



**RURAL
ALBERTA'S**
DEVELOPMENT FUND

2009 RADF Project Showcase
Afternoon Breakout Sessions Summary

November 25, 2009

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INTRODUCTION

On November 25, 2009, Rural Alberta's Development Fund (RADF) held a full day conference at the Shaw Conference Centre in Edmonton. The *2009 RADF Project Showcase* morning session featured the unveiling of RADF's future and its go-forward strategy, the results of a community capacity and quality of life survey RADF commissioned in 2009, with a spotlight on four diverse projects funded by RADF.

The afternoon was spent in small group discussions. Ninety-two rural leaders from across the province spent three hours in four groups discussing rural community capacity, leadership and development issues. They shared success stories and key learnings from community projects and identified opportunities for further collaboration and growth.

This document summarizes the input provided during the afternoon session. Prior to attending, participants were given a one page handout outlining how RADF defines and measures community capacity. This is attached as Appendix A.

The majority of participants were experienced leaders in developing community projects, working collaboratively with others and implementing small, medium or large rural development initiatives. RADF's *Showcase* represented one of the few times in Alberta such individuals have been brought together to discuss rural development in a focused environment.

Outcomes from the *Showcase* discussions will be used to further inform RADF's Board and staff as the not-for-profit company develops and implements its future funding and service delivery programs.

"Every good idea is a good idea for 15 minutes. Don't dismiss anything out of hand. Let's think about it and see if we can make it work first." Showcase afternoon participant

DISCUSSION SUMMARY

A. Picturing a Community with Ideal Community Capacity and Leadership

To begin, groups were asked what good rural community capacity and leadership looked like, and where examples could be found. In an ideal environment, participants said they would expect to see the following in a community or region that exhibits good community capacity and leadership:

- There is good governance and strong, effective, accountable leadership in all sectors (political, social, cultural). There is succession planning in place.
- There is an ability to bring financial capital to the community and have the resources and capacity to use the funds effectively.
- Access to services, supports and information for residents is easy.
- Technology and other tools are readily available and accessible to reduce the effects of rural isolation.
- The community has a vision, a sense of pride, a welcoming attitude and recognizes the assets it has. It has hope, optimism and confidence that it can be effective at those things it chooses to do.
- There is a strong, engaged, enthusiastic volunteer network.
- Everyone is involved and citizens are “engaged” – they are aware and talk about community initiatives or issues even if they are not active volunteers. They invest in their own community.
- Non-profit organizations are strong and resilient.
- Partnerships are strong within the community but also among communities in the region.
- Existing programs and growth are sustainable.
- The community is attractive to look at, there are lots of gathering places and the main street is vibrant.
- The community has a good quality of life and there are opportunities for young people, which encourage them to stay in the community in which they were raised.
- The community is inclusive of all cultures and generations.

“You require visionary leadership to move a community forward.”

“We need to imagine that we can prosper.”

Some Examples

Participants believed examples of such communities were:

- *Medicine Hat*: Clean; diversified; has positive economic impact on surrounding communities.
- *Rosebud*: A revived town with a pride of ownership.
- *Grande Prairie and Athabasca*: Both have a high level of citizen engagement and cooperation.
- *Westlock and Barrhead*: Both have shown leadership in seniors housing.

- *Hanna and Three Hills*: Both have developed technology centres.
- *Cold Lake*: Developed physician attraction program.
- *Warner & Vauxhall*: Kept public schools open; revitalized communities by becoming a home for elite sports programs.
- *Olds*: Created virtual school and expanded broadband through fibre networks.
- *Peavine Metis Settlement*: Entrepreneurial; good at building businesses and economic partnerships.
- *Fort Mackay*: Dedicated leadership and a commitment to change.
- *Drayton Valley*: Developing a bio-industrial sector.
- *Camrose*: Forward-thinking; innovative; open to new program ideas.
- *Southern Alberta communities* – Developed wind power industry.
- *Moab, Utah*: A vibrant main street with lots of entrepreneurial businesses.
- *Pictou, Ontario*: Built on deep agricultural roots by promoting winery properties; provided for diversity by allowing for other industries; promoted local businesses and revitalized its main street.
- *Nelson, BC*: Encouraged growth in its student population and arts community; expanded town's identity beyond mining and forestry.

Other mentions were Red Deer, Banff, Wainwright, Canmore, Dauphin (Man.), Dog River (Sask.), and Revelstoke (B.C).

B. Community Capacity and Leadership Issues

The Barriers

- Many governance and human resource issues including a lack of:
 - Young leaders and visionaries to take over from the current group who are aging.
 - Pragmatic assistance, training and mentoring on how to get things done – i.e. how to organize and chair meetings, how to develop a plan, how to think about the ‘big picture’, how to ensure outcomes and accountability for projects, etc.

“Just knowing how to fill out forms and follow the processes to get funding can be huge. A lot of people just can’t do it.”
 - The right skill set to create and see a project through – the person with the vision does not always have the skills or capacity to do it alone. Often, the necessary skills are not available locally because of limited population.
 - Professional expertise or advice. Rural communities often have to pay to bring in this advice from other places.
 - A community governance model that allows everyone to participate in decision-making, not just elected or appointed Boards.
 - Ability to integrate new people into the community so they feel engaged and encouraged to be involved in a leadership role.
 - A sufficient volunteer base to prevent volunteer fatigue.
- Community groups and networks that do not collaborate with one another, or are unaware of each other. Some are protectionist in nature, which creates an artificial barrier.

“A lot of them (groups/communities) don’t want to cooperate with other groups or municipalities. They see it as a competition thing.”
- Government programs and grants that apply urban paradigms to rural circumstances such as number of people impacted or project size. A ‘one size fits all’ approach for funding criteria or service support does not fit the rural reality.
- A lot of things important to rural communities are considered soft or discretionary, such as the arts. These areas do not receive much government support.
- Long-time community decision-makers who squash new ideas or have negative attitudes because of perceived risks – this discourages newcomers or young people who have new ideas for growth and community development.
- Acceptance of newcomers as leaders in smaller rural communities is an issue. They often do not get support because they do not have ‘historical (time in the community) legitimacy’.

“A lot of ideas in rural Alberta never even get put to paper, or go anywhere. They (people) don’t know who to talk to about it.”
- Transportation/connectivity issues and the physical separation and isolation of rural communities, particularly in the north.
- Managing expectations; i.e. sometimes a community may be at its best in its present form.

- Loss of youth and other citizens to urban centres; general labour mobility where people do not stay in a community long enough to develop a strong vested interest.
- Insufficient infrastructure (e.g. recreation facilities, meeting spaces) and money to facilitate success.

The Opportunities

- Rural communities have the ability to act quickly and mobilize resources faster. The rural identity – the willingness of people to pull together - is a rural advantage that should be used more often.
 - Better utilization of current assets, tapping into the wealth that already exists in the community. This may include human resources or underutilized infrastructure such as libraries or churches.

“The rural advantage is that entrepreneurialism and innovation can be done anywhere...and often better in a small community.”
 - Encouragement and growth of people to be leaders and community champions (formal and informal), particularly women, youth and newcomers. Connecting leaders with leaders so they can learn from each other.
 - Transferring intergenerational wealth and knowledge - making sure that some or all of the accumulated wealth and knowledge of older adults stays in a rural community and is used for development.
 - Creating and applying a sense of urgency to do things - don't just talk about rural development, do it! Focus on projects with a start and an end that people can be passionate about.
 - Creating ownership through more community governance.

“We can use technology to overcome a lot of things (like isolation) now.”
 - Taking greater advantage of technology to enhance communications and connectivity between people and resources like educational services.
 - Thinking big. A global business can be built anywhere, and costs are greater in larger centres.
 - Increasing perceptions that quality of life in rural Alberta is good.
 - Creating more partnerships and alliances between people, communities and organizations, reducing competition and increasing networking. This can be done by:
 - Developing personal relationships and a record of success to build trust.
 - Cultivating an understanding of mutual benefit between communities.
 - Providing seed money to facilitate a transfer of resources.
 - Working with municipal governments and local industry, not simply seeking their approval or financial support.
 - Using a community development planning framework that involves more people up front.
 - Demonstrating the value of cross-promoting communities and products.
- “Somehow find a way to come to a common goal or a common vision of what's possible. If groups can share a vision, it is a lot easier to partner up.”*

Recognizing Success

Many participants noted that success is something you continually work toward and therefore, the process to achieve it is never done. However, they did offer that a rural development project is a success when:

- Goals were met and other opportunities created.
- It leaves a lasting legacy. This means the initial effort is continued; there is sustainability even after original funds are used up.

“Know what success looks like before you begin.”
- It moves beyond its original purpose and has a wider reach (i.e. a videoconferencing tool created by one organization is now a community resource).
- It meets budget or exceeds revenue and profit forecasts.
- It is being copied by other communities. People are looking to learn from it.
- It achieves national and international recognition.
- It makes use of regional partnerships.
- User feedback is positive – testimonials are strong and there is a hunger for the program or service.

“Success is not a destination, its part of an evolutionary process.”
- The community is engaged, has pride in the project or program and feels some ownership of it.
- Leadership is shared or well distributed.
- The percentage of young people and professionals within the community is maintained or increases. The general population is growing and job opportunities increase.
- It contributes to people’s feelings of satisfaction in living and working in the local community or area.
- Investment in the community increases.
- Crime decreases; other social measures are influenced positively.

C. GROUP QUESTIONS

Each breakout session group was asked to consider and answer five core questions about project success factors. The collective responses are summarized here.

1. How can a person or organization develop better partnerships and relationships?

Participants indicated that a personal and social approach to developing partnerships and relationships is important. They articulated the need for meeting face-to-face in social settings and that contact needs to be frequent. Once a collaborative partnership has begun, there needs to be open and honest feedback, and ongoing communication.

According to session participants, a better partnership or relationship emerges when both parties can see a mutual benefit. This means people are willing to come to the table prepared to share assets and work towards a common goal with common values. Participants stressed that an attitude of sharing - the ability to look for win-wins is essential. There needs to be recognition that a partnership can be an opportunity to access funding and provide services that would not be possible individually.

A number of groups noted that it's important to understand your own limitations and be willing to step aside and allow the other party to take over in areas where they excel. This means there is value in seeking to partner on complementary initiatives. It requires being aware of the other organization's needs and being able to appreciate different roles and contributions.

Similarly, better partnerships and relationships are nurtured when there is gratitude and recognition for contributions. A majority of people noted that recognition must be given where it is due – nothing should be taken for granted.

Other suggestions for developing better partnerships and relationships offered by one or two groups:

- Recognize that there is a balance between the common good and the reality that every party has its own vested interest. Bring in an outside mediator if conflict develops.
- Projects should have real involvement, not just letters of support.
- Belong to Chambers of Commerce.
- Network online and communicate with other projects. Bring in an outside resource, like a mentor, to help with networking.
- Create a network of RADF funding projects and create opportunities to help other programs.
- Find partners through schools.
- Promote linkages.
- Tell the truth and be specific about the organization's needs.
- Follow through on commitments.

2. How can an organization best determine the value of technology for project support before investing too heavily in it?

In all four of the breakout sessions, participants emphasized that technology is a support tool, not an end in itself. This means that a project's needs, scope and purpose must be clearly defined first. *Then* the technology to support those needs can be determined.

Participants articulated different ways to do this but noted that very simple technologies (such as telephone conferencing and Skype) may meet needs as effectively as more expensive alternatives. Therefore, researching technological options is important. A variety of ways to do this research were suggested including:

- Joining user groups online for information.
- Checking with other organizations to see how they handled a similar project.
- Researching the cost of maintaining the technology (training and repairs).
- Talking to current users in-depth about the options available.
- Taking an evidence-based approach by reviewing existing technology.
- Examining longevity; what is the compatibility of old hardware with the new?
- Considering the ongoing human resource requirements to support it.

A majority of groups mentioned the importance of considering the audience or end user as a way to determine value. Factors to consider:

- Is the technology user-friendly?
- Does it meet the end user's expectations?
- Is there enough flexibility in the organization's website or other technologies so that those with lower technological capacity can still access it?

Most groups suggested running pilot projects or focus groups to test solutions, or even "borrowing" the technology before committing to invest. Partnering with another organization that already has the technology, or with an organization that has similar technological needs was also seen as having strong merit.

In determining the value of technology, some participants advocated flexibility, suggesting a 'learn as you go' approach or calculated risk-taking. "If you don't invest, you may not learn the value of a technology," offered one participant.

3. How can funds be leveraged effectively?

All groups felt funds can be leveraged effectively through the use of partnerships. This approach has the added potential benefits of creating more inclusive projects, setting common goals and working together to match funding. Many groups noted that the concept of matching funds is an effective strategy for leveraging more money (i.e. using one source of funding as a way of getting matching funds from another source).

Other suggestions by one or more breakout groups for effective leveraging:

- Use sponsorships to promote and recognize funding partners, or as a way to match other sources of funding.
- Seek in-kind contributions (if they can be properly assessed and valued).
- Set up trust funds and private foundations.
- Write proposals to show funding options.
- Pool resources.
- Reduce red tape.
- Apply user fees.

4. What are the key elements of an administrative framework that works effectively within funding parameters, government policies, provincial regulations and other imposed ‘fences’?

Properly resourced and empowered people to facilitate strong personal connections between project offices and project leaders were considered by all groups as critical to any administrative framework. As part of this, some participants expressed a wish for a client-based approach that allowed them to deal with one person for continuity and simplicity, and to help with proposal development.

The importance of transparency and communication to session participants was articulated in a number of ways. Overall, they expressed a desire for openness and a strong line of communication that encourages sharing and facilitates success through honest feedback. Some participants also defined transparency in terms of clear guidelines, terms of reference and selection criteria.

Some participants wanted flexibility in any administrative framework. They defined it as having the ability to recognize that communities may define terms differently and measure outcomes differently. Others stated the importance of not using urban paradigms in rural realities (i.e. expecting the same square foot usage in a rural community as in an urban one).

The need for accountability and the ability to demonstrate good project management was deemed important. For participants, this meant having the resources and systems in place to keep good records, provide detailed reporting on how projects have been implemented and having the ability to pull out numbers quickly and easily.

Other key elements mentioned by one or two groups were:

- Having reasonable documentation requirements.
- Instituting a sustainable, predictable funding formula to facilitate multi-year planning.

5. What are the best ways to manage funds so the project is gaining the full benefit?

A majority of participants said it is important to have a mechanism in place that defines outcomes, opportunities and deliverables. This can be used to evaluate benefits and make any necessary adjustments.

In one group, participants suggested that money should be given based upon the delivery of outcomes (instead of expenses or receipts). This way, if an innovative way is found to deliver an outcome more cheaply, the money saved could be used in another part of the project or for expansion.

Half of the groups felt it was important to find ways to ensure the project actually benefits the community. Suggestions for how this could be done included:

- Build in a community development approach that takes into account skill building, leadership development and involvement of diverse groups.
- Get an independent review of the business plan to ensure that what is best for the community has been taken into account.
- Hire specialists to identify assets matched with community engagement.
- Seek community feedback.

Many participants recommended adopting an attitude of frugality and good stewardship. This begins with a proper bookkeeping system and people who can manage it well. Spend with the understanding that the organization is entrusted with public and/or donated funds. It was pointed out however that flexibility in the management of funds is important too because it supports innovation and learning. It allows an organization to respond as new opportunities arise and events change.

Other suggestions for managing funds well, as expressed by one or more groups:

- Have a good understanding of the true cost for skill sets, time to do work and overall scope – avoid underestimating.
- Set priorities to allow for budget allocation. This will prevent the project scope from overwhelming budgets.
- Seek contributions by other supportive organizations.
- Put funds into the hands of someone who is able to leverage additional funding (e.g. a charitable status group that can apply for funding restricted to that sector).
- Generate funds by investing well.
- Do simple, consistent reporting of finances. Inform volunteers, stakeholders and politicians. Have one person who fully understands the project maintain contact with partners and key stakeholders.
- Issue an annual disbursement.
- Work with auditors on a regular basis to ensure good stewardship.
- Focus on sustainability more than dollars.

KEY LEARNINGS

At the end of the day, each group was asked what the key learnings of the afternoon discussion were for them. Here is what they offered:

- There are a lot of similarities and a lot of projects related to what we do. We can learn from each other. We need to find more ways to share.
- There are substantial opportunities to network and leverage partnerships.
- Other communities have the same issues and problems.
- Solutions and innovations need to come from the communities themselves; the answers are in the community.
- The importance of leadership to adjust and change as needed; and the importance of mentors to enable and support that leadership.
- Sustainability is critical, not only in terms of ongoing financial reserves, but also in the areas of leadership and human resources.
- There should be a better understanding of potential barriers and opportunities for rural Alberta.
- The importance of programs to rural Alberta that might be seen as soft or discretionary (i.e. culture, recreation) should be defined; this can be done by linking the economy to people (i.e. people's satisfaction with quality of life, access to services, etc.)
- The complexity of identifying measures that demonstrate the success of projects.
- The best decisions or actions are driven by community values and approaches.
- The involvement of people and buy-in is critical – listening and communication is important to getting buy-in.
- RADF has had an impact in meeting a funding need in rural Alberta, and they speed the process of rural development.

"We are not alone. We can find solutions together."

"What a wonderful forum for everyone to share solutions."

Appendix A

RADF Community Capacity Framework

In 2008, RADF developed a Community Capacity Framework as a means to evaluate projects for potential funding. This framework allows RADF to use a common language and understanding to define for itself and describe to others what is meant by community capacity.

RADF defines community capacity as a process of increasing the combined influence of a community's commitment, resources and skills that can be deployed to build on community strengths and address community problems and opportunities. There are eight outcomes that, if achieved, would confirm that a community has the capacity to be successful.

Outcome 1: Expanded, diverse, inclusive citizen participation: An ever-increasing number of people participate in all types of activities and decisions.

Outcome 2: Expanded leadership base: Community leaders bring new people into decision-making and give them the chance to learn and practice leadership skills.

Outcome 3: Strengthened individual skills: A variety of resources create opportunities for individual skill development. As skills and expertise is developed, the level of volunteer service is raised.

Outcome 4: Widely shared understanding and vision: A vision of the best future for the community is widely shared and agreed to.

Outcome 5: Strategic community agenda: Clubs and organizations consider changes that might come in the future and plan together.

Outcome 6: Consistent, tangible progress toward goals: The community turns plans into results and gets things done. Benchmarks gauge progress and/or milestones mark accomplishments.

Outcome 7: Effective community organizations and institutions: All types of civic clubs and traditional institutions — such as churches, schools and newspapers — are supported and run well, making the community stronger.

Outcome 8: Better resource utilization by the community: The community selects and uses resources that balance local self-reliance with the use of outside resources.

Outcomes adapted by RADF from The Aspen Institute, Rural Economic Policy Program, "Measuring Community Capacity Building", 1996, 11-12. <http://www.aspeninstitute.org/atf/cf/%7BDEB6F227-659B-4EC8-8F84-8DF23CA704F5%7D/Measuring%20Community%20Capacity%20Building.pdf>