# STRATEGIES FOR SMALL COMMUNITY SURVIVAL AND DEVELOPMENT

## Municipal Affairs Project

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Over the past four years, municipalities served by the Planning Branch/Parkview Unit have identified community needs through a series of community needs assessments. The question that arose from these needs assessments could be broadly stated as follows: Communities have needs. They also have potential. How can these needs be met and this potential developed? In August of 1988 the Edmonton Social Planning Council was contracted to investigate the availability and usefulness of any approaches, programs, self-help materials and other resources that would help staff of the Planning Branch/Parkview Unit and municipalities address the range of community needs that were identified in the needs assessments.

## 2.0 METHODOLOGY

Our review was based on consultations with key informants; a brief review of literature on community development, public involvement, community economic development and small towns; and a review of selected approaches and resources in use in Alberta and elsewhere.

Several persons with experience in small town community planning and decision-making provided information and gave us leads about approaches and resources. A literature review provided additional information about approaches and important factors for consideration by communities. We then looked at a sample of materials used by a number of Alberta government departments and agencies. The informants are listed in Appendix One. Resource materials are in Appendix Two.

## 3.0 SMALL COMMUNITIES: WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

Parkview Unit provides land use planning services to thirty-five municipalities not serviced by a regional planning commission. Municipalities include summer villages, villages, towns, counties and municipal districts. Assistance and advice are provided on a broad range of land use and development matters. Our review focused primarily on materials and resources dealing with small towns and villages.

To most people living in a large urban centre, it may appear that one small town is the same as the next. In fact, there is no average small town. This means there is no universal single planning method for small towns. What works for one town may not necessarily work for the next town. Each town faces different choices and options. Similar decisions can have varying impacts. This situation is often not recognized by "outsiders" who deal with small towns. Three generalizations can be drawn about small towns and the people who live there:

a) *Small towns are not alike.* Small towns are influenced by the people living there, the economic base, the history of the community, its location and the like. Some towns are in decline, others are growing. They are affected by different influences.

b) *Urban community concepts do not fit.* Small town communities are different from city and suburban communities. Many of the concepts and ideas used to study and assist small towns are often urban in nature. As a result they do not fit with small town realities.

c) *Small towners are people.* Having said the above it needs to be recognized that small towners behave like most people. They have "pecking orders". They have ways of including and excluding people. They have certain patterns for making decisions.

The approaches to small town downtown revitalization in Alberta illustrate what can occur when the uniqueness of small towns are not taken into consideration. Efforts in the 1970s focused on physical improvements such as sprucing up buildings, planting trees and flowers and putting in brick sidewalks. One Alberta foundation provided millions of dollars in grants to small towns across Alberta for this purpose. Planners, townspeople and downtown businessmen, among others, now know that this "brick and mortar" approach is not sufficient to revitalize a town's downtown. They realize that a community's downtown reflects the community's history and its social, economic and physical development. This gives the downtown in each community a unique and special identity. It is unlikely that there are a standardized set of solutions to the issue of downtown revitalization.

Swanson et al (1979) outline a framework for analyzing and understanding small towns. Their analysis has four key elements:

a) Cultural Values and Norms
These are the values, beliefs and attitudes that guide people's everyday actions. Compare, for example, feelings about increased development, between people living in a summer village and people living in a town of 3,500.

b) Local Economy
Some towns are growing and prospering. Others are declining and deteriorating. While some local businesses may fare well, the whole community may not necessarily benefit. Looking at the local economy provides a sense of how people make a living and gives a general impression of the town's standard of living.

c) Influence Patterns
Social, religious and business clubs and associations are formal mechanisms for decision-making, shaping opinions and action that determine how things get done. Just as important are the informal relationships that exist in the community.

d) Social Structure
The extent or form of change depends on the ideologies or value preference of those in power in the community. Some people or groups may benefit more than others from change in a particular direction. Do both the "gainers" and "losers" have a say in what change should occur?

## 4.0 COMMUNITY NEEDS: WHERE DO PLANNERS FIT IN?

Planners are only one of many actors with an interest in small towns. The various actors have different insights, ideas and concepts about the towns they deal with. As well, they have different resources to offer.

### 4.1 Town Residents
This is the most important group since ultimately they must pay the cost and live with the results of any actions taken. They can see adverse changes in the community but really do not know what to do to stop or reverse change. Usually only a handful of small towners are aware of the range of available options for community change. In many small towns those most willing to seek change are often the "boosters" who

easily settle upon the economic development strategy of bringing some new business into town.

### 4.2 Policy-makers

Policy-makers at the local, regional, provincial and national level make decisions that affect small communities. The closure of rural post offices, the provision of oil drilling incentives, the building of a rural hospital, cutbacks in community school funding and changes in taxation regulations, all have a direct impact on the small community. The programs that are designed and the funding that is provided are often decided on the basis of broad social, economic and political goals that only very indirectly take into account the unique or special features of any one town.

### 4.3 Social Scientists

A lot of what is written about small towns has been done by social scientists who have studied and commented on the life and times of small communities. Much of their concern lies with understanding and promoting awareness of small towns.

Their work may be undertaken individually, as part of the university department or faculty (usually through their extension services or the agriculture or planning or geography department) or through an independent institute specializing in small town or rural issues.

### 4.4 Planners, technicians, community developers, other "problem-solvers"

Generally these are the people who attempt to work with communities to solve a particular problem. They may be a social worker who lives in the town, a department planner from the corporate office or a program consultant who is responsible for the region. Some live in the town and can be affected by the decisions they take or recommend. Others are visitors. All of them face the reality of working within the current framework of funding, programs and policies. Within this framework however, they have a flexibility in the role they can play in the community, shifting from one role to another as the situation calls for. Some common roles are:

a) technician - to provide technical assistance with planning and planning legislation

b) facilitator - to assist and guide small-towners in achieving their objectives through direct assistance, referral and information provision

c) option-builder - to expand choices available to small-towners beyond the standard solutions presently available

d) advocate - to help those groups or towns who need special attention and assistance

There are planners who may be uncomfortable with some of these roles. More importantly, some planners' employers may be uncomfortable with some of these roles. Another consideration is the resources available to the planner. In some cases, the action will be a one-shot effort, in others there will be a number or series of activities. In some, the planner plays the prominent role, while in others, local residents will dominate the process.

## 5.0 ADDRESSING COMMUNITY NEEDS: WHAT'S AVAILABLE?

We found a wealth of resources and materials that have been produced to help communities identify and address their needs. We classified those which we thought would be most applicable to Parkview Planning Unit's needs into three broad categories: literature on community change; other resources; and government resources.

### 5.1 Literature

Our review of the literature on community development and public involvement focused on two research questions. What role will town residents play in change in their community? How can people get involved in or be organized for addressing their community needs? We narrowed our review to handbooks or guidebooks that dealt with practical matters such as: getting the right people involved, fostering community support, finding out where the resources are and carrying out the action.

As might be expected from books dealing with citizen involvement or participation, the starting premise of this literature is that residents have every right to determine their community's future. As Bill Lee (1986) says, people need to realize that they have the power and ability "to get things done or make things happen or to keep things from getting done or happening" (p. 25). Lee deals not only with the pragmatics of organizing but also with the political reasons for organizing the community, that is, understanding the causes of community problems and the need for change.

Other handbooks stress the political nature of community change. In her book How to Make Citizen Involvement Work, Duane Dales takes the reader through a discussion and exercises to help the reader understand his role in the politics of community change. She then offers practical advice for taking action.

A few general community development rules of thumb derived from the literature are listed below:

a) There are two dimensions to community development. The short-term goal is a project to improve some part of the community. The longer-term goal is to develop a sense of community ownership and increased satisfaction from having participated in a community effort. The former goal is the practical dimension, the latter is the political. The two go hand-in-hand.

b) The most common tasks associated with community development are the development of an organization and the development of leadership. Both of these tasks should come from within the community.

c) More people and organizations taking part will pay off in terms of greater community support, more hands to help and increased feeling of community.

d) Local resources should be used as much as possible to reduce the likelihood of having outsiders determining goals and strategies. Outside help should only be sought when appropriate and necessary.

e) Flexibility is the key to organizational success. Elected officers, by-laws and Robert's Rules of Order are not guarantees of success.

f ) Leadership does not necessarily come from people who are "successful", rich or in a position of prestige. "A leader is someone who wants to do something and is willing to invest time and energy to make something happen in his or her community." (McCall, 1988 p. 19).

In an article on the role of community associations, Baker (1985) outlines common problems they face in the community. Community associations are defined as informal groups formed around some initial problem or issue that is of concern to a large number of people or because some individual, small group or a special interest group has brought a concern to the rest of the community.

Factors such as the nature of the community, the leadership involved, and the effectiveness with which they work with the municipal council affect the degree and nature of the problems encountered.

Common circumstances identified were:

a) People want to undertake action as soon as possible. They may get tired with studying, recommending and co-ordinating.

b) The wider community may not support the group if there is little or no visible action of the type they expect to see, such as buildings and other physical projects.

c) Some groups may feel that they have not been given adequate opportunity to participate at meetings, or they may grow to feel that their group will gain no benefits from participating.

d) Some individual participants may have narrow interests such as square dancing or curling. They may not have enough interest in the community as a whole to remain involved.

e) The municipal council may see the group as a threat to their authority.

## 5.2 Other Resources

It is clear from the literature review and discussions with key informants that there are no shortcuts to organizing for community survival and/or development. A guidebook or manual can be a useful tool for helping people through the process of community change but it cannot stand on its own. We have identified other types of resources that can be utilized. We do not know enough about the examples listed below to comment on their quality or applicability for meeting Parkview Planning Unit's needs - we cite them more as an illustration of the kinds of resources that are available.

a) *Resource Groups*

i ) Rural Education and Development Association (R.E.D.A)
R.E.D.A. is a continuing education organization that offers a wide range of seminars, workshops and information programs. They have a resource library which includes materials on leadership and organizational development and the rural community.

R.E.D.A.'s experience includes designing and managing citizen participation programs, boards and staff training programs, co-operative education programs and conducting social and economic surveys. They maintain a close working liaison with Alberta Agriculture, Universities, Co-operatives and Farm Organizations.

Contact person:  John Melicher, Executive Director
Rural Education and Development Association (R.E.D.A.)
14815 - 119 Avenue
Edmonton, Alberta
T5L 2N9
Telephone:  451-5959

ii)  Heartland Center

Heartland Center programs include:

Training for leaders in communities, businesses and organizations to help them deal with fundamental change by finding opportunities where others may see only threats.

Assisting communities and organizations in developing a capacity for strategic planning and tackling problems of the future through solutions they themselves take the lead in devising.

Helping policymakers clarify questions key to the future of communities and states and promoting broad-scale public participation in the search for workable yet innovative solutions to problems brought on by significant change.

Conducting research related to leadership and its potential impact on quality of life, public policy and business and community prosperity.

Contact person:  Vicki Luther, Co-Director
Heartland Centre for Leadership Development
941 "O" Street, Suite 920
Lincoln, Nebraska  68508
Telephone:  (402) 474-7667

iii)  Alternative Economic Development Ideas

University of Missouri - Columbia

They have developed a low-tech approach to economic development that helps communities think about their economy in new ways by encouraging them to build the local economy from within. The Tool Kit for Alternative Economic Development includes a video tape, catalogue of ideas and a semi-annual idea bulletin on alternative economic development.

Contact person:  Jack McCall
Missouri Community Economic Development
Projects Office
628 Clark Hall
University of Missouri-Columbia
Columbia, Missouri  65211
Telephone:  (314) 882-2937

iv) <u>Saskatchewan Committee on Rural Area Development (SCRAD)</u>
SCRAD is a provincial organization that attempts to provide a forum for the expression of views on rural development in Saskatchewan. The Committee's members represent organizations that all share a vital interest in rural development. Among the materials produced in conjunction with the project are a series of 22 papers about many of the issues affecting the viability of small communities. This group has also produced the film "A Town Like Elrose" described in the next section.
Contact person:  Harold R. Baker
University of Saskatchewan
132 Kirk Hall
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan
S7N 0W0
Telephone:  (306)  966-5591

b) *Useful visual material*

Films can be powerful devices for stimulating people's interest in doing something about their community.

i) <u>Video Tape on Alternative Economic Development</u>
This video uses a simple, uncomplicated approach; namely, a man with the leaky bucket of water, standing on the mainstreet of a dying town to illustrate how dollars leak out of town. He goes on to explain how the holes can be plugged through innovative economic projects. An interesting quote from the video, "There's nothing wrong with downtown redevelopment and developing tourism. They are great ideas. The problem is, they don't work."

Produced by the Alternative Economic Development Ideas Project (see Section iii in Resource Groups above for address). Cost of the video is $70.00 (U.S). Parkview Planning Unit, Alberta Municipal Affairs has a copy of this video.

ii) <u>VTR Rosedale</u>
Rosedale is a small coal mining community located near Drumheller, Alberta. Once referred to as "the rear end of Alberta", Rosedale pulled itself together as a community. It formed a citizens action committee, cleaned up the town, built a park and negotiated with the government to install gas, water and sewage systems. And it all happened within five months.

Produced by Tony Karch, Continuing Education Department, University of Calgary. This video was once distributed by the National Film Board. Its reference number is 106B 0174 183. We are presently trying to track down a copy of the film.

iii) <u>A Town Like Elrose</u>
This videotape cassette focuses on rural community change, using the town of Elrose, Saskatchewan as a case study. The benchmark for the filming is a CBC documentary film completed in 1959, entitled "Road to Rosetown," which portrays the relationships at that time between the village of Hughton, the town of Elrose and the larger town of Rosetown. In

1979, local people were again interviewed in an attempt to get their views on the nature of the changes that had taken place over the intervening twenty years. Discussion centers around four areas: business, education, farming and social life. The demise of Hughton and consideration of the future of Elrose are intended to help similar communities in the Prairie Region assess their future.

Produced by Harold Baker (See Section iv in Resource Groups above) Copies are available on loan or can be purchased for $20 from the Film Library, Audio Visual Services, Division of Extension and Community Relations, Education Building, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, S7N 0W0.

## 5.3 Government Resources

In this review we looked at a number of booklets and kits put out by several Alberta Government Departments and Agencies. A list of these is included in Appendix Two. The purpose of looking at these materials was to see how they are used, the follow-up support that is provided and their general usefulness for Parkview Planning Unit and the municipalities they work with.

More specifically, we were interested in finding out:

1.  What is the purpose of the kit, booklet, etc. for the department? What is the purpose for the community?

2.  Who is it directed to? (e.g. municipal council, specific group, the general public)

3.  What logistical support is provided?

4.  Is it tied in with specific funding or programs?

5.  Is it suitable for use by smaller municipalities? (e.g. towns less than 4,000 population, counties, summer villages)

6.  Is it user friendly?

Of the materials we looked at, there were two kits, one on downtown revitalization by Alberta Municipal Affairs and one on tourism by Alberta Tourism. The Department of Economic Development and Trade will be publishing an economic development kit in mid-1989. As well, Vision 2020, a project for the Minister of Municipal Affairs will be publishing a kit to help communities develop a vision statement. These materials will be available in early 1989.

*Question One: What is the purpose of the kit, booklet, etc. for the department? What is the purpose for the community?*
Two broad purposes were identified: to help communities through a planning process and to provide information commonly asked for or needed by communities. All of the informants noted that none of this reduced demand for departmental staff assistance. What usually resulted was either an increased demand for assistance (especially when program funding was made available) or requests for more specialized services.

In line with the two purposes discussed earlier, the purpose for the community was either to help them help themselves or to provide them with useful information. Most materials implicitly assume that there is some organized group, or that one could be readily put together, to use the materials.

*Question Two: Who is it directed to?*
The materials were either directed to the municipal council or to an organized group such as a Chamber of Commerce. None was directed to the general public although several informants noted that Joe or Jane Public could use them if they were not part of an organized group.

*Question Three: What logistical support is provided?*
Generally speaking, the materials do not lessen the demand for staff assistance. Where materials were used to provide information, for example, how to hire a consultant, it has been the experience that calls for information do not necessarily decrease. Likewise with the kits, although they are meant to guide communities through a self-help process, they still generate requests for assistance. Some departments provide support though regional department consultants, others use field people, some will assist with the hiring of a consultant. As a way of limiting municipal use of the department resources, some departments have chosen not to market their materials in blanket fashion. For example, the Municipal Affairs kit has been "advertised" at conventions and by word of mouth. Municipalities request copies. By contrast, every permanent community in Alberta was sent two copies of the Community Tourism Action Plan Manual.

None of the people talked to were aware of any information networks that communities could tap into to find out about "successes" or "failures" with their particular program.

*Question Four: Is it tied in with specific funding or programs?*
Generally they are not. In fact, some departments make it clear that there is no funding available in order to discourage municipalities from participating simply because there is money available.

*Question Five: Is it suitable for use by smaller municipalities?*
All informants noted that their materials were designed to be used by most communities except for Edmonton and Calgary. Whether or not communities would use these resources depends to some extent on the answer to the next question as well as the funding that is available.

*Question Six: Is it user friendly?*
All the materials looked at were written in layman's language. The materials published by the Northern Alberta Development Council are especially good in this regard. Some materials, while written in easy language have not simplified the planning process, creating an impression that planning is a complicated affair.

6.0   CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Our task was to investigate the availability and usefulness of any approaches, programs, self-help materials and other resources that would help staff of the Planning Branch/Parkview Unit and municipalities address the range of community needs that they

had identified. We found a wealth of resources; unfortunately none would be useful as a stand alone resource that could be a model for community action.

As we discovered, there is no shortage of resources to help planners and townspeople address community needs. The problem is to sort through all the resources that are available and to select and adapt these resources to meet the specific situation. Most of the government materials appear to be directed to formal decision-making groups such as municipal councils and municipal officials and/or to organized groups such as the Chamber of Commerce. None is directed to Joe and Jane Public. Few deal with the process of getting a group of citizens together, helping them organize around their concerns, and then assisting them with doing something about it. In fairness to those who have produced the resources we looked at, it must be noted that in most cases resources were prepared to meet a specific need rather than to be used as general planning tools.

We recommend that Parkview Unit bring together and/or identify existing resources and community change strategies that planners and townspeople could have access to. Resources could include: the names of contact persons, kits, publications, videos and an inventory of community change case studies. Strategies for community change could involve the use of games, simulations, workshops, idea fairs and video. Some ideas for resources and strategies are discussed briefly below.

1.  *Establish connections with key people*
    As we noted in section 4, planners are only one of many people with an interest in community survival and/or development. Possible contacts could be townspeople and university people. These people have ideas, experiences and resources that can be shared.

2.  *Collect useful materials*
    Two departments have produced planning kits. Two more are due to be released in 1989. We came across three publications designed to help communities through the process of hiring a consultant. Most government departments publish a publications list. The department library would be a useful collection point.

3.  *Prepare an inventory of community success (and failure) stories.*
    Of the people we talked to, none knew of any organized collection of case studies, that people could refer to, to learn from other communities experiences. Parkview Planning Unit could establish an inventory of case histories of municipal self-help stories. They could be classified under the headings used in the 1984-86 needs assessments carried out by Parkview Planning Unit (e.g. economic development, public development, recreation and tourism). Cases could be kept on computer and periodically distributed in a book or on a P.C. diskette.

4.  *Develop strategies and tools that encourage community development activities.*
    In the book <u>Small Town Survival Manual</u>, Jack McCall describes the tasks faced by communities that want to control their destiny.

    "You can change the future of your community.
    Or you can sit back and allow whatever happens to happen.
    You can create your own destiny.
    However, the cost is high. It means organizing a group of people who are willing to give of their time and their energy to make things happen in your town.
    It means believing in yourself and in your organization.

It means putting aside individual differences to work together for the good of the community.
It means working together to decide what you want for the future and then working together to make it happen.
You can do it. People are doing it." (McCall, 1987)

There are a number of strategies and tools that Parkview Planning Unit could utilize to help townspeople gain the confidence and develop that ability to help themselves.

a) *Community development game* - Gaming is an effective educational tool for getting people to recognize attitudes and develop creative solutions in order to "win". The development of a game is something that Parkview Unit could explore and possibly develop as a planning resource.

b) *Annual idea fair* - What are other towns doing? What has worked? What has not? Where can people find out about activities they could do? Local speakers, new materials, and other resources would be brought together. Municipal councillors and others could come to see and share their ideas.

c) *Pilot projects* - Parkview Planning Unit in cooperation with other departments, agencies and/or other organizations could develop small-scale community pilot projects that promote community development. What is learned from a project could be shared with other communities.

d) *Planning in the schools* - Lesson plans on community planning and community development would be developed for teachers to use in schools. Junior and senior high school students would become aware of community potentials and opportunities and with it the realization that they can have an influence in the development of their community.

e) *Community resource people* - A community development type resource centre would operate like the C.A.S.E. program of the Federal Business Development Bank. In the C.A.S.E. program, retired or semi-retired business people are matched with people who require expert business advice on a particular topic. These resource people are paid a much lower fee than a consultant would charge. Thus, for example, if a town wanted to set up a local brewery, they could be matched with a councillor from a town that has tried one, a small brewery expert and/or someone that had set up a small brewery previously.

It often seems that in Alberta nothing gets done in small communities unless there are government grants, loans or loan guarantees. As we have shown, there are alternatives that can foster community independence and reduce dependence on government.

## APPENDIX ONE

## KEY CONTACT PEOPLE

Harold Baker, Chairman, Saskatchewan Committee on Rural Area Development (SCRAD), University of Saskatchewan.

Dave Barber, Senior Planner. Parkview Planning Unit, Alberta Municipal Affairs.

Linda Beltrano, Senior Northern Development Officer, Northern Alberta Development Council.

Peter Boothroyd, Adjunct Professor, School of Community and Regional Planning, The University of British Columbia.

Ron Gaunt, Executive Director, Family and Community Support Services Division, Alberta Health.

Ron Hancock, Business Councillor, Edmonton Metro Region, Alberta Economic Development and Trade.

George Ilagan, Senior Planner, Prairie Planning Unit, Alberta Municipal Affairs.

Tony Karch (retired), Professor, Department of Continuing Education, University of Calgary.

Heather Lacey, Consultant, Recreation and Sport Facilities Section, Community Recreation Branch, Alberta Recreation and Parks.

Stuart Lazear, Historical Resources Planner, Alberta Culture and Multiculturalism.

Edd Lesage, Director, Local Government Studies Program, Department of Extension, University of Alberta.

Al McCully, Planning Officer, Parkview Planning Unit, Alberta Municipal Affairs.

Dennis Shewfelt, Planning Officer, Research and Development Branch, Alberta Municipal Affairs.

Peter Van Belle, Project Officer, Vision 2020, Minister's Advisory Committee on the Future of Alberta Communities, Alberta Municipal Affairs.

APPENDIX TWO

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