CULTURE AND COMMUNITY
Sustainable Community Planning in the Rolling River First Nation

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ABSTRACT

Urban, rural and First Nations communities across the country face a growing infrastructure deficit. Sustainable community planning processes provide an opportunity to address this deficit in a way that both improves the quality of life for citizens and reduces environmental impact. However, there remains a gap between planning processes infused with sustainability principles and implementation. The purpose of this article is to explore this 'implementation gap' from a First Nations perspective. First Nations communities face particular capacity barriers and opportunities to conducting innovative and integrated planning. Using data drawn from a case study of Rolling River First Nation in Manitoba, the article illustrates how the community identified cultural traditions and the land base as critical components of their planning process. Both served to build the social infrastructure that provided the necessary capacity to bridge the planning — implementation gap.

INTRODUCTION

Recent studies by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) indicate that Canadian municipalities are facing the dual problem of declining infrastructure investments and aging infrastructure, resulting in an infrastructure funding deficit that is estimated at $123 billion and growing by $2 billion each year (Mirza, 2007). The infrastructure deficit raises concerns about potential declines in overall quality of life in communities as a result of deteriorating transpor-

tation systems, water and waste systems and public services. For Canadian First Nations communities, the challenge is even greater. First Nations communities lack adequate education facilities, all weather roads, housing and over one hundred communities are under drinking water advisories (AFN, 2010).

The infrastructure deficit is further complicated by the need to integrate planning for global issues (e.g. climate change and trade agreements) into systems that are already struggling with increased infrastructure costs, dwindling natural resources, and land-use development conflicts. As a result, many communities are turning to sustainable community development as a means to integrate planning priorities, improve public participation, leverage resources, and generate creative and practical solutions to shared economic, environmental, and social problems. However, despite adding sustainable development principles to planning and decision-making processes, few communities have succeeded in translating high-level sustainability goals and objectives into tangible projects. Barriers to implementation are many. They include a lack of connection between sustainable community development ideals and planning practices that result from the failure to mobilize support for sustainability (Berke, 2008), difficulty with merging institutional processes with grassroots initiatives (van Bueren & ten Heuvelhof, 2005), jurisdictional challenges associated with First Nations governance (McNeil, 2007), and problems generating effective citizen engagement and social capital (Dale & Onyx, 2005; Rydin & Pennington, 2000). These barriers are aggravated by the tendency to focus exclusively on the environmental elements of sustainable development instead of capitalizing on the economic and social benefits of integrated decision-making (Anand & Sen, 2000).

The purpose of this paper is to address the planning–implementation gap from a First Nations community perspective. Drawing from a two-year project that investigated sustainable community planning processes, this paper relays broader findings from the project and looks specifically at lessons learned from working with the Rolling River First Nation, Manitoba, Canada. The Rolling River community is successfully navigating the multiple implementation gaps related to capacity, resources and jurisdiction to develop a planning process that advances self-determined priorities and outlines an integrated and holistic development plan for the future. We hope that their story provides lessons for other communities, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, that are struggling with sustainability planning.

In the following sections we outline the conceptual underpinnings for sustainable community development and identify specific nuances of First Nations sustainability. This is followed by a presentation of our research design for the project as a whole and contextual information about the Rolling River First Nation. Finally, we present findings from the research and discuss their relevance to the discourse on advancing sustainability at the community level.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND FIRST NATIONS

Sustainable development is a concept that has achieved widespread recognition following the publication of *Our Common Future* (Brundtland, 1987). While the report galvanized and elevated attention to matters of the environment, economy, society relationship, it did little to provide direction as to the appropriate balance between sustainability on one hand, and development on the other. Despite the diverse and contested meanings attached to concepts of sustainability, they all fundamentally begin with the recognition of the mismatch between increasing human demands on the earth and the ability of finite natural systems to cope with those demands (Williams & Millington, 2004). In very broad terms, the diverse perspectives of sustainable development and related responses to environmental problems can be placed along a continuum from weak to strong sustainability (Hamstead & Quinn, 2005; Williams & Millington, 2004). Weak sustainability views the environment-economy challenge largely as an issue of supply. It prioritizes the economy and economic growth over ecosystem integrity, while seeking to meet sustainability objectives through technological efficiency. Conversely, strong sustainability challenges the material intensity of demand and views a healthy economy as fundamentally dependent upon ecosystem integrity and carrying capacity.

The variability of interpretation concerning sustainable development leads some to question the utility of the concept altogether (Robinson, 2004). If sustainable development means everything to everyone, then it ultimately means nothing and simply delays needed intervention or leads to cosmetic environmentalism. However, other researchers view the discourse surrounding sustainability as the inevitable and necessary politics of sustainable development, where societies wrestle with understanding and seek to define the specific values and priorities associated with their development (Scott et al., 2000; Newman & Dale, 2005).

An extension of the literature that seeks to apply the principles of sustainability at a manageable scale, and to localize the politics of sustainability, is found in discussions of sustainable *community* development (SCD). SCD applies the concept of sustainable development to the local or community level. The challenge facing communities is one of integration — how to integrate principles related to sustainable development, a commitment to long-term planning and specific community priorities. The Centre for Sustainable Community Development (CSCD) at Simon Fraser University uses the community capital framework as way to illustrate the need for integration and as a way of understanding and implementing sustainability (see Figure 1). The goal for SCD is to adopt strategies, structures and processes that mobilize citizens and their governments in the quantitative and qualitative improvement of all six forms of capital (human, natural, economic, physical, cultural, and social). Community mobilization serves to coordinate, balance and catalyze the values, visions and activities of various community actors through democratic processes, resulting in outcomes that strengthen all forms of capital (Roseland, 2005).

While sustainability has proven to be successful at integrating environmental and economic concerns at the local level (i.e. green jobs, eco-efficiency), it has largely failed to adequately address social justice issues (i.e. struggle for distributional and procedural equity and quality of life) (Agyeman & Evans, 2004; Jones 2008). Social and environmental justice is of critical concern for Canada's First Nations communities (Booth & Skelton, 2011a), providing a different

context within which to explore and implement sustainable community planning processes.

First Nations Context for Sustainability — Challenges

In order to fully grasp the context of sustainable community development in Canadian First Nation communities it is important to recognize that while Canada was ranked first on the UN Human Development Index (1998), calculations by the Federal government Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development determined that First Nations communities were ranked 63rd.

The 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) found that First Nations communities in Canada suffered from higher levels of poverty and health issues, lack adequate housing and schools, have higher rates of unemployment and incarceration rates and a lack of community services (water, Internet access, all-weather roads, etc.) (RCAP, 1996). In the decade and a half since that report, little progress has been made (Paradis, 2009). Many communities suffer from a physical environment that is detrimental to health and safety as a result of resource exploitation, contamination, persistent organic pollution and climate change.

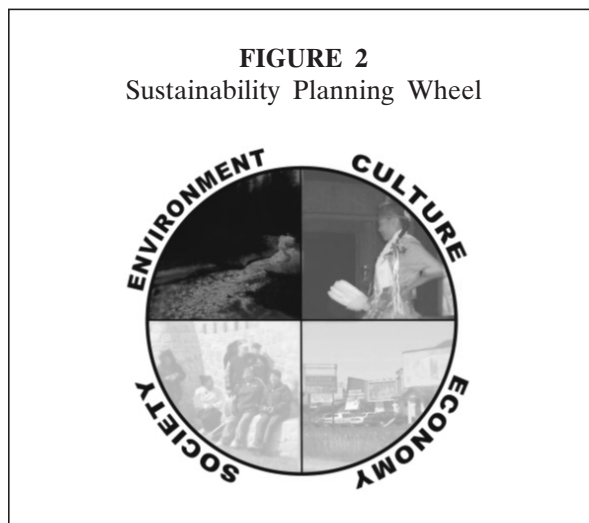**FIGURE 1**
Community Capital Framework
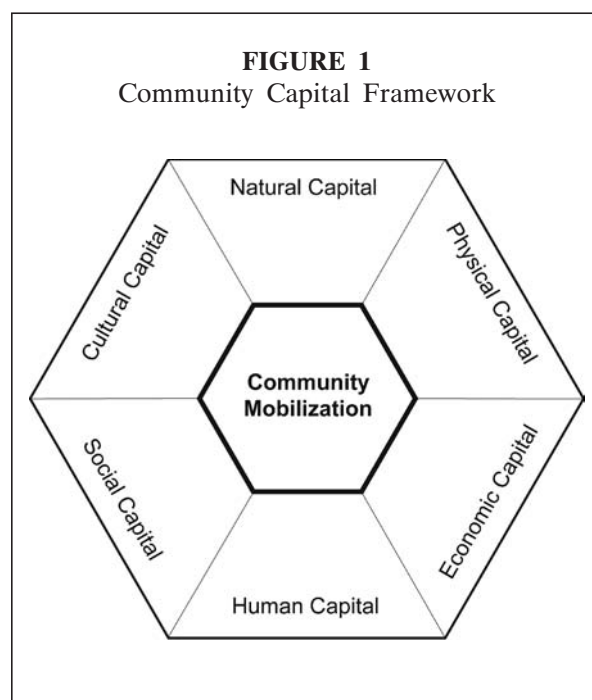
Federal government responses to these concerns through the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development have been focused on capital investments for physical infrastructure in communities to address:

- Demands for adequate housing for the existing population, in particular to address overcrowding, and housing demands stemming from projected on-reserve population growth;
- Need for educational facilities;
- Evolving or emerging infrastructure needs such as long-term care facilities for the elderly; and
- The extraordinary or 'one-off' infrastructure needs such as flood protection, all weather road and electrification of some remote communities, remediation of contaminated sites, and broadband access, etc.

However, First Nations engaged in comprehensive community planning (CCP) initiatives are more focused on what has been referred to as soft infrastructure (e.g. social development, health and healing, capacity building, employment and economic development (see for example CIER, 2005). The meaning of sustainable community development for First Nations[1] is more often an approach that at its core involves embracing and reinforcing the culture and unique identity of the community, community empowerment and stresses the physical relationship with the environment. Traditional knowledge forms the basis of community planning. Sustainable community planning in First Nations communities is best thought of as a process that recognizes the shared responsibilities between individuals, communities, nations and the environment. It embraces social and environmental justice, not just for humans but also for all living things, past and present. Environmental injustice, therefore, "is not only inflicted by dominant society upon Aboriginal peoples, people of colour and people in low-income communities but also upon Creation itself" (McGregor, 2009, p. 28).

For example, the Centre for Indigenous Environmental Resources (CIER) uses the sus-

FIGURE 2
Sustainability Planning Wheel

tainability planning wheel (see Figure 2) to illustrate the holistic approach to comprehensive planning based on social and environmental justice based on pillars of the environment, culture, society and economy. This cultural pillar and explicit connection to holistic approaches to justice is often overlooked in traditional urban and rural sustainability initiatives.

Despite the values and cultural traditions associated with sustainable community development, planning in First Nations communities is often equated with resource planning and resource conservation rather than community development (see for example the special issue of Plan Canada, 2008). The result is that planning initiatives are often reactive to external development pressures, highly technical, reliant on external expertise and one-off resources for planning. Planners often give little attention to the potential role of SCD planning to develop social and cultural capital or build capacity in communities, despite calls in the sustainability planning literature for building community capacity to engage in and actively participate in the implementation of sustainable community development planning initiatives (Rydin & Pennington, 2000; Dale & Onyx, 2005; Bulkeley, 2006).

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[1] It is important to stress here that First Nations in Canada can not be thought of as a homogenous group — there is a rich diversity of traditions, culture, language and concerns.

Limitations to Sustainability Planning Tools

In an effort to tackle issues of complexity and to incorporate sustainability principles into community planning processes, researchers have developed a variety of guiding planning frameworks and tools (Robert et al., 2002; Seymoar, 2004). These frameworks (e.g. The Natural Step, LA21, PLUS) incorporate best planning practice and essentially move through a variety of steps associated with strategic planning:

- Development of a multi-stakeholder and shared decision-making process designed to be cross-sectoral that will provide guidance for the overall process;
- Assessment of baseline conditions to determine the current state of environment, economic and social conditions and identify key indicators;
- Development of a sustainability vision and objectives to provide set the goal of where the community wants to be and to set long term targets;
- Creation of action plans and priorities to designed to achieve intermediate targets; and
- Monitoring and review of progress to track progress and hold participants accountable to the long-term objectives and goals.

Planning frameworks can provide a mechanism to manage the complexity of sustainable community planning. However, the reliance on planning tools can also mask the politics of power relations and social justice necessary to implement sustainability, with the assumption being that sustainability is necessarily a "win–win" for all involved (Marcuse, 1998). In addition, despite attempts to modify the process of sustainability planning, these frameworks still present barriers to use in First Nations communities. First, the tools still require considerable capacity to use effectively. Second, the processes advocated by the frameworks may be lengthy, making it difficult to sustain interest and commitment over time. Third, the guided implementation of certain process can be expensive,

consuming limited resources. And, finally, while the frameworks offer generic process steps that may be adapted to different settings, they are not inherently sensitive to the First Nation context. This may make their adaptation to the First Nation setting difficult or make their blind application completely inappropriate to First Nation communities.

CASE DESIGN AND FIRST NATIONS CONTEXT

Case study research provides an appropriate methodology for investigating the dynamic and real-time processes of sustainable community planning (Yin, 2003; Stake, 1995). In addition to the flexibility and place-sensitive advantages of case studies, we also hoped to address the need for more systematic case study research related to the implementation of SCD initiatives, a stated gap in the literature (Portney, 2003).

The results presented here are drawn from a larger research project that focused on the decision-making process involved in moving from sustainability planning to implementation (Connelly, Markey & Roseland, 2009). The research was based on four case study communities that were chosen out of an analysis of award winning sustainability initiatives and in consultation with our research partners.[2] Further case selection criteria included: degree of community impact, the comprehensiveness of implementation, and the relationship to public infrastructure. Care was also taken to ensure that the chosen case studies were representative of different regions and provided a diversity of community contexts. These criteria resulted in the selection of projects from two urban areas (the development of the East Clayton neighbourhood in Surrey, British Columbia and The Better Building Partnership in Toronto, Ontario), a rural case (The Sustainable Living Project in Craik, Saskatchewan) and a First Nations study (the Comprehensive Community Plan for Rolling River, Manitoba).

By focusing on the decision-making processes involved in sustainability planning, we

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[2] Research partners included the Centre for Indigenous Environmental Resources (www.cier.ca), Federation of Canadian Municipalities (www.fcm.ca) and ICLEI-Local Governments for Sustainability (www.iclei.org).

were able learn from specific community contexts while also drawing more general cross case comparative conclusions. The investigation explored the elements of decision-making, including the actors involved, their motivations and values, the specific decision-making structures and the policies and strategies that were used to achieve sustainability outcomes in moving from planning to implementation. Data collection relied on multiple sources (key documents and semi-structured interviews) and occurred during intensive week-long visits to each community to interview key stakeholders involved in the community's sustainability plan implementation and follow-up telephone interviews as necessary. Our case study research was guided by a central proposition: that barriers to implementation are not a result of a lack of known and viable sustainable development options or access to sustainability planning tools; rather they lie elsewhere in the decision-making processes, the knowledge base and capacity of planners and decision-makers, and in mobilizing the institutional resources of local government and community-based organizations to take action. Research questions to guide the implementation of the case research were as follows:

- What were the key elements, processes, decision-making tools, actors and roles that allowed for moving from planning to implementation?
- How do communities identify and prioritize activities, policies and programmes to advance sustainability? and,
- What are the linkages between communities, sustainability and community infrastructure?

The following discussion builds from our literature review on sustainability in a First Nations context and presents our findings exclusive to our case study in Rolling River First Nation, Manitoba. Rolling River was selected as a suitable case study for a variety of reasons. First, they had engaged in a comprehensive community planning process that had demonstrable implementation results. Second, Rolling River is a community with an approximate on reserve population of 500 located 80 km from Brandon (pop. 40,000) and is broadly representative of rural First Nations communities given its experience of out-migration, reliance on their land-base

for economic development and the pressing need to address housing, health, education and employment opportunities for members.

## Rolling River First Nation Comprehensive Community Planning Process

Rolling River First Nation is located 250 km Northwest of Winnipeg, near Riding Mountain National Park (see Figure 3). The community has an on reserve population of 500 (2009), with approximately another 400 members living off reserve. Rolling River FN comprises 7,500 hectares of land that includes the main settlement area near the Town of Erickson, agricultural land and natural areas. The focus of the Rolling River case study was on the comprehensive community plan that was initiated in 1998. The plan is treated as a living-document, constantly being modified to reflect changes in the community, new challenges and new opportunities. The main priorities of the community plan are economic development initiatives designed to create employment within the community, generate revenue, and reduce the reliance of the community on funding from Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development.

Some of the initiatives from the community plan that have been successfully implemented include the new health centre (see Figure 4), gas bar, restaurant, Video Lottery Terminal (VLT) centre and new farms. Projects that are still underway include the modular home plant, community sawmill (see Figure 5) and a local wind energy project.

The primary focus of the community plan is to improve the socio-economic conditions of community members. Members of Chief and Council felt that the key to local development was to increase self-reliance and decrease dependency on the Federal government for funding. The main challenges identified by the group were to identify appropriate and viable economic development initiatives, and learn how to link existing capacity for economic development with opportunities presented by acquiring new reserve status land.

The first step in creating the community plan was to generate community interest and engagement. Chief and Council announced that they were unveiling the community plan at a special meeting, knowing that their members

FIGURE 3
Rolling River First Nation
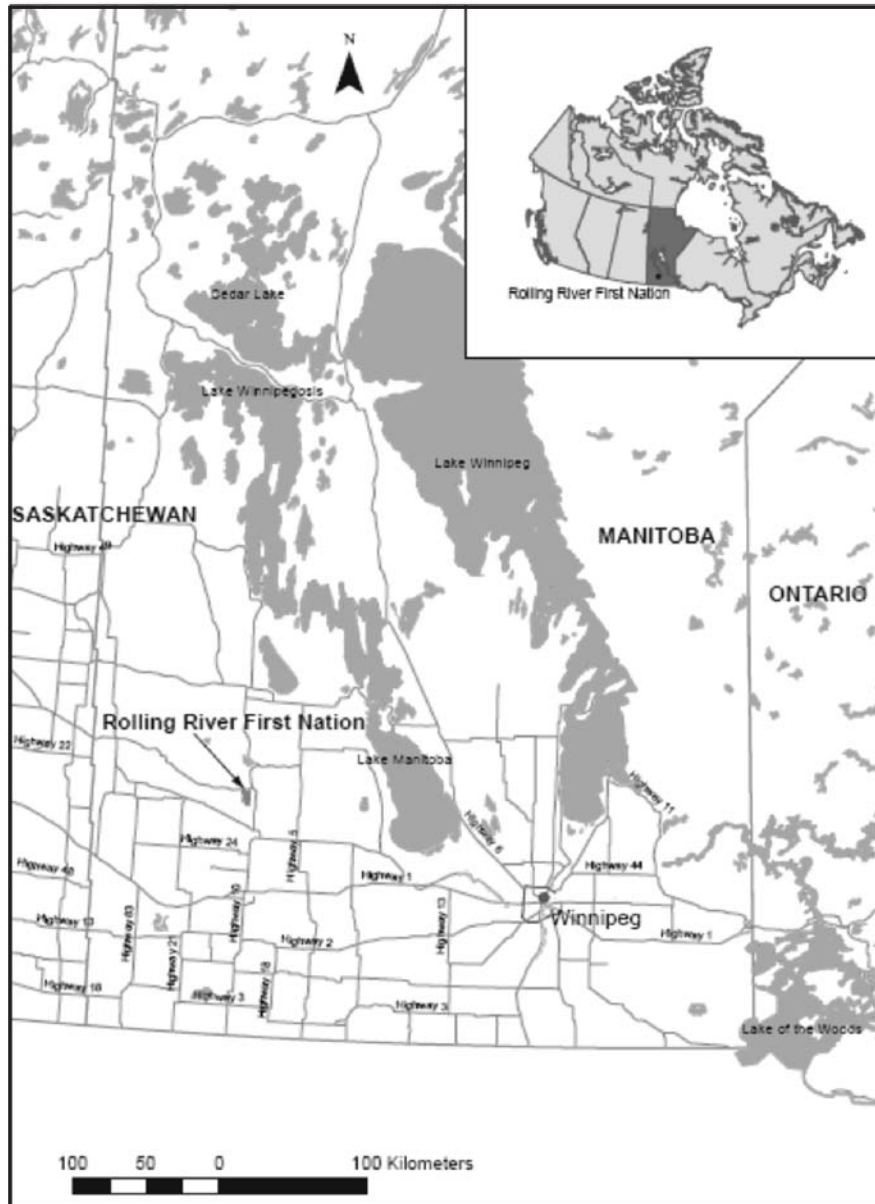
Map: Courtesy of John Ng.

would react with criticisms if they were presented with a plan that was already completed. In fact, they did not have a plan, but community members were so concerned about not having any input that the turnout at the open community meeting was exceptional. People came with the intention of criticizing whatever was going to be presented but ended up engaging in a community meeting to establish the vision and goals for the community. The meeting was highly

constructive and established a precedent for engagement that greatly assisted the sustainable community planning process going forward. From that initial meeting, the foundations for the community development plan were created that identified the vision and goals of the community and the economic development projects and strategies to accomplish them. Next, they took an inventory of the community's human resource capacity. The community decided to focus on opportunities that could be carried out with existing resources and available funding programs.

The community established a series of community roundtables to ensure ongoing and productive participation from community members. The roundtables identified key issues, proposed projects, addressed challenges and discussed solutions, values, ideologies and decision-making structures. Each family group was able to nominate one person that would represent the family in the community roundtable process. The community roundtables began in 1998 with seven families participating and have since grown to over twenty. The community roundtables proved instrumental in laying the foundation for the 10-year community development plan that was refined by the community economic development officer and approved by Chief and Council later that year.

Success Factors and Lessons Learned

Leadership, decision-making processes, community engagement and capacity building are four factors identified by interview respondents that contributed to the success of the comprehensive community plan. Chief and council were committed to economic development as the foundation for future activities in the community. This political leadership and the financial support associated with it served to support individual initiatives that had the potential to become self-sustaining businesses, where the viability of the business over the long-term was the key to making strategic decisions between initiatives. Chief and council were able to rely on a strong commitment and mandate from residents over a prolonged period (beyond election cycles) that allowed for a longer-term view of success for economic development initiatives.

> The continuity of governance is a very, very important factor because if you are changing leadership every 2 years you are not going to get a lot done because what you are doing is having a competition within your own community. But if everyone can work together and you can come up with a plan — I said give me 10 years and that's good. And I've done my ten years and now I'm going to move on as much as I'd like to stay. (Member of Chief and Council)

FIGURE 4
Rolling River First Nation Health Centre

FIGURE 5
Portable Community Sawmill

For example, land acquisition decisions were made based on economic development opportunities and capacity building programs were established to drive economic development. The political leadership in Rolling River was able to obtain long-term support from residents through decision-making processes, such as the community roundtables, that ensured that activities of the leadership were open, transparent and accountable. When the Chief was first elected, he asked specifically for a mandate for a community plan that would take ten years to implement. He made it clear that there would be no quick fixes, but that incremental progress would be made over time for the plan to be fully implemented and that a longer time frame was required to take a more comprehensive approach. This provided the leadership team with the security to take more risks, to innovate and to plan for the longer term.

Decision-making processes were critical for engaging the community around economic development opportunities that could improve the socio-economic status of all residents. In order to reach these different internal constituencies, the community roundtables directly engaged the youth, elders and the broader community.

> These tables were deemed as our consultation table, people get to report back to their families and bring it back to the table. The youth, we were still meeting with them, and you'd go do a power talk with them and encourage them and they'd clap when you left and say right on Chief. The adult tables on the other hand were practically booing you when you walked in. But now things are going better and there is capacity development money available at INAC we're going to apply for to make sure the roundtable knows good negotiation practices and good terms of development. (Member of Chief and Council)

Decision-making structures were based on a model of self-government that starts in the home and works out to the community.

> A lot of the information you guys are looking for it's in the heads of the elders. So it's a holistic thing for us, looking at it from all angles. That's why it's so important to talk to the elders because they might know it. Somebody might know it ... they might remember it. (Band staff)

The high level of community engagement contributed to the success of the comprehensive community plan and subsequent economic development initiatives and provided the necessary support to the political leadership. Including community members in the decision-making process and structures ensured broad community ownership of activities.

> The roundtables deal directly with families and the band meeting that's basically the reps from the round table and they hash it out there. So there are 2 levels of compromise before a decision is made. And if there's counter opponents it will go back and forth until they reach a compromise. Particularly for buying new land through the TLE [Treaty Land Entitlement Agreement] where we select people voted from our community to represent our trust. So there's lots of different levels of support. (Band staff)

This sense of ownership of activities nurtured a "can-do attitude" and created a positive vision for the future. In the early stages, the community focused on initiatives that could be implemented immediately to demonstrate success and to engage residents in community change — again, a by-product of their efforts to match economic development possibilities with existing community capacity and resources. Over time, capacity building contributed to the success of the planning initiative and the development and expansion of subsequent economic development activities. Prioritizing options was based on a clear understanding of the difference between visioning and capacity to implement. It was important to understand the difference between what you want to do in terms of development and what you can do.

> So what we had to do was after we had all the wish list packaged together we had to bring in our council and human resources person and say lets see which ones of these we can tackle immediately and start seeing results. I got 2 years here and I asked for 10. How are we going to do this as a council? We always talk about youth and say youth are our future leaders but what are we actually doing for them? So we developed a gym for them to hang out and people using key words to keep in their mind like business. How are we going to pay for that gym? Who's going to

cover the expenses, the lights the hydro everything? We have to start putting a fee to these things so they can look after themselves. So the bingo looks after that and the youth look after that. (Member of Chief and Council)

Challenges

Interviewees identified self-awareness and a lack of resources and capacity as two key challenges that limited the success of previous community economic development initiatives. The residential school legacy was identified as a significant barrier to developing a positive image of the community, both internally and externally.

> It was the women a long time ago that selected our leaders because the men would have long days where they would have to be providers for the community and the women naturally stayed back and kept homes and the camp, and they watched the children. So they knew exactly how every child acted, they knew which ones were going to be the little scrapper guys, which ones were the good speakers, and helped create those friendships that kept the community intact. And a long time ago it used to be the women who said that's who's going to lead us. Today we use this democratic system that's really screwed up and it creates in-fighting, it creates division on the reserve. So I'd like to get back to that old style where our women can actually come together, but again because of residential school some of our old people can't even look at each other let alone say hi. And when you decipher everything and take everything apart you realize we are still carrying this on from a family feud between your grandfather and my grandfather. But that's how it is ... (Community Elder)

For example, the societal conditions in the community created a sense of dependency that made it difficult to move beyond day-to-day survival and address the visionary change that many in the community thought was necessary.

> Some people come to a band meeting just to be negative and just to say no to it. And then I ask why would you turn down such an idea? And they say it's just not going to work ... because we got so used to things not going to work. (Community Elder)

There was also the perception within the community that recognition of traditions and cultural heritage and pursuing economic growth were not compatible, a perception that was closely related to the generation gap between elders and youth. The challenge for the community planning process was to identify opportunities that intersected with both and created further opportunities for interaction and learning between youth and elders. For example, the log-home building project employs youths in the community and is supervised by an elder who educates the participants about traditional heritage and, more specifically, about traditional approaches to forestry. A final challenge related to self-awareness was the difficulty of integrating multiple worldviews, ways of thinking with economic development. Community members understood the connection between making claims for a holistic and comprehensive approach to community development, but at the same time wrestle with opportunities that prioritize economic development and growth above all else. Interviewees also identified a challenge of incorporating holistic views with Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development management requirements and broader economic and social systems.

As a second main barrier, the lack of resources and capacity was in part related to the socio-economic conditions in the community. Graduates from high school, trades and universities tend to not locate in the community because of a lack of opportunity. This makes it difficult to cultivate leadership and leadership qualities among the next generation.

> I guess it's up to us to make the youth aware of what exactly is needed in our community. Because right now, some of our youth that are in school, they want to come home but they don't have anything to come home for. And if they do come home, they end up sitting at home waiting for a job that they are over qualified for, you know, pumping gas. So, those are some of the economic things that we have to address. We have to start creating jobs that our youth can do. (Member of Chief and Council)

Professional training, skills and trades are needed that can be put to use within the community. The implementation success associated with prioritizing economic development initiatives

for which capacity exists comes with the associated cost that development becomes much more opportunistic (i.e. doing what is possible rather than what would best serve the interests, needs of the community). The lack of capacity for planning limits the outcomes of comprehensive planning processes to a wish list for the community. The lack of training and capacity for planning fosters a sense of the community being dependent on government hand-outs, something that is reflected in the relationships between the band and federal government agencies.

> Maybe we do go about it the wrong way, maybe we shouldn't be so head on, maybe we should learn to negotiate, to do better planning. But when you really go into these meetings with our local MPs, with people in power they still see us as a 3rd rate nation who can't take care of themselves and that's sad because I know in my heart, in my mind, this community could flourish if they'd just give us a chance but they don't. (Community Youth)

In addition, that lack of financial resources forces the community to rely on government grants for implementation and therefore the community is placed in a position where funding from external sources directs the planning outcomes rather than having the planning outcomes come from the community.

> And a lot of times we end up trying to embarrass them [Government agencies] first before they release any funding. It's not a good way to live. We had said we wanted to set one of these homes as a model home built from our forest and cut from our logs. And we asked the department does this qualify for funding under your special homes funding and they said well it's a log home, it's not special. We said 'wait a minute it's made from logs from our reserve, from our own land that we cut and harvested. What do you mean that doesn't qualify?' ... The department used to set us up for things that aren't going to work ... they'd take a $10–$20,000 dollar business proposal and look at it and say oh great ... here's $5,000. They set you up for failure right away. (Member of Chief and Council)

Chasing government funding results in decision-making based on short-term opportunities and makes it more difficult to recognize the long-term synergistic initiatives that could result in transformative change for the community. The challenge for the community is to how best to "bend" the funding programs to meet their pre-determined community planning priorities (Connelly, Markey & Roseland, 2009).

DISCUSSION

The Rolling River First Nation community planning process highlights the tensions inherent in sustainable community planning. Those tensions exist between the community and external actors and also within the community. Due to substandard social conditions, the community has prioritized an approach to comprehensive planning that is focused on social justice concerns, yet has struggled with accessing the necessary resources and capacity to address those issues without emphasizing their reliance on limited mainstream economic growth opportunities. Moving the Gas Bar and Video Lottery Terminals to new locations on the highway has opened the community to greater trickle-down revenues from passing tourists, but these approaches do not address the underlying lack of opportunities to build community capital based on the community's expressed values of holistic linkages between the community and the land.

The development pursued by Rolling River may be defined, in part, by a weak sustainability approach, giving priority to economic development issues over the environment. However, unlike the other case study communities we examined (Connelly, Markey & Roseland, 2009), there was an explicit focus on the linkages between economic development and improving the social conditions for both individuals and for the broader community, for the elder population and for youths. In that regard, a focus on social justice, with strong linkages between the economy and society, moderated by a worldview that placed emphasis on the importance of the land base may also be considered a strong sustainability approach.

> We had talked about creating a self-sustaining eco-village. Something that was all green, cabins would be made from natural resources or local materials using solar panels, geothermal heat. We have that in our health building right now. So that was

the whole concept, and we talked about even looking at wind energy back then. Just being a couple of native guys talking about this stuff without really knowing what was going on or involved in it. (Member of Band administration)

The turtle is knowledge, the beaver is wisdom, you need both to be effective. Knowledge without wisdom or wisdom without knowledge is incomplete understanding. The relationship between people, the land and resources are important. It is through working on the land that you can understand yourself and your place in the world. (Community Elder)

The key to navigating the internal tensions between social dynamics, the economy and the environment was the Chief and Council's commitment to community engagement and participation. While there was conflict between views and approaches to economic development and its relationship to traditional ways of life, there was also an explicit focus on trying to define and moderate the economic growth imperative with a focus on improving the quality of life for community members. For example:

Well yeah it is because when we look at economic development we look at, well, what's the cultural impact. Is it negative or positive and we try to make it positive. Like yeah, we're going to make money but we're going to be putting that into language classes, hiring an elder in the evening to come in and sit with the youth or anybody that wants it. (Youth member)

With the creation of the comprehensive community plan, Chief and Council were concerned about generating engagement with the community about ideas, opportunities and capacity for pursuing specific economic development opportunities. This was particularly important to the Treaty Land Entitlement (TLE) agreement[3] that allowed the community to purchase land anywhere in the province and obtain reserve status for it.

As a community member, I know that before land is bought it's approached at a roundtable meeting and then at a band meeting and approval is reached through consensus and then back to the TLE guys and they buy it. If there's not quorum and consensus in the band meeting the land doesn't get bought. (Youth member)

The community roundtables played a central role in facilitating community engagement. They provided a forum to all of the families in the community to be engaged in the decision-making process.

Go ahead, here is your chance, come sit at the roundtable. We had 33 members that eventually sat on the roundtable, and for a while it was used as a bitch session ... you're not doing this you're not doing that. Well now you have a chance to participate. And this table will be deemed as our consultation table, they get to report back to their families and bring it back to the table. (Member of Chief and Council)

Rolling River also displays a strong sense of community. The community drew upon strong cultural beliefs and traditional ways of doing things based on consultation and deliberation with all community members. Putting particular emphasis on the cultural capital of community allowed the planning process to proceed from perceived strengths and was a means of addressing internal awareness and perceptions about the potential for the community. Despite the strong cultural traditions that reinforce common views, values and approaches, the legacy of residential schools has eroded some of the ties that link individuals to their community. Cultural traditions, languages and shared values were all disrupted with the removal of children from the community and that has had a lasting legacy on the strength of community ties.

It is important to know where you come from, your ancestors, and your traditions to understand who you are and how you fit in. Cultural context is very important.

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[3] Treaty Land Entitlement Agreement provided Rolling River with an addition of reserve land as a result of previous unfulfilled treaty obligations. As part of the agreement, Rolling River has been allocated over $8.5 M to purchase up to 44,745 acres of land from private landowners, providing a number of possibilities for development.

> This is why the impact of the residential schools has contributed to the problems for First Nations. They taught us that who we are, our traditions and values were useless and we were sinners. Those lessons stay with you and it is hard to have pride over self-identity. (Community Elder)

Participants view the culture of the community as a particular strength in moving forward with their development agenda. There are strong cultural linkages between social and economic development and the relationship to the land. Residents recognize that the key to sustainable community development is to strengthen community ties, to bridge the gap between youths and elders and to provide opportunities for community members living off-reserve to return home.

For Rolling River, cultural development is equally as important as economic development, Cultural development provides the ties that bind the community together based on shared history. It is the cultural component that bridges the other components (social, environment and economic) of the community planning wheel.

> Those ceremonies told us what we were going to do with the land and to pursue wind energy. Tradition has to be a part of it. That's core. It keeps us ethically there on our goals of what we want to achieve. (Member of Band Administration)

CONCLUSION

The Rolling River comprehensive community plan served to catalyze community engagement around economic development opportunities that could address existing socio-economic conditions in the community. The planning process and decision-making structures established for implementation reflect a commitment to consensual decision-making, cultural values and a holistic way of thinking that has served to improve the self-awareness of both individuals and the community. Rolling River engaged in a broad visioning exercise, yet they were conscious of the need to provide tangible results. They were ultimately successful in identifying specific priorities for action based on evaluating their capacity for implementation over the short term. The outcomes of the planning process served to reinforce the need for local self-reliance, to build

community capacity and to create a sense of community ownership over the various projects. They also ensured that the risks associated with going forward were shared and not associated with one individual leader.

Unlike the other case study examples in sustainability planning that use the "plan" as a means of resolving economic and environmental tensions to implement sustainability (Portney, 2003), Rolling River's comprehensive community plan relied on linkages between cultural, social and economic development based on a worldview that links all decisions to the land to guide implementation. It was assumed that existing community values towards the environment and the land base would ensure that any community development initiative would result in sustainable community development. This approach to sustainability fits with the way community mobilization and participatory processes are presented in the literature. The sustainability literature suggests that it is through participatory processes that sustainability solutions to community problems can be identified and implemented (Berke, 2002; Bulkeley, 2006; Conroy & Berke, 2004; Roseland, 2005). However, much of the research and practice is focused on how sustainability planning can be used as a means of engaging citizens. The Rolling River case focused explicitly on establishing processes for community decision-making as a means for sustainability planning.

The communal decision-making and communal resources that are at the foundation of the Rolling River First Nation contributed to a strong sense of place that has been reinforced through culture and traditions that emphasize collective responsibility. The community identified the land base and cultural traditions as their greatest strengths and both are collective resources that contribute to and reinforce the strength of community and shared sense of place. Rolling River did not have the capacity to undertake sustainability planning processes based on sophisticated planning frameworks, tools and expensive consultants. However, they had the more critical capacity to openly address conflicts in a community setting based on a history of collaborative and consensus-based decision-making; and, they were able to use political conflicts creatively to address community problems.

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