



Measuring  
Rural Community  
Vitality



# BALDWIN TOWNSHIP LET'S TALK INITIATIVE

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RURAL ONTARIO  
INSTITUTE

# I INTRODUCTION

Lack of citizen engagement is a significant issue for the vitality of northern Ontario rural communities. In response to this, the LaCloche Foothills Municipal Association (LFMA) partnered with **Northern Policy Institute (NPI)** and the **Rural Ontario Institute (ROI)**, to launch the “Let’s Talk” initiative. This project originally sought to understand and begin to reverse this disengagement in the LaCloche Foothills, an area located in the Sudbury District (My Momentum Strategies Inc., 2016). To do so, the project partners consulted residents in the LaCloche Foothills area with a focus on the following four municipalities: **Township of Baldwin**, **Town of Espanola**, **Township of Nairn & Hyman** and the **Township of Sables-Spanish Rivers**. ROI supported the project through its **Measuring Rural Community Vitality initiative** with a Memorandum of Understanding with the Township of Baldwin.

# I NEEDS ADDRESSED

The level of resident participation in community life is directly proportional to community vitality and indirectly to growth. Resident disengagement has almost become the norm in most small municipalities in Ontario. Moreover, this is the experience in rural communities. Community members are needed in their municipality’s civic processes. So, it is imperative that municipal leaders understand how to engage their citizenry. Elected officials are required to “consult” with the electorate on services, land-use planning matters, asset management as well as long-term strategic community planning. They rely on residents to volunteer their time on committees or at events within the community. Communities need engaged citizens to run for Council positions in municipal elections.

In the LaCloche Foothills area, disengagement has been attributed in part to perceived divisions between residents and their elected officials, working outside of the community they reside in, as well as to low population density over wide geographic areas.

This project also recognized the challenge of engaging marginalized communities. It acknowledged that for everyone their basic needs are what is most important to them. Until basic needs are met, it is unlikely they will engage with what the municipality is doing. So for those living in poverty or having limited fixed income, they are more concerned with daily life and might only become involved if they see something as urgent.

This project’s core belief is that “municipal governments need to find new and better ways to involve citizens in decisions that shape their communities. It’s about local people working together, making a difference, and building communities they are proud to live in” (My Momentum Strategies Inc., 2016)

The intended benefit of the “Let’s Talk” project was to produce a broadened understanding of disengagement in the rural context, establish a qualitative and quantitative benchmark defining current levels of engagement, and create a tool for sustaining municipalities through community engagement. While this project initiated important discussions around disengagement broadening the understanding of the issue, the project goals and deliverables shifted from having benchmarks and a tool to solely engaging in conversations about civic engagement as it was clear that this project was large in scale and needed to be phased to achieve maximum results.

## | SOLUTIONS PROPOSED

“Let’s Talk” was about opening and nurturing conversations in four municipalities in the LaCloche Foothills area. Project partners hired a consultant from My Momentum Strategies (MMS) Inc., to work alongside the Secretary Treasurer of the LFMA who was also a Township of Baldwin staff member serving as the project lead. The project’s initial goal was to collect as much information as possible through one-on-one conversations at places of ‘natural gathering’ (Lovelace, 2016). This was recognized as the best approach to engage with the public in rural communities. Although a mixed research method approach including focus groups was preferred, budget and time considerations limited data collection to surveys. The survey’s 40 questions explored demographic factors and residents’ feelings towards their community (My Momentum Strategies Inc., 2016). Residents were also asked about their interest and level of activity in municipal processes, elections and volunteering.

A **Survey Monkey** questionnaire was developed and made available to residents from October 2016 – December 2016 online. A paper copy was available at municipal offices. The project lead disseminated surveys through social media sites, mailing lists and in-person. Of these methods, emailed surveys were the most effective in engaging community members with 79.5% of surveys completed this way (Ibid). In total, there were 102 formal responses received out of an approximate potential of 1,000 participants in the four municipalities (Ibid). A further number of residents who were unwilling to complete the survey discussed the questions and issues involved with the project lead. The project lead also noted the survey in its final form was more likely to garner input from those who identified themselves as engaged. The results from this Phase 1 consultation will be available in the “Let’s Talk: A Community Engagement Study in the La Cloche Foothills” report not yet released (Lovelace, 2016).

The LaCloche Foothills Municipal Association (LFMA) is an independent association of municipalities that work together to achieve shared goals and meet common challenges in the LaCloche Region.

The Northern Policy Institute is Northern Ontario’s independent think tank that performs research, collects and disseminates evidence, and identifies policy opportunities to support the growth of sustainable Northern Ontario communities. Their operations are located in Thunder Bay, Sault Ste. Marie and Sudbury to enhance Northern Ontario’s capacity to take the lead position on socio-economic policy that impacts Northern Ontario and Canada as a whole (Northern Policy Institute, 2017).

## LACLOCHE FOOTHILLS

The LaCloche Foothills area is comprised of four very vibrant communities along the Trans-Canada Highway (Highway 17) — each led by engaged municipal leaders working hard to ensure residents and visitors experience the best that the region has to offer (LaCloche Foothills/North Channel Region Tourism Guide & Business Directory 2012–2014; Sudbury & District Health Unit, 2017).

### Township of Baldwin

The Township of Baldwin is a quiet bedroom community, with no heavy industry within its boundaries. It is situated on Highway 17 along the north and south side taking in the Highway 6 junction (Corporation of the Township of Baldwin, 2014; LaCloche Foothills/North Channel Region Tourism Guide & Business Directory 2012–2014)

### Town of Espanola

The Town of Espanola has the largest population out of the four municipalities. It is located one kilometre south of the junction of Highway 17 and Highway 6, and 45 minutes from the City of Greater Sudbury. Espanola is a dynamic northern community that serves as a centre for business, retail, medical, government, transportation and distribution for the LaCloche/Manitoulin area (Corporation of the Town of Espanola, 2017).

### Township of Nairn & Hyman

The Township of Nairn and Hyman is situated on the east end of the LaCloche Foothills area on Highway 17 and abuts the City of Greater Sudbury.

Nairn Centre is the only urban settlement area of an otherwise rural township area. Outside of this area, the nearest urban centre is the City of Sudbury located approximately 40 minutes west (LaCloche Foothills/North Channel Region Tourism Guide & Business Directory 2012–2014).

### Township of Sables-Spanish Rivers

The Township of Sables-Spanish River is the largest in hectares out of the four municipalities. It is a vibrant and friendly community that takes advantage of its location on Highway 17 and the North Channel of Lake Huron.

The river has played an important and continuous role in the local economy from the days of the fur trade to date as a worthwhile tourist destination (LaCloche Foothills/North Channel Region Tourism Guide & Business Directory 2012–2014).

## Timeline

This project began in January 2016. The nature of the project and the collaboration between partners allowed for this project's workplan to be followed by action items instead of deadlines. Timelines required by project funders were needed for administrative funding purposes but were seen as restrictive in capturing the successes of the project in a larger, more sustainable and organic scheme. The workplan helped partners accomplish milestones, while recognizing the need for fluidity and flexibility. The workplan was modified mid-project to focus on realistic and attainable objectives. The "Let's Talk: A Community Engagement Study in the La Cloche Foothills" is seen as a starting point for a more comprehensive consultation to increase understanding of disengagement in the rural context, establish a qualitative and quantitative benchmark defining current levels of engagement, and create a tool for sustaining municipalities through community engagement.

Project partners adjusted their timelines to accommodate both the project lead's departure from the Township of Baldwin and internal staff changes at NPI. Additional time was required to train replacement staff and to shore up interest and enthusiasm for the project.

Project milestones include:

### February 2016

Peggy Lovelace Secretary/Treasurer of the LaCloche Foothills Municipal Association as well as CAO/Clerk-Treasurer of the Township of Baldwin named project lead. Dr. Mike Commito, Senior Policy Analyst at NPI named NPI project representative.

### March 2016

My Momentum Strategies (MMS) Inc., a third-party organization was contracted by the LaCloche Foothills Municipal Association to develop the survey, collect and analyze the responses.

### May 2016

Rural Ontario Institute and Northern Policy Institute hosted project Kick-Off Meeting.

### Summer 2016

Partner meetings to develop consultation strategies and research questions.

### October – December 2016

Surveys made available to residents in the four municipalities.

### June – August 2017

Report writing and completion of Phase 1.

### October 2017

Report findings shared with the LaCloche Foothills Municipal Association and other project partners.

## Budget

The Northern Policy Institute supported the project financially with a contribution of \$11,000 plus staff time and resources for data analysis and collection. ROI complemented this with an additional \$4,000, resulting in a \$15,000 budget. This partnership was intended to build broader provincial awareness of northern communities and to support a locally driven project designed to strengthen a northern community. NPI also offered resources for data analysis and collection, but these were not accessed. Communication assistance was also supplied as needed during the project launch.

The funds provided by ROI and the NPI allowed the project lead to hire a consultant to begin the community consultation. The consultant worked with the project lead in developing the research questions, methodology and in collecting data. The project lead paid for many additional expenses from her personal resources.

## | COMMUNITY ASSETS

While this project aimed to understand roots of civic disengagement, it also became apparent that leadership disengagement was a roadblock for the project achieving its desired results. The main asset identified in this project was the project lead's commitment and passion for the work. Peggy Lovelace was the former CAO (and only full-time administrative staff) at the Municipality of Baldwin and Secretary/Treasurer of the LFMA when this project was submitted. She took on this project on a volunteer basis driven by her deep belief that civic engagement is key for the vitality and sustainability of northern rural communities. She is no longer with Baldwin Township and is continuing work on this project as time allows.

Project partners struggled to maximize the impact of their collaboration. Project outcomes resulted in large measure from the work and determination of the project lead. These factors limited the project's impact and scope, and were partly attributed to the embryonic nature of partnerships between organizations in the community. Future connections with student councils, seniors' groups, church groups and other community groups were noted as potential assets for future consultations.

# | RESULTS

The project set out to increase understanding as to the roots of civic disengagement. It also intended to make a difference in the LaCloche Foothills area by decreasing apathy and increasing engagement.

Significant limitations got in the way of these goals. This project was a big task for one person to lead with minimal additional support, and there was little organizational experience in community engagement. From the project lead's perspective, municipalities had been doing the bare minimum to engage citizens and expected citizens to come to them. Municipal staff who are few in number and overworked were lukewarm in their support. Intentions to do wide outreach and engage in meaningful conversations with people in all four municipalities were hindered by limited internal capacity.

While the project developed differently than originally intended, it became apparent that it was a years-long endeavour. The project lead modified the workplan and goals accordingly by breaking down this project into phases. During the initial timeframe, Phase 1 of 2 "Let's Talk" initiatives were undertaken. Phase 1 was successful in that it started conversations and built capacity for future work. The project lead reflected on the many conversations she had with community members who came to the municipal office, sparking interest and acknowledgement of the need to be involved.

An unintended result of this consultation was that more people started attending council meetings in Baldwin Township. While there is more work to be done to address roots of disengagement, the project played a role in raising awareness and educating people on the importance of engagement. People have become more aware of their role within civic processes and have a stronger desire to be involved. On a political level, some municipal departments have increased their appreciation and understanding of a bigger focus on engagement and in a few cases have hired staff to facilitate community engagement.

Phase 2 of "Let's Talk" is projected to have a broader impact, hopefully building on Phase 1 results. Phase 2 will look at engaging a larger catchment area, training more interviewers, and expanding consultation methods beyond social media outreach. In order to accomplish these goals, more council funding and support will be required for advertisement and to ensure sustainability.

In summary, the project partners worked as intended in terms of identifying the nature and scope of their communities' challenges ahead. Both learned from and continue to value their experience. The Project Lead noted with appreciation how NPI staff reviewed the survey and expressed hope that NPI will continue as a partner in the project's next phase. NPI describes themselves as having benefited from the connections they made with ROI, Baldwin Township staff, and other community members. They have maintained momentum with these connections by working on a subsequent project with ROI. The NPI is also in contact with community members who continue to share ideas and feedback as part of their community engagement and research agenda-setting processes. NPI describes their experience as instructive as to how to involve themselves more deeply in projects they sponsor.

# LESSONS LEARNED & ADVICE TO OTHERS

Project leaders and partners learned many lessons as they calibrated their collaborative efforts and adjusted their initial goals. These included:

- Engage in a disciplined analysis of community needs, ensuring project goals, definitions and scope address these needs in robust and realistic ways.
- Review internal capacity and buy-in before developing the workplan.
- Cultivate clear and regular communication at multiple levels between partners. This is especially important in small communities and organizations where staff changes can have massive impact.
- Ensure active participation by all partners involved, especially when partners' passion and commitment, knowledge and experience vary significantly. This changes the dynamic of the partnership and sustainability of the work for all organizations involved.
- Recognize that the work of understanding and addressing disengagement is inherently difficult. Residents and staff members can be reluctant to participate and support efforts, especially in the beginning before momentum is established.
- Acknowledge the role and importance of a project lead's commitment and passion, especially when faced with significantly limited project resources and community support.
- Anticipate more work than expected, especially at the beginning of a project. Realize that workplans need to be flexible and respond to realities faced where possible.
- Ensure project strategies are aligned with lived realities and needs of target populations.
- Ensure skills and knowledge are transferred vertically and horizontally to maintain capacity and institutional memory. When possible, assign a secondary project contact or lead to sustain the endeavour in the event of staff change or project disruption.
- Cultivate support and buy-in from council to promote sustainability.
- Continue support and funding for further projects in northern communities.
- Acknowledge importance of attempting to develop partnerships to address difficult realities. Learning, capacity building and progress are hard won and worth the effort.

## CONCLUSION

"Let's Talk" aimed to tackle disengagement, a difficult and pressing issue in rural communities. Final results reflect a modified workplan with reduced project scope to conform to a one-year funding window. The project was successful in sparking interest and conversations around civic engagement, offering a learning opportunity for all involved. Partners are passionate to continue work in rural northern communities and will use this challenging and fruitful experience to shape future projects.

# | CHECKLIST

## Key Ingredients for Success

Considering doing a similar project in your community?

It may work well if your county/organization...

- is able to provide staff support (ex. Minimum 1 paid staff per agency to manage project, 2 is ideal).
- is willing to spend time transferring knowledge and skills across the organization and partnerships.
- has internal capacity to lead, work with other partners, and train additional support (ex. Interviewers).
- is able to reach out to a large catchment area and have diverse promotion strategies.
- is willing to invest in advertisement and awareness building to develop strong community engagement.
- is committed to active and continued engagement efforts in the community.

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The Rural Ontario Institute provided information gathered and summarized by Dr Suzanne Ainley of Ainley Consulting to Platinum Leadership to describe the community projects. All such descriptions have been reviewed and approved by the relevant community contacts.

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