Creek, Alberta

Description of community

Pincher Creek, population 3,712 in 2006, is located in the southwest corner of Alberta, and is a central location for passage across the Crowsnest Pass, access to Waterton National park, and is close to the urban centres of Calgary and Lethbridge.

Major challenge

For years, the provincial government and industry analysts predicted that the gas supply from the local reservoir had at least a 100 year lifetime. However, in the late 1980s, it became clear that reliance on natural gas would lead to a downwards spiral for the community. Businesses were closing and the economic situation was not good within the town. Added to this economic decline, the coal mine in the Crowsnest Pass was expected to close in the late 1980s. When the mine closed, there were many people with limited education laid off and looking for work. Within the town leadership, given these changing economic circumstances, there was recognition that something more was needed to be done to create community stability.

The call to action

Given the reliance on several local industries that were in decline, local leaders started to look for alternative avenues for economic diversification. In this community, the call to action came from the local Economic Development Board at first, then from several municipal governments. Local elected officials, such as former Mayor, Art Bonertz, were instrumental in bringing forward a new vision for economic development that centered on tourism and wind energy development.

Steps of transition

One of the first steps in this economic transition was a meeting of mayors within the southwest region to discuss regional collaboration on a number of different items. This was the start of a process whereby the Southwest region would foster itself into a group of communities working together to promote tourism and to speak with one voice to higher levels of government (Alberta Southwest Regional Alliance, 2010). Former mayor of Pincher Creek, Art Bonertz, explains the significance of the collaboration.

“The collective support of surrounding communities has made a big difference. The southwest platform speaks to a larger audience and we feel that it speaks as one voice.” (Bonertz, 2010)

In addition, local leaders took steps to initiate a more comprehensive community re-visioning plan. It was in these presentations and public discussions where local community leaders got their support in pursuing new industries for growth in Pincher Creek.

Based on these community meetings, new directions were established to make Pincher Creek the home of a new wind power industry in Alberta and to pursue programs to boost the town's tourism attractiveness.

As a first step to developing the industry, local officials met with the provincial government to share their idea of a local wind power industry and to ask for support and guidance in initiating its development. Local leaders noted that the initial response was not positive from the provincial government regarding their plans for wind energy development.

Without provincial government support, local officials continued to market the region to local energy companies and worldwide wind companies as a great location for wind energy production. In fact, without any support or subsidies to get the industry off the ground, the town started to see some success.

From 1994 to 2004, wind energy projects had injected more than \$10 million in the local economy and a number of wind power companies established head offices in Pincher Creek (Canadian Wind Energy Association, 2004). In 2007, there were 167 MW of installed capacity in the MD, with the proposed output for all projects under consideration reaching 706.2 MW (Municipal District of Pincher Creek No. 9, 2010).

Meanwhile, with growth occurring in the wind energy industry, the town was also successfully building itself into a tourist destination. However, the process of developing the local tourism sector has been a fairly gradual development, and there continues to be investment in local facilities and regional marketing strategies.

Local context and contributing factors

In exploring the internal sources of successful economic transition, two words are often expressed: human resources. Volunteerism and community spirit is very much alive in Pincher Creek and it is seen in examples such as the Pincher Planters, which was a group of four ladies that decided to plant flowers all over the town. There were also many challenges, however, with some groups expressing strong resistance to the wind power industry. But despite the challenge of varied support for the initiatives being pursued by council, it was important to the local councils for the community to get involved and to build support for their initiatives. Small successes in the community lead to greater support from the community over time.

Achievements to date

To date, the town of Pincher Creek is growing with respect to both population and the number of jobs. The town has become more of a regional supply centre and opened a Walmart a few years ago, which has attracted more traffic to the town. Gary Mills, Mayor of Pincher Creek at the time of this report, expressed Pincher Creek's many achievements,

“Small businesses are attracted to the progressive government. We have many amenities that complement businesses and have attracted people to move to the region. We have people coming to Cowboy poetry, home and garden shows, and the local rodeo. We’re moving forward to build strong partnerships with neighbouring communities. And we are very blessed with our relationship with surrounding first nation communities.” (Mills, 2010)

With regards to the wind industry, the potential for growth is enormous moving forward, and the town has been successful in making itself a hub for the wind power industry.

Next steps

The future is bright in Pincher Creek as there are many wind power projects on the shelf that are waiting to start construction. Many of the projects will go ahead once the transmission infrastructure capacity from the area is improved. It appears that continued visioning and adapting to changing circumstances is a shared perspective for success to be maintained in Pincher Creek.

Battle River Railway (Kelsey, Rosalind, Heisler, Forestburg, Galahad, and Alliance)

Description of community

The Battle River Railway New Generation Co-op is an organization fully driven by local farmers in the communities of Alliance, Galahad, Forestburg, Heisler, Rosalind, and Kelsey. These communities are located south east of Camrose, Alberta, and employment is primarily in the agriculture industry. The 43.03 rail line from Alliance to Camrose has been utilized by farmers to transport grains to western ports and world markets, via a rail linkage in Camrose. Canadian National (CN), the previously nationalized railway that was privatized in 1995, currently owns the rights to the rail line.

Major challenge

In 2003, a small group of farmers in the region met with CN officials and it was discovered that CN had plans to abandon the 43.03 rail line from Alliance to Camrose. Unless the number of cars were to increase substantially, CN could not justify maintaining the line. Furthermore, the number of grain cars loaded had been continually declining, as the number of grain elevators along the line decreased and farmers were forced into using trucking services to haul their grain to the large terminals in Camrose.

Along with the elevators, the rural communities that supported the regional agricultural producers were on their way out. The communities of Alliance, Galahad, Heisler, Rosalind, and Kelsey (the exception being Forestburg, due to the local coal and power-generation industry) were all facing a systematic decrease in local services, tax dollars, and population. Bob Coutts, Mayor of Forestburg, explained how the threat of abandonment of the railroad and loss of elevators impacts rural communities,

“The loss of elevators impacted the community in that it brought less people to the community. Along with the loss of infrastructure, also, there is a change in community support as people’s buying patterns move to the larger centres.” (Coutts, 2010)

The call to action

Shortly after meeting with CN in 2003 and hearing the news of abandonment of the rail line, a small group of roughly 10 local farmers met to discuss their options. The group believed that CN would not abandon the line if the number of grain cars loaded could be subsequently increased.

From the meeting, the farmers formed a partnership that organized loading days for the train, advocated to increase the number of farmers loading grain cars, and loaded grain cars using local remaining elevators, seed cleaning facilities, or personal farm equipment. In 2003, the producer car group had 180 members and each farmer paid \$30 to the group each time they loaded a grain car (Battle River Railway New Generation Co-op, 2010).

Steps of transition

From 2003 up until 2008, the producer group acted to increase the number of cars loaded on an annual basis. In 2008, a peak-level of 650 cars were loaded on the line.

In the fall of 2008, the producer car group became a registered not-for-profit society. Shortly thereafter, however, CN advertised the 43.03 line for sale by tender. The producer car group then decided that they would purchase the line from CN and in May 2008 formed the New Generation Co-op to raise funds for the purchase.

The New Generation Co-op was formed so that area farmers, local governments, and citizens could all invest in the purchase of the railway. Despite the fact that anyone in the community could invest, the Co-op remained in farmer control.

In February 2009, the producer group filed a letter of intent to purchase the 43.03 line in February 2009, an application was submitted to purchase the line adhering to CN requirements, and in early August of 2009, an agreement with CN was developed and signed to complete the purchase of the line (Battle River Railway New Generation Co-op, 2010). As of January 11, 2010, the New Generation Co-op raised \$2.8 million of the \$3.5 million that is required before financing for purchase of the rail line (Battle River Railway New Generation Co-op, 2010).

Local context and contributing factors

Local rural communities played a large role in the producer group's success, from its inception in 2003 to the raising of funds for the purchase of the line. Although not playing a big operational role in the producer group, local municipal governments contributed greatly to the rail line purchase.

However, where a number of local communities were very supportive of the group and its endeavours, the provincial government was not involved in providing financial support to acquire the rail line.

Achievements to date

At the time of this report, the group is continually advocating local farmers to use the railway, loading more producer cars, and raising additional funds for purchase of the rail line 43.03. Given where they are now, the group is set to finalize the purchase of the rail line and start offering producers more reliability when using local elevators and the rail line.

Looking overall at what a small group of local farmers can accomplish in 6 years, it is hard not to consider the Battle River Railway's endeavours a success. Darin Barney, a researcher from McGill University who has been conducting interviews on the Battle River Railway throughout the past two years, explains the importance of the group's actions,

“In general, this is a remarkable story of producer interests and understanding the important role that infrastructure plays in the agricultural community. People within the railway group understand the broader social and economic stakes of what would happen if the railway was abandoned for their local communities. The endeavour has also had spill over effects in that, for example, it has taught them that some kind of collective action is possible, despite the economic constraints.” (Barney, 2010)

Next steps

In the future the producer group hopes to attract more people to use producer cars and local elevators through installing a new grading system and additional facilities along the rail line. The new grading system consists of an advanced way to blend grains so that each farmer can extract a higher profit from loading a producer car compared to trucking to a large terminal.

In addition to increasing the number of rail cars on the line through attracting more producers to use it, the group is also looking into other areas where rail service in the area may be in demand. This may include tourism services, as the line follows the Battle River and is a very scenic and historical ride.

Grand Cache, Alberta

Description of community

The town of Grande Cache, population 4,200 (Town of Grande Cache, 2008), was originally created in 1966 by the Alberta Government in order to open the area up for the development of a coal mine. Following construction of the town in the late 60's, early 70's, a number of coal mines were developed and served as the main source of employment for people wanting to live in the community. Grand Cache is nestled mid-way between Grande Prairie and Hinton, and currently has key industries in oil and gas development, forestry, coal production, tourism, thermal-electricity generation, and a federal correctional institution (Town of Grande Cache, 2008).

Major challenge

Grande Cache has experienced a number of boom and bust cycles with population moving to and from the town due to its dependence on the coal industry. In the 1980s, for example, the coal industry took a big stumble and the town was once again striving to maintain its local economy. This cyclical nature of the local economy was a major challenge for the town.

The call to action

The catalyst for local economic diversification involved a desire of people in the town to want to stay in Grande Cache. The Mayor at the time of this study, Louis Krewusik, explained that people would quickly fall in love with the town.

“Something very sudden happened while they were here; people fell in love with the town and didn't want to leave. Now you have people committing to something more long term and sustainable. We now have children in our schools.” (Krewusik, 2010)

It was out of the desire to stay in the town that people would begin to work to sustain the town, seek available employment opportunities, foster entrepreneurial spirit, and attract industries to come to Grande Cache.

Steps of transition

The pursuit of a more diverse economy in Grande Cache has its origins in the early 1980s. In the midst of a bust period in the local economy, the town looked to the federal government and the possible placement of a federal correctional facility in town to add stability. Also a Weyerhaeuser sawmill was built during

this time, and the town enjoyed a period of economic diversification and prosperity from forestry, coal mining, and the federal prison.

It wasn't until 2003 that things in town got troublesome again, as Weyerhaeuser had plans to close the mill and increase capacity at their Grande Prairie facility. In response to the threat of mill closer, community members quickly set up a community forestry committee. The committee had support from forest workers, councillors, and worked to establish a new business plan for the mill. In the end, Weyerhaeuser sold the mill to another company called Foothills Forest Products.

During this period of economic decline in coal mining and forestry, the community received more support from the provincial government to develop the local tourism industry. Several studies were funded by the provincial government on the development of the local tourism industry.

However, it wasn't until 2004/05 that Grande Cache's local economy started to pick up, fuelled by rising coal prices, and the start of a local oil and gas industry in the Grande Cache region.

Despite being in the middle of a boom, the town administrators and local officials continued to plan and pursue diversification strategies in Grande Cache. In 2006, the town published their first 2020 strategic plan that focused on developing a balanced economy between tourism and resource industries (Stantec Consulting Ltd., 2008).

As part of the 2020 strategic plan, the town followed with projects including: beautification of businesses, parks, and walkways; the establishment of the death race and music festivals as tourist attractions; and marketing of the town as an outdoor recreation destination. These efforts are a way for the community to become as economically diverse as possible.

Local context and contributing factors

Grande Cache's current situation can be attributed to the will of the people to keep the town alive during the tough times. There was a willingness among residents to dig in during the tough times, including parents who would go away for work and keep their family in the community.

This is not to say that the town and local officials didn't have trouble in getting a number of projects done. Like many small communities there were those that wouldn't support change and didn't see the value in diversification projects,

Today, the demographics of Grande Cache are changing. More young families are seeking full-time employment, buying houses, and becoming part of the community. This is seen as very positive thing by Louise Krewusik,

“When it was a downturn it looked like the town was going to be a retirement community. What we're seeing now is that there are many young families that are moving back. Now we're growing tremendously, and the number of children in the community has significantly gone up.”
(Krewusik, 2010)

Achievements to date

The major achievement of Grande Cache has been the substantial amount of investment that the town has been able to attract, all of which has been dispersed in many diverse local industries, such as forestry, oil, coal, tourism, and services. Since January 2006, the town has seen over \$44.4 million in new developments come to their small community (Town of Grande Cache, 2009).

Next steps

Despite the hope for the future in Grande Cache, town leaders still see a lot of work to be done. One of the challenges is the relatively small town population. At just under 5,000 people, it is difficult to attract certain kinds of businesses. Attracting more residents is a key goal, and putting services into place that will meet the needs of young families will help the community moving forward.

Valemount, British Columbia

Description of community

The Village of Valemount, population 1,018 (Statistics Canada, 2010), has largely relied on the forestry sector for job creation and economic growth. Valemount was originally established as a temporary ‘camp’ community for seasonal forestry work, and as a desolate train stop for CN rail on its track towards Prince Rupert. The opening of the Yellowhead Highway in the late 1960’s opened up the community to more traffic and development. In 1967, Canyon Creek Forestry Products opened a lumber mill in the community, which was the foundation of permanent full-time employment and led to a population increase of 67.4% throughout the 1970s, from 693 to 1,160 people. At the time, more people wanted to permanently work and live in the area.

Major challenge

Valemount has experienced economic fluctuations due to reliance on only the forestry industry for job creation and economic growth. Of the 610 people within the local labour force in 1996, 230 were employed in the logging, manufacturing, and construction sectors, all of which were related to the forestry industry (Brent Harley and Associates Inc., 2004-a).

However, the mechanization of production processes and environmental pressures put a significant limitation on stable employment from local forestry activities. In 1998, the mill’s operator, Slocan, reduced its workforce by two thirds which eventually perpetuated population decline in the community. In response to this decline in the local forestry industry, in the 1990s, the community decided to pursue a series of economic diversification initiatives.

The call to action

According to community members, the call to action was sounded by the mayor and local council through their leadership and vision of the community. Local leadership created an Economic Development Commission, and their activities were supported by local business. This call to action came from a realization that there was only one industry in town, and this industry was becoming less reliable as a source of stable employment for community residents. Residents expressed a desire to see the community grow in size, and so a series of economic development strategies were developed for the community.

Steps of transition

As a first step to pursuing economic diversification in the Valemount, local council created the community’s first Economic Development Committee (EDC) in 1991. The EDC prepared a number of discussion papers, workshops, and helped with the village’s first Economic Development Plan in 1994.

The Plan pinned the community's economic sustainability on two main industries: forestry and tourism. The focus on creating a local tourism industry was seen as a growth area to stabilize the reliance of the village on the forestry industry. Studies showed that in the summer time there were 3,500 people on the highway – so the resource was there. But there remained a desire within the community to blend forestry activities with tourism development.

The Mayor of Valemount during that time, Jeannette Townsend, explains the various initiatives taken by council,

“We started marketing, of course, under the direction of consultants, to generate the local tourism industry. There was assistance available from the provincial government, which gave us money for studies, conferences, and many initiatives. Also, our role as a municipality was to ensure infrastructure was adequate for developers to come to the community. We did water and sewer upgrades, paved all the roads in town, and improved our overall appearance with beautification projects.” (Townsend, 2010)

Although there remain some big challenges for the community, including a lack of success in securing large-scale tourism development within the region, Valemount has succeeded in attracting more people to visit the village and increasingly, more people are using Valemount as a vacation destination. A bright spot is the development of a local tourism niche in recreational snowmobiling. Valemount is a growing destination spot for snowmobilers seeking a mountain trail riding experience.

In addition, provincial agencies and local government have recently partnered together on local policies that assisted in providing services and attracting investment to the area. Provincial and federal funding for tangible projects started to increase in the 2000s.

In these and other local initiatives, such as downtown revitalization, the village is still very much in the process of creating an attractive product for the village, one that will help in ‘branding’ the community and encourage business investment.

Local context and contributing factors

Originally, the plan of local council and the Economic Development Commission was to have a diversified economy that had both a sustainable forestry and tourism sector as its backbone of growth. However, in recent years the forestry industry in the Valemount region has been getting progressively worse.

The local lumber mill remains closed and changes to provincial forest policy, allowing logs to move more freely within the province, makes the viability of a local mill even more remote now than in previous years. This policy change, what is known as apertency, has had a similar effect on many forest communities through British Columbia, and this change in provincial policy is probably the single most important contextual factor in understanding recent changes in the relationship between the forest sector and forest-based communities in the province.

Achievements to date

Recent achievements in Valemount include a community forest initiative, a new high school that fronts as a community centre, and the Valemount Interpretive Centre.

Local council was very instrumental in developing the village's first visitor and interpretive centre, opened in March 2007. Local government was successful in partnering local resources, government and

private funding, and community support to build the \$1.1 million centre. The village uses the centre as a multi-purpose facility as it houses offices for local community organizations, the local chamber of commerce, and the community forest corporation, and also serves as the centre for tourist and visitor information. It was believed the interpretive centre would increase community capacity, foster community identity, and provide new marketing opportunities for the growing tourism industry (Village of Valemount, 2006).

The village received funding from Western Economic Diversification Canada (\$600,000 of federal funding) and from Northern Development Trust (\$300,000) for a downtown revitalization project in June 2008. Funding was provided to help Valemount hire consultants to conduct engineering and planning to revitalize several streets (Western Economic Diversification Canada, 2008). The funding was earmarked to help address the needs of rural communities affected by the mountain pine beetle. Downtown revitalization was believed to provide additional infrastructure to attract tourism developments (Western Economic Diversification Canada, 2008).

Next steps

Although there have been many positive initiatives in Valemount, unfortunately, there remain a number of challenges for the village. There is hope with regards to local tourism development but the impact of the decline in the forestry industry is very real. The community continues to look for new large-scale investors in industries such as mining and tourism development.

Nevertheless, Valemount does have one resource of which there is ample supply and opportunity to fuel economic growth in the town's future: its people. There is a strong sense of community in the town, and people feel connected to the community as a result.

Drayton Valley, Alberta

Description of community

The town of Drayton Valley, population 6,893, is located just 90 minutes southwest of Edmonton and has a local economy that largely relies on the energy sector and a service industry required for a trading area population of over 20,000 people (Town of Drayton Valley, 2008). Oil and gas, forestry and agriculture are major contributors to the local economy. Drayton Valley's development goal has been to establish itself as a centre of knowledge, learning and innovation as well as a centre for research and development related to the energy industry (Town of Drayton Valley, 2008).

Major challenge

In November 2007, Weyerhaeuser Canada Ltd. conferred with local officials that it had plans to close the OSB (oriented strand board) plant located in Drayton Valley. Citing weak demand stemming from the U.S. housing market, Weyerhaeuser was going to close the plant which employed 130 full-time workers, which contributed to a major portion of the municipal tax base.

At the time of the OSB mill closing, the oil and gas industry was also exhibiting a slow down. Rising local unemployment from the OSB plant closing and the loss of significant revenue was a significant issue to local government and these conditions created the impetus for local action.

The call to action

At first, council discussions were on what the local government could do to potentially keep the OSB plant operating. Discussions eventually moved towards what government could do to offset some of the economic loss due to the plant's closing. Local officials met with the provincial government to lobby for help in keeping the OSB plant open and look for solutions. However, talks with the provincial government took the community in some new and interesting directions.

At about the same time as this meeting with government officials, an organization called BioProducts Alberta was searching for a place to start a bio-energy facility, headed by Otoka Energy Inc.

Otoka Energy Inc. is a Minnesota-based renewable energy company that focused on large-scale biomass-to-energy projects and manages the multiple technological systems required for these projects (Otoka Energy Inc., 2008). After contacting Otoka, the local mayor and council began to envision a bio-industrial project within the community that could capture the value added opportunities in the biomass industry and establish the town as a centre for bioproduct innovation. Mayor Moe Hamdon continues,

“It was mainly the desire and the dedication of council and town administration to make this happen that created momentum. There was just a vision that united us, and it was shared by the provincial government which helped a lot.” (Hamdon, 2010)

Steps of transition

From the time of meeting with the provincial government and talking to Otoka energy in 2007-08, local government in Drayton Valley was very active in trying to attract bio-industry investors to the community and promoting the town as a centre for bioproducts, bioenergy, and biofuels (Long, 2010). The town believed it could be a centre for this type of production as the wood biomass supply that was originally used as a feedstock for the OSB plant is now essentially available as a feedstock for another use.

As a first step, the local government was able to initiate a study of the local forestry industry to determine the amount of fibre supply available to be potentially used as bio-feedstock.. Following this study, local officials met with industry representatives and sought companies interested in investing in Drayton Valley.

In discussions with Otoka Energy, it was clear that the company was interested in constructing a biomass-to-energy facility in Drayton Valley. The biomass input would come from the Weyerhaeuser sawmill, and the facility would be constructed within the town's land dedicated to bio-industry development, called the bio-mile. The 'bio-mile' is roughly one square mile of land where the current wood industry, power plant, and future bio-industry would operate in co-ordination (Town of Drayton Valley, 2010).

In January 2009, another company called Tekle Technical Services (TTS) Inc. benefited from the availability of \$4.5 million from the Provincial Community Development Trust fund to construct a fibremat research and production plant in the Bio-Mile (Town of Drayton Valley, 2009). The fibremat plant would research the use of biomass from the forest and agricultural sectors to produce a variety of bioproducts, including flooring, insulation, construction materials, automobile interior parts, and other bio-geotextiles (Town of Drayton Valley, 2009).

Furthermore, at one of many conferences that officials attended, they got in contact with a group of German companies and research institutes looking for a place to invest, referred to as CLIB2021.

CLIB2021 is proposing to set up an office in Drayton Valley as their only Canadian presence to serve as an incubator of research on biomass to lignocellulosic fuels and chemicals (Town of Drayton Valley, 2010). In addition, the municipality has formed a not-for-profit organization that will support CLIB2021 with research involving bioproduct innovation.

Throughout negotiations with the industry and developing partnerships, the town put in significant time and effort to organizing deals across stakeholders so that projects would come to fruition.

To date, a deal had been reached between Otoka Energy Inc. and Weyerhaeuser to provide a continual biomass feedstock to the proposed bio-mass to energy facility and Otoka has purchased the land where the facility is to be located. In addition, TTS Inc. has cleared land for their proposed project and is supposed to start construction in April.

Local context and contributing factors

Most people in Drayton Valley seem to be in favour of the initiative taken by mayor and council to attract investment in the Bio Mile. It is this support, coupled with the leadership and drive of council, which has led to significant headway in Drayton Valley becoming a bio-products industry pioneer. However, there are still a few within the community that are somewhat concerned about the impacts of the proposed projects when they are fully constructed. These concerned are largely focused on the proximity of new industries to local homes.

In addition to the momentum driven by local town administration and officials, the provincial government played a key role in fostering the development of the bio-mile project. The provincial government provided significant funding for the research into bio-innovations and direct funding to the start-up of the projects in the bio-mile park.

The Mayor at the time of this report, Moe Hamdon, recognized that the project would have little life if it wasn't for the support provided by the provincial government,

“When we started, the provincial government was looking for ways that it could foster the bio-industry’s development in Alberta. Clearly we wouldn’t have been as far if we didn’t have the provincial government supporting us. In addition, we have been very successful in going to the province and sharing what the town wants out of the industry’s development.” (Hamdon, 2010)

Achievements to date

Although many milestones have been achieved, the bio-mile is still a long way from being declared a fully successful project. The project is only at its beginning stages. There is real consensus, however, that the steps taken so far have been done so correctly and there have been several small, mid-process successes.

Next steps

The immediate next steps for the bio-mile initiative are to identify companies that are willing to invest in Drayton Valley, to start constructing facilities and to provide local employment. Following the construction of the proposed projects, the town has plans to foster further innovation and business activity through using the bio mile as a commercialization centre of new technologies. It may be many years before the project is completed, but the possibilities for it to diversify Drayton Valley’s local economy,

and for Drayton Valley and rural Alberta to lead in the formation of this new industry's development, are very promising.

West Central Road and Rail (LaPorte, Eston, Lucky Lake, and Beechy)

Description of community

The origins of producer car movement across the prairies was the result of the innovation of a group of farmers located along 300 miles of CN branch line stretching from Delilse west to Alberta's border in west-central Saskatchewan (West Central Road and Rail, 2010). The producer car group called themselves West Central Road and Rail (WCRR) and today, the company owns and operates producer car loaded grain handling facilities in Eston, Beechy, Laporte, and Lucky Lake. The town of Eston is the largest community on the rail line with a population of 971, while the village of Beechy is one of the smallest, with a population of 243 (Statistics Canada, 2010).

Major challenge

The producer car group's challenge came in the form of the threat of abandonment of 300 miles of CN rail line in 1997. Since the privatization of CN in 1995, the company had been pursuing policies of consolidation and rationalization to reduce track maintenance costs, and increase volumes on existing track.

The economic impact of abandoning the line would mean numerous job losses, closure of elevators, reduction of tax revenue, and loss of economic opportunity for the rural communities along the line.

The call to action

When the news started to spread that CN wanted to abandon the line, farmers and local communities realized the scale of the issue. To clarify, a small group of farmers, RM and town officials, and local business owners approached CN and asked CN its intentions for the line. Following the meeting with CN, the same group of farmers, business owners, and local officials attended a short line railway seminar put on by the provincial government.

Steps of transition

As a first step, area farmers had an organizational meeting, including officials from both the RMs and towns affected. Some farmers put their name in a hat to become an information group that would explore options.

The group tried to educate themselves on what exactly CN could do, **legally**. They went to the provincial government, and sought the people that had expertise in dealing with CN. Once they got the information, the group disseminated it to the wider agricultural community. It was on the advise of a lawyer, they decided to organize an event to create attention.

In December 1997, West Central Road and Rail loaded the first ever "producer car train" mainly as a protest and to create media attention. The point was to send a message to the railways and grain-handling companies that farmers were not going to stand by while they worked together to demarket the line.

In 1998, following the event, the group (now called WCRR) decided that there was enough potential to incorporate and started selling shares within communities to raise funds for the purchase of the rail line. WCRR went to work negotiating the purchase of the rail line from CN, from 1998 to 2000. However, in the summer of 2000, CN decided not to abandon the line, so WCRR turned its business focus on grain gathering and elevating (West Central Road and Rail, 2010).

WCRR came out with its second share offering in 2001 to build a grain handling facility in Eston Saskatchewan. In six weeks, the group rose more funds than their target of \$1.5 million, and they broke ground in July, 2001. Rob Lobdell, President and CEO of West Central Road and Rail, shares his insights into the process of raising funds,

“The implementation is the most difficult part. The public must feel that it would work. We marketed it as an opportunity that ultimately would return value back to the farmers and local communities. We picked the area where we thought we would have the most success. If you want a project to succeed, you need the public support, and you need their cash. Then they take ownership of it.” (Lobdell, 2010)

To date, West Central Road and Rail has constructed and operates four grain handling facilities starting in Eston, then Laporte, Lucky Lake, and Beechy.

Local context and contributing factors

The contributing factors to West Central Road and Rail’s success have come in the form of leadership and community support. Rob Lobdell attributes a lot of the success to area councillors, business leaders, and other producers,

“We had a lot of guys willing to spend their own cash to move the project forward, even at an exploratory point. We had really good individuals, including local officials, business owners, and producers. Eston was a large contributing community to the group. It wasn’t an individual effort; it was collaborative broad-based community effort.” (Lobdell, 2010)

Achievements to date

It is quite clear that WCRR is a success story for small rural communities in Saskatchewan. In fact, the WCRR story is being used by the provincial government in hopes of fostering the same sort of development in other areas of the province.

Perhaps one of the greatest, and most visible signs of WCRR’s success is a recent policy by the competing grain handling companies to provide trucking incentives only to those area farmers that WCRR services. The grain companies offer an incentive to only those farmers south of Kindersley, but not to those to the north.

Next steps

In 2010, WCRR is starting construction on their fifth facility in Dinsmore and have already raised the funds required, totalling \$1.4 million. After Dinsmore’s facility is up and running, WCRR hopes to add one more grain handling facility in Elrose (35 miles east of Eston) to complete the rail network (Lobdell, 2010).

Quesnel, British Columbia

Description of community

The city of Quesnel, population 9,326 (Statistics Canada, 2010), is located nearly evenly between the cities of Prince George and Williams Lake. Quesnel was originally established in the 1860's for travellers stopping on their way to one of the richest gold finds in North America (Quesnel Community and Economic Development Corporation, 2010). Since the 1950s, Quesnel has been traditionally linked to the forestry industry for economic growth. One third of Quesnel's labour force works directly in the forest industry, a fact which underlines its vital importance to the city's fortunes.

Major challenge

Quesnel is facing significant economic challenge due to the major reduction in timber harvesting from the spread of the mountain pine beetle. In addition, as recent as early January, 2010, Canfor announced that they would curtail production at their Quesnel mill and that the curtailment is linked to market demand as well as production costs. Due to the pine beetle, the timber supply in the Quesnel area was expected to decrease from 5 million m³ per year harvested in 2008, to 1.7 to 1.9 million m³ per year in less than 10 years (Quesnel Community and Economic Development Corporation, 2008).

The call to action

It was quite clear early on that the mountain pine beetle was going to have a devastating impact on Quesnel. The Quesnel Community and Economic Development Corporation (QCEDC) and some of the local officials on council expressed concern about this situation, and wanted to act on it immediately, but there was limited local community support or political support at the time.

Steps of transition

It was in 2003 when some members of the community, local government, and QCEDC, first identified the extent of the mountain pine beetle crisis. The economic development corporation had just been formed in 2000, mainly to find avenues of diversification due to the threat of technological innovation and loss of employment in forestry. In 2003, city council and the QCEDC completed the Quesnel 2020 project that opened up the discussion of future impacts and possible amenity developments in the city.

The QCEDC then prepared programs and projects that would foster diversification. In 2005, the QCEDC started preparing a second plan, referred to as the prosperity plan, to mitigate the impacts from the expected reduction in timber harvest due to the mountain pine beetle. Despite a limited amount of respondents when compared to the 2020 project, the QCEDC attempted to get support from council for the plan.

Shortly after, and in collaboration with other forestry-dependent communities in central British Columbia, Quesnel helped form the Cariboo-Chilcotin Beetle Action Coalition in 2006. Although some good ideas came from this coalition, major funding from the provincial government never materialized.

However, the QCEDC continued with the actions set out in the prosperity plan. Funding proposals worth a total value of \$5.5 million were developed and submitted to Western Economic Diversification Canada (Quesnel Community and Economic Development Corporation, 2008). Projects that were initiated and completed included: a Multi-centre for tourism development, restoration of Old Fraser River Bridge, commercial area beautification, improvements to major transportation corridors, broadband internet

access, community marketing, the improvement of the Quesnel Farmers Market, and an audit of industrial and agricultural waste for a potential bio-energy or bio-products facility (Quesnel Community and Economic Development Corporation, 2008). The QCEDC managed to gather \$15 million in grant money to implement the above and other projects, all of which have been completed by 2010.

Further, there is another recent project that is expected to provide more jobs, and local tax dollars, and has been a result of direct action of the QCEDC and diversification efforts. The QCEDC managed to raise \$14 million from private, provincial and federal government sources to construct a bio-energy facility using industrial waste sources.

Local context and contributing factors

Despite the successes of the various projects pursued by the QCEDC, then Mayor Nate Bellow feels that more could have been done if there was more public support for diversification initiatives,

“What we needed was to increase the public support for the endeavours for the QCEDC and council. Opposite us, the council was split and we didn’t have a majority in the community. However, we still got everything we wanted done.” (Bellow, 2010)

As a result, the contributing factors to the success of diversification initiatives pursued in Quesnel can be mainly attributed to the will of local economic development organizations; including, the QCEDC, Community Futures, and Western Economic Diversification Canada.

Achievements to date

Quesnel’s achievements are demonstrated through the various individual projects that have been initiated and continue to foster growth in non-forestry sectors. When asking April Cheng, Economic Development Officer for QCEDC, what she perceives are Quesnel’s successes, she stated that,

“Completing the community planning process was successful and got us to where we are now. More than a hundred different community organizations were involved in the process of picking projects to diversify the community. We continue to use this model to engage the public and community.” (Cheng, 2010).

Next steps

As for success for Quesnel in its future, there are mixed feelings. The mountain pine beetle is a serious threat that could further harm the local forest industry moving forward. There have been a few new developments that are very hopeful, such as a new sustainability commission, and it seems that people in Quesnel are now waking up to the challenge of this impact on the local forest resource.

Craik, Saskatchewan

Description of community

The town of Craik, population 408 (Statistics Canada, 2010), is located half-way between Regina and Saskatoon and is only a 40 minute drive from Moose Jaw. Craik historically serviced the regional agricultural community and the town’s economy has largely relied on agriculture and related industries.

Viterra operates an elevator in the town that directly services area farmers, and there are many other agriculture-based services like fuel, parts, and service (Craik, Saskatchewan, 2010).

Major challenge

Rural decline in small agricultural towns across the prairies has been well-documented by researchers and government officials alike. Threats of globalizing markets, access to services, and the consolidation of farms have perpetuated this decline, and the community of Craik is no exception. In the late 1990s, rural de-population was an issue that was very real and alive for the residents of Craik, and the trend had no end in sight.

The call to action

For the people of Craik, the call to action was sounded loudly by the local officials of the RM and the town. At the time, the leaders of the community knew that business as usual was not going to end in the community's favour, and it took some leadership to start looking for alternatives. Shirley Eade, Ex-administrator of the town of Craik, recognized that,

“We were very fortunate that we had exactly the right leadership in place. They were the right group of people that were willing to make a decision, and it wasn't quite a popular decision. They didn't care if they didn't vote for them again; they got into this to get this done. This situation doesn't come around in a small community all that often. It's hard to get a group of people like that to make a stand.” (Eade, 2010)

The two councils were looking for an idea to spark some economic development and attract people to the community, but didn't know what quite to look for. It was with a group called the Mid-lakes Community Coalition, which was a group of volunteers from rural communities between Regina and Saskatoon, that Craik found its idea. The group brought in Dr. Lynn Oliphant to speak and he suggested the idea of an eco-village.

Steps of transition

In 2001, representatives from the town and RM, along with Dr. Lynn Oliphant, who was a retired professor and founder of the Prairie Institute for Human Ecology, met one weekend to discuss Craik's plan for an eco-village. Out of the weekend retreat the local officials and Dr. Oliphant formed a four pronged plan for development, as Glen Hymers, chairman of the Craik Sustainable Living Project (CSLP), explained,

“First we were to construct an million dollar eco-centre to create an attraction and be a destination point. Second, we wanted to form a model community with alternative construction, being the actual eco-village. Third, was to mobilize the community to get people to think about how they use resources. We knew it would be a hard sell because we live in a traditional farming community used to pesticide use. Fourth was outreach and education as we needed to get the message outside the borders of our community.” (Hymers, 2010)

Following the establishment of the four pronged plan, referred to as the CSLP, the community got to work quickly. The group of local officials and volunteers formed a number of committees to look into things like funding, architecture plans for the eco-centre, hire a local contractor, etc.

The goal was to try to attract people to come to live in the community, and the eco-village had a big selling point to do just that. The Rural Municipality (RM) of Craik developed 10 unserviced, off-grid lots, and sold each lot for \$1 each.

The eco-centre was built and opened in July 2004, and it started to service the town as a place for eco-education, business meetings, and housed the golf course's pro shop and a restaurant. The idea was to create a structure that was completely recycled, using new energy efficient systems, and straw bale construction.

In addition, due to the town's reputation for environmental sustainability and community spirit, the community has been able to attract a few businesses. Titan Clean Energies Inc, Atlantis Solar, and a private, eco-education school all have plans to set up shop in Craik.

Local context and contributing factors

While most in the town are quite happy with the increase in population, maintenance of local social services, and the attraction of new business, not everyone has been in favour of the CSLP project and the steering committee has faced challenges. Some residents even started a local petition against the actions of the project. In response, the community reached out and provided educational materials to the local community.

Nevertheless, these challenges did not slow progress on the project and there have been recent successes.

Achievements to date

The town and RM of Craik have been successful in raising the population of Craik, more kids are in school, there are 5 or 6 new homes being built in town, and now the community of Craik is regarded as an environmental leader. Hilton Spencer, Reeve of the RM of Craik, expressed satisfaction with how well the CSLP project turned out,

“The eco-village turned out much better than we originally thought. If we would have picked up just a few families, that would have been enough. Now it is much bigger than I would have ever thought. The private school, Titan, and Atlantis are all moving in. Titan has five guys working there. Atlantis could build the largest solar farm in Canada here.” (Spencer, 2010)

Next steps

The Eco-village in Craik is still growing and more people are purchasing lots and starting construction on new homes every day. The RM has recently got approval from the province to subdivide 10 more lots in the village, as all the existing lots have been sold.

Furthermore, the CSLP steering committee's focus moving forward is to continue to expand their projects in environmental sustainability and social sustainability, with potential in attracting people to 'healthy' living.

Revelstoke, British Columbia

Description of community

The City of Revelstoke, population 7,230 (Statistics Canada, 2010), is on the Columbia River and the community has been a stop for the CN railway since the late 1800s. In the last half of the 20th century,

Revelstoke's local economy has been largely tied to the industries of forestry, the railroad, and hydroelectric dams located close to the city. Nearby dams included the Mica Dam, built in the 1960s and located 80 miles north of Revelstoke, and the Revelstoke Dam, built in the late 1970s and located 5 miles north of Revelstoke. Up until the mid-1980s, the local economy was being sustained only by mega-projects, such as a dam construction or the lumber mill.

Major challenge

In the late 1980s, Revelstoke's local economy came to a staggering and sudden halt. Dam construction was ending in the area (Revelstoke Dam was completed in 1985), and the forestry industry was undergoing a period of significant hardship. The unemployment rate was 25%, the mill shutdown, and 25% of the homes in Revelstoke were left vacant (Mason, 2010).

David Raven, Mayor of Revelstoke at the time of this study, sums up the impact the dam completion and forestry industry were having on the city's population,

“From the late 70s through the 80s, there were 12,000 people in Revelstoke, 4,000 of which were all construction workers. Then the construction people all left in 1988, and the town's population declined to 7000 people. Also in 1988, we didn't need many people working on the rail road anymore because of improvements in technology.” (Raven, 2010)

The call to action

In the mid 1980s, local leaders in the community discussed ways they could diversify the local economy to offset some of the loss of employment from the dams being completed and from the forestry industry in decline. The idea at the time was to strive toward growth in the tourism industry as it would build on the natural assets that Revelstoke affords. Revelstoke's location on the TransCanada highway, the scenery of the landscape, and the older buildings in downtown Revelstoke were its assets.

The downtown revitalization project was a part of the community's first economic development strategy in 1986, which identified tourism and forestry as the main growth sectors. The economic development strategy came from the leadership that was present in Revelstoke at the time.

Steps of transition

Following the period of decline in the middle to late 1980s, and after developing the community's first economic development strategy, local officials and business leaders pursued projects and programs to boost both the tourism and forestry industry. Although things at the time were in rough shape, Revelstoke did have enormous potential for growth in both industries.

The downtown revitalization project included renovating the façade of all business buildings on main street and the construction of a downtown community plaza where live music was played in the evenings. After completion of the project in the late 1980s, the city had the momentum to continue with other development projects, and this made the community more attractive and people wanted to spend more time in the community. With these small successes, town leaders realized they could achieve more with other projects as well.

This confidence in achieving community goals was important, as it was needed for the next project the community was about to tackle: the creation of the province's first community forest corporation. In 1992, local council and the economic development commission put forward an offer to purchase a portion

of the nearby tree farm license (TFL) to assume management and harvesting of surrounding timber resources. The city and three local sawmills became partners in the venture, with \$1 million of city dollars invested (Canadian Centre for Community Renewal, 2003).

Throughout the 1990s, the tourism industry in Revelstoke continued to grow as it was persistently being regarded as the premier place for heli-skiing and snowmobiling; due to the large amounts of snow it received each year and vast mountain landscape.

Also in that time period, the city had been very actively chasing developers to come and build a mountain resort in the community. Ski hills had been proposed in Revelstoke since the 1970s, but never seemed to get past the planning phases. It wasn't until 2005 that Revelstoke found a credible investor willing to see the project through, and opened the Revelstoke Mountain Resort a few years later. At full build out, the resort could increase the town's population up to 16,000 people.

Local context and contributing factors

For all the ground-breaking initiatives started by city in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the community's leaders have been able to do so with limited backlash from Revelstoke's residents. Part of this success has been extensive community consultation and this ensures buy-in from local residents. Communication with the public about pursuing the local forest license was particularly effective. This included a referendum on whether or not the community should go ahead with the initiative.

Achievements to date

The success of Revelstoke can be measured by its ability to create a balanced economy, attract new businesses, and prevent depopulation. At this stage, the community has a fairly diverse economy – forestry, tourism, transportation, and government offices. This diversity has allowed the community to withstand economic decline within a particular sector. When one sector is down, other sectors can pick up the slack.

Next steps

The city of Revelstoke has been successful in creating a balanced economy for local residents, but in moving forward, there may be difficulty in maintaining this balance. The city has to be careful not to become another resort community like Whistler that is solely dependent on tourism and thus, less diversified. Local officials want the resort to exist along with forestry and other sectors to maintain the balanced economy.

Ogema, Saskatchewan

Description of community

The town of Ogema's, population 304 (Statistics Canada, 2010), primary business was in servicing the regional agricultural community. Ogema is surrounded by prime agricultural land that the southern Saskatchewan prairies are known for. Established in 1912, Ogema is situated 80 miles south of Regina, on Highway #13, and half way between Weyburn and Assiniboia (Southeast Regional Economic Development Authority, 2010). In addition, the Red Coat Road and Rail short line railway runs through Ogema and loads producer cars with the Ogema elevator (Town of Ogema, 2007).

Major challenge

Rural decline across the grain growing areas of the Western prairies has been occurring gradually over the last 40 years. To maintain sustainable incomes as a farmer today, you require much more land and capital than in years past. As small farms are sold to larger farm operations, people in small agricultural communities have been moving away to larger centers for employment and access to services. Many communities have been seeing year-after-year depopulation, and are becoming aware of the fact that their towns and villages are dying.

Like many other communities, rural decline was a major challenge for the community of Ogema. The population dropped from a peak of 550 people to 292 people in the late 1980s. To make matters worse, the business of farming went through a period of difficulty in the 1980s, which further contributed to farm families leaving the community and population decline.

The call to action

There were a few residents that started to come forward in the community in the late 1980s. They decided that the town had to do something, and they were willing to work at it. A core group of 20 people formed and led the rest of the community in pursuing economic development initiatives. The first action of the group was to lobby the provincial government to be a part of Fair Share Saskatchewan, a rural revitalization program that dispersed a number of government offices from Regina to rural areas across Saskatchewan.

Ogema wasn't accepted for Fair Share Saskatchewan, but it was this initial group that rang the alarm bells for action in the community, and each person within the group demonstrated leadership in pursuing actions.

Steps of transition

The group of leaders in Ogema all started to pursue economic development projects, of which many were varied and ongoing at the same time. However, each project had the same ultimate goal: to bring more people to the community. In 1997, to preserve a local health centre for the community, the town created the first not-for-profit personal care home that worked jointly with a health centre in a neighbouring community. Also in 1997, a local farmer, named Keith Bacon, attended a hog symposium in Saskatoon, and came back thinking that it might be a good idea to bring a hog operation to Ogema. After some community discussion, Keith invited three hog companies to come to Ogema and give presentations on their proposed hog operations.

It was in one of the presentations where the residents got informed and interested in Big Sky Farms Ltd, and where Big Sky learned a little more about the potential of Ogema as well.

In 1999, Big Sky started construction in Ogema and in April 2000, Big Sky had their Grand Opening. The opening of the hog operation provided the town with steady jobs, a secondary market for feed grains for local producers, and people moving into, rather than away from Ogema.

In the same period of time, another farmer from the community was working on a different project to purchase a branch of rail line from CN that stretched from Pangman to Assiniboia, Saskatchewan, a 115 km stretch of rail line. The branch of rail line was purchased from CN in 1998 by a collection of municipalities along the line, including Ogema, and was called the Red Coat Road & Rail Ltd.

Furthermore, the town started pursuing a local tourism sector in 1998. They focused on the building of heritage sites in the community, especially the development of their train-stop heritage. Ogema now has one of the largest community-owned museum sites in Western Canada. They also established a Sports Hall of Fame in 2005 to highlight Ogema's sports history (Southeast Regional Economic Development Authority, 2010).

Lastly, the town has been successful in luring new immigrants to come live and work in Canada. Over the past two years, at least 50 people from the Philippines have moved to Ogema and found jobs with Big Sky farms. The town has seen 18 to 25% population growth in the last year, most of which has come from new immigrants.

Local context and contributing factors

When asked about the contributing factors that led to success, the Mayor of Ogema at the time of this report, Wayne Myren, pointed out that the town's greatest asset is its people,

"We had strong volunteering and leadership from the people. In dealing with a community with a population of 500 or 500,000, you need leadership. Not just leadership from one or two people, but more like leadership from a whole group of people." (Myren, 2010)

There were still some challenges in getting public support for the new initiatives pursued by the group of local leaders. However, it was simply that case that some community members just needed to see the positive things to come out the group's determination and actions in order to become less opposed.

Achievements to date

By all measures, Ogema has been successful in pursuing projects to increase economic diversification and attract people to their little agricultural community. When asked about their achievements and how the interviewees view their success, all share the positive feelings that can be felt in the town and their hope for the future. These people are truly happy with what they have been able to accomplish.

As a result of its actions, Ogema has received a number of awards including the Provincial Communities in Bloom award in 2004, Canada Lands Company National Sustainable Development Award in 2005, and a silver medal in the United Nations International Award for Liveable Communities in 2008 (Town of Ogema, 2007).

Next steps

The town of Ogema is pursuing plans for community growth, tourism, and infrastructure development to continue its momentum. However, despite the many successful initiatives pursued and completed in the town, the threat of rural decline is still very real. Community leaders continue to work toward more economic development initiatives that will sustain the community into the future.

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