

Stimulus Needs to Address Communities:

Learning, Innovation and Entrepreneurship in Communities Should be Cornerstone of Economic Recovery

By Mike Stolte

"Perhaps the most important resource available to the entrepreneurial community is the personal initiative of the individuals who call it home" – Heartland Center (Nebraska) – "The Entrepreneurial Community -- A Strategic Leadership Approach to Community Survival"

It seems like a distant memory. Five years ago we were on the right track. Canada was moving to position itself as a beacon of learning and innovation, indisputable pillars of prosperity in the 21st century.

There was consensus we had to move beyond our dependence on pulling our finite resources out of the ground, out of the sea and shipping them off without adding extra value. The strategy was sound, endorsed by all levels of government, the OECD and others.

Then the sleek commodity boom pulled up alongside like a Porsche, and with her breathtaking lines, speed and promises of riches, we abandoned our solid, smart Corolla (sorry Ford, GM and Chrysler), our sound principles, and chased her. We got sucked in.

Five years later, we've been caught flat-footed, unable to respond strategically to the troubles in the manufacturing heartland and elsewhere. Our governments react, aiming stimulus at individuals and industries, forgetting the critical unit called community, and forgetting the innovation, learning and home grown entrepreneurship that has played catalytic roles in strengthening our communities and country in financial crises past.

In the early 1980s, my hometown of Sudbury, rocked by record low commodity prices, looked ready to die. Perhaps spurred on by the Globe's editorial cartoon - a skeletal beaver on the Big Nickel - the community responded identifying a future that brought hope to its beleaguered citizens: Science North (a world class science centre), a waterfront pathway along the city's beautiful Ramsey Lake, positioning Sudbury and Laurentian University as the world centre for mining expertise. The Neutrino Observatory and other innovative projects followed on these early successes.

My adopted city, Nelson, BC, reinvented itself from a crisis in the 1980s when three large employers shut down and the spectre of foreclosure hung over the town. Again, the community came together, identifying assets and opportunities through a strategic process. Revitalizing Baker Street, Nelson's 100-year-old main street, became the focus of attention. The "yes we can" optimism led to other small incremental successes. Today, a diverse and energetic entrepreneurial class – 1,200 business licenses for the 10,000 residents (the highest rate in Canada) – are testament to the commitment of the people to the community. The community needed to innovate, to inspire and to develop its home grown entrepreneurs.

Lost in the stories is the critical financial and facilitative role the provincial and federal governments played in helping these communities identify and carry out their ambitions. Had we focused only on individuals and industries, these economic transformations would not have occurred.

Our communities and our country need to rebuild themselves on these sound, tested principles. Like a good high school athlete who relies on his natural strengths (commodities) but ignores the books (innovation, learning and entrepreneurship), we do so at our peril.

Canada needs to re-establish policies that support a culture of learning – not just money to universities and colleges, but new learning that stimulates the curiosity that will lead to the next insulin discovery or the building of better communities. We need to instil a culture of entrepreneurship and innovation where we recognize, reward and mentor the people who excel in these areas AND give back to the communities who supported their getting there. We need to fit communities with new sets of glasses that allow young people, displaced workers, teachers, and community leaders to spot and harness the abundant opportunities.

A stimulus package that fails to recognize these principles and forgets the critical role of the community in economic transformation will be wasted money.