


Out of the Development Box

*How small towns can discover
a new approach to local development*

BY MICHELLE COLUSSI





WE ALL KNOW COMMUNITIES that, under tremendous social and economic pressure, are struggling to re-invent themselves. I think it is also safe to say that we all know communities that, notwithstanding the pressure, continue to use old approaches to the new and more complex problems before them. In a word, these communities are *stuck*.

So, as Dr. Phil would say, if the old approaches to local development aren't working, why is it so hard to shift to a different approach? How do people come to see the rut they're in, and then start to climb out of it?

The Centre for Community Enterprise (CCE) conducted an informal phone survey of 29 BC communities in 2002. We talked to regional district staff, EDOs, and municipal and Community Futures staff. Over 70% of respondents describe their approach to local development as "business," "commercial," or "economic development."

Conversely, nearly three-quarters of respondents considered it important to include both social and economic factors and to engage a broad range of citizens and organizations in development planning and implementation.

Survey respondents cited lack of knowledge, skills and political support as the key reasons why their approach to development does not reflect these principles. In most cases, they or their governing bodies believe that, "once we have jobs, all the rest will follow."

There are no villains here. Most of the people we talked to are evidently doing the best they can to respond to and influence change despite the competing interests of politicians, small business, citizens and social service organizations. Clearly, they are concerned, committed people struggling to preserve accustomed values and lifestyles without the knowledge and tools necessary in our country's new economy and political climate.

My own community of Port Alberni is a good example of this dilemma. This strong and proud coastal forest community once had the highest per capita income of any community in the country. For 20 years now there has been crisis after crisis. Mills have shut down. Job opportunities in the forest sector have imploded. Fishing quotas have been reduced or taken away completely. Twenty years!

Overall, the change has been pretty gradual. What has not happened is any sort of gradual shift to new models of, or approaches to, local development. The community still deals with grief and to some extent denial; we still look primarily to international corporate solutions to save us. There is still no common vision of "what we want to be when we grow up."

More specifically, no one can tell me what our real market and local development opportunities or priorities should be. ("Jobs" is the common answer). Despite everything, a great many of our residents and development organizations continue to ascribe to the Old Model of Local Development (see sidebar, next page). The result is a fractured and conflicted environment around how to strengthen the social and economic fabric of the community. Many organizations are rowing hard and fast, but not necessarily in the same direction.

How then do we begin to break down this Old Model of development that once worked so well, but now is obsolete? How do communities like ours reach a point where they might give serious consideration to a New Model – one that integrates the social and economic aspects of our lives, engages citizens and organizations, and builds their capacity for long-term self-reliance?

The antiquated sawmills of MacMillan Bloedel's Alberni Pacific Division, mainstay of the local economy for decades, undergo demolition in 1981. The new, computerized plant nearby has 40% more capacity – and 75% the workforce. Photograph from the Alberni Valley Museum Collection, PN8543. (Inset) The old habit of planning *for* people, not *with* them, is hard to break. Nowadays, it makes conflict inevitable. These residents campaigned against a plan to locate a gas-fired plant near Port Alberni to generate electricity. Many other citizens still hold this group responsible for "preventing growth and jobs." Photo: Mia Vare, *Alberni Valley Times*.

Models of Local Development

Described often as “industrial” or “economic” or “business” development, I see the **Old Model of Local Development** this way:

- It takes a relatively narrow, “economic only” view of community revitalization. Although there may be a “social development strategy” and an “economic development strategy,” odds are the two are not integrated, and the two planning groups never meet.
- There is a “survival of the fittest” attitude about the poor. Local developers do not consider poverty issues to be part of their mandate – regardless of the intrinsic link between poverty and economic self-reliance.
- There is a tendency to link economic development with infrastructure development. Other functions, like human resource development, are not seen as key pieces of the puzzle, however.
- Planning and research primarily tends to take the form of feasibility studies on a project-by-project basis, or on a sectoral basis. While this is not a bad thing, it is simply not enough to examine and build a project or sector in isolation – we all know communities don’t work that way in reality.
- Those involved in the planning and implementation are sector-specific experts or members of local companies or businesses. Those affected are not usually involved.
- Because there is no need to involve a broad cross-section of citizens or organizations in either the planning or the implementation, there is no need to train or support them. Power is held, not shared.
- It can be long term. It can be publicly accountable if there is a set of priorities and reports of progress are made against those desired outcomes.
- There can be a very strong orientation toward strengthening local ownership. However in some cases support for starting or strengthening local, (typically) small business is superseded by a stronger focus on larger, outside investments.

Regardless of what you call it (Local Economic Development, Community Controlled Development, Sustainable Development, Community Economic Development, etc.), I see the **New Model of Local Development** in these terms:

- It considers all aspects of “community” (social, economic, environmental, political) as inter-connected parts of a whole. The functions of infrastructure development, financial development, human resource development, and planning and research are seen as inter-related parts of a comprehensive development system.
- Efforts are made to engage a broad cross-section of citizens and organizations in the planning and implementation.
- Efforts are made to increase citizen and organizational skills, knowledge and leadership for local development. There is an intent to empower the participants.
- It is long term.
- It is publicly accountable through some means of priority setting and assessment of progress towards outcomes. There is an orientation toward strengthening local ownership and equity.

A 3-Step Process

In my experience, destabilizing the Old Model involves three steps. These steps can be undertaken with a local board of directors, a service club, a municipal council, or a public forum. You decide what will work, and where the greatest impact might be in your community.

1. Offer people a new lens through which to view their community – a lens derived from what has worked in other places.

Tell the stories of communities that have managed to survive and even thrive in the face of change or stress. From them derive a list of the key approaches, or ingredients, that were instrumental to that success.

Some tools, like the *Community Resilience Manual*, explain the characteristics that successful communities demonstrate. (See the list of 23 characteristics on page 10). These characteristics can be useful benchmarks for people to apply to their own community. *20 Clues to Rural Community Survival* (Lincoln, NE: Heartland Center for Leadership Development, 1987) is another and there are more.

Whatever framework of “community success factors” that you choose to use, make sure that it encompasses the economic and the social aspects of the community – and of the whole community, as opposed to any one sector.

Is this CED? No – or at least, not yet. This public seminar process has ushered in the paradigm shift that makes CED a possibility, however. Local leaders are moving from holding & controlling information to sharing it. They are turning away from a dependence on experts to a commitment to building the capacity of local citizens.

2. Using this new lens, engage a broad cross-section of citizens and organizations in a dialogue about and assessment of local strengths and weaknesses.

When people struggle to identify barriers, to think through the causes of local weaknesses, and to think about how the strengths might best serve them – this is where the magic happens. People are exposed to diverse perspectives and new ideas. Soon light bulbs are going off as people see connections for the first time.

For example, one characteristic of Community Resilience is the following: “Local elected leadership is visionary, shares power, and builds consensus.” This statement could lead to discussions about whether or not that is the role of elected officials. If it isn’t, whose job is it? Why is it so important anyway? The question then might become, “How do we create a basis for working together that does

share power and build consensus?” And on it goes. The characteristics themselves encourage questions and debate. People learn and apply that learning immediately to their local environment.

While this discussion is important, encourage participants to identify which characteristics or “success factors” their community demonstrates, and which it doesn’t. People do know and understand their communities. Typically, even an informal assessment – when we ask residents to rate their community’s strengths and weaknesses against given “success factors,” for example – generates results that are consistent and realistic.

3. Find a way to summarize the participants’ perceptions of local strengths and weaknesses. Use this to identify emerging themes and to increase understanding of the relationships between factors or themes.

As the results of surveys and/or ranked strengths and weaknesses are fed back to participants the fun really begins.

What are the most common concerns or strengths? What were the anomalies? Why did a group or individual select them? Can any of the top ranked items be clustered around a common theme? Are there any cause and effect relationships between the top-ranked items? This discussion builds on the learning that has happened in previous steps and encourages participants to arrive at a *collective* sense of the top strengths and weaknesses. Ask participants to think about what might help their community become more successful, given what they now know about other successful communities and about their own community. In other words, what might help them get from here – to there?

Port Alberni

CCE applied these steps in Port Alberni in three 2-hour evening seminars in the spring of 2002. Our goal was to engage a broad cross section of citizens and organizations in thinking *differently* about the community and approaches to strengthen it. We wanted to destabilize the current model of local development. We thought if this public seminar approach could work here, it could work anywhere.

The seminars were publicly advertised, with key organizations across all sectors getting invitations faxed, or phone calls urging them to attend. Given our dual role as residents, with all the connections that entails, and event organizers/facilitators, we were in a unique position to take on this type of recruitment. In the end however, it didn’t matter if the leaders we tried to recruit attended or not (and most did not). Out of a population of 27,000, about 120 people attended the seminars. They were primarily ordinary citizens, not high-profile community leaders. Significantly, few were currently active in the issues and processes of local economic development.

We introduced key principles of local development, including the 23 characteristics of resilient communities. Case studies illustrated the principles in action. We asked participants to

think about their own community in terms of these principles. People could also respond through a mail-in survey published in the local newspaper. Finally we looked at a citizen-based, community-wide planning process from Oregon and how it might address the key weaknesses that had emerged.

In addition to the seminars we did radio interviews. The local paper publicized each seminar and published a mail-in survey about the town’s strengths and weaknesses. We also wrote several additional articles on the different approaches to local development.

They are getting over a purely economic perspective of “development” in preference for a perspective that integrates all segments of the community & all aspects of its life. They have perceived “the box” & are beginning to think “out of it”

In the end, 50 or so citizens supported the creation of a Task Force to develop a Terms of Reference for a local planning process with three chief attributes. It would

- be citizen-led.
- integrate the social, economic and environmental.
- engage a broad cross section of citizens and organizations.

A subsequent public meeting endorsed these Terms of Reference and formed a committee to select from public nominees a non-partisan group of citizens to steward the planning process. This group, the Alberni Outlook 20/20 Council, will embark on a planning process this year. The Terms of Reference and the Outlook Council have both City and Regional District endorsement. Neither the Economic Development Commission nor Community Futures were part of that final group of 50, but they currently express guarded support.

So, using “soft” political support and the power of citizens, a community has begun to look at new ways of working. We fully expect that the local development organizations will eventually become partners in, or at least supportive of, this process.

Paradigm Shift

The power of our effort in Port Alberni seems to derive from two sources.

Firstly, there are the seminar participants. All were local leaders of one kind or another (including youth), but they were not power brokers. They are not all CED experts on account of the seminars by any means. But they can describe what’s worked for others and where Port Alberni falls short. They have a sense of the kind of relationships and leadership that were key to the success of others. They also have a sense of ownership for local development that was not there before as well as a new energy and sense of commitment – maybe even hope.

Today, we have even more of these “atypical” community leaders involved in the development process on account of the people selected to sit on the Alberni Outlook Council. Not a bad beginning.

Secondly, there were the facilitators. CCE had the expertise to facilitate the process and bring in the examples, sure. But beyond that, we ourselves are locals. We were able to use our own personal connections to mobilize participation. (For example, we met personally with staff from the City, Regional District, and Economic Development Commission about the seminars.) Finally, we were available to support the task force after the seminar series and commit time to additional newspaper articles, as the seminar participants themselves requested.

It has been the knowledge, skills, and leadership ability of both these groups that has “readied” Port Alberni for a more realistic, more promising approach to local development – got the ball rolling out of the rut and in a new direction, as it were. Essentially, a substratum of community leaders has emerged, is equipping themselves with new information, and is beginning to apply it.

The hope is that over time, the planning process and the goals and strategies that issue from it will increase local awareness of alternatives and insistence on doing local development differently. Maybe even local development organizations will begin to work differently, given a common set of priorities.

Is this CED? No – or at least, not yet. This public seminar process has ushered in the paradigm shift that makes CED a possibility, however. Local leaders are moving from holding and controlling information to sharing it. They are turning away from a dependence on experts to a commitment to building the capacity of local citizens. They are getting over a purely economic perspective of “development” in preference for a perspective that integrates all segments of the community and all aspects of its life. They have perceived “the box” and are beginning to think “out of it” – which is more or less CED’s point of origin, right?



MICHELLE COLUSSI has been active in community economic development since 1985. She is manager of the Technical Assistance Division of the Centre for Community Enterprise and team leader of the CCE’s Community Resilience Project. Contact Michelle at (tel) 250-724-1675 or (e-mail) colussi@shaw.ca.

23 Characteristics of Resilient Communities

These 23 characteristics can be researched and analyzed to provide a portrait of a community’s resilience. They are not exhaustive; many other characteristics might relate to or describe a community’s resilience. (At the outset of our research we started with over 60.) However, these 23 have the strongest relationship to resilience, given current knowledge about how successful communities work.

1. Leadership is diversified and representative of age, gender, and cultural composition of the community.
2. Elected community leadership is visionary, shares power and builds consensus.
3. Community members are involved in significant community decisions.
4. The community feels a sense of pride.
5. People feel optimistic about the future of the community.
6. There is a spirit of mutual assistance and co-operation in the community.
7. People feel a sense of attachment to their community.
8. The community is self-reliant and looks to itself and its own resources to address major issues.
9. There is a strong belief in and support for education at all levels.
10. There are a variety of CED organizations in the community such that the key CED functions are well served.
11. Organizations in the community have developed partnerships and collaborative working relationships.
12. Employment in the community is diversified beyond a single large employer.
13. Major employers in the community are locally owned.
14. The community has a strategy for increasing independent local ownership.
15. There is openness to alternative ways of earning a living and economic activity.
16. The community looks outside itself to seek and secure resources (skills, expertise, finance) that will address areas of identified weakness.
17. The community is aware of its competitive position in the broader economy.
18. The community has a Community Economic Development Plan that guides its development.
19. Citizens are involved in the creation and implementation of the community vision and goals.
20. There is on-going action towards achieving the goals in the CED Plan.
21. There is regular evaluation of progress towards the community’s strategic goals.
22. Organizations use the CED Plan to guide their actions.
23. The community adopts a development approach that encompasses all segments of the population.

Download the complete *Community Resilience Manual* (Guide and Workbook) from www.cedworks.com (click on “Community Resilience”) in portable document format at no charge. A bibliography is also available on request.