



Measuring
Rural Community
Vitality



HURON COUNTY

HEALTHY RURAL POLICY LENS INITIATIVE

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RURAL ONTARIO
INSTITUTE

I 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.

I 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.

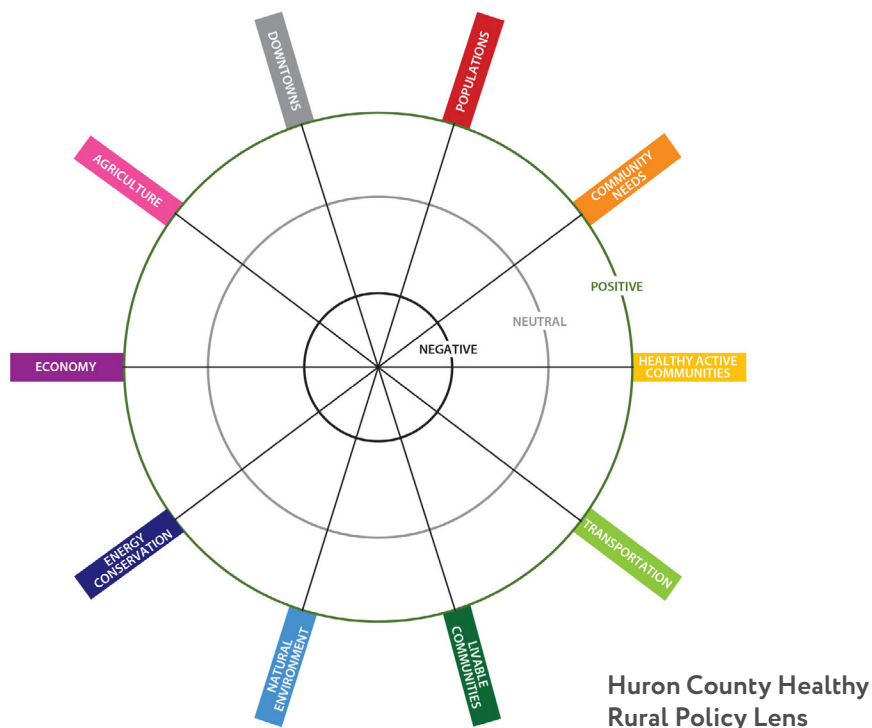
Based on a community development model, the HCHRPL tool opens opportunities for grassroots conversations, fostering important discussions which in turn promote community vitality. This tool helps evaluate decision-making in terms of its impact on the measures of community life. By using this tool, people 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).



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 Institute's 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 Schuehle 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 Schuehlele 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

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.

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| 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.

Prepared for:



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Facilitated by:



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