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How Social Prosperity Came to Wood Buffalo, Alberta

By Leslie Wright and Norah McClintock

This article is the first in a series on Social Prosperity Wood Buffalo.

SUMMARY: With this article, *The Philanthropist* begins a five-part series on Social Prosperity Wood Buffalo, an innovative partnership involving business, the charitable sector, and an entire community in Alberta. In this article, Diane Shannon, executive director of United Way of Fort McMurray, sets the stage: Why was change needed? How did it come about? What have been the results to date? Future articles will delve in more depth into this initiative, with articles by participants, including Suncor Energy Inc. and the Suncor Energy Foundation.

RÉSUMÉ: Avec cet article, *The Philanthropist* commence une série en cinq parties au sujet de Social Prosperity Wood Buffalo, un partenariat novateur regroupant le monde des affaires, le secteur caritatif et toute la communauté albertaine. Diane Shannon, directrice générale de United Way (Centraide) de Fort McMurray, dresse la table dans cet article : Pourquoi un changement était-il nécessaire? Comment cela s'est-il produit? Quels sont les résultats à ce jour? Dans les prochains articles, cette initiative sera présentée plus en détail par des participants, notamment Suncor Énergie inc. et la Fondation Suncor Énergie.

The following is based on an interview with Diane Shannon, Executive Director of United Way of Fort McMurray.

The Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, Alberta, is the second largest regional municipality in Canada, covering over 68,000 square kilometres and includes the community of Fort McMurray, population 77,000.

Fort McMurray's proximity to Alberta's oil sands has made it a magnet for workers, many of whom have homes and families elsewhere, which has had a significant impact on the community. In the past decade, it has largely shaken its image as a town of rough-and-ready young transients lured from across the country by high wages in the oil sands and evolved into a town where young couples are raising children and hoping to make their future. Although the oil sands brought good wages and a new generation of residents, the town's good times and fast growth have not been without challenges.

Housing is hard to come by and is much more expensive than in other similar-sized communities. An average single-family home can sell for \$750,000, and costs are high for contractors who have to pay high wages to compete with those paid in the oil sands.

“When there’s a shortage of housing, there’s also an inflated value placed on office and retail space,” says Diane Shannon, Executive Director of United Way of Fort McMurray. The ripple effect of the market hit nonprofits especially hard. There are no cheaper areas of town to move to. The result, she says, was “community benefit organizations being run off kitchen tables or out of church basements. When you operate in that way, you have a really hard time retaining staff.”

It was exactly this sort of problem facing local charities and nonprofits that led to Social Prosperity Wood Buffalo (SPWB) – a partnership to build the capacity of this sector and the community to address social issues. The partnership was spearheaded by Suncor Energy Foundation, the United Way of Fort McMurray, and the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, and involved the University of Waterloo and Capacity Canada.

Suncor Energy Foundation and the local United Way had already worked together to develop The Redpoll Centre, a shared office space that houses nonprofits – or, as they are now called in Wood Buffalo, “social profits” – under one roof. Suncor even seconded a staff person to provide the backbone support, help create the shared space and, for the first year, support development of the culture within the centre.

“We started offering small professional development courses and opportunities, such as webinars and realized that a lot more organizations in the community could benefit from them,” Shannon says. About the same time, Suncor Energy Foundation was discussing how to make a longer-lasting impact in the community. Cathy Glover, Suncor’s Director, Community Investment, had been reading and learning about social innovation. The book *Getting to Maybe* (Westley, Zimmerman, & Quinn Patton, 2006) made an impression on her and helped to develop the vision for SPWB.

“We thought that maybe we could do something innovative in this community and become more than just a remote community way up in the north,” Shannon says. “We could become a model for doing things differently. We’re a young city in many ways. No large scale changes really happened here until oil started being produced. So the bulk of the community is only 40 years old. We haven’t got things so entrenched here that we’re unable to change. We’re able to influence change here in a different way because we’re more mouldable.”

But this wasn’t just a partnership of organizations. “We realized from the beginning that we wanted the whole community involved,” Shannon says. “So we put together a steering committee of advisors from the community and hosted a community conversation.”

“The hardest part,” says Shannon, “was trusting the process. Sometimes it felt so vague and so bulky and so difficult and that we’d bitten off more than made sense. How do we really think we can influence and sustain an undertaking this big for five years? We had to talk each other through it, have a vision and stick to it, and keep plugging away at it.”

They brought workshops to the community, including Imagine Canada's Standards Program. They also brought in experts to connect with social profit organizations and determine where there were gaps in knowledge or resources that needed to be filled.

“Working with Imagine Canada's standards accreditation process helped us identify the policies that it made sense to have in place and ones that were needed to manage risk. We stepped up our game in governance, human resources, and volunteer management, and that's still going on. Organizations working together to develop policies; each organization's policies look different, but they have someone in the room to bounce things off when we worked on the standards together.”

Involving “outsiders” like the University of Waterloo and Capacity Canada posed an initial problem. “People thought, ‘We have smart people here. Why don't we just do this ourselves?’ But it also had an upside. “We would never have been able to muster the strength to do those things otherwise because we're struggling all the time to clear the piles that are already on our desks and working on so many projects including homelessness, poverty, and youth initiatives for the community. How would we find the time to be able to focus on building skills and professionalism and strengthening organizations?”

Shannon says that it was critical to have dedicated staff like Nancy Mattes and Katharine McGowan (both from the University of Waterloo and both of whom have contributed articles for this series) to identify experts to bring to the table and to provide the backbone support to keep the process going. “This is a prime example of how collective impact works,” she adds. “We have a backbone organization whose only focus is supporting the project. For five years, we've had a commitment. We didn't have to worry about funding. We didn't have to worry about whether we would be able to do it next year. They provided the backbone support to make it all happen.”

What have been the results to date? “In May our community welcomed an expanded shared-space centre, which is three times as large. An arts council has been formed as a result of the community conversation five years ago. And we've been able to build a different level of trust, talk about our successes, and do some community consultations about what we'll do next.”

As for Suncor Energy Foundation, “They've been clear,” says Shannon, “that they want to expand the Social Prosperity model and take it to other communities across the country.”

In the series of articles to follow on Social Prosperity Wood Buffalo, you'll get an on-the-ground view of collective impact in action. Participants in the SPWB process will describe some of the obstacles they faced as well as the successes they've had along the way.

References

Westley, F., Zimmerman B., & Quinn Patton, M. (2006). *Getting to Maybe – How the World is Changed*. Toronto, ON: Random House Canada.