

# REPURPOSING PUBLIC SPACE

**United Church Community Innovation Hubs  
Elgin Innovation Centre  
Sophiasburgh Community Kitchen**

## INTRODUCTION

New opportunities for entrepreneurship development present themselves in different forms throughout rural Ontario. One important opportunity lies in re-purposing existing space to support entrepreneurial endeavours. As local economies evolve and demographics change, new opportunities arise as different facilities in communities become vacant or under-used.

The types of spaces that might find new life through entrepreneurship development programming are diverse: arenas, libraries, churches, schools and business parks are all facilities commonly found in rural Ontario – all of which play important roles in the vitality and prosperity of the community. However, in each of these examples, the space alone is not enough – facilitating access to coaching services, connecting entrepreneurs with fellow entrepreneurs, funders or mentors, and creating a supportive and collaborative environment are all found (to varying degrees) in each of the case studies below.

There are three different examples explored below of communities coming together to re-purpose space and create a more favourable environment for entrepreneurship and innovation in rural Ontario businesses.

1. United Church Community Innovation Hubs
2. Elgin Innovation Centre
3. Sophiasburgh Community Kitchen

What is common among all of these case studies? In each case, members of the community have recognized an opportunity to do more with an existing space – to provide an important service and add value to existing entrepreneurship programming in the community. In each case, these initiatives have brought new life to existing community infrastructure.

## THE UNITED CHURCH – COMMUNITY INNOVATION HUBS

### **BACKGROUND**

The United Church has recently been reviewing their assets and activities across the country, looking for ways to continually grow alongside the communities they serve. There is greater emphasis now on exploring alternative strategies to support community growth: spiritually, socially and economically. The United Church is recognizing that meaningful community outreach and engagement is equally as important as the number of folks in attendance at church every Sunday.

Central to re-thinking the role churches play in a community is the examination of their use of space (or often lack thereof). In stepping back and assessing the physical assets of the church, it has been recognized that many facilities are not being used to their full potential. While churches remain important to weekly gatherings around prayer and worship, much of the week they also sit empty.

### **HOW CAN CHURCHES SERVE THEIR COMMUNITIES IN NEW AND INNOVATIVE WAYS?**

The United Church has developed the Community Innovation Hub as a model for re-purposing existing space, an idea that both community and church can come together around. The concept of a Community Innovation Hub is to provide space and programming to local entrepreneurs looking to create businesses that serve social and spiritual goals in the community and beyond. The Community Innovation Hub takes advantage of underutilized or vacant infrastructure and assets, as well as the expertise and community networks surrounding this already-central institution, to provide an environment designed to help entrepreneurs prosper.

### **MUTUAL INTERESTS BETWEEN COMMUNITY AND CHURCH**

It is important to note – a Community Innovation Hub could be either a church or community-driven initiative. The exciting part of this model for entrepreneurship development is that both community and church have mutual interests in collaborating on such a project.

Economic development organizations in rural communities are commonly seeking new and creative ways to offer entrepreneurship programming, often operating within limited budgets. Strengthening relationships with the church and its social networks through a Community Innovation Hub can be a relatively low-cost, high-impact strategy to address entrepreneurship development.

Churches can support communities and economic developers through:

- **Provision of physical space**
- **Programming resources**
- **Funding for entrepreneurs (will vary by church)**
- **Social capital – access to social and professional networks throughout the community**

As a church looking to further its reach in spiritual and social development, engaging the community can help strengthen the offering for programming and networking. As such, the church has much to be gained from strengthening its connections with community.

Communities can support Community Innovation Hubs through:

- **Connections with regional organizations (Community Futures, SBEC, Municipal Economic Development, Business Improvement Associations, volunteer associations)**
- **Municipal supports or partnerships (municipal council or staff)**
- **Support or expertise from local business community**
- **Community residents (volunteers, mentors, teachers)**

## **COMPONENTS OF A COMMUNITY INNOVATION HUB**

There are many different directions that the Community Innovation Hub could take, depending on the needs in the community and the energy among community leaders and volunteers for the different possibilities. The most important part in this model is to engage the community, start a conversation, and allow the process to unfold naturally.

Community Innovation Hubs might include:

- **Makerspace:** provide equipment, supplies and spaces for small businesses, contractors and hobbyists to learn and apply skills.
- **Co-working space:** provide entrepreneurs with the opportunity to work alongside other like-minded business people.
- **Monthly workshops:** recently retired or young professionals living in the community have a wealth of business experience they can share with social enterprises, nonprofits and social innovators.

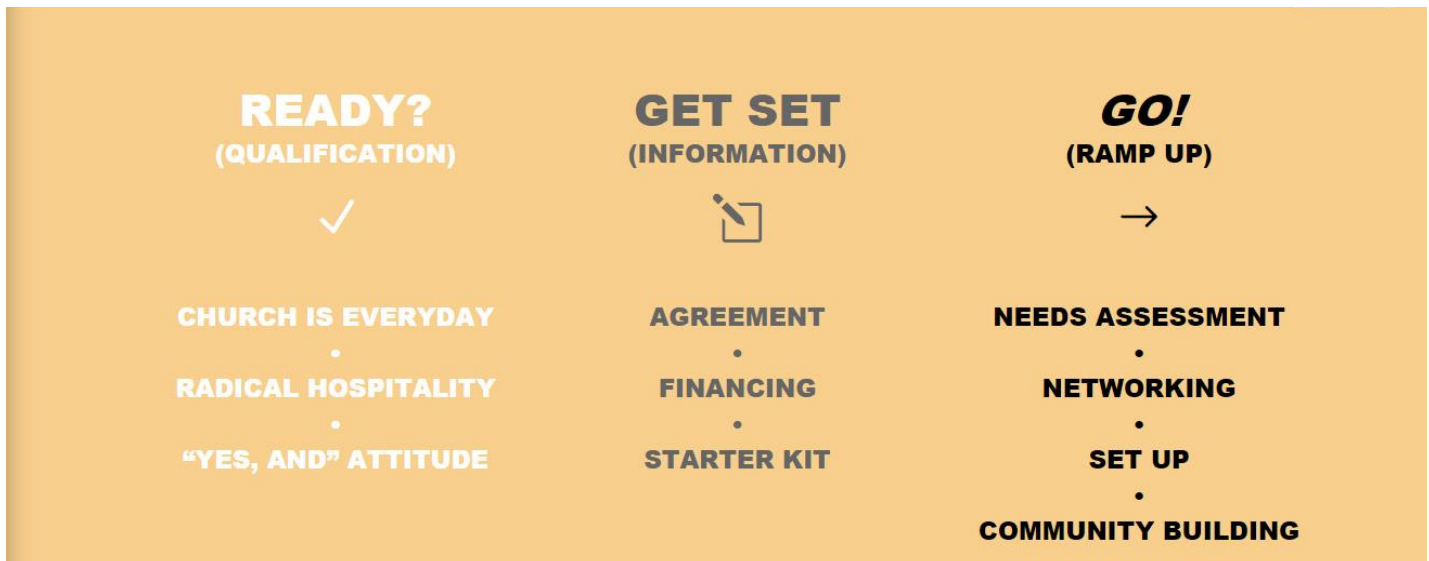
- Peer-to-peer coaching and mentoring: Peers come together, each bringing a problem, and the whole community works to help address those challenges and find resources for each other. This also creates accountability: “positive peer pressure” for all participants to meet their goals for their next gathering.
- Community Innovation Challenge: This is a design jam where people from the community from all sectors are welcomed into the Hub to discuss community problems to see how they might be able to address some/one of them collectively.

A video of a final pitch from a Community Innovation Challenge can be found here. This particular pitch addresses the fact that only 10% of food consumed in Newfoundland is farmed in Newfoundland. This pitch proposes using recycled shipping containers to create growing space in partnership with community partners.

## HOW TO GET STARTED

If either a church or a community is looking to develop a Community Innovation Hub, the United Church has prepared a number of resources to help get the ball rolling.

Each of the steps outlined in the image have additional resources linked to them on the Community Innovation Hub website.



Working through these steps will ensure that:

1. This is the right fit for your church and community.
2. You have the necessary administrative components lined up.
3. You have engaged the right partners and let the group create the vision.

When your community is ready and you're set to put everything into motion, the Starter Kit is an important resource. This Kit outlines the various moving parts as your Community Innovation Hub gets going. While every community is different, the Starter Kit gives an overview of the different stages and things to expect.

### **INFORMATION AND RESOURCES**

There are a number of additional resources that have been developed by the United Church to help your Community Innovation Hub thrive. These additional resources are available on request, and include:

- Starter Kit
- Community Round Table Toolkit
- Social Innovation Jams
- Turnkey Kits (Agrihoods, Coworking Space, and Makerspaces)

### **LESSONS LEARNED**

The most important lessons to be derived from the experience of the United Church is to:

1) engage your community from the beginning, and

2) do not over plan your Community Hub. As your Hub comes together, new energy and new ideas will emerge. The final direction may be quite different than what was originally planned. It may even be better than expected. Build in flexibility to allow your Hub to follow the direction the community needs it to go.

The work of United Church shows us that a physical space is only the beginning – the type of programming and community connections that are created in and around this space can create the opportunities for entrepreneurship development. The same resources (or principles found therein) that the United Church have curated to support their various congregations, can be used in creative ways in facilities throughout rural Ontario: arenas, schools, agricultural societies, theatres, libraries, legions and more.

### ELGIN INNOVATION CENTRE

#### BACKGROUND

The Elgin Innovation Centre (EIC) is a successful business as well as a creative solution to a major plant closure in the small rural community of Aylmer, Ontario – now home to 25 thriving businesses.

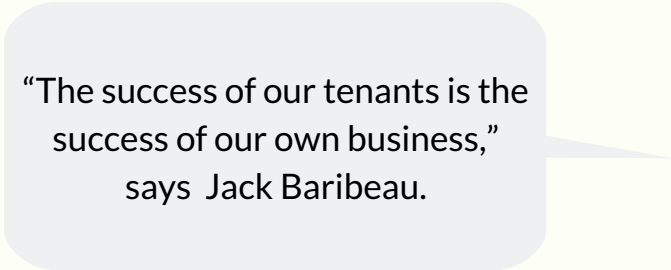
The previous owners of the facility that now houses the Elgin Innovation Centre, Imperial Tobacco, had been an anchor employer in the region for many decades. When they chose to relocate their operations, 400-500 jobs were lost and the building sat virtually empty. Jack Baribeau, a local entrepreneur and owner of Baribeau Construction saw opportunity in the facility as he drove past it each week taking his kids to hockey. It seemed unlikely that another single user would re-locate to Aylmer and take over the million-square-foot complex. Baribeau understood that if the building wasn't revitalized and re-purposed, there was a high risk of it being demolished – significantly extending the recovery period for the community and the local economy.

The idea of resurrecting the former tobacco plant into something new was a risky business proposition for Baribeau, his family and Baribeau Construction, but an important endeavour both personally and professionally. Baribeau has called this project an act of faith – an unproven idea to create a sustainable business as a landlord, while bringing back jobs and investment to the community.

Baribeau eventually recruited a number of business associates and investors and put forward a proposal to purchase the existing facility from Imperial Tobacco. When they had secured a deal, they began work on retrofitting the facility.

#### EIC IN OPERATION

The basic idea was to break the existing facility into malleable, versatile sections that might attract a higher quantity of smaller businesses.



“The success of our tenants is the success of our own business,”  
says Jack Baribeau.

From day one, the EIC has been designed to nurture the success of prospective entrepreneurs and the businesses who call it home. It has been a conscious and strategic decision to be co-operative landlords - to create a supportive environment for the entrepreneurs and business owners who will in-turn create jobs for the region. Being co-operative landlords means understanding not all business situations are predictable.

When items come up that create an unforeseen challenge for business owners, the EIC team are open and willing to meet with them to come up with a creative solution that works for everyone.

As a co-operative landlord, the EIC assists businesses to succeed in a number of ways:

1. Providing experience in the design, process layout and build outs of many different business operations, creating efficient solutions for new tenants.
2. Construction experience to help connect business owners with various experienced trades and suppliers.
3. Offering the service to upgrade their space and assist in the costs of these upgrades.
4. On-site business coaching and mentorship

### *Flex Space*

In the spirit of being supportive landlords, the EIC strategically created space that was larger than the business owners felt they needed and provided a vision for expansion. Monthly “flex-space” is offered to businesses during busy times, with the ability to scale back during slower times. This moveable flex-space can be measured each month and billed according to each tenant, meaning they can expand and contract operations as needed. The ability to expand permanently has also been valuable for the businesses in the EIC. One business who began with approximately 20,000 square feet doubled their footprint within their first year of operation, and today occupies close to 180,000 square feet.

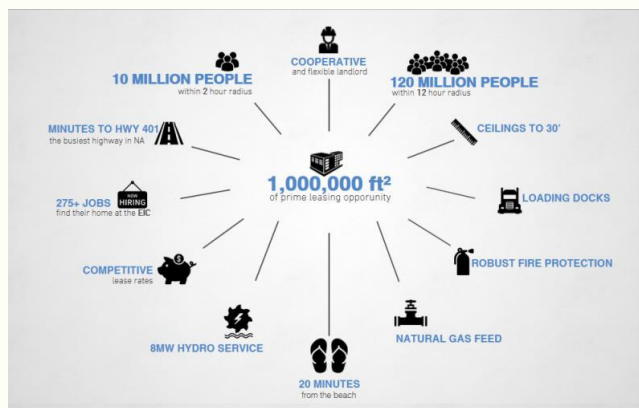
### *Business Coaching*

Many of the businesses that have taken up shop in the EIC have been in need of mentorship and business and planning support. In response, the EIC has developed creative ways of assisting with government regulations, health and safety plans, business plan development, bank financing and government grant applications as part of the package. While this was not a sustainable task for the ownership team to maintain themselves, over time, they were able to provide space for the local CFDC, the Elgin Business Resource Centre to set up shop inside the EIC, where they can now provide business coaching and support to EIC tenants.



### *Additional Amenities*

The Elgin Innovation Centre is an industrial facility with a wealth of amenities that new and emerging businesses may not always have access to. The EIC is located close to major markets in Ontario and the US as well as highway 401. The EIC offers competitive lease rates, 8 MW hydro service, natural gas feed, fire protection, variable ceiling height space up to 30' and loading docks.



### *Businesses in the EIC*

There are currently 25 businesses that employ close to 400 people, and the EIC now sits at only 50% of its capacity. As many of the EIC businesses are growing, there is optimism that many more jobs will be created in the years to come.

The types of permitted businesses that EIC is zoned for fall under Heavy Industrial (M2) zoning. The current businesses that call EIC home are varied, including machining shops, food processing facilities, steel fabrication, welding, IT, counselling and mediation, and seasonal automotive storage.

One unintended outcome has been the culture of collaboration that has emerged among the businesses in the EIC. In one instance there are two direct competitors – neighbours in the facility – that share equipment when something breaks down. Further, as new businesses arrive, many of the fellow tenants have been able to support these new businesses with creating and installing the technology they need to get up and running.

### *Planet Shrimp*

One business that stands out in the EIC is Planet Shrimp, a shrimp-growing facility that uses a recirculating aquaculture system. This facility grows indoor shrimp using proprietary designed systems to regulate a number of environmental variables, including, but not limited to, temperature, humidity and mineral nutrients in the water. Further, this fully enclosed system uses no chemicals, antibiotics, pesticides or hormones. From an innovative technological perspective, this business is a true leader, garnering the attention of countries around the world. Planet Shrimp has had the opportunity to grow and emerge as a leader in Canadian food production a result of the unique space provided by the EIC and their co-operative landlord philosophy.

### **CONCLUSION**

The Elgin Innovation Centre, yet another example of the renaissance of Ontario's Tobacco belt, demonstrates the creativity and ingenuity that exists in rural Ontario. Where there was once uncertainty there is now opportunity – opportunity for the current tenants and future aspiring entrepreneurs in the Aylmer region and beyond.

While the Elgin Innovation Centre was a large and risky undertaking, it shows the kind of creative problem solving that can overcome hardship. This case study illustrates the opportunity for the private sector to have a hand in strengthening the economic vitality of rural Ontario, and the great synergies for entrepreneurship development that can be created in engaging with community service providers. For the Elgin Innovation Centre, creating new opportunities for entrepreneurship through the re-purposing of existing space is not only beneficial to new entrepreneurs, but to the economic and social well-being of the whole community.

### Sophiasburgh Central School Community Kitchen

#### BACKGROUND

A modest small-town school, reminiscent of most any school throughout rural Ontario, has been saved from a looming shutdown and has created new opportunities for entrepreneurship programming, rooted in the local agriculture and food economy.



It has been called “sheer will, determination and positive community spirit” contributing to the preservation of Sophiasburgh Central School in Prince Edward County. Faced with looming consolidation, residents from the small-town communities of Demorestville, Northport, Big Island, Fish Lake, Bethel Street, Crofton, Green Point and Woodville all came together searching for a creative solution to help keep the school open and running. The basic question the group discussed was how to turn excess space in a Centennial-era school into a more widely utilized and in-demand community gathering space.

An important part of the planning process for this initiative was identifying a defining feature of the local economy that could be leveraged in a shared-use space. In Prince Edward County, agriculture has long been an important economic driver. More recently, food preparation and gastronomy has become a staple of the local tourism offering. In community round table discussions the idea for commercial kitchen space was raised and explored. Local businesses like Pyramid Ferments and Food To Share helped identify the business case for a shared commercial kitchen space.



This model of entrepreneurship programming through a shared community space is replicable across the province, where communities can effectively identify and build on an existing asset or strength in their local economy – which won't always be agriculture and food production. If forestry is an important part of the local economy, a lumber and carpentry hub may be a more natural outgrowth for a shared community space.

### **STATUS OF THE SCHOOL**

The whole project has been two years in the making, beginning with a Parent Action Committee who originally formed to keep the school's doors open. Throughout these two years there has been many factors needed to bring this project to fruition, including: active lobbying, fundraising, architectural designing, business planning, program planning and securing insurance.

In September 2018, after demonstrating financial viability, a five-year lease was signed between the federally incorporated not-for-profit Prince Edward County Food Hub (PECFH) and the Prince Edward District School Board (HPEDSB). The PECFH pays the school board on an annual basis enough to cover 85-90% of physical operating costs, not including teachers' salaries. This lease has ensured the school will stay active, and that the food hub can co-exist in a 5,800 square foot portion of the west wing of the school, which includes five classrooms and some storage space.

Following years of planning and an intensive nine-month fundraising campaign, with over \$800,000 raised in community donations from across the County, the PECFH has now begun work on renovations to bring the commercial kitchen into fruition.

Sophiasburgh councillor, Bill Roberts, called this a great example of what a vibrant community partnership can do:

**“We are developing a model for rural education and new ways of making use of global school resources for the benefit of the community, community health and educational access for our wonderful students,” Roberts said. “And we are developing a unique made-in-the-County solution with the County Food Hub.”**

## WHAT WILL BE AVAILABLE

The PECFH commercial kitchen is designed to support innovation, entrepreneurship, education and training for the burgeoning local food industry and local students. It includes:

- Shared use commercial kitchen for rental and/or use by businesses and community groups
- Food incubator for agricultural operations
- Business support services for users and food education and cooking classes available to community members.

In the short term, local residents, businesses and not-for-profit organizations will all be able to rent space in the certified commercial kitchen, at a reasonable cost. In the longer-term, incubation space will be leased to qualified local or regional food producers to help them scale up operations and grow their businesses outside of the County. The first tenant of the facility will be Food To Share, a not-for-profit organization devoted to increasing access to healthy, fresh and locally grown food to regional food banks. Food To Share collects food grown by local farmers and gardeners and prepares and processes them in a number of kitchen spaces throughout the region. The PECFH will be the new home for Food To Share.

PECFH is partnering with the local school board and the local Health Unit to design and deliver enhanced, curriculum-approved learning opportunities around food literacy, food preparation and cultivation as well as food entrepreneurship. PECFH is also in conversations with the Ontario Agri-Food Venture Centre in Northumberland County, to incorporate their experience in food entrepreneurship, value-added processing and support programming.

Community connected food literacy curriculum is another important outgrowth from the commercial kitchen space. Small-batch food production is a key tenant in Prince Edward County's emerging gastro-economy and as culinary skills and concepts become a stronger part of a Sophiasburgh Central School's curriculum there is a newfound opportunity to provide skills training to students that may open the door to career opportunities close to home. Connecting students with local career opportunities is an ongoing challenge all rural communities face as youth out-migration from rural areas continues to create challenges for workforce development.

## CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS (TO DATE)

### *IDENTIFYING MUTUAL INTERESTS*

From the beginning, the whole community came together around saving the school, so there was already a unifying goal in the minds' of residents. The positivity around that idea and the collective energies that were invested has created something more concrete.

**“It starts ticking off enough boxes that people get excited about the idea”, says Mike Farrell, co-chair of the Prince Edward County Food Hub.**

Food is an idea that most everyone can relate to, particularly in the Prince Edward County region with a longstanding agriculture community and a burgeoning gastronomy economy. A food hub facility that facilitates access to food, food literacy, job training and entrepreneurship development was a compelling idea for a community to rally behind.

### *COMMUNITY CHAMPIONS*

There were a number community champions crucial to the success of this initiative. All of the community champions brought different expertise to the project. These community champions include:

- Parent Action Committee
- Marketing and Communications Consultant
- Local Elected Leadership
- The Prince Edward County Food Hub (PECFH)
- Hastings and Prince Edward District School Board (HPEDSB)

In a project like this, a spokesperson with an understanding of how to effectively market and pitch an idea to prospective partners, donors and community leaders was crucially important. The spokesperson helps unite the myriad of different ideas and interests in the community. Mike Farrell, co-chair of the Prince Edward County Food Hub took on this role, using his experience in marketing and public speaking to bring ideas to life.

Working with the school board is also particularly important as their interests are fully intertwined with the interests of the community in a project like this. For many involved in community development work, a school board's systems and structures can be unfamiliar territory. It has been important for this project's success to build new relationships and work alongside trustees, teachers and principals throughout, to ensure the project was moving forward in the best interests of both sides.

### *BUILDING COMMUNITY SUPPORT IN FUNDRAISING*

Initial funding (close to one third) came from a combination of sources including Prince Edward County, an OMAFRA Rural Economic Development (RED) grant and the local Community Futures Development Corporation. The whole project required close to \$800,000 in cash and in-kind funding to come to fruition – much of that was support in-kind. The remaining two thirds of funding came from community fundraising, whether it was a \$50 cheque from a local resident or a local business offering in-kind construction work. In generating this community support, it was crucial to share the message of mutual benefits, so the organizing committee made it a news story. They hosted town halls to get input from community members and invited local politicians and the local media. In the end, it was clear to all that keeping the school open was good for the economy and the whole community.

### **CONCLUSION**

While the Sophiasburgh Central School Community Kitchen project is still in progress, it shows the tremendous opportunity that exists when a group of community members come together to work towards a singular goal. This project shows the potential for community development projects to serve a breadth of important community needs if enough creative thinkers take time to sit around a table and collaborate. By identifying mutual interests among a variety of stakeholders, this initiative has managed to save one community asset while creating another. Moving forward, this community will have the opportunity to further strengthen the local gastro-economy through the energies of agricultural entrepreneurs, and will be keeping their youth attending school close to home.