

Final Report, BridgeBuilder Project, Phase II

Les Brost and Jerome Martin, May 2005

Background

The first phase of the BridgeBuilder Report was built upon the assumption that meaningful rural renewal would only happen with the understanding and support of all Albertans. Since urban Albertans constitute a demographic and political majority, their perceptions and values pertaining to rural Alberta's people and landscape are very important. This reality underscores the need for rural and urban Albertans to have conversations that will build bridges of understanding towards a new and renewed rural Alberta.

Phase I was based upon a series of interviews with thoughtful rural and urban Albertans, from 15 to 80 years of age, living from Manyberries to Grande Prairie, and from Pincher Creek to Kitscoty. The resulting BridgeBuilder Report contained some surprising revelations regarding the values and perceptions of the respondents and their assumptions regarding the viewpoints and values of the others.

The BridgeBuilder Report was used as a discussion generator for the second phase of the project. Six meetings were held across Alberta in Lethbridge, Oyen, Calgary, Edmonton, Wainwright and Grande Prairie. An eclectic mixture of rural, urban and rural residential Albertans came together to share their reactions to the BridgeBuilder Report and talk about their passions for rural Alberta. Their backgrounds were varied – from high school students, municipal leaders, farmers, urban business leaders, to government personnel from all levels of government and leaders in Alberta's cultural and educational communities.

Meetings were carefully structured to provide the optimum opportunities for conversations between participants using a variation of the salon meeting model. There were no breakout groups or forced decision-making exercises. The aims were to provide a safe yet spirited environment for the sharing of passions, concerns and innovative ideas, and to stimulate the creative wisdom of Albertans.

Most participants had received advance copies of the BridgeBuilder Report. Meetings began with a short review of the Report's findings and the reactions of the attendees to these findings. This discussion then led to conversations on questions posed by the facilitator. These questions were designed to stimulate ideas and understanding between participants.

This is a summary of the results of the Phase II meetings. It's primarily an Executive Summary, focusing on some of the most provocative and interesting ideas and comments which arose in our meetings. This summary also includes the authors' interpretation and synthesis of those ideas and comments.

We have also included mostly verbatim statements made at the meetings. We did not record the comments in audio but rather transcribed them by longhand and typed them after the meetings.

"This is the right time and the right place for this discussion"

People were ready for these discussions. Attendance at the meetings in Lethbridge, Oyen, Calgary, Edmonton, Wainwright and Grande Prairie varied from 15 to 35, which, in our opinion, suggested that people were interested in the topic. The quality of the discussion and the quality of the ideas confirmed that. The tone of the discussion was largely positive. People wanted to solve problems, not just complain about them. Participants enjoyed the opportunity to understand and be understood and to share their passions, concerns and innovative ideas. The discussions highlighted the importance of the exploration of community values as a key component of successful community-driven rural renewal strategies. Les Brost, who guided the meetings, noted that individuals would e-mail after each meeting to further share their insights.

General Observations on the BridgeBuilder Report

The Tone

Some people said that they liked the tone of the report and the holistic approach that was used. One person said that the report 'challenges us to go deeper ... to rethink what a community is.' Another said that the report shows powerful, common interests (rural and urban) that are converging. Others said that it is important to bring rural and urban people together.

Some participants said that they were surprised at the positive urban reactions to the questions in the report. One rural person said that he didn't believe that urban people have the compassion that they say they have and that what they do and what they say may be different. Another said that the discussion at the meeting in which he participated showed that there is, indeed, a vision for rural Alberta.

"The report shows powerful common interests that are converging."

Agriculture in Rural Alberta and Its Relationship to Rural Renewal

Some participants talked about what they called a *cheap food policy*; others felt that there was no such defined policy.

We were told that prices are low and input costs are high. BSE, of course, is a very significant problem for the livestock industry and related industries. Nevertheless, some producers and local business people have been very successful over the years.

Some felt that while crop diversification and value-added approaches have potential, they don't work for everyone. Some areas are suited to only a few crops and distance to market is also a factor. New markets and other enterprises such as tourism may provide new opportunities for some areas.

Some participants felt that marketing was very difficult for them while others felt that if farmers don't market their products they won't be in business for long.

There was strong agreement on the need for agricultural policy rooted in sustainability. There was general agreement that rural renewal would not be achieved solely through the application of agricultural policy and that inter-ministry co-operation and co-ordination was essential.

"Farming is like a small business in an urban city."

Communities: What are they and how can we conserve, enrich and develop them?

Virtually everyone at our meetings was concerned with community. Many felt that there was a loss of community independence in their areas and that the money made in communities is being invested elsewhere.

One of the participants asked us to think carefully about what we mean by the word community: "We need to think about our definition of 'community'. There is a huge difference between a neighborhood and a community. Often we use the word community when we should be using neighborhood. Varsity Heights is not the same as Tofield. We must understand anew what community is."

"A community has a land base. If you picked up a group of families in Manyberries and moved them to Tofield they would be different because the land is different. We are tied to the land."

"Community is land and heart; geography and values."

There are other definitions of community, especially with new information technology. One of our participants told us the story of CKUA and how its local community supporters and those from other countries who supported it on the internet brought it back into production and made it a community-based organization, serving people who love its music and other programs. CKUA will play an even greater role in rural Alberta in the near future as it takes music, news and cultural activities to remote areas.

While there are notable exceptions discussed later in this report most participants felt that depopulation and the loss of young people were among their largest concerns. People are selling their farms and businesses and moving to larger centres and others who are retiring are finding that family members and others are unwilling to buy or take over their business operations. When people leave their farms other farmers buy the land to make their farms larger and as a result the number of people in the community declines.

Schools are closing and the schools that remain may not have the facilities and staff to provide the level of education that is wanted.

Change: Coping with it, managing it and using change to create opportunities

A wise participant said: ‘The future isn’t extrapolated from the past in a straight line. We won’t be the same as we were.’ Others lamented the loss of independence, the economic problems in the agricultural industry, and the changes resulting from rural people choosing to shop in urban areas rather than in their home communities.

Participants at the meetings felt that we needed a vision of what rural Alberta could be.

“What perspective should we use to develop policy? How should we view the development of the corridor between Edmonton and Calgary? What are the fundamental perspectives that would anchor a policy for rural Alberta?”

A number of the people quoted in the report and many who attended the meetings felt that we are looking at ‘rural’ too narrowly – that it’s not just agriculture. One person suggested that agriculture will be only 20% of rural activities and income and other endeavours will provide 80% of the income.

“What will be our future profit centres in rural Alberta? We don’t have to produce just goods.”

Several participants reminded us that there are economic realities that will continue to favour larger farms and agribusinesses and that there are significant opportunities in agriculture and value-added industries. One producer said ‘Globalization is here whether we like it or not.’

Opportunities for Rural Renewal: An Overview

The process gave participants at the meetings opportunities to brainstorm and to be creative with regard to how rural areas could be renewed.

Some participants felt that people were keen to move back to rural Alberta while others were concerned about keeping those who are there. Some felt that if we work hard at this we can reverse the trend of depopulation while some others felt that what has been happening is inevitable for most small and medium-sized settlements and that we will see greater changes in the near future.

There were some very exciting ideas and opportunities discussed that are grouped around some key themes that emerged during the series of meetings.

Investment Opportunities

Many participants observed the paradox of a lot of money in many rural communities and a reluctance to invest in local business opportunities. How can we find ways of keeping that investment money at home so that local entrepreneurs can take advantage of opportunities?

There was also concern with regard to infrastructure and the cost of providing community services in villages and small towns, especially when there was competition amongst the centres with respect to schools and other facilities.

“Instead of government giving out money to projects let’s put that money into foundations; the interest will then finance the projects on a long-term basis. We raised money for our community hall, then put it into a foundation and now use the interest instead of raising money all the time. We now have a basis on which to exist.”

Most participants felt that we have to pursue new opportunities in rural Alberta: diversification in agriculture, value-added activities, new businesses other than agriculture, tourism etc. We need new ways to earn money from the land and we have to find ways to encourage investment in rural Alberta. All meetings discussed the

problem of attracting capital to the kind of small-scale business opportunities consistent with community capacity.

“Let’s create Rural Investment Alberta, which could be a clearinghouse of information on rural investment opportunities in rural Alberta. Entrepreneurs with sound business plans could list their investment opportunities and requirements in a central location that could be accessed by investors from around the world.”

“There is an opportunity for new investment vehicles and better use of the new-generation co-ops.”

Communication and Marketing

All our meetings discussed the need for new and innovative ways to enhance communication and understanding of the opportunities and issues pertaining to rural renewal and to facilitate rural/urban understanding. Participants also discussed the need for community access to information on rural renewal success stories.

“CKUA has a program in the works. We’ll be working with the Alberta weekly newspapers to bring news from rural Alberta to our audience. Also, we should remember the town of Rosebud. They reinvented themselves with culture. Also libraries are now staying open because of new technology.”

“I’m interested in the perception that rural and acreage people are more sexist and conservative. They may have to market themselves to show that they’re more progressive.”

Participants remarked on the need for easily accessible information on rural renewal. There was interest expressed in learning from other success stories in rural renewal.

“There is a lack of information on rural renewal.”

“We have to search for best practices.”

Co-operation and Networking Opportunities

“We (individuals and communities) must co-operate and collaborate with each other” was a common message in the meetings. Communities cannot afford to duplicate services, nor can government afford to let them do so. One participant said that if he had to pick one activity for his community to work on for rural renewal it would be regional communication and education.

“Communities have to think about how tax dollars are spent to provide the same rinks, community centres etc. in every community. We can’t afford this duplication.”

Schools

At each meeting, public schools were identified as the cornerstone of rural communities. Participants noted the various roles that schools in rural Alberta play or might play in addition to their traditional role. Insightful comments were made regarding the impact of current funding arrangements and the potential for new and innovative ways to fund schools in rural Alberta.

“I’d like to see multi-use of schools. For example, we might house senior citizens in one section and school classes in another.”

“If a rural community loses a school, it also loses its human infrastructure – the coach of the hockey team, the chairman of the library committee, etc. You take the human infrastructure out of the rural area. It is one of the economic developers; it is a community centre, etc.”

“We could integrate schools with Economic Development which could then sponsor entrepreneurial activities and courses. We could have 24 hour access to the Internet in schools.”

“Rural boards really do need to get together and realize that this is not just an education problem; it is a whole lot more.”

“We need a local government charter for schools and revenue sharing for schools from other government departments.”

Trades and Training

A consistent theme emerging at all meetings was that of problems caused by a shortage of skilled trades people. Participants at some meetings observed that it might be necessary to correct some inherent biases concerning trades within our public education system.

“There is a real need for trades people in rural Alberta with the skill sets required to meet local needs. Careers in the trades need to be recognized as being worthwhile.’ We’re losing service people and those remaining are overworked trying to cover the territory.”

“We should stream people into areas in which they are interested, such as the trades, rather than expect them all to go to University.”

“The agriculture industry needs to develop a human resource culture and capability that makes the industry attractive to young people.”

“There is a huge deficit of agricultural workers. There are no health and safety regulations, no benefits, workers are subjected to long working hours, etc. If we had these costs we wouldn’t be able to pass them on. There are discrepancies between industries. We’re competing with these other industries.”

Tourism

We who live with clean air, blue skies and landscapes that stretch to the horizon forget that many people in the world would like to enjoy them too. Several interviewees and participants in the meetings felt strongly that tourism (agri-tourism and geo-tourism) could be a major part of our prairie economy.

“A farmer friend in southern Saskatchewan told me about a fellow farmer near Leader who started a bed and breakfast and advertised on the Internet. A European tourist company phoned and said: ‘We’re thinking of sending people. But, tell me, what colour is the sky?’

‘Uh, well, it’s blue.’

‘Great. We’ll send tourists.’”

“A friend and her husband have a farm near the Bow River. She told her husband that they should build a fishing lodge so that they could do business with all of the fly fishermen who were going past their farm. They did that and it’s been very successful.”

Open space and blue sky is already a marketable commodity in Alberta. Movie companies, both local and international, have filmed in this province. Such exposure brings tourists and keeps a creative community working here.

Some of the participants in the meetings felt that we have to approach tourism on a regional basis and that we should expand agri-tourism and geo-tourism.

The Need and Motivation for New and Innovative Ideas

“Desperation provides a stimulus to community creativity. Manyberries horse school and Warner girls’ hockey school ... communities were hungry enough or desperate enough to do something.”

“There is an opportunity to market environmental goods and services.”

“Red Deer County’s assessment of the county and the communities is a model that presents opportunities for the whole province.”

“The keys to rural Alberta's salvation are within rural Albertans.”

“We don’t have to invent the toilet seat – we just need to cut a hole in the outhouse.”

“The Special Areas Water Project holds the key to our future.”

Opportunities for Women and Youth

Several participants said that there was a lack of educational, training and work opportunities for women in rural areas.

“In our work with rural women we’ve found that they want learning power, access to work so they can make a living and the opportunity for networking. They want to be recognized, and, of course, they want access to good health care.”

Most participants were concerned about the lack of opportunities – jobs, education, chances for advancement – for young people in rural areas. They want to find ways of keeping at least some of the best and the brightest young people on the farms and in the towns. They also suggested various incentive programs to keep young people in their communities. Providing higher education facilities close to home would also help.

New People on the Land and in the Towns

The energy industry has brought new wealth to some producers and allowed others to stay on the land. Employment opportunities in the energy field in rural Alberta have also resulted in people new to the area settling in inexpensive housing in towns and villages. Young farmers find off-farm income in the energy industry which allows them to stay on the farm. Others may find that they can now buy land with the security provided by a part-time or full-time job.

People new to an area or town are not always welcomed. The house, acreage or land they buy once belonged to a local family and other people in the community may have wanted to buy it themselves. New people from urban areas have different expectations about community services and how a community should function.

“Communities will have to discover for themselves what they can do best. There is the myth here and in Europe that people in rural areas are friendly. In some respects urban people are more friendly than the people in the country.”

Government Policies and Regulations

Most rural participants expressed a degree of frustration with some of the policies and regulations established by the three levels of government. This was not a feeling of “anti-regulation”, but rather a feeling that “the rules are made by urban people”.

“The Canadian Wheat Board structure and policies get in the way of rural entrepreneurs. The Canadian Wheat Board won’t let us buy wheat from our neighbor if we have a flourmill. We have to buy it from the Wheat Board.”

“The jobs are all in Edmonton or Ottawa if you are working with the government.”

“An opportunity for more support to hamlets, i.e. paved roads or better roads, etc. Provide some services to hamlets and villages and people may want to look at them as a place to live and raise a family.”

“What if you could stay in your community as a young person and not pay taxes for five years? We’re paying northern allowances to some people. Can’t we use taxation instead of subsidies?”

The Myths of Rural Alberta

These myths (or what are perceived as myths) were discussed in several of the meetings as well as in the original interviews.

Rural Alberta was built by people acting independently. One participant addressed what he called the myth of independence: “Let’s deal with myths and words. The history of this province is interdependence, not independence. We’re screwing ourselves by extolling a myth which does not exist.”

Rural folks are always friendly folks. Many participants, rural and urban, agreed that this was a myth. Rural people are not necessarily friendly to people moving into their areas. Several participants who have moved into areas said that people in those areas were unfriendly.

“Rural Alberta is friendly if you're an insider”

“I found that moving into a rural area (Gull Lake) was difficult. I did not feel welcome. You’re an invader coming in, snatching up some farmland. If it were not for my kids in school I’d never have any friends.”

Everybody in the city is fine; only people in rural areas are affected by globalization and bigger and bigger businesses. Several people said that businesses, especially small businesses, in the cities are having the same problems as farms. Small convenience stores are disappearing and other small and medium size businesses are also being lost or taken over by larger companies.

Young people who are born in Alberta cities stay in those cities. While many young people don’t stay on farms or in small towns many young people from Edmonton and Calgary find greener pastures in other provinces and other countries.

Everyone in rural areas has economic problems. No: some people – some farmers and some business folks – have done very well financially. However, many others have not.

Urban people are worried about food safety: pesticides, herbicides, hormones. And they don’t want to pay much for their food. That’s not what we found. Urban people, according to our conversations, assume that the food produced here is safe. They’re looking for quality food and are willing to pay a lot for quality food with a story attached (beef, organic or not, raised by someone in this province; special bread made by special bakers with local products).

Only rural people understand and care about the land. This is not so. Many of our urban interviewees spoke long and eloquently about the land, about their cities and the agricultural and parkland that is part of or is adjacent to those cities.

“City born and raised, my soul is the Alberta landscape that W.O. Mitchell captured in his writing. What alarms me is the fast, thoughtless growth of both Edmonton and Calgary and the Edmonton/Calgary corridor by developers (and I don’t use that word kindly) who come for the quick buck and move on – eating up all the landscape that we require to cleanse the destruction of our environment and souls.”

The Process is the Product

We think that the most profound contribution that has been made in the BridgeBuilders project is the unique process itself. We’ve talked to urban people and rural people about rural Alberta and how each group feels about the other and about rural Alberta. While most consultation processes shy away from values-based discussion, this process explores community values and encourages conversation and understanding. Participants have responded enthusiastically.

The BridgeBuilder Reports (Phase I and II) and the “Operator’s Manual” can be the foundation of community-building approaches for use by people in their home communities. Community development does not come from the outside: it comes from communities and from individuals. Outside consultants and advisors can help to provide resources and ideas but only local people can implement true development. We hope that the information provided in the Phase I, Phase II and “Operator’s Manual” components will be helpful to individuals and communities working to renew rural Alberta.

“A discussion about rural renewal in Alberta is a discussion about values.”

Final Thoughts

A participant with a rural and urban background told the following story at one of our meetings: A friend in Arkansas worked with the people in his town on community development: “What do we want our community to be like in 20 years?” In five years they had attracted several businesses with national markets and things were going well. However, in 2002 two of the companies closed. People said, “We should be really

worried but we're not. We've done our planning over the years and we know that we'll succeed in spite of these closures. We know what to do and we'll just do it."

"What a wonderful province to have this conversation in."

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Submitted by Les Brost and Jerome Martin, April 30, 2005