

Community Co-operatives: A Revolutionary Model of Rural Community Revitalisation

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The Goal? Reduce politicians and save money. The Means? Amalgamate rural townships into municipalities. The Consequences? Loss of local identity, self-determination, and services.

The Muskoka District, covering 4,000 square km north of Toronto, began amalgamations in 1970. Twenty-five townships converged into six municipalities, each covering up to 30 square km and housing up to one town and three villages.

The long-term effects have been painful. Small communities were left without a voice. Taxes paid saw few services returned. Rural Canadians were dependent on local councillors to present their views, yet rare were community meetings to identify needs and wants.

In too many places, the lingering result was anger and apathy. Without a cohesive voice to clearly articulate their concerns, these places literally found themselves, "out of sight; out of mind."

Villages and small communities began to look for options. How could they gain unity and self-reliance? How could they influence their future and the future of their children? How could they initiate and implement economic development in their small rural areas?

The Community Co-operative Model addresses these issues. Described as "people coming together to help themselves," this model recognises the unique value of rural hamlets, villages, and small towns, and the importance of utilising and funnelling each community members' strengths and talents to promote economic and social well-being.

Back in 1994, in the midst of the recession, the town of Gravenhurst (population 9,000) lost all of its major industry. I initiated the formation of the Gravenhurst Food Co-operative to provide healthy, affordable food and a revenue generating business. But as the co-operative developed, members wanted to address community issues and struggled to find an

appropriate structure. It was during this process, in 1996, that the Community Co-operative Model was born.

This newly formed, first of its kind, community co-operative began to partner with local agencies in various projects which successfully brought the first Community Internet Site to Muskoka, a pre-natal nutrition project named 'Great Beginnings,' later to be replicated in five other communities, and a Youth Drop in Centre.

In 2001, Muskoka had four community co-operatives, and two District/County Associations, with an increasing number of enquiries from communities considering implementation of this innovative model. The word is definitely out.

Rather than live on the margins, communities can take charge of their future. When the phone company failed to list them in the yellow pages, the residents of Honey Harbour (population 400, year-round) launched a community co-operative. It developed and distributed a brochure of businesses and services that directed visitors and locals to local amenities.

Rather than wait for outside investors, townsfolk can buy individual shares to form a community-owned business. For example, if a general store, often the anchor of small villages, is about to go under, the community can look at purchasing and operating it as a co-operative.

Working collectively to facilitate entrepreneurs, a community can act on opportunities and move forward.

The alternatives

As the rural communities in Muskoka searched for answers following amalgamation, they naturally considered many models. But each, despite their strengths, had disadvantages.

Women's Institutes, Cottage and Ratepayers' Associations are special interest groups, not representative of the whole community.

The Healthy Community Coalition Model, with its emphasis on collaboration between agencies, organisations, municipal councils, and businesses, works well for urban areas at a District or County level. Rural hamlets do not have these potential partners. Additionally, this model's activities are motivated primarily by altruism, whereas community co-operative initiatives benefit its members.

Social Planning Councils provide wonderful research and planning tools. But Muskoka's Council, despite participation from a large number of agencies, had no rural community representation. Since priorities were often based on the perceived needs of those agencies present, communities not represented received little or no programme dollars.

Neighbourhood Associations tend to be very task-oriented, focussing on one or two issues. They are less likely to live past the original members and are unable to apply for funding opportunities, since they are unincorporated.

Traditional co-operatives tend to be end-oriented. They usually have narrow mandates with one outcome, such as food co-operatives, nursery co-operatives, credit unions, etc. This is limiting and requires the creation of a new board for each initiative.

Advantages of the community co-operative

By contrast, the community co-operative model is a multi-purpose umbrella that can meet the diverse social and economic needs of rural communities without creating another level of government. With a holistic approach, viewing the community from birth to death, this inclusive, democratic structure can call meetings, identify local needs, advocate common interests, and create local solutions, as well as partner with organisations, political bodies, and funding agencies.

Independence and versatility

As an incorporated structure, a co-operative can move ahead independently and out-live its founding members. Co-operative nursery schools are a wonderful example. Whereas ad-hoc nursery groups frequently collapse once the children of founding members enter school, many nursery co-operatives are still operating in Muskoka after over 30 years. As a corporation, the co-operative can own local assets, sell them, and reinvest revenue.

The community co-op model's flexibility is a useful feature in small, rural communities with shifting demographics and needs. The goal of the co-operative is to support a broad range of projects through partnerships with churches,

community police, volunteer fire departments, women's institutes, cottage associations, and other grassroots organisations. Because of this, duplication of initiatives and resources is avoided.

With the ability to initiate, partner, and follow through on solutions, a community co-operative can be pro-active and action-oriented, creating a positive working relationship with all three levels of government.

Unity

The ultimate goal of the co-operative is to promote unity within the community, creating an atmosphere of tolerance, thoughtfulness, and consideration. Membership is open to all local residents. Annual local community meetings bring members together to consider the future, identify current gaps and needs, and to suggest possible solutions. The directors are seen as facilitators, equal to other co-op members.

Electoral process

The electoral process for the board is key to this attitude of facilitation and equality. Under the traditional process boards tend to self-select, thereby representing a specific sector or group within the community.

Under the community co-operative model, there are no nominations or electioneering. Each year, a list of the entire membership is sent to each individual member. They then select a number of appropriate board members, based on their availability and skills, taking into account the demographics of their community, the balance of gender, young and old, and new and lifetime residents. (It is only through such a balance on the board that the co-operative will have true synergy.)

Those members with the most votes are then asked if they would be willing to sit on the board for a one-year period. It would be surprising for someone to turn down a position, since people are elected out of respect, not from a lack of choice. To date, for the eight years this model has been in effect, no board position on any co-operative in the Muskoka region has ever been declined.

Consultation & consensus

A community co-operative makes its decisions through a process of consultation. The purpose of the consultation is to find the truth of any matter and, whenever possible, to achieve a consensus.

This requires that individuals refrain from holding fast to personal opinions, simply to have their views prevail. Instead, they must approach the matter with a genuine desire to determine the right course of action. Members are encouraged to "put their ideas into the pot;" to focus on issues and not on individuals, organisations, or businesses; and to support the collective outcome.

Achieving consensus takes time and is often a difficult matter for new members. If consensus cannot be achieved, the majority vote of a quorum prevails. The decision is equally valid and binding.

Two Basic Structures

The appropriate basic structure of the community co-operative depends on the size of the community and number of residing organisations.

A mid-sized community with several service clubs and business associations would organise a second tier co-operative, with membership comprised of representatives from these organisations.

This type of umbrella structure supports bi-directional feedback with each sector of the community sitting at the table - the municipality, service clubs, business associations, etc. This prevents issues from falling through the cracks and costly duplication of services and resources.

When a community is small, such that it has little in the way of structured organisations, co-operative membership is comprised of individuals who live in the area. A representative of this grassroots co-operative would then sit as a representative on a regional structure at the district level.

Developing a successful community co-operative

Community co-operatives are formed only when a need has been identified. In Gravenhurst, it was the recession. For

Honey Harbour, it was their sense of isolation. In Haliburton, it was the closing of their women's shelter, and for Ryde and Oakley, it was the closure of their schools.

Membership size varies, depending on community demographics, and has not been a factor in the success of these co-operatives. Other factors are critical, however.

Capacity Building: It is extremely important to teach people about co-operatives, how they operate, and how to carry out the electoral and consultation processes.

Relationship Building: Partnership is crucial to this model. co-operative members have to be able to reach out to local politicians, organisations, and other groups and maintain a long-term relationship with them.

Mentoring: It is important for communities considering this model to hear directly from other co-ops about the successes and pitfalls that they have experienced. Likewise, people who have been through the development process of a co-operative must be encouraged and enabled to become mentors for other communities.

Membership Development: One of the major struggles of community co-operatives is the expansion of membership. People are often too shy to discuss membership with others - even people who are benefiting from the co-operative's initiatives. Learning this assertiveness is very important to the co-operative's success.

Human Resources: None of the co-operatives would have been able to survive the difficult periods without assistance from outside, experienced fieldworkers. When a facilitator can focus on one geographic area, she or he can develop the kind of relationships and local understanding necessary to identify opportunities and pitfalls.

Political: While community co-operatives must avoid partisan politics, productive communications between the co-operative and its municipality are essential. The community co-operatives in Muskoka have developed relationships with their local political councils. In one instance, the mayor has promoted the model to other villages in the same township, stating that this is the only way these communities can truly gain some control over their destiny.

Quick tips

In the course of developing these community co-operatives, we gained several valuable insights:

- Start with a small group. Complete the administration portion of the development process before initiating any large projects.
- Seed money makes a significant difference for co-operatives in their infancy. It gives them funds to develop events and lessens the financial pressure of starting an organisation. Each of the current Muskoka community co-operatives received \$2,000 - but only after their bylaws were completed!
- The board is not meant to do all the work. Board members often struggle with asking members to assist with tasks, yet people often enjoy being asked, and find satisfaction as a contributing member.
- When charging for events or items, have a non-member cost, a member cost, and a participating member cost. Although people are encouraged to participate without additional incentives, you will find that members are phoning you asking for some sort of work for the extra reduction. This method also reduces the tension often felt by members "doing all the work."
- Have fun. Without fun, enthusiasm is lost very quickly. In our experience, members often volunteer a large number of hours and need venues or events where they can kick back and relax.

As we move through these turbulent times, imagination and courage is needed to develop new community based organisations that reflect the views and aspirations of the local community. The community co-operative model offers an organisational structure, to Canadians otherwise scattered and isolated in rural areas, which can implement and be accountable for targeted economic development and government initiatives.

The residents themselves come to look at themselves as a whole, identifying their needs and developing local solutions with the government as a resource and partner. When rural municipalities are being amalgamated or restructured, the community co-operative alternative is both timely and

effective.

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