Measuring
Rural Community
Vitality

RURAL CASE STUDIES OF COMMUNITY IMPACT

RURAL ONTARIO
INSTITUTE

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| TABLE OF CONTENTS

APPENDICES

APPENDICES

| INTRODUCTION

The Rural Ontario Institute (ROI) launched the Measuring Rural Community Vitality (MRCV) initiative in 2015 with financial sponsorship from the Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs. The MRCV is a three-year applied research and analysis initiative focused on civic engagement, social capital and community well-being. Through this initiative, ROI seeks to assist rural stakeholders through information sharing, documenting practitioner insights and lessons learned, and facilitating peer exchange of emerging practices.

This report is a product of MRCV's focus on deepening understanding of emerging practices to quantify rural community well-being. As part of this component of the MRCV initiative, 30 rural communities expressed interest in working together to share experiences and learning in the area of measuring hard-to-measure outcomes. Eight of these communities were selected to collaborate with ROI by evaluating a community project in 2016. The eight communities selected across Ontario were: Baldwin, Centre Wellington, Dufferin County, Huron County, Northern Bruce Peninsula, Northumberland County, Oxford County and West Carleton. These eight communities received ROI support in the form of ongoing collaboration and knowledge transfer along with a $15,000 grant for consulting services in support of their project. The community projects were divided in two groups: rural case studies and demonstration projects.

The **Rural Case Studies of Social Return on Investment and Community Impact** projects focused on a community project addressing a specific issue of community vitality. They sought to collect and share best practices regarding measurement of community impact among rural municipal stakeholders.

The 5 case study communities were:

- **Baldwin Township:** Let's Talk
- **Huron County:** Huron Healthy Rural Policy Lens
- **Northern Bruce Peninsula:** Schools as Anchors for Rural Community Vitality
- **Northumberland County:** Specialized Rural Transportation Pilot
- **West Carleton:** Aging in Rural Community

The **Demonstration Projects** involved rural communities using well-being indicators, including the **Canadian Index of Wellbeing** and Community Foundation **Vital Signs** reports. These projects used these frameworks as lenses for measuring and evaluating rural community wellbeing.

The 3 demonstration project communities were:

- **Centre Wellington:** Vital Signs Community Well-Being Assessment
- **Dufferin County – Headwaters:** 2015 Community Well-Being Refresh Project
- **Oxford County:** Canadian Index of Well-Being Community Assessment

This summary report focuses on the **three demonstration projects**, with the intention of sharing insights and best practices gleaned from these projects. Companion reports discussing each project in more detail are included as appendices to this document, and are also available at www.ruralontarioinstitute.ca as individual reports.

| CASE STUDIES AT A GLANCE

Brief descriptions of the five community projects follow:

Baldwin Township: Let's Talk

This project convened and nurtured conversations on civic engagement in four municipalities in the LaCloche Foothills area including: Township of Baldwin, Town of Espanola, Township of Nairn & Hyman, and the Township of Sables-Spanish Rivers. The project focused on a community consultation through surveys aiming to assess barriers to civic engagement in partnership with the Northern Policy Institute (NPI). By opening the discussion, it promoted awareness of the importance of residents being engaged in civic processes and for municipal leaders to be purposeful in their engagement strategies.

Huron County: Huron Healthy Rural Policy Lens

The Huron Health Rural Policy Lens (HCHRPL) was developed in 2012 to assist urban policy makers and other community leaders to implement policies and programs that best reflect the experiences of rural populations. In a desire to maximize the use of this tool, the Gateway Centre for Excellence in Rural Health took the lead in promoting the tool to a wide range of stakeholders. The focus of this initiative was to increase public awareness of this framework to facilitate future planning in various sectors and work together as a community to achieve common well-being goals.

Northern Bruce Peninsula: Schools as Anchors for Rural Community Vitality

The Municipality of Northern Bruce Peninsula in partnership with the Peninsula Action Committee for Education (PACE) launched the Schools as Anchors for Rural Community Vitality. This initiative was developed to explore community hubs as service delivery models to reinvigorate rural schools while responding to demonstrated local needs and priorities. This project focused on facilitating a community consultation to better understand community needs and document the importance of keeping education local.

Northumberland County: Specialized Rural Transportation

In 2008, Community Care Northumberland (CCN) created the Northumberland Transportation Initiative to address the need for affordable and reliable transportation in the county. To evaluate the impact of this initiative, CCN facilitated an evaluation of its services by engaging clients, caregivers, service providers and other stakeholders in a consultation.

West Carleton: Aging in Rural Community

The Western Ottawa Community Resource Centre (WOCRC) undertook the "Rural Community Development: engagement on Health Priorities for Seniors and Caregivers in West Carleton" project in 2015. West Carleton was chosen as a pilot site for an asset-based community consultation to follow-up on services addressed through the 2015 project.

▍ COMMUNITY ASSETS

Each setting and project undertaken was unique. Even so, several community assets emerged as necessary and predictive of success in the case studies. The following were essential:

Community Support

Thriving community projects acknowledge residents as fundamental to their success. Local expertise was a top community asset for each of these five projects. Project leaders recognized that communities know best about their own needs. Proposed solutions allowed for organic and sustainable processes to evolve, based on the wisdom and experience of community members. This was particularly strong in the **Aging in Rural Community** initiative, which used an Asset-Based Community Development consultation that did not propose or prescribe solutions but allowed for an open assessment of community needs and experience.

Community members felt ownership of initiatives they were consulted on. Volunteers also felt empowered to continue being community leaders and to contribute their knowledge and experience to the benefit of the projects. This was particularly evident in Northumberland County, where the lead agency built on the connections within its extensive network of 850 volunteers to engage residents in gathering feedback and sharing stories.

In practical terms, projects that were able to tap into local networks and natural sources of community gathering were more likely to engage more people and raise awareness of their specific issues.

Partnerships

Projects that enjoyed strong partnership support had a greater impact and were more likely to follow through on their workplans. The engagement of cross-sectorial partners was a particularly strong asset for many of the projects, allowing various levels and areas of expertise to come together. For example, the **Schools as Anchors for Rural Community Vitality and the Specialized Rural Transportation** initiatives tapped into stakeholders from various sectors, including municipal leaders, who offered support in the form of expertise and advocacy. The **Specialized Rural Transportation** initiative was creative in engaging stakeholders by communicating the benefits of the consultation to service providers, who were secondary beneficiaries of their transportation programs. As a result, one of their key stakeholders supported the consultation by promoting and having surveys available at their site, as well as by helping clients requiring support to complete surveys.

Partnership also took the form of various actors participating on steering and advisory committees. This brought a variety of opinions, skills, and expertise to the table. Project leads in the various initiatives emphasized the importance of engaging stakeholders with academic research expertise to support evaluations, data analysis and to increase evaluative credibility. Connections with university students and professors were a source of significant support. These cross-sectorial partnerships were highly valued by residents who felt their issues and community mattered.

The **Huron Healthy Rural Policy Lens** initiative was noteworthy in its ability to bridge a variety of sectors while promoting the benefits and utility of their tool. The project lead was resourceful in sharing how the tool could be used by a range of stakeholders outside the health sector, including universities, financial institutions, municipalities, and other organizations. This was exemplary in modeling and promoting a holistic understanding of community well-being.

Strong Leadership

Strong leadership was critical in aligning vision, resources, and stakeholders to accomplish proposed goals. Each leader was committed to their project and was willing to provide direction and organizational support. LaCloche Foothill's **Let's Talk** would not have achieved what it did without the passionate commitment of its project lead. The Huron project lead's resourcefulness and creativity were essential to reach a wide range of audiences in Canada and abroad. Northern Bruce Peninsula's project lead brought years of expertise in the school board along with her academic skills in service of project goals. Northumberland County leads were financially savvy, maximizing use of resources and creative in engaging partners. Leads in West Carleton's case took risks and shifted priorities and resources in support of the project and staff. Each of these examples of strong leadership reflect the potential within organizations to maximize impact by tapping into institutional memory, including staff expertise, skills, previous projects, and community engagement.

| BEST PRACTICES

Best practices and lessons learned in key areas include:

Community Engagement

Community well-being projects are more successful when residents are engaged at the forefront of the project. Some best practices for ensuring community engagement in projects include:

- Acknowledge that every community is different and evolving. Take community culture into account when developing a program and its engagement strategy.
- Develop projects that match the needs and lived experiences of the community. Do not impose solutions to perceived problems.
- Community readiness is crucial. Respect the organic nature and pace of a community. Assess whether it is ready for the specific type of intervention envisioned by consulting with residents as key stakeholders from the outset.
- Maximize community engagement by tapping into existing networks and natural places of gathering. Churches are often important hubs in rural communities.

Internal Leadership

Internal leadership is crucial for ensuring realistic project scope, providing direction and support from beginning to end and ensuring sustainability. Best practices from project leads include:

- Project leads need to be passionate and committed to the work. This energy gets transferred to the project and team and builds project momentum.
- Assess organizational capacity, including top leadership and staff buy-in, before deciding project scope and adjust workplan accordingly.
- Plan to maintain institutional memory and ensure skills transfer. Do not centralize project expertise in one individual. Whenever possible, ensure a co-lead or supporting staff who can continue to lead and support the project in the event of staff changes.
- Savvy financial management includes creativity and commitment to the project. Look into a wide range of funding sources. Hire internally when existing expertise, capacity and commitment allows. Support and encourage in-kind contributions from various stakeholders.

Workplan

All five projects had fluid workplans that were modified to accomplish project goals. Some best practices for setting and following a workplan include:

- Reflect on organizational resources and internal capacity when setting workplan and timelines.
- Recognize that workplans serve as guidelines to keep project on track and ensure accountability.
  They can be flexible in order to respond to emerging project needs, opportunities and delays.
- Do not underestimate front-end loading. It takes a lot of work.
- Consultation is often the most time consuming phase of a project as response rates are often beyond an organization's control. Schedule extra work time to prepare for this and other unexpected project needs.
- Remember that sustainable community projects do not end upon project completion. A follow-up plan is important to assess impact, maintain project momentum and deepen impact. This is particularly important for ensuring community credibility of organizations doing community work.

| FINAL THOUGHTS

In summary, these five case study projects underscore the importance of project evaluations and community assessments for hard to capture outcomes. Community support, partnerships and strong leadership were critical elements for success. These projects can serve as examples to other communities considering similar initiatives, recognizing that each community is unique. Common learnings that can be transferred to other communities include the importance of engaging local expertise to form strategic partnerships and building community leaders. Following the culture of the community and organic processes will allow for residents to feel ownership and encourage their contributions toward well-being goals.

The Rural Ontario Institute is grateful to these five communities across Ontario for participating in this knowledge transfer opportunity. Thank you to all who were involved.

BALDWIN TOWNSHIP
LET'S TALK INITIATIVE

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.

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 identify 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 work plan 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 work plan helped partners accomplish milestones, while recognizing the need for fluidity and flexibility. The work plan 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 students' 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 work plans 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.

HURON COUNTY
HEALTHY RURAL POLICY LENS INITIATIVE

| INTRODUCTION

Rural areas are unique – they have distinct characteristics and face diverse challenges. When decisions are being made, it can be difficult to understand the particular needs of rural communities, as well as the impact of such decisions on life in these communities. As such, the Huron County Healthy Rural Policy Lens (HCHRPL) was developed in 2012 to be used by urban policy makers and other agencies wanting to implement policies or programs that best reflect the experiences of rural populations.

The HCHRPL was identified as a priority project under the Community Needs Section of the 2011 Take Action for Sustainable Huron – Sustainability Plan (Gateway Centre of Excellence in Rural Health. June 2016. Through the Lens: HCHRPL Newsletter). The Huron County Health Unit took the lead in developing the tool, working with the Sustainable Huron Committee and in June 2014, the tool was presented to and adopted by the Huron Board of Health (Ibid). This tool became one of the frameworks for the Health Unit's policy assessment and program evaluation methodologies to facilitate future planning (Ibid).

In 2016, the Rural Ontario Institute (ROI)'s Measuring Rural Community Vitality initiative offered an opportunity to the Huron Business Development Corporation, Sustainable Huron and the Gateway Centre of Excellence in Rural Health to continue promoting the tool, as well as to evaluate its use of among users.

| NEEDS ADDRESSED

Urban policy makers benefit from opportunities to more fully understand the intricacies of rural life given their different life experiences. While urban policy makers and non-rural service providers can have the best intentions when making decisions for rural communities, the specific needs and intricacies of rural communities are often misrepresented. As such, there is an identified need to share rural experiences and needs, and to create a common language to guide the discussions of policy makers and service providers.

Based on a community development model, the HCHRPL tool opens opportunities for grassroots conversations, fostering important discussions which in turn promote community vitality. This tool helps evaluate decision-making in terms of its impact on the measures of community life. By using this tool, people will have discussions beyond economic or immediate project impacts, focusing on sustainability of rural communities for the long-term. This tool has gained a lot of traction in Huron County, allowing the community to have an integrated view of how decisions made impact broader community goals. While acknowledging the uniqueness of each rural community, the tool's proponents believe it can be modified and applied to other rural communities as needed. The HCHRPL aims to ignite discussion on viewing communities as a whole, rather than in fragments of their individual sectors.

| SOLUTIONS PROPOSED

In order to respond to the need for increased awareness of the unique and specific needs of rural policy and programs, the HCHRPL was developed in 2012. This multi-objective framework was developed with the support of Dr. Wayne Caldwell and captures various dimensions of the community. Using a consensus model, this tool was designed to help policy makers and other community leaders understand how to meet needs of a specific population. This includes a consideration of the implications of an initiative for a given population; as well as help identifying unforeseen consequences and opportunities resulting from new policies or programs, and their applicability to rural realities.

The HCHRPL is based on the framework of Sustainable Huron, the County's "community-wide initiative intended to raise awareness and foster action to enhance community capacity in the face of global issues." (Huron County, n.d). It considers the three pillars of environment, economy, and society/culture, and the necessary overlap between each area in order to achieve community sustainability.

Specifically, the HCHRPL presents a holistic view of important issues. Indicators of Success for each of the Sustainable Huron Themes are presented visually to provide focused considerations regarding the impacts of a given program or policy. The tool also provides questions to help consider important factors such as time, money, and long term impact for each theme in order to assess if the program or policy would have a positive, neutral, or negative impact (The Healthy Rural Lens for Huron County, n.d.). After thinking through the impacts and using the tool, the resulting picture helps predict how the action will affect the county, including the unintended consequences and opportunities resulting from the initiative (Ibid).

Huron County Healthy Rural Policy Lens
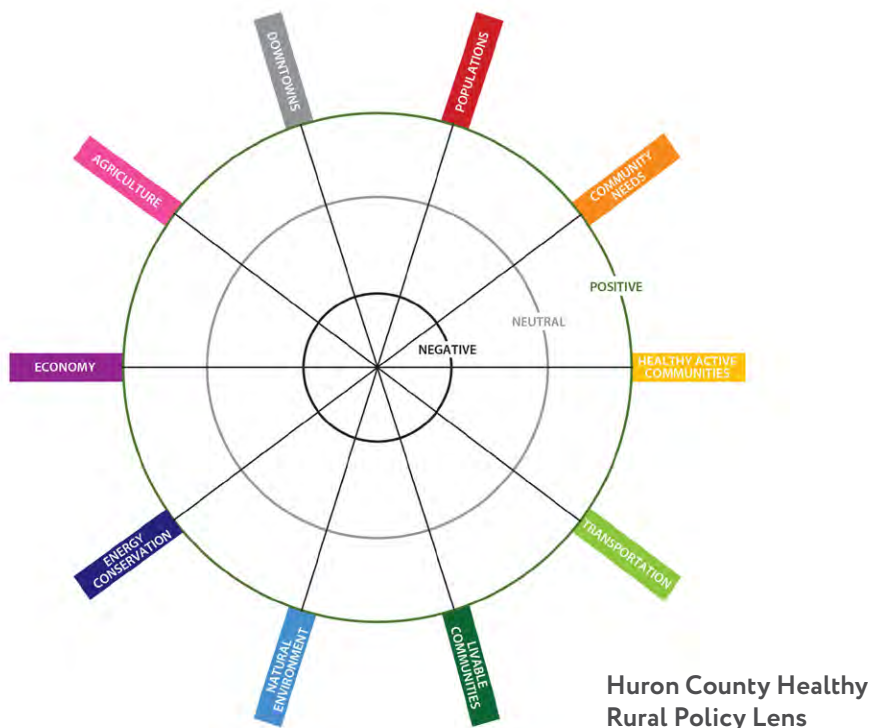
The primary intention of this project was to assess the usefulness of this tool among its users and learn from the experiences of those who have used the tool. However, the project shifted in scope to also promote and teach individuals how to use the tool because the sample size of identified users at the project onset was too low for a conclusive evaluation. Sheila Schuehlein, Project Lead for the HCHRPL, offered free education; teaching others to properly use and implement the tool and providing support documentation such as: HCHRPL Top 10 Valuable Uses.

Community partners made contributions to the project in various ways, and helped with the development and consultation process. Staff also took the time, and shared their willingness to learn about the tool. They intend to keep the project alive and to continue to encourage people to use it.

The project was flexible in light of shifting objectives. It was guided by three general objectives. It sought to acquire a general understanding of who used the tool, how they used it, and what the tool contributed. Project champions also sought to engage and spread awareness to as many people as possible about the usefulness and value of the tool.

Gateway Centre of Excellence in Rural Health

Gateway Centre of Excellence in Rural Health (Gateway) aims to improve the health and quality of life of rural residents through research, education, and communication.

Located in Goderich, Ontario, Gateway is the only community-driven rural health research institute in Canada.

Huron County

Huron County is located on Ontario's West Coast, along the shores of Lake Huron. This vibrant rural community is the most agriculturally productive county in Ontario, and a leader in areas of agricultural technology and innovation.

Huron County is composed of nine municipalities including Ashfield–Colborne–Wawanosh, Bluewater, Central Huron, Howick, Huron East, Morris-Turnberry, North Huron, and South Huron.

Timeline

The following is a timeline of key milestones achieved within this project, spanning from February 2016 through June 2017.

February 2016

Contract for HCHRPL Project awarded by Huron Business Development Corporation to Gateway Centre of Excellence in Rural Health.

April 2016

HCHRPL presentation and collaboration invitation made at the Huron County Public Health Huron Park Poverty to Prosperity (P2P) Project planning/advisory meeting.

May 2016

HCHRPL presentation at the Huron-Perth Family Health Team Administrators Meeting.

June 2016

Delegation at Huron South Council presenting HCHRPL. First HCHRPL newsletter disseminated electronically to a Project specific database of nearly 200 contacts.

August 2016

HCHRPL poster presentation at the World Congress of Rural Sociology, Ryerson University, Toronto.

October 2016

HCHRPL presentation to Rural Ontario Institutes Advisory Committee for the Measuring Rural Community Vitality Initiative. HCHRPL shared through the Ontario Trillium Funds Knowledge Centre as part of their Measurement online community.

February 2017

Measuring Rural Community Vitality Initiative collaboration planning meeting with ROI Project Leads and Headwaters Communities in Action Project.

COMMUNITY ASSETS

The following are some of the community assets that contributed to the success of the project:

Community Willingness to Use Tool

Huron County residents live the everyday experiences embedded in the tool and have the ability and understanding of how to apply the tool. One of the benefits of this tool is that it is simple and does not require specific skills to use it, but just a willingness to use it.

Stakeholder Support

Various stakeholders were supportive of this project. Participation in the Measuring Community Vitality Project was supported by municipal leaders and the Sustainable Huron Steering Committee. The Huron Business Development Corporation, which works closely with the Huron County in many economic and community development projects, took the lead on this project and successfully applied to become one of the eight rural communities across Ontario involved in this initiative (Through the Lens: HCHRPL Newsletter, 2016). Huron County's Warden, Jim Ginn, made sure the tool encompassed the Sustainability Plan and helped others understand how leaders can apply this tool in their decision-making process. Janice Dunbar, the former HCHRPL Lead, and retired member of the Huron County Health Unit, pushed to document the tool and encouraged the community to own it and use it for their needs. Paul Nichol, Economic Development Manager of Huron Business Development Corporation was also involved throughout the whole process to facilitate the goals and outcomes of this project. Sheila Schuehlein played a vital role in promoting the Lens, offering free education to organizations in order to help them use the tool effectively and collecting data regarding users' experiences

The project supported partnerships in the community by serving as a discussion starter. When having a community consultation process to develop new programs or services, individuals used the tool to guide discussions and acknowledge diverse groups and different sectors. For example, people representing economic development worked with people speaking for other sectors to understand the impact of their work.

| RESULTS

The main aim of this project shifted from an assessment of the usefulness of the tool among its users to an increase in awareness of the resource across Huron County and beyond. This was achieved by promoting and sharing the tool to numerous groups and organizations. The Huron County Council was also supportive in moving the tool from a policy context to a broader context, making it useful for all sectors.

This project allowed Gateway to create a network for future discussions, and showcase the organization as a promoter of community resources. Individuals are working hard to get this project recognized at the provincial level, and connections are being made across sectors at a community level. Currently, the project has been shared at numerous conferences, including the R2R (Rural Talks to Rural), Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation and the International Rural Sociology Conference. Communities from all over the world want to have a rural decision making tool. More locally to rural Ontario, this tool has allowed different disciplines to build consensus, as well as to see how decisions move and have impacts across sectors.

A variety of groups have also used the HCHRPL tool so far, including:

Avon Maitland District School Board's Gifted Students Program

Students from the Avon Maitland District School Board's Out of School Gifted Withdrawal Modules were invited on May 30, 2016 to use the tool by creating presentations on possible solutions to current problems for one of the ten indicators found on the HCHRL (Through the Lens: HCHRPL Newsletter, 2016). After students learned about the different indicators on the HCHRPL, community experts met with participating students to discuss their indicators and answer questions about their professions and role in the community. Students chose rural issues they were passionate about and worked on presentations over the course of 4 days. A variety of presentation topics were chosen, including Piezoelectric roads, which harvest traffic energy to generate electricity and creating portable ramps built by high school tech students to help increase accessibility for individuals with disabilities (Through the Lens: HCHRPL Newsletter, 2016).

University of Waterloo's School of Pharmacy

Sheila Schuehlein facilitated an educational workshop at the University of Waterloo School of Pharmacy where pharmacy, optometry and medical students tried out the rural lens to see first-hand how the tool brings a rural perspective (Through the Lens: HCHRPL Newsletter, 2016). Students were invited to select an issue of interest (i.e. tobacco smoking cessation) and to use the tool to bring a rural perspective. They identified issues and opportunities, as well as potential solutions (Ibid). Small groups of students presented their findings by plotting them on the indicator diagram.

Huron Perth Health Centres' Administrators

County health centres' explored use of the tool Professionals in other health centres (e.g. Perth) acknowledged that, while not everything in the tool applied in their community context, for the most part could be adapted.

Libro Credit Union

Libro Credit Union was approached with the tool to help individuals who want to come to a rural community and start a business in a rural setting. Other financial institutions could benefit from participating and using the tool.

Municipality of Grey-Highlands and University of Guelph's Rural Studies program

In February 2016, the Municipality of Grey-Highlands Council approved a plan to work with four students from the University of Guelph's Rural Studies program to develop a decision-making framework, similar to the one used by Huron County which was adopted in May 2017.

Ontario Parks and Recreation

The tool was introduced at the Ontario Parks and Recreation Conference. A case study was given on trails, and individuals had to determine the positive and negative impacts of the project. This process helped open participants' eyes to the many implications of the trail project.

Awareness of this tool increased in large measure with thanks to conference participation and showcasing, being a part of MRCV Initiative, and the Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition.

LESSONS LEARNED & ADVICE TO OTHERS

This project has prompted many lessons since its implementation. These include:

- Decision making tools do not remain static – they are a framework. It is important to review them periodically, in collaboration with the community, in order to maintain their value and assess whether new changes are required.
- Allow for flexibility. If needed, adjust project timelines to ensure that the project can make use of opportunities that arise, enhancing final results and allowing ample time for reflection.
- Try not to worry about low numbers in the beginning. It can take a long time for a project to gain traction.
- Promote community ownership and create opportunities for consensus building around the tool. Come together as a community regularly to review and make sure the tool is the best it can be for the community it serves.
- Foster community engagement and find opportunities to break silos in the community. Engage in conversations across sectors in order to have valuable and productive discussions.
- Confer with organizational leaders and assess how the project impacts community members.
- You don't know what you don't know — talk to people in the community!

CONCLUSION

Overall, the project promoted greater awareness of the Huron County Healthy Rural Policy Lens (HCHRPL) in Huron County and in other communities. The HCHRPL helps policy makers and community groups consider broader perspectives to ensure their initiatives positively impact the wellbeing of their community and its residents. This project has aided in the dissemination of the foundational understanding that rural areas differ from urban, and that they require different planning approaches. The need for ongoing staff advocacy of the tool is abundantly clear. Suggestions have been made for an App to help align projects and provide visuals for potential users. Current work can help further the development of such ideas.

The project has used a rural voice to bring a greater emphasis and spotlight on rural issues, spreading awareness that 'rural is different' and needs to be serviced as such. Checking in with the community regularly is vital in maintaining the tool's relevance. The HCHRPL has proved to be a valuable resource applicable in many sectors of the community, creating a unified voice and vision for rural communities such as those in Huron County.

| CHECKLIST

Key Ingredients for Success

Considering doing a similar project in your community?
It may work well if your county/organization…

- ☑ is passionate about grassroots community development and acknowledges that each rural community is unique and has different needs

- ☑ desires to communicate the unique nature of rural life in the county and how different sectors overlap in providing community wellbeing

- ☑ is flexible with project outcomes and goals, willing to adapt objectives with changing needs in the community

- ☑ is willing to participate in various conferences and events to promote awareness and engagement

- ☑ has the capacity to engage numerous stakeholders across sectors, regularly looking for opportunities to foster strong partnerships

- ☑ is committed to maintain regular review of tool, ensuring that the tool remains relevant and useful to the community it serves

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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.

NORTHERN BRUCE PENINSULA

SCHOOLS AS ANCHORS FOR COMMUNITY VITALITY INITIATIVE

INTRODUCTION

Declining enrolment in schools is a phenomenon experienced across Canada, having greatest impact on rural communities (Thomson, 2016). Community hubs have emerged as a potential approach to address this issue. The Rural Ontario Institute (ROI) chose the Municipality of Northern Bruce Peninsula, in partnership with the Peninsula Action Committee for Education (PACE), as a community project site to participate in ROI's Measuring Rural Community Vitality (MRCV) initiative. Of the six MRCV projects from across rural Ontario, Schools as Anchors for Rural Community Vitality was the only project focusing on education. This unique initiative allowed the community to conduct an assessment of the present and envisioned roles of schools serving not only young people, but the entire community, with a particular focus on rural community vitality (Thomson, 2016).

NEEDS ADDRESSED

School closures in rural communities can cause anxiety and hardship, and many community members advocate against closing local schools. This project sought to clarify views expressed by community members about the importance of local schools and their value to rural communities, and to foster discussions about integrated service delivery models that look at all areas of wellbeing and education through community hubs. On a fundamental level, the study examined the assertion that schools are crucial to community vitality and economic development in rural areas.

To investigate this issue, measurable data was required to analyze the general sentiments of the community. Collective emotional responses alone would not be enough to demonstrate to local school board(s) and the Ministry of Education that school closures are a significant detriment to rural communities. Using the Canadian Index of Well-Being (CIW), this study bridged the divide between emotional responses and measurable data. It highlighted the link between schools and economically sustainable communities, and illustrated the importance of schools in relation to community vitality Data literacy was an important component in the discussion; school boards, provincial ministries and municipalities often use different data sources to make decisions. This project identified the need for a uniform standard of reporting that allows for effective measurement and tracking of change. Not only have school boards lacked any measurable data beyond enrolment predictions, they often do not have the policy tools or resources to collaborate with other ministries, thus limiting their capacity to lead change outside of their direct mandate. This study was designed to address those gaps by coordinating with diverse stakeholders. Municipalities, partners, and schools will have the opportunity to dialogue about innovative solutions and strategies to address school closures in rural communities. These processes help key stakeholders better understand the importance of this issue, and will serve as a basis on which higher-level decisions can be made.

| SOLUTIONS PROPOSED

In response to declining enrolment in schools, Premier Wynne has mandated four ministries, including the Ministry of Education, to investigate the development of community hubs as one possible alternative to school closures (Thomson, 2016). A community hub is a service delivery model that brings together service providers to offer a range of services that respond to demonstrated local needs and priorities.

The Peninsula Action Committee for Education (PACE) took the lead on the Schools as Anchors for Rural Community Vitality project. PACE is committed to quality education for all students in the Northern Bruce Peninsula, and seeks to explore alternatives and creative solutions to out-sourcing education. The main goals of this volunteer group are to invite, inform, and influence others about the importance of keeping education local.

The funding for the Schools as Anchors for Rural Community Vitality project focuses on: a) developing a model for creating community hubs that enhance education opportunities for youth, and b) the means for assessing the effectiveness of initiatives resulting from the creation of these hubs. The project explored the characteristics of successful hubs, developing a greater understanding of the drivers needed to create effective and sustainable community hubs. The project also created links between schools and economic development and identified the role schools play in sustaining the viability of a community (Peninsula Action Committee for Education, 2016).

Several data collection methods were used:

Surveys

Surveys were developed to map assets, challenges, and actions related to creating community hubs that reflect local needs; these focused on the education needs of the community and emphasized schools.

Two mixed methods (quantitative and qualitative) surveys were developed: a community survey to assess the community hubs model led by PACE, and an online survey for former students to incorporate feedback on their experience in the local secondary school. The goal of the survey was to assess the role of the schools in the community, and to see if the community hubs model would appropriately cater to community needs and priorities. The community survey targeted all residents, both permanent and seasonal, in the municipality of Northern Bruce Peninsula. To maximize accessibility, the community survey was distributed online, in the local free newspaper delivered to every mailbox, and by telephone. The former student survey targeted all those who attended Bruce Peninsula District School for one or more years of secondary education between 2004 and 2016. This survey was only available online on the Interceptum web platform. Participants were asked about school experiences, such as student engagement, school culture, and their feelings of safety at school, as well as the role schools played in building characteristics associated with community wellbeing.

Data regarding the role of the school in the community was analyzed through the Canadian Index of Wellbeing utilizing NVivo software. Both qualitative and quantitative data were compared to the domains of the Canadian Index of Wellbeing. There are overlapping domains in the two frameworks (CIW and OMAFRA), but the reporting was eventually narrowed to the CIW as the conceptual framework for analysing the comments about the role of the schools in the community.

Workshops

Workshops are planned to discuss survey findings, as well as to work toward an action plan by stakeholders who will examine ways to integrate service delivery that includes education, as a means of supporting rural community vitality.

Model

Using information derived from survey findings, meetings and other feedback from stakeholders, a final report, including the survey template itself, are being shared with other communities to use in creating solutions such as community hubs in their rural schools. Document and meeting processes, assessment tools, action steps, and feedback were gathered and documented as a resource for others interested in this topic.

Partners

The project included communication with the Bluewater District School Board, Community Schools Alliance, School Closure Policy Group from University of Western Ontario and University of Waterloo, Four County Labour Planning Board, and the Premier's Advisory Committee on Community Hubs. Many local agencies and groups also pledged their support for this undertaking (Thomson, 2016). Survey results and plans for stakeholder involvement were shared with the Bluewater District School Board, municipal representatives and community members Meetings to discuss possible future actions are planned for the fall of 2017.

Timeline

Actualizing project timelines was a challenge. As a key goal of the project was to involve community members in stakeholder meetings, finding mutually convenient meeting times was important and difficult. So too was covering the large geography involved in the catchment area of this study, a challenge typical of many rural areas.

The completion timeline for the project shifted from September 2016 to September 2017. Fluid timelines were required in light of challenges discussed. The project's actual milestones included:

January 18, 2016

Municipality of Northern Bruce Peninsula announced the collaborative project led by the Peninsula Action Committee for Education (PACE).

May 2016

Survey development.

July – August 2016

Survey distribution.

January – February 2017

Presentation of preliminary results to the Bluewater District School Board, Municipality of Northern Bruce Peninsula, and the community.

September 2017

Publication of final report and articles.

Organizational Profiles

The **Peninsula Action Committee for Education (PACE)** is a group of concerned parents and community members committed to quality education for all students on the Northern Bruce Peninsula. PACE seeks a collaborative exploration of education possibilities, and is interested in pursuing partnerships to explore alternatives and creative solutions.

Northern Bruce Peninsula

The Municipality of Northern Bruce Peninsula (NBP) is the northern neighbouring community to the Town of South Bruce Peninsula. NBP covers an area of 781.51 square kilometers and has a permanent population of 3,850 year-round residents. It encompasses the former Townships of Eastnor, Lindsay, St. Edmunds, and the Village of Lion's Head. Other hamlets within NBP are Tobermory, Stokes Bay, Pike Bay, Miller Lake, Barrow Bay, Ferndale, Dyers Bay, and the Lindsay 20 Communities.

| COMMUNITY ASSETS

The following are some of the community assets that helped this project reach its desired outcomes:

Steering Committee

The Schools as Anchors for Rural Community Vitality project engaged different assets and skills within the community. The project's PACE steering committee was comprised of volunteers from many backgrounds; the diverse skills of these individuals were helpful in facilitating and moving the project forward. The project coordinator's school board experience contributed first-hand knowledge of the challenges that school boards face. As she was also a skilled researcher, an external research consultant was not required. Other committee members also offered critical expertise and skills in facilitating the project's goals.

The steering committee had originally planned to meet a total of three times; however, they met every second week throughout the course of the project. This changed perceptions of community members, who saw the possibility of real change from their constant fear of impending school closures.

Collaboration

The project aimed for a collaborative approach where community partners could work together toward a common goal. Stakeholders who supported the project included the Municipality of Northern Bruce Peninsula, the deputy major, who was part of the steering committee, and the County. Community members contributed many ideas and suggestions about the potential of schools in rural communities, and envisioned roles for community members. The project provided opportunities to learn about leadership in a rural setting, and was successful in fostering dialogue and communication among various community groups. Informal conversations were critical in developing trust and relationships in rural areas. First fostering informal relationships then building toward more formal relationship structures helped set the tone and dynamics of the project and its collaborative relationships.

The project also facilitated relationships with other key players in education and rural development, such as the Rural Ontario Institute (ROI), Community Schools Alliance, and the School Closure Policy Research group. Dr. Bill Irwin of the Department of Economics and Business at Huron College was pivotal in providing external academic validation on the project, fulfilling a goal of developing a project that could be applied in other rural communities. Indeed, having the project's survey approved by the University Research Ethics Board added weight to how the research results would be received.

Developing relationships with these important education and rural development actors strengthened voices of the community so they could be better heard. Knowing that external influential voices were also pursuing this issue boosted the confidence of the community, not only validating their feelings that their concerns were relevant and important, but that their sentiments were supported by research. Parents and concerned community members were buoyed knowing that other people were working hard to address this issue.

The project survey taps into the knowledge and expertise of community members. The insights of parents and former students helped to inform this work. Communication and engagement were maximized by going out into the community and providing opportunities for people to contribute their perspective.

| RESULTS

Given the project data generated, people in Northern Bruce Peninsula seem to have felt heard and believe they have a stronger case to advocate against school closures. Residents seem to feel validated by the CIW's linkages between schools and the wellbeing of the community, which aligns with the expressed opinions of local community members. However, because the CIW incorporates statistics from across Canada, additional research was conducted to resonate more closely with lived experiences of Northern Bruce Peninsula residents. Questions were added to expand the educational attainment indicator in the CIW. For example:

- When people ask you what you liked/missed in your high school experience, what do you tell them?

- In general, how important are the following aspects of an elementary school experience? Rated 1 to 4:
   - o Students have access to extracurricular activities
   - o Teachers know and care about their students

- The following characteristics have been identified when considering the roles schools play within a community. How would you rate these characteristics?
   - o The school fosters a sense of personal belonging to the community
   - o A school attracts young families

The survey was largely successful in its implementation and distribution, and included an assessment of the importance and relevance of municipal characteristics. Incorporating this component was intended to encourage involvement from the local economic development committee, with the hope they would be impacted by project insights and ultimately incorporate findings into their broader planning process.

298 residents responded by survey, and preliminary results were shared with stakeholders. The geographic distribution of respondents included the hamlets of Barrow Bay, Dyers Bay, Lion's Head, Miller Lake, Pike Bay, Stokes Bay and Tobermory, with Tobermory having the most participants with 31% of respondents. The community survey had 17 questions, including eight questions that provided an opportunity for written comments. Over 600 comments were received. Overall, survey results aligned with the project's anticipated outcomes, and survey responses demonstrated that the Canadian Index of Wellbeing has significant application on the issue of school closures. It was evident in the responses that schools play an important part in creating sustainable wellbeing in rural communities. Study findings highlight the importance of acknowledging the benefits of having education close to the homes of families in the community.

The project also identified insight as to the effectiveness of data gathering and reporting. The data sets used by school boards and ministries are not compatible with that used by municipalities. For example, school reports on projected enrolments are different from the projected enrolments of the County. Discussions ensued regarding developing workshops on data literacy, with an objective of standardizing measurements to track change. Improving data literacy will improve understanding and the identification of solutions, helping to create templates for what needs to be measured and how to measure it, and better developing data integration processes.

The social return on investment for this project remains unmeasured. People still fear school closures and the long commutes to distant schools that would result. The project has spurred many conversations and partnerships between community members and groups. A significant value from the project is that discussions can now be backed with researched data.

Expenditures for this project included publishing the survey in the local paper, conducting literature reviews, promotion through various media sources, hiring individuals for quantitative statistical analysis, printing of posters and surveys, and purchasing refreshments. An unexpected cost was the development of the website. Community partners contributed in various ways to cover costs. For example, the municipality offered space to hold meetings and presentations, community members volunteered their time to present at meetings and programs, and advertising costs were mitigated using advertising space in grocery store bulletin boards. The project was carried in large measure by the commitment of community volunteers, whose interest in preserving local schools was manifestly clear throughout.

LESSONS LEARNED
& ADVICE TO OTHERS

Several members of the PACE steering committee documented their reflections on the project. These include:

- Although momentum can create change, it is also important to be respectful of the organic nature and pace of how things happen.

- It is recommended to have a partner who can receive, hold, and dispense the funds for a project, with a process to receive budget updates (e.g., PACE asked the NBP municipality to submit an application for this project on their behalf). Finances need to be accounted and outlined in the budget.

- Communicate creatively and establish a strong presence to keep the project on everybody's agenda and radar. Seek opportunities for informal networking and participate in other rural events. Be aware that different demographic groups require different methods of engagement.

- A project such as this needs both a small steering committee to ensure that project meets its goals, and a larger representative advisory committee to test the effectiveness and impact of each step of the project.

- Be flexible and adaptive with project timelines as needs arise during the endeavour. Be prepared to spend many hours on survey development, communications, presentations, website management, and process decision-making.

- Identification of target audience, survey distribution, and a follow up plan are useful to ensure a meaningful return rate, and all steps require separate planning. Data collection methods such as post-paid mail and advertising require extra time and money.

- Ensure diverse committee membership that reflects community makeup (e.g., academics, parents, long-term residents, etc.). Recognize the expertise and availability of volunteer staff and consider hiring out skills and tasks (e.g., hiring a research assistant for literature review and statistical data analysis, website photographer, etc.). Work may require more than simply the perseverance of volunteer members, and having this type of infrastructure will increase efficiency and effectiveness.

- Effective project management requires a clear outline of the tasks to be accomplished, identifiable milestones, and a way to measure progress towards the achievement of those milestones. This helps identify necessary additional tasks and needed course corrections.

| CONCLUSION

The Schools as Anchors for Rural Community Vitality project aimed to address and explore the difficult and pressing issue of school closure in the Northern Bruce Peninsula. Survey results validated the feelings and knowledge of community members, and demonstrated the importance of schools to community vitality. The project expanded the way rural community vitality is measured, and identified useful data processes and language for topics that are hard to express verbally. The tools developed through this project will benefit other communities interested in pursuing similar projects, assuming they tailor and adapt the tools for their area.

This project shed light on the political processes and pitfalls concerning rural education and development. It has generated momentum and insight, impacting strategy and service delivery and the county level. The project engaged a diverse cross section of community stakeholders, fostering many productive discussions and cultivating important relationships. These have contributed to greater awareness and action on the issue and impact of rural school closures. This is an important legacy, and other communities would do well to modify the project and its tools in their own setting.

| CHECKLIST

Key Ingredients for Success

Considering doing a similar project in your community?
It may work well if your county/organization...

☑ Can call forth a dedicated volunteer committee with hired staff support, who can contribute significant time and effort.

☑ is willing to invest in advertisement and awareness building to develop strong community engagement.

☑ Has the capacity to foster strong partnerships with multiple stakeholders across key disciplines (school boards, research institutions, municipalities).

☑ Is committed to provide community members with opportunities to share opinions and insights to inform the work, and to report results back to the community.

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NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY
COMMUNITY CARE
NORTHUMBERLAND INITIATIVE

INTRODUCTION

Local transportation is an important factor of wellbeing for residents living in rural areas. Community members, especially seniors and those without cars, are dependent on local transportation to go about their everyday activities. These include grocery shopping, going to and from work, attending appointments, and seeing friends. Due to sparse population density, however, public rural transportation is difficult to implement and even harder to maintain. In 2008, Community Care Northumberland (CCN) created the Northumberland Transportation Initiative (rural transit) to address the need for affordable and reliable local transportation in Northumberland County (Birney & Hoskins, 2017). This initiative was one of three CCN transportation programs in Northumberland, which included previously named Aging at Home, and Venture Van. Also, CCN offers a Volunteer Transportation Program that provides transportation for Seniors and those on OW and ODSP. As the county population grew, the needs for rural transportation became obvious, and the three programs were consolidated into two: Specialized Transportation Program, and Volunteer Driving Program (Ibid). The Rural Ontario Institute (ROI) selected the Specialized Transportation Program to participate in its Measuring Rural Community Vitality Initiative, which offered funds to facilitate an evaluation of the project.

NEEDS ADDRESSED

Prior to this initiative, local public transportation in Northumberland was only available in urban centres of Cobourg and Port Hope. These towns were the county's main destinations for shopping, medical appointments, and entertainment. With the growing aging population, transportation became an increasingly important issue. It serves as a vital link to services offered in various townships within the county. To address this need, Northumberland United Way conducted a community survey in 2006 to identify priority community issues – over 1000 surveys and 1,200 comments were received. Over a third of county respondents identified transportation as their top priority and identified four townships for service expansion: Alnwick/Haldimand, Cramahe, Trent Hills, and Brighton.

The Northumberland Transportation Initiative was created in 2008 in response to the clear message that better-connected transportation was needed. CCN served as the lead agency from the outset. One full time project coordinator was hired with funding from the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) – Employment Supports. This individual has remained the coordinator of transportation in Northumberland for the past nine years (Birney & Hoskins, 2017). CCN launched services in Cramahe and Alnwich/Haldimand following another round of consultation with residents, research on transportation studies, and case study learning. This included consultation with other transportation services in surrounding communities who also offer transportation.

To respond to a demand for growth, CCN consolidated the rural and accessible service names, calling the new initiative the Specialized Transportation Program. The Specialized Transportation Program aimed to provide sustainable, affordable, and wheelchair accessible rural transportation services to residents. CCN also provides the Volunteer Driving Program for seniors and those on OW and ODSP. CCN aims to enhance existing service by adding additional days to the current program, expand the hours of operations to evening and weekends, and expand service to Trent Hills, rural Port Hope, and Hamilton Township. Brighton is currently serviced by Quinte Access.

In order to successfully implement the next improvement phase of the Specialized Transportation Program, CCN engaged in an evaluation of its current services. This evaluation was made possible through the funding received from ROI and offered an opportunity to receive feedback to create an improved, centralized service of convenient schedules and low fares. This service expansion would dramatically increase the availability of transportation options for approximately 300 rural residents in currently underserviced areas. Consequently, community members could enjoy improved mobility, increased socialization, and further employment options.

▎SOLUTIONS PROPOSED

With the support of local service organizations, including libraries, churches, Northumberland County Community & Social Services and the municipalities, the program connected with potential clients and partners to review the Specialized Transportation Program and how it could be improved. The consultation engaged 200 clients, caregivers, and other stakeholders. The main research objectives were to:

- Understand the impact (social, economic, quality of life) of transportation on the lives of individuals in rural communities
- Discern how access to transportation changes the number or level of opportunities (education, employment, social supports) available to individuals?
- Increase awareness and collaboration amongst users and stakeholders of transportation options, including gaps in service, potential service improvements and expansion.

This consultation was divided in four stages:

1) "Ride-along" discussions

The first stage consisted of the project coordinator and other researchers going on bus rides to gather information from current riders about their experience with the transportation service including: benefits and gaps in service, impact of service in their life, and other questions related to research objectives.

2) Survey distribution

The second stage involved further data collection through surveys designed by the researcher and CCN staff. It was important to gather information from transportation service clients who may not have had a chance to provide verbal feedback. Clients from three routes were invited to participate by either completing the survey on the van or taking it home and mailing it back. A second survey was also prepared for stakeholders to receive feedback on their needs. Similar to the "ride-along" discussions, the eight survey questions inquired about the benefits and gaps in service, impact of service in their life, and other questions related to research objectives.

Several agencies, including Northumberland County Community & Social Services Ontario Works (OW) helped support this work by assisting clients to complete the surveys by overcoming any literacy barriers to participation. This engagement by partner agencies also served to advertise the program to those who were previously unaware and to highlight its importance in facilitating access to community services

3) Story Telling

The third stage of this consultation was to collect stories from clients, their families, and other stakeholders regarding the positive or negative impact of rural transportation services. Researchers made connections with participants through CCN staff and/or Regional Transportation Committee members. Story telling interviews were conducted in person, at a location identified by the storyteller, or over the phone. 136 participants shared their stories.

4) Transportation Summit

The final stage of the project involved a Transportation Summit organized to showcase transportation services in Northumberland County. This provided an opportunity to discuss future plans and requirements for a sustainable rural transportation service. During the summit, riders and drivers came forward to share their stories and brainstorm next steps for the program. The summit enabled 60-70 local municipal politicians and staff: County Social Service, ODSP and OW Case Workers; employment agencies; Fleming College staff, and other educational providers; Community Living workers, as well as; CCN clients, caregivers, and family members to celebrate successes and discuss opportunities for improvement.

Timeline

Evaluation of the Rural Transportation Pilot was conducted between June and December 2016. CCN staff were adaptable and responded to many changes impacting their workplan. Timelines were adjusted to accommodate staff retirements. While the project coordinator completed the evaluation's requirements, internal work has continued to improve the service and to follow-up with summit attendees one year later. Two lessons learned from adjusting the timeline were to include post-summit activities in the workplan from the beginning and to have a smaller time frame for data collection. Rather than giving participants a month for survey completion, the project coordinator reflected that 1.5 to 2 weeks would have been sufficient time.

The following are some of the project's milestones:

Summer 2016
Data collection - Complete 'ride-alongs' with current users to collect stories from clients, families and other stakeholders.

July – September 2016
Survey distribution.

September 2016
Data analysis.

October 2016
Transportation summit.

Summer 2017
Summit follow-up.

Northumberland County is located on the Northern shore of Lake Ontario and is home to over 85,000 people in seven municipalities (Alnwick/Haldimand, Brighton, Cobourg, Cramahe, Hamilton, Port Hope, Trent Hills). The area is 50 minutes away from the Toronto metropolitan area with market access to 9 million people. Population density in Northumberland County itself is sparse at 43.1 per square kilometer.

Community Care Northumberland (CCN) was established in 1988 and is a multi-service, primarily volunteer-run community support organization. Over 850 volunteers, through a variety of programs, help residents maintain a higher quality of life and strengthen community ties. In addition to their transportation programs, CCN also runs other programs such as meal delivery, friendly visits, home help and maintenance, hospice and palliative care support, and recreational programs.

| COMMUNITY ASSETS

Engagement & Partnerships

CCN's extensive network and experience running various programs, including previous start-ups and implementations of the rural transportation program also helped make the Specialized Transportation Program expansion a success. The community was also very active in engaging with the program coordinators; dozens of both riders and drivers provided feedback, and community services also participated. Community services such as libraries, churches, and employment agencies saw the rural transportation service as a key enabler for residents to access and connect the various services the County had to offer. Engaged residents, community services and organizations, staff, and committee volunteers were essential to the long-term success of the program.

Early in the transportation program's development, it became evident that collaboration and support from organizations and municipalities would be key to the success and sustainability of the program. With this in mind, the program coordinator met annually with local political and service providers for a program update. These meetings build a strong partnership between various stakeholders in the community and allowed for easier connections during this consultation.

This program benefitted from partners' generosity of time and resources. Partners demonstrated commitment to improving rural transportation through their financial contributions, helping clients participate in interviews and surveys, and by participating in crucial conversations for the future during the summit.

Institutional Memory

The project aimed for a collaborative approach where community partners could work together toward a common goal. Stakeholders who supported the project included the Municipality of Northern Bruce Peninsula, the deputy major, who was part of the steering committee, and the County. Community members contributed many ideas and suggestions about the potential of schools in rural communities, and envisioned roles for community members. The project provided opportunities to learn about leadership in a rural setting, and was successful in fostering dialogue and communication among various community groups. Informal conversations were critical in developing trust and relationships in rural areas. First fostering informal relationships then building toward more formal relationship structures helped set the tone and dynamics of the project and its collaborative relationships.

The project also facilitated relationships with other key players in education and rural development, such as the Rural Ontario Institute (ROI), Community Schools Alliance, and the School Closure Policy Research group. Dr. Bill Irwin of the Department of Economics and Business at Huron College was pivotal in providing external academic validation on the project, fulfilling a goal of developing a project that could be applied in other rural communities. Indeed, having the project's survey approved by the University Research Ethics Board added weight to how the research results would be received.

Developing relationships with these important education and rural development actors strengthened voices of the community so they could be better heard. Knowing that external influential voices were also pursuing this issue boosted the confidence of the community, not only validating their feelings that their concerns were relevant and important, but that their sentiments were supported by research. Parents and concerned community members were buoyed knowing that other people were working hard to address this issue.

The project survey taps into the knowledge and expertise of community members. The insights of parents and former students helped to inform this work. Communication and engagement were maximized by going out into the community and providing opportunities for people to contribute their perspective.

Financial Management of Resources

Financial obstacles were perhaps some of the greater and more constant challenges of the program. However, the CCN staff were finance-savvy in their use of funds received from the Ministry of Transportation and the Rural Ontario Institute. They hired internally a part-time staff to oversee work plans, data collection and analysis. By doing this they were able maximize the use of their resources in the evaluation.

The project coordinator was a skilled networker and leveraged funds from a variety of sources and grant pools over the years. Without municipal grants and MTO Gas Tax funds, running such a program would be almost impossible. The coordinator noted that "transportation isn't a money maker, but there is high social return – people that live in these rural communities, if they didn't have this program, they wouldn't be able to go anywhere".

Thanks to the fund development skills of the project coordinator, this project benefited from various financial contributions beyond ROI support over the years. Operating and maintenance costs are combined from multiple sources, i.e., In 2010, to help grow the rural service, the Ontario Trillium Foundation provided an $80,000 grant, of which $20,000 was spent on a wheelchair-accessible van, and $60,000 was spend on expansion operating costs. The Northumberland Community Futures Development Corporation provided another $20,000 and the Northumberland United way contributed $5,000 (Hoskin & Vandine, 2016). The program is also supported by the Municipality of Trent Hills, which donates $45,500 to CCN for additional gas tax support every year (Community Care Northumberland, 2014). The program also receives a yearly grant from Northumberland County Community and Social Services $40,000.

The project coordinator also approached the townships of Cramahe and Alnwick/Haldimand to request financial assistance, and suggested they apply to the Gas Tax Fund from the provincial government. The Gas Tax funding allowed the program to continue past the pilot stage and is critical to its ongoing operation

In-kind contributions included a videographer at the Summit to tell the story of the project and volunteer time of a dedicated transportation committee that meets four times per year.

| RESULTS

Currently, Municipality of Trent Hills, Alnwick/Haldimand, Cramahe Townships, Town of Cobourg and Port Hope, and Hamilton Township in Northumberland County are connected through the Specialized Transportation Program. Other important results, though less tangible in nature, were noticed. Stories of resident's finishing school, finding employment, and making friends thanks to the Specialized Transportation Program demonstrate the value of rural transportation in benefiting individuals and strengthening social capital. Program staff who typically have access to personal vehicles were struck by the program's impact through survey feedback and the stakeholder summit. Summit organizers were surprised at the high level of community interest in the program. CCN staff report a greater appreciation and understanding of transportation needs and services. The program's success story has been shared with Haliburton County, where similar efforts are struggling to receive support.

CCN presentations to local councils and participation in social services coordination meetings with mayors and wardens have been helpful. The project coordinator has undertaken these activities at least once a year since the transportation initiative began in 2008. Overall, this evaluation has helped strengthen partnerships and increase engagement.

The program is currently conducting a one-year review following the stakeholder summit. Leaders have found it difficult to maintain momentum after the initial push of engagement and implementation. However, they still plan on finishing the review despite some delays, as they believe it important to provide residents with an update as well as to demonstrate what has become of their feedback. In hindsight, a stronger post-implementation plan and a smaller survey sample (e.g. 50 instead of 200 people and more quality conversations with the community) would have been useful at the onset of the project (Interview, 2017).

LESSONS LEARNED & ADVICE TO OTHERS

CCN Specialized Transportation Program has learned many lessons since it first implemented its transportation service in 2008. Their advice to others includes:

- Start with a work plan and adjust along the way
- When conducting surveys, think quality over quantity
- Have a separate follow up work plan for post-implementation; accept that "the work never ends" and that there are always improvements to be made
- Be in the public eye, keep the community engaged and informed
- Every community is different, there is no cookie cutter approach that will work everywhere
- Political support and financial backing will be different in each community and are essential to the success of the project
- There is currently a lot of support from the Ministry of Transportation to improve transportation services; the time to act is now!

CONCLUSION

Overall, the Specialized Transportation Program has had a tremendous positive impact on the wellbeing of Northumberland County residents. The increase in ridership and need to expand, as well as the personal stories of how it has impacted residents' lives, highlights the importance of the service to the community. Community service providers have also seen the value of the program, as their services are more integrated and frequented. Rural transportation programs are expensive to maintain and constant grants and subsidies are needed to keep the program running. CCN, through extensive community engagement and visibility as well as strong organizational planning, has proven the value of such a service and can provide an example to other rural communities seeking to implement similar transportation services.

| CHECKLIST

Key Ingredients for Success

Considering doing a similar project in your community?
It may work well if your county/organization...

- ☑ Has strong and supportive political backing.
- ☑ Is eligible to receive sufficient grants and subsidies to implement and maintain the program.
- ☑ Has a strong need for regular, affordable, accessible, and sustainable transportation options.
- ☑ Has a sufficient number of dedicated staff willing to deliver a transportation program.
- ☑ Has strong organizational and planning skills and preferably a history of running community or transportation services; running a public transportation and booking service requires a lot of coordination!
- ☑ Is willing to invest in advertisement and awareness building to develop strong community engagement, gather feedback, and gain clientele.
- ☑ Is looking to provide a much-needed service, but are not expecting to turn in a profit.

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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.

WEST CARLETON
AGING IN RURAL COMMUNITY PROJECT

❙ INTRODUCTION

Despite its close proximity to our nation's capital, seniors in West Carleton face isolation, exacerbated by a lack of transportation and access to community services. These challenges have detrimental effects on seniors' mental, emotional, and physical health. Local agencies face many challenges in providing fulsome supports. While agencies like the Western Ottawa Community Resource Centre (WOCRC) previously offered transportation programs, meals on wheels, and other services that addressed seniors' needs, these resources were underused. In 2015, WOCRC's new leadership decided to address the issue directly through the "Rural Community Development (RCD): Engagement on Health Priorities for Seniors and Caregivers in West Carleton" project (Bruce, McKercher, & Murray, 2016). WOCRC chose West Carleton as the pilot site for an asset-based community consultation as this community had the highest percentage of seniors living alone. WOCRC's Rural Community Development project was then selected by the Rural Ontario Institute to participate in its Measuring Rural Community Vitality Initiative, which provided funds to facilitate WOCRC's community consultation.

❙ NEEDS ADDRESSED

Although WOCRC had identified community engagement as a primary area of improvement, there was little political backing to approve such a project due to a lack of funds, the need to restructure priorities, cash flow, staff, etc. Serendipitously, addressing the needs of seniors became a provincial priority, opening the opportunity for WOCRC to apply for funding and build a case in favour of addressing this issue.

There was a need to understand why existing programs and services were underused. WOCRC, which also serviced communities closer to Ottawa, began to more fully appreciate that rural development is different than urban or sub-urban development. Unlike larger population areas, in rural areas it was essential for the community to be involved in the design and delivery of services (i.e. through volunteers and in-kind support) due to remoteness, high cost, and other logistical issues. In rural communities, it is virtually impossible for service providers to provide services on their own. The WOCRC acknowledged it had implemented programs and services based on the perceived needs of residents as understood by agencies and service providers, without trying to understand the real community needs based on feedback from residents themselves. Therefore, in implementing the project, a key component was establishing strong partnerships with as many stakeholders as possible. Donors — particularly the United Way — recognized the importance of relationship-building to the success of the project and funded much of WOCRC's "front-end" work.

To improve on how previous services were planned and implemented, this initiative sought to support the development of an integrated approach to improving the health, wellness, and resilience of the community, and reducing isolation. Additionally, the project also sought to identify community assets and opportunities to foster skill development (Bruce, McKercher, & Murray, 2016). Specifically, project champions wanted to engage and better understand the target community and their needs, and work with residents to identify barriers, opportunities, shared goals, and potential projects that would empower citizens and build community capacity to improve the lives of seniors and their caregivers.

▍SOLUTIONS PROPOSED

The lack of traction for other WOCRC projects indicated a lack of community awareness and engagement in their development and delivery of services. For the Rural Community Development project, WOCRC wanted the project to go beyond an aging and health-focused initiative, involving the whole community and increasing social capital. To do this, the project lead identified the need to perform an Asset-Based Community Development consultation that did not propose or prescribe solutions but allowed for an open assessment to truly hear the needs of community members. This consultation was intentional in working with the community and connecting to its natural synergies.

Using an Asset-Based Community Development framework drawing on existing community strengths to build stronger and more sustainable communities, the consultation focused on three main questions:

1. What are the community assets and advantages that could be used to benefit seniors and caregivers?
2. What are the problems and needs of seniors and caregivers?
3. What services and partnerships with health and social services partners would benefit seniors and caregivers, as well as what organizations would residents like to engage with in a co-production relationship (Bruce, McKercher, & Murray, 2016; DePaul University Asset-Based Community Development Institute, 2017)

To explore these questions, WOCRC, in partnership with Dr. Bruce of the West Carleton Family Health Team (WCFHT), began facilitating community forums using the Engagement on Health Priorities model to connect with residents. Church groups were instrumental in getting initial word out and connecting WOCRC with the community (Bruce, McKercher, & Murray, 2016). The forums built on previous engagements related to the project which began in 2011 and were captured on a blog designed to "tell the story" of rural community development (Ibid).

Six community forums were conducted, as well as three other informal events that facilitated data collection. Other sources of feedback were personal letters and emails detailing the challenges of living rurally, and key informant interviews with service providers as well as residents with health issues. In total, the project captured feedback from over 400 residents.

In June 2016, they received three years of additional funding from New Horizons for Seniors (Employment and Social Development Canada), for essential programming to reduce seniors' isolation and engage the broader local community to connect more effectively with seniors (Western Ottawa Community Resource Centre, 2016). A multi-stakeholder Task Group has been created to continue the leadership on the initiative (Bruce, McKercher, & Murray, 2016).

Budget

The project had a budget of approximately $47,000. In early 2016, WOCRC received $15,000 from ROI to support a robust consultation and resident-engaged planning process and to research the Champlain Link Health Initiative Network's (LHIN)'s "be-friending" community-support program (Bruce, McKercher, & Murray, 2016). That same year, WOCRC also received three years of additional funding from New Horizons for Seniors (Western Ottawa Community Resource Centre, 2016).

In-kind contributions from physicians (time and expertise), staff (time taken in lieu, and skills), community faith leaders (promotion, facilitation for wrap-up activity), and in the form of food and space were provided to help offset costs. Additionally, more than $100,000 in organizational resources were allocated to support the project. To ensure continuity, WOCRC's partner, United Way, extended funding for the project lead's position, to ensure the project continued moving forward.

West Carleton is located west of the city of Ottawa and has a population of over 18,500 people. Of all Canadian cities, Ottawa has the largest rural area: 80 percent of its territory is comprised of rural areas. However, residents of West Carleton must travel an average distance of 27.6 km to reach the closest resource center. The areas of Constance Bay and Fitzroy Harbor in West Carleton also have high rates of isolated seniors. Approximately 25% and 18%, respectively, of the population in these two areas are seniors who live alone (Bruce, McKercher, & Murray, 2016).

The **Western Ottawa Community Resource Centre** is a not-for-profit organization that provides health and social services to communities in far west Ottawa. Founded in 1986, the WOCRC has grown exponentially in terms of its programs and services, staffing, volunteers and clients served. They work to ensure vibrant, safe, healthy communities where everyone has access to the services and resources they require for their health and wellbeing, including support for seniors, new Canadians, those impacted by domestic violence, socialization programs, counselling, youth skills-building, and more.

| COMMUNITY ASSETS

Community assets were essential to the success of the project, and were brought to the forefront of the project through the Asset-Based Community Development approach.

Community members' expertise and personal experiences were a primary asset for the success of this initiative. Although residents were initially disengaged and largely unaware of the services WOCRC had to offer, a strong engagement strategy led to 400 residents and service representatives providing important feedback for the vision of the community moving forward, particularly on the issue of seniors and caregiver support. The stories of seniors and caregivers, including those who experienced isolation and health problems, were also heard, and ensured the voices of the most vulnerable were placed at the forefront of community decision-making.

Although community members were at the core of this project, having a strong and supportive leader was an essential asset for the project's success. WOCRC's new Director of Programs & Services, Michelle Murray, brought a shift in priorities and resources to better support the project and its lead, Julie McKercher. Through their leadership, the project's asset-based evaluation moved forward with greater direction and organizational support. As Director, Murray gave the project formal approval, supported her staff, moved resources within the organization to give the project the best chance of success, and took a strong stand to back the initiative. The outcome was better results in West Carleton.

Community leadership was also vital. Dr. Barry Bruce and the West Carleton Family Health Team (WCFHT) steered the facilitations to address key issues of health and vitality in the community. Julie McKercher, having worked in the community since 2011, brought in-depth institutional memory and excellent networking skills that helped strengthen partnerships and understand the challenges and opportunities of the community (Bruce, McKercher, & Murray, 2016; McKercher & Murray, 2017). Both Dr. Bruce and McKercher were highly regarded in the community, giving the initiative greater legitimacy.

Churches were also vital, active stakeholders: spreading news of the project, helping gather and engage residents, and participating in initial talks when brainstorming the initiative. Without the involvement of church groups, the project would not have been as successful (Bruce, McKercher, & Murray, 2016).

Volunteers became key members of the project, and developed a clear understanding of the project's mission. They helped as trainees, drivers, and in other capacities. A volunteer co-creative taskforce was initiated, which is still involved in leading the work of the community. Over the one-year life of the project, 26 new volunteer leaders were identified in the community (McKercher & Murray, 2017).

| RESULTS

The evaluation of the project funded by the Rural Ontario Institute was designed using a "Results Based Accountability" (RBA) framework. The evaluation explored three primary RBA questions:

1. How much did we do?

2. How well did we do it?

3. Is anybody better off?

The evaluation demonstrated the initiative was extremely successful and had directly benefited the wellbeing of seniors, caregivers, and the community at large. The feedback of more than 400 residents resulted in a shared understanding of supporting factors and barriers, key community assets, and the following five priorities for service to support seniors aging in place:

- Affordable and accessible transportation

- Caregiving: care unit and support

- Respite and adult day programs (ADP)

- Housing and household services

- Home care such as the Community Care Access Centre (Western Ottawa Community Resource Centre, 2016).

The consultation feedback was developed into a sustainable community action plan. The partners used an approach called co-production, in which those most affected design solutions and serve as key decision-makers. This resulted in many new initiatives and services being launched, such as new social groups, transportation supports, a handyperson service, computer training, and more (Ibid).

The social capital gained in West Carleton has been immense. Vulnerable seniors, many with health problems, are now included in community-building. Targeted services, chosen by the community themselves, have been launched. 26 new volunteer leaders were identified in newly established relationships with local service providers. Civic leadership, resident connection and socialization, as well as stronger partnerships between key stakeholders and organizations in the community, have been important results of the Rural Community Development project.

The initiative helped build social capital, leadership, and resilience in West Carleton. Project leads describe the Aging in Rural Community project as having increased individual residents' confidence to handle flooding given the service providers and resources in place. Project leads acknowledge the community's appropriation of lessons learned and application in situations beyond the intended scope of the original project. WOCRC reports a general sense of increased confidence in the community as to the impact collective efforts of citizens can have.

Other stakeholders are noticing the effectiveness of WOCRC's work. In 2016, the United Way approached WOCRC to submit an Ontario Trillium Foundation application for a multidimensional poverty reduction project worth $4 million. WOCRC led the submission with four area organizations, something they previously may not have considered. Although the proposal was ultimately unsuccessful, the invitation and ensuing process demonstrated the promise and potential for collaborative community work involving WOCRC and community partners.

LESSONS LEARNED & ADVICE TO OTHERS

West Carleton has learned many lessons since it began its Rural Community Development Project in 2011 (McKercher & Murray, 2016). Their advice to others includes:

- Build on and enhance existing social networks, particularly connecting "webs" of people who know others in the community
- Tap into and build relationships with existing community groups who work well together
- Ensure there is ample face-to-face time; building trust takes time and effort
- Cultivate supportive leadership, e.g. trusted local leaders, local groups with effective and collaborative leadership, well-established community development supports, supportive political environment
- Do not underestimate the need for 'front-end loading' of the project plan, i.e. early preparation and planning, especially in terms of networking and trust-building
- Stay community focused. The community is responsible for determining and shaping the compelling vision; the job of the project coordinators is to keep the initiative front and center
- Build a cohesive, productive culture. Community culture matters, and determines how community members engage in the process
- Be sure the community is ready for change. Community readiness is crucial. "There are no shortcuts to any place worth going"
- Look for sustainable sources of money
- Do not be afraid to take risks
- Be flexible; plans may change
- Consider the (Scottish) National Community Engagement Standards. These were a helpful resource on how to evaluate community engagement (Scottish Community Development Centre; Western Ottawa Community Resource, 2016).

CONCLUSION

The project evaluation, funded by the Rural Ontario Institute, provided an opportunity to reflect on how far the Rural Community Development project had come and the significant impact it had on civic engagement, social capital, and community wellbeing. The initiative enjoyed considerable success, resulting in better supports for healthy aging in the local area, an action plan based on strong local connections and existing support services, an increase in volunteering and community leadership, as well as high energy and optimism about the ability of rural residents to lead meaningful improvements in their communities (Evaluation Report, 2016). Positive change occurred not just for seniors and caregivers but at a systematic level, demonstrating the value of Asset-Based Community Development and designing programs and services in a manner that is collaborative rather than prescriptive. A multi-stakeholder Task Group has been created to continue the leadership of this initiative (RCD Report, 2016). The project demonstrates that disengaged communities can successfully adopt co-creation and asset-based development strategies to re-engage rural residents, develop civic leaders, and build a sense of communal ownership over community services.

| CHECKLIST

Key Ingredients for Success

Considering doing a similar project in your community?
It may work well if your county/organization...

☑ Has open-minded leadership that sees value in community consultations and is committed to rural community development and co-creation.

☑ Is willing to reallocate money within the agency to support community engagement projects (multi-year commitment).

☑ Values the work and impact of front-line workers and volunteers.

☑ Is willing to be reflective and respond to the needs of the community even if it means leadership, staff, and funders will be pushed out of their comfort zone.

☑ Believes that community members have solutions and assets to contribute to issues in their own community. This belief is paired with strong leadership that is not afraid to let the community take the reins over the direction of project outcomes.

☑ Is willing to provide ongoing support and engagement with the community. This might mean being the one to facilitate relationships among community members, groups and organizations.

☑ Seeks to intentionally listen and engage with vulnerable, traditionally marginalized groups.

☑ Has a strong volunteer base committed to the work.

☑ Has an organized project team able to synthesize large-scale community feedback into actionable community-wide goals and continuously remains accountable to the community.

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