



UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA
ALBERTA CENTRE FOR SUSTAINABLE
RURAL COMMUNITIES

Regional Collaboration Policy Brief

SUPPORTING REGIONAL COLLABORATION FOR SUCCESS

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Executive Summary

Collaboration within and between regions is increasingly a priority for rural Albertan municipalities, and has been encouraged by the provincial government. Improved and/or broader partnerships are seen as key elements in potentially reducing costs, increasing economic benefits and focusing planning services and project development. In an economic climate of scarcity, and with the gradual adoption of the Land Use Framework, there are increased pressures upon rural communities to integrate, collaborate and partner with not just other municipalities, but various service and program providers in innovative ways. There is, therefore, a need to consider the form, function and implications of regional collaboration. This policy brief summarizes the highest priorities, impact areas, needs and gaps as outlined in the Regional Collaboration Workshop Synthesis Report (ACSRC, 2016). Based upon a series of regional workshops conducted in 2015 and 2016, this document outlines (1) models for regionalized collaboration in the future (based upon a scenario planning process; and (2) priority recommendations for different levels of action. Additional details on the results and process of the workshops are available in the synthesis report, and from the ACSRC.

The Existing Approach:

The 2014 Alberta Rural Economic Development Action Plan identifies 5 different priority areas for implementation in order to improve economic development, including:

1. Enhanced business capacity
2. Increased access to capital
3. Recruitment and retention strategies
4. Improving business infrastructure
5. Enabling collaboration within and between regions in Alberta to better focus planning, service delivery and project development.

This strategy aligns with a number of other shifts in the policy and economic development context of Alberta, including:

1. The Land Use Framework (and affiliated legislation), the shift to regionalized land use planning, cumulative effects and a role for municipalities in the compliance of regions with plans;
2. Increasing awareness of the benefits and opportunities for rural municipalities – presented by infrastructural, service and programming-based collaboration;
3. Increasing awareness of reforms to municipal and rural government in other provinces in Canada that have implications for regionalized governance.

Rural communities are often already engaged in extensive partnerships, cost-sharing and similar collaborations. These were identified to commonly include:

- cross-municipal partnerships and agreements
- emergency services, fire, police
- recreation
- tourism
- land use planning
- regional waste management commissions
- Family and Community Support Services (FCSS)
- Municipal partnerships where a larger municipality, typically a county, provides financial administrative support to smaller municipalities within its borders.

A number of trends and patterns were identified by workshop participants in the categories of education, government, economy, technology, demography, social and collaboration itself. The overarching trend identified in every workshop was the requirement that municipalities continue to do more with less; there is often a decrease in available funding but an increase articulated as a need, or a devolved responsibility.

Scenarios for Collaboration in Rural Alberta

What does the future hold?

- economic development and diversification beyond oil and gas
- because of the need to do more with less, there will be ever more incentives, i.e. grant programs, for collaborative projects
- adapting to a knowledge-based economy
- increased information and data-sharing
- increased/accelerated communications due to ICT and social media use
- a segment of youth migrating/returning to rural areas
- when trying to attract investment to the region, it is likely that even businesses that normally compete come together for the benefit of attracting outside investment
- continued investment in capital projects

Best Ways to Foster Collaboration:

- make it more expensive NOT to collaborate
- facilitate grassroots participation
- create a positive rationale for collaboration (ie, provide good reasons)
- develop, train and support leadership that has knowledge, experience, and a sense of history
- collaboration cannot be mandated, but must grow on its own
- mandating collaboration may actually exceed the capacity of those being pushed together
- collaboration should NOT be dictated or directed by the province (imposed/mandated collaboration gives the reluctant partners a common enemy) but rather can be enabled or supported from the bottom-up

The Next Step: Recommendations

While a number of potential areas for collaboration were raised in the workshops (ACSRC, 2016), there were a number of common areas identified as high priority areas for collaboration several themes emerge:

1. **Access.** This theme encompasses areas of transportation; education and health services - moving people to the service or the service to the people; and broadband. Addressing the issue of access to high bandwidth broadband itself is an avenue providing access to health and education. Providing a basic level of access was itself listed as a high impact area for collaboration in Fort McMurray, while in Hanna the same theme of basic access was identified as a principle upon which to base collaboration.
2. **Regional identity allowing for community specialization.** If the residents of the region identify with the region, rather than their municipality, then health care, recreation, arts and culture can be spread throughout the communities in the

region. However, there remains the need to ensure that residents have access to the other communities in their region to be able to reach those services.

3. **Regionalization of administration and governance.** While there are a variety of existing shared service agreements, there was general agreement that these agreements would continue to grow, particularly in the areas of administration as rural populations continue to shrink and it isn't financially feasible for small municipalities to hire full time administrators. Furthermore, given shrinking populations, it may be more sustainable for rural municipalities to combine councils, as well as administration. While there was substantial support for municipalities having the opportunity to investigate various amalgamation options, there was adamant opposition to the process being mandated. It was a matter for debate as to whether regionalizing administration and governance helps create a regional identity; or if the regional identity supports the development of regionalized government.

Priority Sectors:

1. extending the reach and bandwidth capacity of broadband internet service
2. economic diversification
3. developing welcoming communities strategies that encourage and support new Canadians, and includes a workforce attraction and retention plan
4. developing hubs - education, food, libraries
5. increasing capacity in mental health services
6. increasing capacity for senior care
7. investing in the existing assets of the FCSS and existing tourism and special events.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO:

Regional Economic Development Alliances (REDAs)

1. Spearhead an **access to broadband initiative**, with an emphasis on higher bandwidth than what is currently the official definition of high speed internet.
2. Develop, or further enhance existing, **regional branding** for both tourism and attracting business, professionals, workforce and young families.
3. Broaden **research and development** efforts in hub development beyond business and industry hubs to include social service hubs.
4. REDAs are uniquely positioned to be able to give collective voice to rural issues. Two workshops specifically stated the need to collaborate for the purposes of **giving rural issues legitimacy and voice**.

Municipalities

1. Ensure that **planning commitments** which have a life longer than the election cycle can't be changed with a change in council.

2. Continue to work with other municipalities in the region in the development of a **regional culture**.
3. Partner with and engage local/regional **non-profit and non-government organizations**. It was observed by administrators and non-profit representatives in several workshops that the conversations at the workshop had given them an understanding of each other's organizations that they had not previously had.
4. With increasing immigration, even smaller rural municipalities are seeing new Canadians. Engage in or develop **welcoming communities strategies** to ensure new Canadians feel at home in the community. Natural population increase is not going to be enough to support rural community populations; we need to attract immigrants to sustain population.

Government of Alberta

1. Enable municipal collaboration via **incentives and streamlined voluntary amalgamation** processes, rather than legislating collaboration.
2. Dissolution is currently financially punitive to the receiving municipality (usually a county), as it has to take on infrastructure deficit and liabilities. In the interests of supporting regional government, the province could remove that financial burden. Furthermore, **voluntary amalgamation** is a process that could be streamlined; and in support of encouraging regional collaboration and efficient use of resources, municipalities could have the option of amalgamating as they see fit, rather than based on a shared boundary.
3. Continue to work on ensuring access to **quality water and wastewater management**
4. **Consult with municipalities** on issues that affect them. Collaboration needs to include the provincial government.
5. Given the amendment to the Municipal Government Act requiring municipalities to adopt an Intermunicipal Collaboration Framework (ICF) with neighbouring municipalities to address land-use planning, regional service delivery and cost-sharing, note that participants in these workshops saw services as something that could/should be provided regionally, not just between municipalities sharing a boundary. Consequently, it could be a more efficient and effective use of resources to develop a **regional ICF** rather than one with each neighbouring municipality.
6. These workshops identified that a successful collaboration has a formalized governance structure, and that a template is a useful tool on which to develop a collaboration, though with room for modification. It would be useful for the province to **provide a governance model or framework** on which the ICFs are to be developed, rather than leaving it completely open to the municipalities to develop them.
7. Funding is not just an issue for non-profit and non-government organizations; municipalities, and the organizations that rely on them, require a consistent and predictable source of funding. The current amendments to the Municipal Government Act do not address this issue. Municipalities could be provided with

- the ability to **increase their revenue generating authority**; and core provincial grants and transfers could be stabilized to allow for multi-year planning.
8. One of the identified variables impacting successful collaboration was a lack of capacity to **engage First Nations communities**. Alberta Indigenous Relations could provide training to enhance that capacity.

Conclusion

There are numerous examples of successful regional collaboration throughout the province, and it is recognized that collaboration will continue to be an effective and necessary method of addressing regional issues in rural Alberta. With the provincial government in favour of collaboration as a cost effective way to achieve projects and delivery services, including the regionalization of services and government, these ends will best be served by incentivizing and otherwise providing support for various forms of collaboration, rather than mandating or legislating it outright.

Recommended Readings

Van Assche, K., et al. (2016) Boom & Bust, managing ups and downs in communities: A Guide. The University of Alberta, Faculty of Extension.

Hallstrom, L., et al. (March, 2016). Sustainability Planning and Collaboration: Taking the Next Steps. The University of Alberta Press

Alberta Land Stewardship Act
(2011) (<https://www.landuse.alberta.ca/Governance/ALSA/Pages/default.aspx>)

Alberta Municipal Governance Act Review (<http://mgareview.alberta.ca/>)

Scanton, A. Canadian Local Government: An Urban Perspective (2011)

References

ACSRC, Regional Collaboration Workshop Synthesis Report, ACSRC REPORT SERIES NO. 27/2016 8of 8
[<http://www.augustana.ualberta.ca/research/centres/acsrc/resources/reports.html>]

Acknowledgments

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About ACSRC

The ACSRC fills the gap for research and policy in rural areas by fostering constructive dialogue, promoting interdisciplinary and collaborative research, and developing partnerships between the University of Alberta and rural communities.

Mission

The mission of the ACSRC is to link the research, outreach and educational capacity of the University of Alberta with students, researchers, rural communities, rural community organizations and policy makers at multiple levels across the province, nationally, and internationally in order to support the improved sustainability of rural communities and populations.

General information

The vision of the ACSRC is of resilient rural communities across Canada linked closely to the discovery, dissemination, and application of new knowledge at the University of Alberta through teaching and learning, research and creative activity, community involvement, and partnerships. Such resilient rural communities will hinge on informed citizens actively participating in community governance and development in order to support and sustain the people, livelihoods, regional and local capital, economic development and long-term social viability of rural communities as a key element of the Canadian economy, the natural environment and as home to many Canadians.

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