

## **Community-Municipal Partnerships Working Together to Create Healthy Communities**

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A healthy community has individual, economic and environmental health. It is a place where people can maintain good health through activities that are safe, accessible and inclusive. A healthy community is "...continually creating and improving those social and physical environments...that enable people to mutually support each other in performing all the functions of life and in developing to their maximum potential."<sup>1</sup>

Municipalities have an important role to play in creating healthy communities. Investing in infrastructure, facilities, programs, and economic development projects are just a few of the ways that they can promote and encourage healthy people and places.

Small rural municipalities often have limited human and financial resources and this can reduce their capacity to plan for and implement healthy community initiatives. However, rural communities tend to be rich in social capital found in voluntary, community-based and non-profit groups. One solution to overcome a lack of capacity within the rural municipality is to enter into partnerships with community groups whose goals and activities contribute to creating a healthy community.

### **Why work with community groups?**

Community groups can be made up of a range of stakeholders, including public health, education, business, economic development, law enforcement and interested citizens. Their focus can be on specific projects, (e.g. development of a community trail, planning an event), education and awareness raising, community-based research, fundraising or advocacy – or a combination of these.

Because of their diversity in composition, community groups can offer a range of knowledge, experience and skills. By nature, community groups have strong associations and networks. They can provide bridges and links between municipal governments and the community, and offer new connections, information, research and resources in order to address needs and interests.

Community groups can also often access funding that is not available to the municipality. Another important asset that they can bring to a partnership is time: time to address healthy community priorities that might otherwise be overlooked due to human resource constraints or competing priorities.

The Ontario Professional Planners Institute speaks to the value of engagement and partnership with the community. "...goals can be better attained through the pooling of resources – time, staff, funding, skills,

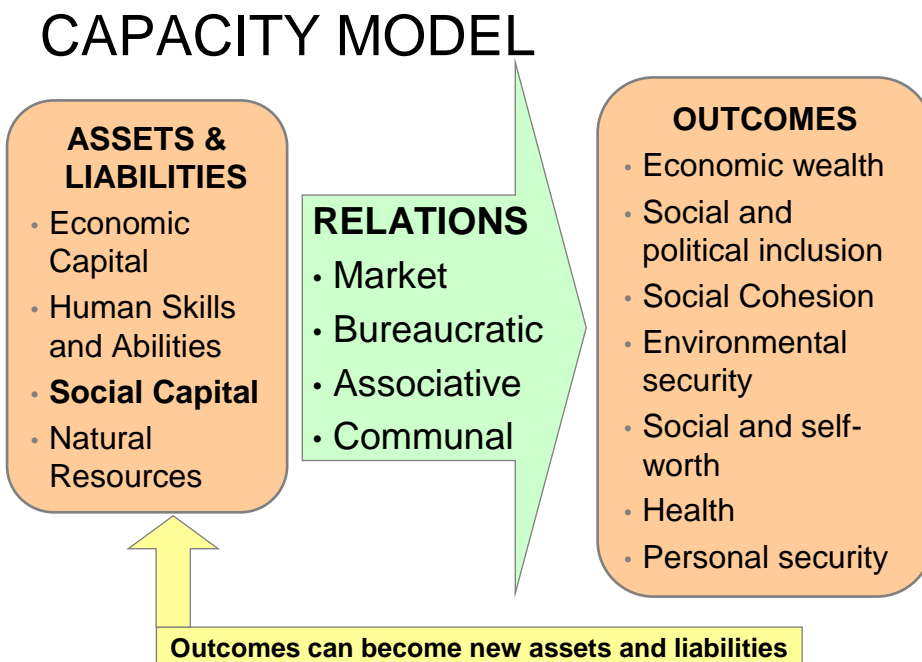
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<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Healthy Places Terminology.  
<http://www.cdc.gov/healthyplaces/terminology.htm>

knowledge and experience – and through the development of cooperating networks that can cross sectoral, geographic and political boundaries.”<sup>2</sup>

Community-municipal partnerships present opportunities for bringing new ideas and innovations to the table thereby building capacity. Brenda Herchmer notes, “Innovation is more likely to be about the relationships or networks that bring together already existing ideas or resources and applying them in different ways”.<sup>3</sup>

Through his work on the New Rural Economy (NRE) Project, Bill Reimer developed a capacity model that helps to explain how community assets and liabilities can be utilized through different types of social relations and produce outcomes that can become new assets or liabilities in a cycle of capacity building or decline<sup>4</sup>. How effective relations are between a community group and municipality will have a bearing on whether the outcomes of their interactions are positive or negative and can then be considered assets or liabilities in the future. Dysfunctional relationships could result in poor outcomes that do not serve to build capacity for a community to move forward or achieve its goals.



Source: [http://nre.concordia.ca/\\_ftp2004/Whathavewelearned/SocialCapitalFlyer02.pdf](http://nre.concordia.ca/_ftp2004/Whathavewelearned/SocialCapitalFlyer02.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> “Planning by Design: a healthy communities handbook”, Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing & Ontario Professional Planners Institute, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> “Government Innovation – it doesn’t have to be an oxymoron”, Herchmer, Brenda. Municipal World, July 2012, pp. 19 – 22.

<sup>4</sup> Reimer, B. (2006). The Rural Context of Community Development in Canada. Journal of Rural and Community Development, pp. 155-175.

Community groups come together out of an interest in a specific area, and this focus brings with it a level of expertise and passion. Working with these groups presents a golden opportunity for municipalities to capitalize on existing energy and resources, and build relationships to undertake new and innovative ways to create a healthy community. It is a win-win situation, as neither the municipality nor community groups can do this work alone.

### **Building a Partnership**

Community groups and municipalities have different norms and structures that influence how they operate. As mentioned earlier, community groups tend to have a number of networks and connections and are predominately organized based on associative norms, while municipalities are government institutions and are primarily organized based on bureaucratic norms. Partnership building is an opportunity for each party to develop an understanding of each other's culture; their roles, practices and capacities, in order to determine where responsibility for various aspects of the project should fall.

Community groups may seem informal, but they are often quite formalized, governed by boards of directors, by-laws and terms of reference. When entering into a partnership with an established community group, it is useful for a municipality to know who its members are, and what the governance structure is. It's also good to know a bit about the history of the group, its past and current work, successes and sources of funding. Similarly, an effective community group has done its homework and has a reasonable understanding of the basics of municipal processes, and the roles of council and staff. Research shows that community groups that are able to participate effectively in bureaucratic systems are more successful in their partnerships with municipalities<sup>5</sup>. Getting to know and understand one another is an important step in building trust in the partnership.

In any partnership, communication between all parties is critical. It is important that everyone is clear about roles, and in particular, about decision making. On-going sharing of information helps to ensure that there are no surprises along the way. A helpful strategy is for the municipality to assign a "point person", who could be either a member of staff or council, to be the liaison with the community group. The community group can similarly assign one member to be the contact with the municipality. This creates consistency, and helps to ensure that information flows efficiently between the partners.

A key aspect of communication is clarifying expectations. For example, it's important to be clear about such things as: Who is financially responsible? Where does the 'buck stop'? Who 'owns' the final product? Who makes decisions about what?

### **So what does a community-municipal partnership look like?**

#### Case Study: Minden Hills Active Transportation Planning

Minden Hills is a small rural municipality within Haliburton County in south central Ontario. The Communities in Action Committee (CIA) is a community group with representation from a variety of

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<sup>5</sup> Hall, K. (2010). The Roles, Practices and Capacities of Rural Municipalities and Communities to Engage in Community Development Planning. Master's Thesis, University of Guelph, ON.

sectors including public health, community economic development, community planning and trails development. The CIA plans and advocates for active transportation as a way to create a healthy, active community. Barbara Reid is the Reeve of Minden Hills, and recognizes the value of working with community groups, in particular the CIA. “Community groups are important to help the township see what could be possible. Council and staff are typically internally focused on day-to-day management of township tasks. We need people and groups from the community to identify community priorities and projects that otherwise might not capture our attention<sup>6</sup>.”

In 2007, the CIA applied for and received a provincial grant to begin active transportation research and planning in the village of Minden. Representatives of the CIA presented their proposed work to council, and invited a staff member to join the committee as a municipal liaison. This person served as an important communication link between the CIA and municipality, particularly around the municipality’s contribution to the project.

From the CIA’s perspective as a community group, what they had to offer was expertise, time, and funding. Ultimately, however, they recognized that future implementation of any recommendations they put forth would depend on investments from the municipality. They saw that it was important early in the process to engage with, inform, and encourage input from the municipality in order to ensure their commitment to future investment.

From Council’s perspective, they saw this work as an opportunity to build on some municipal priorities such as: drawing more people into the downtown to encourage economic activity, addressing the needs of an aging population, and attraction and retention of both tourists and residents.

Between 2007 and 2012, the CIA undertook community-based research to identify active transportation assets and challenges. Research included a community survey, observation counts, a charette with local students, focus groups and a community meeting. Along the way, they also brought in outside speakers to raise awareness of the value of creating walking and cycling friendly communities. Municipal councillors and staff attended some of these sessions. The CIA worked with a consultant to analyze the research findings and prepare an active transportation plan for the village of Minden. This report was presented to council, and has subsequently been used as a resource for a village development master plan that is currently underway. Members of the CIA were also invited to comment during the consultants’ presentation to Council on the draft village development plan, one of the goals of which was to improve the walkability of main street to increase economic activity. Finally, the CIA has been actively involved in policy development through the review and update of the Official Plan for the Township of Minden Hills.

### **Conversation Stoppers & How to Avoid Them**

Despite the benefits of community-municipal partnerships, there are often barriers that keep discussions between these two parties from moving forward, and prevent innovative ideas from taking root. Two main conversation stoppers come to mind:

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with Barb Reid, Reeve of the Township of Minden Hills, ON. July 4, 2012.

1. Viewing the community group as a special interest group, and as such, marginalizing their ideas

There is an on-going and complex relationship between citizens and their local governments. Citizens have rights and responsibilities with respect to setting the agenda and debating planning and development options that impact their health and the health of their community. One need only pick up a local newspaper in small town rural Canada to see that “citizens have become insistent in their desire to be part of the community-planning process<sup>7</sup>”.

2. Playing the funding card at the outset, e.g. “that’s a great idea, but we can’t afford a project like that”

While there are financial realities to any project, raising this as the first question puts up an immediate barrier that stifles further conversation as well as the opportunity to explore possibilities. No community vision was ever achieved by responding in this way. Money is not the only commodity required for a project. And when it comes to funding, there are a variety of opportunities, particularly when you engage in multi-sectoral partnerships.

To keep the conversation open, when a community group comes before Council, Councils can ask themselves:

- Is the idea in the public interest?
- How could it benefit a specific sector of the community, e.g. youth, people with disabilities, etc.?
- Does the idea support the vision and goals of the municipality?
- Is the community group providing reasonable evidence for what they are proposing?
- How can we say yes to this great idea?
- What role could we play in making this happen?

The benefits of community-municipal partnerships far outweigh the challenges if both parties are mindful of the relationship. Ultimately healthy communities are a product of planning for and by people. The ability of community groups to address healthy community imperatives depends on the quality of the relationship they have with their local government and vice versa. Working together takes time and commitment, but also builds capacity to accomplish great things in rural communities.

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<sup>7</sup> Hodge, G. and Gordon, D. (2008). *The Roots of Canadian Community Planning*. Chapter 1, *Planning Canadian Communities: An introduction to the principles, practices and participants*. Fifth edition, Toronto: Nelson.