

# Stronger Together: First Nation Community/Municipality Collaborations

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“My experience is that it takes time, patience and resilience to build successful partnerships; as municipalities we have a lot to offer and more to receive....”

Vicki Blanchard, Economic Development Manager  
Municipality of Sioux Lookout, ON<sup>1</sup>

Partnerships work well when each partner brings something to the table and is committed to the success of the project. Sometimes history, distance, or other obstacles effectively remove any thought of working together and achieving mutual benefits. First Nations communities are struggling for the most part, in the areas that promote well-being and form the basis for a vigorous economic profile. Physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health are often taxed to the limit. Individuals are often not healthy, which impacts family, community and ultimately the ability to engage in work successfully. The Indian Act, residential schools, poverty and corollaries of suicide, drugs and gangs have a long legacy that continues to negatively impact communities today. To be accurate, there are some First Nation communities that are bright economic lights across the country for supporting their citizens and benefiting surrounding communities.<sup>2</sup> Examples include Westbank First Nation BC, Osoyoos Indian Band, BC, Membertou First Nation, NS and Lac La Ronge Indian Band, SK.

The recent National Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls To Action recognize municipalities specifically as essential to successful reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. Eight recommendations focus on “all levels of government”, and five refer to municipal governments. “The context for working together is positive and encouraging with a means to

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This is an excerpt from a soon-to-be-released book called *Case Studies in Collaborative Governance*, Edited by Claude Rocan and published in the fall by Invenire Books. Dr. Wanda Wuttunee shares her interest in community economic development strategies that make a difference for the partner communities.

<sup>1</sup> Federation of Canadian Municipalities, *Building First Nations-Municipal Community Economic Development Partnerships*. Available online: <http://www.fcm.ca/Documents/reports/CEDI/cedi-tkag-en-screen.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Make Poverty History Expert Advisory Committee, *The State of the First Nation Economy and the Struggle to Make Poverty History* (Ottawa, ON: Assembly of First Nations, 2009) p. 6.

set the stage for collaboration discussions. Most of the Calls to Action require federal, provincial and territorial government leadership, and municipal governments to roll up their sleeves to support reconciliation as a national challenge that is felt deeply at the local level.”<sup>3</sup>

Communities have been reaching out to their neighbours to explore potential partnerships when doors are open and attitudes are positive. The Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) built on their own history to develop a program that supports First Nation communities and neighbouring municipalities in developing collaborations. They partnered with the Council for the Advancement of Native Development Officers (Cando) in the Community Economic Development Initiative (CEDI). FCM has a 2000 municipality membership base while Cando has a broad membership of more than 500 Indigenous economic development officers, economic organizations and academics interested in all aspects of Indigenous community economic development.

The six partner collaborations for CEDI Phase One were geographically diverse and demonstrated a likelihood that they would have a successful collaboration. They can be accessed on FCM’s website under the Participating Communities section.<sup>4</sup> The Manitoba collaboration will be explored more thoroughly in the next section of this excerpt from perspectives of two project champions.

## **OPASKWAYAK CREE NATION (OCN), TOWN OF THE PAS AND RURAL MUNICIPALITY OF KELSEY, MANITOBA**

### **Starting Conditions**

These communities have come together despite a history of independence and some animosity. On behalf of The Pas a community of 5,500 people, a municipal employee took up FCM’s offer of applying to be part of CEDI. They then were required to have surrounding communities send letters of support to the application. Both OCN (3198 on reserve and 2099 off reserve) and the RM of Kelsey (2272 pop.), determined that it was a great opportunity with possibilities of mutual benefit. The Pas and OCN play roles in meeting the needs of communities in the northern region. Recent struggles have resulted from the closure of Tolko’s paper and lumber mill, the IGA store and the possibility of other business closures. The Pas is land-locked with the RM and OCN on three sides as well OCN is across the river, so if the Pas wants to expand they must work with both partners.

The CEDI process brought a brainstorm of ideas to the table that were narrowed to ways to attract investors and joint strategies to attend to infrastructure issues. Without a clearly framed relationship, the brainstorming process got bogged down. A suggestion was made to consider a Friendship Accord which was agreed to and was eventually signed in 2014 by the parties. The Accord’s (Three Communities, One Heart) key terms include a

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<sup>3</sup> Federation of Canadian Municipalities Pathways to reconciliation: Cities respond to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action, 2016 (p. 3). (Released on September 30, Orange Shirt Day). Retrieved June 8, 2017, from <http://email.fcm.ca/m/1/11133000/02-b16277-0895074ce12e4c80a128fd80205182a8/5/993/7a7157bd-6d1c-4b66-a02e-2676071b759e>

<sup>4</sup> *First Nations–Municipality Community Economic Development Initiative*. Retrieved from <https://fcm.ca/home/programs/community-economic-development-initiative.htm>

desire to strengthen the social, spiritual and economic ties that support mutual respect of interests that are beneficial to all communities including the signatories and neighbours. This agreement acknowledges government to government relations where wisdom can be shared for a better future for children and grandchildren. It also commits to building mutual trust and respect while acknowledging their history, past experiences and differences that impact current perspectives and opinions. These communities agree to come together twice a year for open dialogue and to agree on priorities.

OCN member and Special Projects officer, Paskwayak Business Development Corporation, Duncan Lathlin calls the Friendship Accord a strong foundation in the partnership that opened needed dialogue (Personal Communication, June 9, 2017). Town councillor Brian Roque notes “There has always been a need to help each other but bad feelings from the past, got in the way” but the Friendship Accord turned the page and allowed each partner to move forward (Personal Communication, June 9, 2017). Lathlin points out that the OCN and The Pas high schools studied their community Friendship Accord and then created their own Friendship Accord that was signed by students in both communities as they met on a symbolic walk to the middle of the bridge that divides the two communities (Personal Communication, June 9, 2017). They are developing relationships through joint activities and as future leaders this step is remarkable. This is also very exciting for the town, according to Roque (Personal Communication, June 9, 2017). A recent Reeve report shed some light on the shifting young family demographics where an equal number live in The Pas and work in OCN and vice versa. This ties the two communities together in a newly recognized way. Roque concludes that the Friendship Accord is moving forward but not in the ways that everyone might have expected (Personal Communication, June 9, 2017).

## Institutional Design

The collaborative attitude launched quarterly meetings under the purview of a Tri-Council in 2015. The Tri-Council’s main CEDI-supported projects were an investor-focused brochure and website. At the Tri-Council launch of these efforts, Town Councillor Brian Roque noted,

It has been a learning process, but I found it exciting and have enjoyed the networking and the connections I’ve made with other participants. You learn more about them and how they feel. There is a positive energy here. Tonight is called a launch because it’s just a beginning. Now with what we learned today we can move forward and continue on with the process. The ultimate goal is let’s make a better community, let the tri-Council region become stronger because of working together and sharing our resources and situations.<sup>5</sup>

Duncan Lathlin shared further benefits from the collaboration (Personal Communication, June 9, 2017). He characterized the initial relationship with The Pas and the RM as neighbourly from a distance and one where you really didn’t know each other well. That has been improved from feeling like OCN was operating in a bubble as described by Lathlin to one where they knew more about the way their neighbours did business, their organizational structure and their operating environment. Despite the differences, the partnership has greatly expanded what OCN factors into decision-making that might impact one or the other

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<sup>5</sup> J. Cook, “Tricouncil.ca Launched”, *Opasquia Times* (April 1, 2016), p 1.

of their partners. For example, if they have a large project they will ask questions around the capacity of The Pas to handle the project and are prepared to help improve needed changes to the infrastructure.

Unfortunately the change in economic climate referred to earlier, made some of their efforts obsolete. The brochures were archived and the website removed. There is an example of a communication issue around the website at the time of these interviews. Lathlin said that an agreement existed where OCN was to pay for the website in the first year which was honoured, The Pas was to bear the financial costs in the second year and the RM agreed to carry the costs in the third year (Personal Communication, June 9, 2017). Unfortunately, OCN does not know why the website was not continued after the first year as there has not been any communication with the Pas on this decision. Lathlin hypothesizes that the reason might include recent economic impacts with the mill and other businesses closing (Personal Communication, June 9, 2017).

The lack of communication about the website will not impact Lathlin's "to do list" which includes a call to the appropriate person at The Pas. In the past, this lack of communication could be chalked up to something potentially more detrimental but the strength of the relationship keeps the doors of communication open (Lathlin, Personal Communication, June 9, 2017). According to Roque, another example of the collaboration having impact, is on the way they do business. For example, The Pas' community development corporation (CDC) which focuses on municipal business was resurrected but didn't stop there. Discussions are occurring with an eye to ways to bring OCN to broaden the scope of CDC's work (Personal Communication, June 9, 2017).

The Tri-Council identified a landfill as a critical project as the landfills in the area aged out and alternatives that were up to code were needed. When the partners discussed the mutual issue, it was determined that OCN had an appropriate parcel of land that would be the best option for a regional landfill that expanded the area of concern to approximately 20 other communities. Roque outlines the steep learning curves that occur (Personal Communication, June 9, 2017) He points to relationships with other governments including the federal government relationship with OCN and the municipal government relationship with the provincial government. That means for this project, OCN can work with the federal government and the town will work with the provincial government so that a master plan is developed that works most effectively for all involved.

## **Collaborative Process**

The Tri-Council meetings are attended by general managers from each community where relevant issues are discussed and recommendations passed to the leadership. Once a consensus is reached then recommendations are ratified by the respective leadership. If there are such things as by-laws or government permits involved, then the leadership makes final decisions. Lathlin reveals that each person's commitment is strong in doing the best they can and "what we got out of it was a really great relationship" (Personal Communication, June 9, 2017). A leadership approach that is most effective according to Roque is to listen. While it is easy to talk about one's own issues, it is more valuable to listen what the other person wants first. The partnership is strengthened as independent decisions disappear in situations that are more suited to the collaboration. As the relationships are strengthened, identifying where overlaps occur will be streamlined.

An important part of the relationship is the RM of Kelsey. OCN now has a more complete idea of where mutual interests lie. They thought that the RM was only involved in agriculture that occurred on land that was quite removed from OCN. They were surprised to find out that the RM owns land close to OCN. They are now working on coordinating commercial development on contiguous land that each was developing separately until the partnership opened up discussions. Lathlin notes, “We have similar goals that we had no idea of before” (Personal Communication, June 9, 2017).

### **Facilitative Leadership**

Lathlin states that change in leadership does impact the success of the Tri-Council (Personal Communication, June 9, 2017). A challenge to the collaboration’s health, is how new leaders are brought up to speed on the partnership. Some perceptions of change in leadership for example occurred when an eager champion that connected well with the partners to a new leader who has a more “hands off” style. This is not a deal breaker so long as the lines of communication are open. There are always pressures that are hidden to outsiders and as Lathlin states, “Because we are friendly, doesn’t mean that I can poke by nose in their business” (Personal Communication, June 9, 2017).

Roque adds that changes in leadership do not stop the momentum because each partner has goals to accomplish that drive the process. The methods of communication can cause issues when setting meetings. For example, if an effort to schedule a meeting is not successful because there was no response to the email invitation, Roque states “call me old-fashioned but there is such a thing called the telephone. Problems occur when assumptions are made that others prefer to do things the same way that I do. It is better to realize that some people might do things a little differently” (Personal Communication, June 9, 2017).

Both Lathlin and Roque are collaboration champions. They work hard to inspire others and bring their experience to the table to help the Tri-Council move forward. Roque thought a meet and greet after the new chief of OCN was recently elected made sense. He organized it himself despite the inability to set Tri-Council meetings successfully. Fifteen out of 22 leaders showed up across the three partnerships. The new chief met the mayor and many useful contacts were made for the benefit of all concerned (Personal Communication, June 9, 2017).

At OCN, Lathlin and another employee were enthusiastic and passionate about building relationships so they modelled the behaviour to others in various departments. This was picked up as the value became clear so now it is a common means of doing business and people feel comfortable to include the town in the process. This is done independently without leadership having to give directions (Personal Communication, June 9, 2017).

The collaboration future looks promising according to Lathlin and Roque as it can only improve, grow and become stronger. The inevitable shift as young people step into leadership roles will require space for the wisdom of the experienced, older citizens who have much to offer. It makes sense to access all assets even while generation practices, communication and use of technology may stretch older people’s abilities. It is a work in progress that will adapt from generation to generation.

Roque’s advice to municipalities interested in developing collaborations is to know their list of projects well enough so that opportunities for working together are quickly identified (Personal Communication, June 9, 2017). This is a collaborative process that relies on relationship building and not going in with a demanding attitude where the focus is on vent-

ing with the purpose of winning disagreements. Speaking up quickly without the facts or bringing gossip into the picture are injurious.

Lathlin's advice to First Nations communities interested in this type of partnership is to pursue it persistently (Personal Communication, June 9, 2017). "You will find common interests and goals. The paths that lead to achieving those goals will be vastly improved with collaboration. No one has loses anything from collaboration. Instead it is multiplied for the better."