



Celebrating Communities Learning from the Nova Scotia Experience

By Mike Stolte

There's so much energy in the packed room at the Celebrating Communities conference here on Cape Breton Island, it's infectious. People are anxious to get back to their communities with new ideas and connections, and recharged batteries, which hopefully will yield creative and practical solutions to community issues. I'm honoured to have been invited here to present to 300 of Nova Scotia's finest community and economic developers.

It seems everyone I talk to has a cousin, brother or old friend somewhere in the Kootenays – we are only one degree of separation here in Canada despite thousands of kilometers of land and several isolating mountain ranges. I've already met Anne DeGrace's sister, Mary, a former Nelson Waldorf teacher named Shannon, a former resident of Kaslo and Nelson named Ryan, and Ross, a Cape Breton native who assisted sculptor John McKinnon back in the dark days of Nelson. Ross, this same sculpture-apprentice – is with Nova Scotia Economic Development, the conference organizer.

Cape Breton communities, like many in the Kootenays, have rich musical legacies (think Men of the Deeps [they're playing for us tonight], Rita MacNeil [she's got the Teahouse a couple of blocks away] and Matt Minglewood [he, along with a host of rich local talent, played for us last night]), mining pasts, and communities that often feel misunderstood and ignored by provincial governments many miles away. There's a definite pride in quality of life, puzzlement over why Nova Scotians are leaving for the great vacuum of Alberta and even more puzzling, not returning, and fear that youth have given up, not attaching themselves to the communities that they live in. For a culture where lineages can be traced for many generations, this might be the greatest tragedy.

Here are some things I've learned (or learned again) that are useful to the Kootenay experience:

A community starts with a conversation. There needs to be opportunities for conversation **before** the crisis or outside of problem solving. Some of the provocative questions we've been asked in the innovative World Café (people rotate around a room sitting at different tables for short periods having conversations in groups no larger than 5):

- When does the community come alive for you?
- What is working well for positive change in your community?
- What are your wildest dreams for your community?
- What do you want to do in 5, 10, 20, 50 years for your community?
- How do we tap into the collective intelligence of the community (recognizing everyone has a talent or skill they would like to share)?

These are all questions of substance and depth. We are asked to review the ingredients of a good conversation. It should be open and from the heart, respectful, encourage deep listening, bring total focus to the issues others bring (vs. just waiting for the opportunity to jump in with our own), look for linkages, and most importantly, be natural and authentic.

The young facilitator, Tim (from Dartmouth) states, "Conversation is where community really happens - in a vacuum of conversation comes relentless action not rooted in any real meaning." Wow! Wise words from a young man. Everyone concurs.



“When an old person dies, it’s like a library has burned to the ground.” Carol, an elder from Grandparents International Storytelling, shares this powerful African proverb. She tells our small group about a great oral research history project that helps connects seniors to youth. “Don’t lose the stories, the rich local history or ordinary wisdom of our seniors,” she warns.

There are many other themes, ideas and issues put forward, many of them with great passion. Many of the biggest issues – youth out-migration, non-inclusive communities (here it’s Gaelic, Acadian, Mi’kmaq (the provincial First Nations)), Alberta sucking the local talent pool dry, rising housing costs (someone was complaining that houses on Cape Breton were getting out of hand with small houses coming in at almost \$90,000), communities needing vision and to encourage and develop leaders, diversifying our economies, not having adequate federal or provincial support for rural issues, communities needing to work more co-operatively, entrepreneurially and innovatively - aren’t that much different from our issues.

Having a positive forum like Celebrating Communities, however, sets a powerfully positive tone that allows everyone to take that positive note back to the communities they work in. We will always have issues and problems. What’s important is to take a breather and, on occasion, look around at others in the same boat, find out what’s happening with them, and most important, have a big celebration.

In the words of a great songwriter (whose name I shall probably never know), “Let’s get this party started!”