Planning Between Worlds

How a Town/Gown Partnership is Working Towards a ‘Sustainable Churchill’

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Abstract

University-Community partnerships, also known as Town/Gown partnerships, are agreements between a community setting and academic institution to engage in a project with a common interest. While these partnerships strive for a mutually beneficial outcome, the focuses of both sides are often in conflict. University research is primarily theoretical, whereas Governments are usually seeking practical answers to the concerns of the community. In order for Town/Gown partnerships to be successful, both parties must understand what is expected from them, and what they can expect from the process.

In 2008, the Town of Churchill, Manitoba and the Institute of Urban Studies (IUS) at the University of Winnipeg joined into a partnership to create a comprehensive development plan called “Sustainable Churchill”. This plan would contribute to the town’s development plan, which hadn’t been revised since 1999, and focuses on providing a roadmap towards a sustainable future for the town. From this partnership, the Town sought to gain understanding of the needs of its residents, and the IUS hoped to expand its knowledge of the region, and sustainable planning theory.

This case study examines the methods of creating the “Sustainable Churchill” plan, its successes and failures, and the effect that the Town/Gown partnership has had on this process.
Development plans in Manitoba have recently undergone a shift in requirements. In accordance to the Province of Manitoba’s new Provincial Land Use Policies (PLUPs), municipalities must incorporate a comprehensive integrated approach to their regular development plans. This new policy requires an analysis of sustainable factors, such as an integrated watershed management plan or climate change action plan to create a holistic direction for the community. Because of this, many municipalities have begun to look beyond their borders to help construct these integrated plans.

The Town of Churchill, Manitoba is a unique place. Because the town does not lie within a planning district, the municipality is responsible for all planning decisions that affect the area. While there was a draft of a sustainability plan created in 1997, it was not incorporated into their most recent development plan that was written in 1999. In order to comply with the Planning Act of Manitoba, the municipality, with funding from Omnitrax, the owners of the railroad into town, sought to hire a consultant to help draft this development plan.

The University of Winnipeg has a unique connection to the Town of Churchill through its President, Dr. Lloyd Axworthy. Dr. Axworthy has been devoted to keeping Churchill a strong community in the north since his political career. He was instrumental in saving Churchill’s deep sea port from closure, and was honoured for his role by the city naming a street after him. Because of this connection, the Town contacted Dr. Axworthy for assistance on this plan. He did not need to look far to find a willing partner.

The University of Winnipeg's Institute of Urban Studies (IUS) is the oldest urban research body in Canada. Since its inception over 40 years ago, it has been a leader in non-partisan action research. Throughout their tenure, the IUS has offered insight into urban conditions, as well as given the opportunity for students to get hand-on experience in research process. The focus of their research has been primarily in urban settings, however they have also published many reports investigating sustainable development, Aboriginal issues and northern communities.

In 2008, the Town of Churchill sought the aid of the IUS in drafting a sustainability strategy, deemed “Sustainable Churchill”, that would help them receive funding for and guidance towards more sustainable practices. Through this, the IUS would be given an opportunity to use their method of action research outside of an urban setting.
Collaboration between a municipality and an academic institution is not a new concept (Martin et al., 2005). Historically, these partnerships were initiated for the mutual benefit of both parties. Towns were able to use the university’s expertise and resources, while the university was able to gain some practical research opportunities in which to test their theoretical foundation. While the concept of town/gown partnerships is not new, several complications in the process lead to it not being a common practice in planning.

Partnerships of this type are often the result of the two bodies having different methods and goals for the project. The community partner does not place the same value on theory as the academic partner, and expects timely answers and directions to the pressing issues. The academic partner is often more willing to suggest untested and possibly impractical solutions to problems as a way to test theories, rather than offering practical solutions. While the two partners may share an end goal, the reasoning and methodology behind reaching that goal may drive the two into conflict.

Many researchers have studied how to mitigate potential problems in town/gown partnerships (Martin et al., 2005; Prins, 2005; Baum, 2000; Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2005). The main factors that cause conflict in these partnerships are a lack of communication between the parties, and unclear expectations from either side. If the goals and methods are clearly outlined and understood by both parties, the potential for conflict is reduced drastically. Expectations from partnerships are often set too high, in terms of both time required and implementation of the project’s findings. The community partner should not treat the academic partner as a hired consultant, and the academic partner should not assume to have total freedom in their research and recommendations.

For the Sustainable Churchill project, the Town of Churchill’s Sustainability Council and the IUS began the discussion with two objectives in mind. The first objective was to raise the quality of life for Churchill residents through improving the ecological, social and economic conditions of the community. The second was to act as model of sustainability for surrounding northern communities. With both parties understanding these objectives, the next step was to outline how these goals would be met within the context of Churchill.
The establishment of the town of Churchill was primarily focused around its location on the coast of Hudson’s Bay and viability for a new naval base and deep sea port. This port would act as a location from which to export grain from the Canadian Prairies. In the early 20th century, the federal government commissioned a plan that would guide the development of the community to a city of over 500,000 people called “Roblin City”. While the population of the town increased during the tenure of the military, since the base closure in 1964 it has been on a steady decrease from over 3,400 in 1969, to just over 900 people today.

With climate change being an emerging concern, the necessity to make Churchill a sustainable community is more important than ever. The ecological, social and economic challenges that the community is faced with all needed to be addressed in the Sustainable Churchill plan.

Transportation to the community is limited, only having two options: rail and air. The lack of a road into the community means that all goods must travel through the same means as passengers, meaning space is at a premium, leading to higher prices. The port is only in use during the summer months when the ice has melted. The need for a road to the community has been a contentious issue among the residents. Due to the town’s relative isolation, their methods of waste disposal and recycling are a proportionally larger burden than similar sized towns in the south. The one of many issues facing the town’s waste management is the danger of polar bears being attracted to the area. Because of this, the garbage must be stored indoors in an abandoned airplane hangar.

It is often difficult for newer residents to come to Churchill. The provincial government owns the majority of the housing in the community. Because there is no privately owned alternative, there is little choice in housing, and it is rented based upon need and ability to pay. The lack of housing means that the seasonal and temporary workers often cannot find a place to live, putting the burden of finding housing on the employer.

The main industries in the Town of Churchill are the port and the tourism industry. Due to their nature, both of these industries are seasonal. The port, as previously mentioned, only operates during the summer months. Tourism in Churchill is focused on showcasing the wildlife, namely the polar bears and beluga whales, which are only plentiful during certain times of the year.

The ecological, social and economic issues of the community showed that in its current form, the town was unsustainable. The Sustainable Churchill partnership identified these challenges as key elements to address when drafting the plan.
From the summer of 2008 through the summer of 2009, the IUS worked with a Sustainability committee appointed by the Mayor and Council to address these issues. As a town/gown partnership emerged, both the community and the IUS were given separate tasks to focus on before coming together to create a sustainable vision.

The mandate of the Sustainability committee would be to classify the needs of the community as they related to economic, ecological and social sustainability. As the community partner, the Sustainability committee would provide the starting point for the IUS to focus its research. The committee met a number of times between October 2008 and June 2009 and passed on their findings to the IUS.

During this time, the IUS had their student researchers compile the demographic data and background studies on sustainability. The demographic factors were used to give a statistical backing to the social and economic standing of the area. Factors such as population decline, increase in median age, limited access to advanced education, transportation modes and income were analyzed to see any potential issues for the future of the community.

As the academic partner, the IUS was responsible for bringing theoretical principles into the sustainability plan. For this, researchers studied many different sustainable platforms and focused on the best practices found within each. Researchers examined the Five-Milestone Framework, The Natural Step process and the comprehensive community planning process for First Nations as set out by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada to help guide how to engage the community in creating a sustainability plan. This background research was used as a foundation from which the community engagement would be based.

Due to the distance between the two partners, the IUS was only able to make a few short trips to the community. While the initial trip was used to clarify the partnership, there were two separate times when researchers from the IUS engaged with the community to help draft the plan – once in March 2009 and once in late August. An additional trip in connection with the project by a University professor and her student was made in the summer of 2009.

The March engagement had three student researchers, Barb
Bessner, Britanny Shuwera and Kaeley Wiseman, engage with the community by talking at the local school children about sustainability and informal meetings with the public at local coffee shops. The engagement at the school had students identify the risks and opportunities of the town in terms of sustainability. The researchers prompted the students to figure out what was ecological about the town and what needed improvement. While the school session focused mainly on the ecological aspect of sustainability, the informal meetings at the coffee shops focused on all aspects, including housing, the economy, the social status of the community and transportation concerns. The March engagement, while limited, helped to guide the focus of the IUS on Sustainable Churchill towards the larger engagement slated for late August.

In preparation for the second engagement, the IUS worked with the sustainability committee to create a discussion paper that outlined all research to date. This discussion paper was made available to all residents of Churchill on the Town’s website, so to inform the residents of the process, the issues, and of the August engagement. In addition, a newsletter drawing out highlights was placed in every residents’ mailbox. The background studies made by the IUS, as well as the sustainability committee’s identified foci led to the nine themes for which the conversation during the August engagement would be derived.

These nine themes were as follows:

1. Arts, Culture and Heritage
2. The Natural and Built Environment (Including Housing)
3. Education, Training and the Economy
4. Energy and Solid Waste
5. Health and Social Sustainability
6. Transportation
7. Water Quality and Security
8. Recreation, Tourism and Leisure
9. Indigenous Knowledge

Nine researchers from the IUS traveled to Churchill for the August consultation. Because the logistics were so complex and the cost considerable, this engagement would be more intensive and comprehensive than the March one. What was decided on between the IUS and the Sustainability committee was a three-day engagement plan. The first day would serve as an introduction of the researchers to the community and the community to the researchers. During this first day, presentations and tours were given to familiarize both parties to the issues and background of the area.

The second day was again a series of informal meetings. Researchers set up at different locations in the town, and invited residents to talk about their feelings and ideas towards ecological, economic and social sustainability. These conversations offered residents the chance to express concerns and ideas about the nine identified topics, while also giving them an opportunity to learn more about sustainable practices.

The third day held the visioning exercise, a large public engagement in which the town would work together to clarify Churchill’s community values and sustainability principles that would be carried forward into the plan. For this several engagement strategies
were conducted to determine these goals. Priorities were determined through ‘the money game’ in which community members were given fake money to spend on the nine categories to see what was more important for the community. A facilitated discussion identified the strengths and weaknesses of the community, as well as the opportunities and threats that the future may hold. Two breakout sessions around a town and regional map were held to give geographic context to some of the identified issues and opportunities. Finally, after all discussion and ideas were shared, a second sampling of priorities was conducted to see how attitudes had changed.

The researchers at the IUS took all of the information gathered at these engagements back with them to their Winnipeg office. There, the data was analyzed and synthesized into an Interim Report, which was submitted to the Sustainability Committee in December of 2009. The Committee reviewed the report and returned it with comments in April of 2010. In the interim IUS researchers worked on developing the planning framework to work toward the next step in the process. As yet, the information from these engagements has not been made available publicly, and the Sustainable Churchill initiative is still ongoing.

Town/Gown relationships allow partnerships between people who work in extremely different contexts. The geographic context is one that proved to be a challenge in this partnership. As discussed before, the great distance between the IUS offices in Winnipeg and the Town of Churchill was a limiting factor in the partnership. While in the same province, the distance between the two communities is analogous to the distance between London and Prague, Stockholm and Milan or Istanbul and Kiev. Even with telecommunication technology in place, contact between the two partners became an issue, with neither party talking for months at a time.

Another contrast between the partners lay in the environment in which they worked. As discussed before, one of the dangers in a Town/Gown partnership lies in the differences between a municipal government and an academic institution. Even with identifying this as a potential concern and attempting to clearly plan out the expectations and goals for a project, the two partners still saw the project as something different. The misunderstandings between the two partners led to the project taking longer than anticipated.

Town/Gown partnerships do offer unique experiences for both parties. It is unlikely that the information gathered through the series of public engagements would have been disclosed through a municipal plan alone. The IUS had an experience to work outside of their

Conclusions & Lessons Learned
familiar context in the city, and the municipality was exposed to some theories it otherwise would not have had access to. As the project comes to a close, the lessons from this partnership should act as a guide of how two different worlds can plan together.

References:


Pictures by B. Lister, B. Bessner, K. Wiseman, J Golby Borsa, M. Dudley, A. Ladd (all 2009)