

The University-Community Partnership: Benefits of a Rural Ontario Land Use Planning Project

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Abstract

Rural communities often do not have the financial or technical capacity to undertake major planning exercises. At the same time, there is growing interest on the part of rural researchers to engage in community outreach activities, such as action research. Students and a faculty member from Brock University's Department of Geography have been involved in an innovative partnership with a small rural Ontario municipality that has resulted in the creation of a new official land use plan for the community. All partners – the students, faculty member, and municipality – have benefitted from this project, suggesting that its replication in other settings could bring forth similar benefits.

Introduction

The ability of rural places to grapple with the changes and challenges they face is often hindered by a lack of community capacity, including budgetary constraints and a lack of local expertise in the fields of community development and land use planning. Accordingly, several rural scholars have called for more frequent community-based action research (e.g., Douglas 2003; Markey, Halseth and Manson 2010), whereby the researcher(s) can contribute "to the resolution of issues and priorities that are particularly important to [rural] communities and populations" (Bryant 2010, 147). Such arguments are supported by more general calls for university faculty to become more active in the communities they serve, in the dissemination of knowledge to non-academic audiences, and in the provision of applied, "real-world" learning opportunities to their students (Bednarz et al. 2008; Bridger and Alter 2006). Accordingly, there is great potential for researchers and their students to engage in partnerships with rural communities that can ultimately become "win-win-win" situations due to the number of benefits that this form of "public scholarship" (Cantor and Levine 2006) can bring for all parties involved (Figure 1). This poster reports on one such initiative, in which students and faculty from a Southern Ontario university have assisted a sparsely populated rural Northern Ontario municipality in the formulation of a much-needed land use plan.

Project Overview

In May 2007, a councillor from the Township of South Algonquin (Figure 2) approached Brock University's Department of Geography to determine whether there was an interest in helping the municipality to create its first-ever Official Plan, a planning document that would set forth the Township's land use development priorities and policies. Up to that point, a lack of formal planning controls for the community had frequently resulted in the incompatible mixing of land use activities and the denial of land use severance and subdivision applications by the provincial government, who argued that it could not approve such requests without first knowing the Township's development priorities. At the same time, the Township was facing a declining population and economy, increased pressure for cottage development, and growing conflict and competition in the use of local recreational amenities (Figure 3).

Hiring a private consulting firm to undertake the formulation of an official plan was beyond the financial means of the Township, however, and the Township's staff did not possess the expertise to conduct such a process in-house. Fortunately, the Township did have the capacity to cover any costs incurred by faculty and students, such as travel expenses, if they were to spearhead the process. Over the next three years, Professor Christopher Fullerton and a total of thirteen Geography students, who took part in the project through the Department's Honours Internship Program, engaged the South Algonquin community in a variety of ways in order to determine the most appropriate content for the Official Plan. This included the creation of an Official Plan Committee, composed of Township councillors and residents, and:

- the holding of community brainstorming workshops and focus group discussions (Figure 4);
- the conducting of interviews, focus groups and Township tours with key informants;
- consultations with local children in the Township's three elementary schools (Figure 5);
- the distribution of a survey questionnaire; and
- the holding of open houses and public presentations.

The planning process has culminated thus far with the preparation of a draft official plan that is currently under review by the Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing. Once adopted by the Township council and approved by the provincial government, South Algonquin's official plan will establish legally-binding land use regulations that will provide the municipality with greater control over the form and extent of future development in village, rural and waterfront settings.

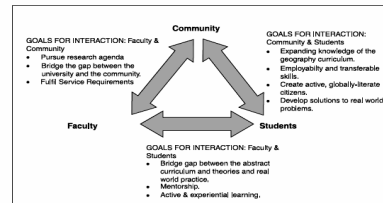


Figure 1. Three-Way Relationship between Teaching, Scholarship and Community Service
Source: Bednarz et al. 2008



Figure 2. Township of South Algonquin, Ontario
Map: Victoria Tasker



Figure 3. Aylen Lake, Township of South Algonquin
Photo: C. Fullerton



Figure 4. Community Workshop, January 2008
Photo: C. Fullerton



Figure 5. Elementary School Student Engagement, October 2008
Photo: C. Fullerton

Benefits of the Project

For the Community

As an outcome of this innovative partnership the thirteen-year-old Township has for the first time witnessed the creation of a formal land use plan that will guide planning and development decisions for several years. The draft plan makes an effort to accommodate future development in ways that will not jeopardize the many qualities of the Township cherished by its seasonal and year-round residents, such as its relatively pristine natural landscape and abundance of outdoor recreational opportunities. It is also doubtful that this project would have been completed were it not for the creation of this university-community partnership, given the financial constraints identified earlier. A more intangible positive outcome of this endeavour has been what some believe to be a stronger sense of community among residents, as the various planning exercises brought people together to talk about local issues and potential solutions to various problems. The community dialogues were noted by several participants as being something sorely needed to help move the community forward.

For the Students

Bednarz et al. (2008, 91) have noted that "community engagement enhances geographic knowledge and skills by encouraging students to apply curricular materials to 'real-world' situations and to reflect on that experience." In the case of this project, students have earned practical experience that, for many, has complemented their theoretical- and classroom-based planning and development courses. This, in turn, has played an instrumental role in the pursuit of their planning-related career aspirations. Several students have continued their educations by enrolling in graduate programs in Planning and Geography, while others have been hired into planning positions immediately upon their graduation from undergraduate studies. Many have also noted that their experiences provided them with an eye-opening glimpse into life in rural Canada, something that had largely been lacking in their university studies.

For the Faculty Member

As noted by Markey, Halseth and Manson (2010, 162), "There is a growing consensus that understanding and addressing rural development issues demands sensitivity to context and a recognition of the variability and diversity of rural areas." Through no other means is it more possible to appreciate the relevance of this statement than by engaging directly in the planning and development activities of rural communities. Thus, for the faculty member involved in this project, the experience of co-creating an official plan for the Township of South Algonquin has provided valuable "first-hand" insight into the process of rural land use planning. Thus, this partnership has served an important purpose in contributing to his longitudinal research concerning the nature and dynamics of the rural community economic development process.

Conclusion

This initiative has the potential to serve as a model for similar university-community partnerships at a time when many rural municipalities are desperately in need of such assistance. Indeed, rural researchers inherently have a deep and vested interest in the fortunes of rural places. Engaging in community-based research provides the opportunity for faculty members and their students to make valuable contributions to rural planning and development. In the case of the Brock University-Township of South Algonquin partnership, a project that might otherwise never have been completed has been undertaken, with myriad benefits having accrued for all project partners.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank the residents, Council and staff of the Township of South Algonquin for their willingness to make such a ground-breaking project a reality, and also his students for applying themselves so diligently in this endeavour.

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