

Conversations on “Community Matters”

Pip J. Farrar & Elaine Grodaes

for
Western Rocky View Communities Development Society (CDS)

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Speak up!
What matters to you?



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1 Introduction

For it is the spirit of the West that charms one, and I can't convey it to you, try as I may. It is a shy wild spirit and will not leave its native mountains and rolling prairies...I must warn you that if it once charms you, it becomes an obsession. . . (Mary E. Inderwick, 1883)

Leadership is not about voting; it is about the democratic value of inclusion. (James O'Toole, 1996)

This is the story of a small semi-rural area in Canada, the western half of a municipality called Rocky View and a smaller organization called Western Rocky View Communities Development Society (CDS) that believes resident engagement strengthens communities. Most of all, it is a story about people coming together to share their concerns and create solutions to complex problems.

The area of western of Rocky View lies between the foothills of the Rocky Mountains and the City of Calgary. The Bow and Elbow rivers flow across it. Its varied landscape includes prairie, rolling hills, and river valleys, all with a magnificent view of the mountains. The municipal website states:

Rocky View boasts a large amount of acreage development, light industrial and commercial development, farming and tourism. With it's (sic) scenic landscape, proximity to urban areas, plentiful resources, abundance of outdoor activities, and available development areas, the MD is one of the most popular places to live and do business in Alberta. The Municipal District of Rocky View extends a year-round welcome to all visitors and new residents alike.

And therein, paradoxically, lies the heart of this tale. For it is a tale of how the shy, wild, spirit of the West has charmed the residents of Rocky View. How, then, can they convey their passion for it and try through local governance to manage such plenty that surely cannot continue forever? The answer to this question forms the heart of this story.

The first chapter of this chronicle begins with a description of the need for community conversations and is followed by the purpose and goals in holding such conversations. Investigation of work done by others that aided in the design of the project is described in the second chapter. The design of the project is illustrated in chapter three. This groundwork is followed in chapter four by new formations expressed through the findings. A discussion of the findings and the formulation of recommendations form chapter five. A short summary concludes the story.

Creating an opportunity

Voting is the cornerstone of democracy. By voting, citizens exercise their democratic right and indicate their support for those candidates who share their vision for their community and neighbourhood. In Canada, however, voter turnout has declined over the past 40 years despite the many calls for increased democratic participation (Howe, Johnston and Blais, 2005; Vital Signs, 2001). Studies have shown that disinterest and apathy with the electoral process, having a sense that their vote would have no impact on the outcome, and not caring about the issues were reasons given for non-participation (Elections Canada, 2003).

For those concerned with local government, citizen participation and healthy communities, such as the CDS, this is troubling. Indeed, at forums organized by CDS, residents had expressed concerns about a number of issues in Western Rocky View, such as rapid development affecting rural lifestyles, limited infrastructure, a lack of seniors’ housing, and municipal planning. Results from our recent Rural Seniors’ Workshop indicated that rural residents wanted to become more involved in important local issues affecting them.

One factor that increases voter turn out is the presence of compelling local issues (Vital Signs, 2001). Increasing residents’ awareness of and interest in issues might increase their participation in local municipal elections and civic engagement. Hence, the upcoming municipal election provided an opportunity to mobilize citizens to discuss these issues and build dialogue between citizens of electoral divisions themselves and their respective candidates in light of the upcoming municipal election. Yet, such involvement may have additional benefits. When citizens are actively involved in their communities, they not only strengthen the democratic processes, but they also generate more resources, achieve more results, and produce healthy, sustainable and robust communities (Reid, 2000). Hence, upcoming municipal elections provided an opportunity to bring residents together to discuss their issues, seek solutions and build community capacity through civic participation.

Purpose

As with all CDS initiatives, the overarching goal was to build community capacity. With this particular project our purpose was first, to encourage all participants (including candidates) to become part of local planning and collaborative community development. Second, our purpose was to increase resident interest and participation in the local municipal election. Our method was to model a community-led planning approach that resulted in participants articulating community issues, identifying challenges and developing solutions thereby contributing to the vibrancy of their community.

Goals

The project was designed to achieve two goals: To build community capacity in western Rocky View and to develop its base of support in the community. The following list provides the measures for success.

Measures of Success

1. High attendance levels by residents, candidates, volunteers and the CDS board is achieved
2. Increased learning regarding the upcoming election is achieved
3. Local and regional issues as defined by residents are shared and discussed
4. Different perspectives on issues are expressed by participants
5. Solutions to community issues are developed by participants
6. Participation results in increased connections with other community members
7. Feedback is obtained on the value of community-led planning
8. Participants have an increased awareness of CDS initiatives
9. The public has an increased awareness of CDS
10. Increased numbers of volunteers are available to CDS
11. Enlargement of community asset inventory database is achieved

2 Literature Review

As Renata Rosol (2006) suggests, the importance of community participation has long been recognized. For example, in 1978, the World Health Organization’s Alma Ata Declaration (1978) defined community participation as follows:

Community participation is the process by which individuals and families assume responsibility for their own health and welfare and for those of the community, and develop the capacity to contribute to their and the community's development.

Community participation ensures that local needs are recognized, identified, and solutions implemented. Indeed, the World Health Organization (WHO) described community action and empowerment as prerequisites for health (Canadian Public Health Association, 1986; WHO, 1997).

Municipal voter turnout is an accepted measure of civic participation and engagement in the local political process (Vital Signs, 2001). Yet, as has been stated earlier, participation in elections has decreased over time. In 1988 over 75% of Canadians voted in the federal election, but only 60.5% of eligible Canadians voted in the 2004 federal election (Parkinson, 2007). Similarly, in Canadian municipal elections voter turnout has diminished. For example, only 20% of eligible voters participated in the Calgary, 2004 municipal election (Renfree, 2007).

A study completed by Jon Pammett and Lawrence LeDuc for Elections Canada (2003) investigated reasons for low voter turnout and found that on average, most non-participants were greatly influenced by general disinterest and apathy with the electoral process, such as not liking the choices of parties/candidates, having a sense that their vote would have no impact on the outcome, and not caring about the issues. Older persons were affected by problems of accessibility to voting and middle aged and younger persons were also somewhat affected by logistical issues, such as being too busy with work to make it to the polling station on election night (Elections Canada, 2003).

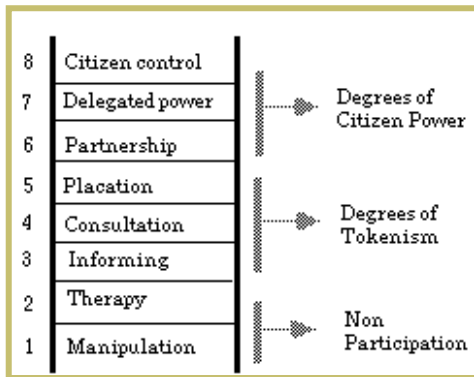
According to Mark Roseland (2005, p. 27) “democracy is an inherent part of the sustainable development process.” Sustainable development, therefore, must be participatory development, in that people actively participate in the decisions and processes that affect their lives (Roseland, 2005). Studies show that when citizens are actively involved in their communities, they not only strengthen the democratic processes, but they also generate more resources, achieve more results, and produce healthy, sustainable and robust communities (Reid, 2000). Hence, active community participation is critical to community success. In sustainable communities, residents believe that the future of their communities is in their hands.

Closer to home, the Alberta government has also recognized the importance of community participation for sustainable development. In 2005, the provincial government released Alberta’s rural development strategy. The report, entitled, “A Place to Grow”, stated that: “The Government of Alberta ... is committed to work together with rural communities and rural Albertans to foster a vibrant and sustainable rural Alberta.” (p.i) Several priority actions were described including the establishment of a group of rural representatives to provide advice to the Minister of Agriculture, and the implementation of strategies for working with communities to build community capacity.

Similarly, citizen participation appears to be part of the Municipal District of Rocky View’s ‘Growth Management Strategy. It aims to achieve “a balance between community values and future growth and development” by having “Council and administration together with residents, landowners and businesses ... engage in a strategic planning initiative”. It adds, “The public will have an integral role in the strategy development process” (Team ISL, 2007).

It is quite common to state that citizens will be included in community planning. Yet, there are different degrees of inclusion, participation and decision-making. A powerful and commonly used model for thinking about citizen participation is Sherry Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation (1969).

Figure 1 – Arnstein’s “Ladder of Citizen Participation,” 1969



The 8 rungs of the ladder describe differing degrees of participation from manipulation (non-participation), through tokenism to full involvement with citizen control. While ‘Informing’, ‘Consultation’ and ‘Placation’ begin the process of participation, they remain tokenistic in that the decision-making power remains in the hands of those who decide who may ‘participate’. The balance of decision-making power begins to change at the ‘Partnership’ level and continues through ‘Delegated power’ and tips to full ‘Citizen control’ at the final rung.

Despite many attempts at promoting inclusive participation in community planning, it often remains an illusive goal. In an extensive review of the literature for the WHO, Nina Wallerstein (2006) found that barriers to participation included: conspicuous bureaucracy or political barriers, top down implementation, a lack of representativeness in participating members, and a lack of structural, material and expert support. While some barriers were easily identified, others were less obvious. For example, unequal power relations within communities could be concealed, such as either those between representative groups, or facilitators and community participants. Further, participation could be constrained by development experts’ unwillingness to challenge internal power relations, lack of knowledge about empowerment, or unwillingness to extend beyond engaging key informants in order to genuinely facilitate community decision-making.

On the other hand, Wallerstein (2006) reported that factors that foster participation included the use of local community opinion leaders, political will, and use of culturally based and culturally competent interventions. Effective leadership that promoted participatory decision-making was potentially the most important characteristic of a community’s capacity to promote participation.

The World Bank identified four characteristics to ensure that participation was empowering: people’s access to information; their inclusion in decision-making; local organizational capacity to make demands on institutions and governing structures; and accountability of institutions to the public (Narayan, 2002). Further, the World Bank’s Learning Group on participation found that, although more time was required for the preparatory stages, the costs were not necessarily higher in preparing and implementing participatory projects than with non-participatory ones (Bhatnagar, 1992). Indeed, they suggested that the costs of failing to provide for participation should be considered. For example, imposing projects that the

community saw as irrelevant, illegitimate, did not accept or use could be financially costly and organizationally damaging.

In summary, literature that informed this project was drawn from studies of citizen participation and civic engagement. Participation in elections is an indication of civic engagement, yet studies showed diminishing numbers of voters. Active citizenship strengthens individuals and their communities, and is found to be a source of health and empowerment. It is, therefore, important to be able to evaluate levels of participation and to understand what factors effect citizen participation. Such knowledge increases the likelihood of using effective methods to achieve community participation and sustainable outcomes.

3 Project Design

Following Philosophy

The design of the project matched the philosophy of CDS by looking to the community for assets and seeking input from community members to guide our planning. A small Advisory Committee was formed with four community members to explore possible approaches to encouraging community citizenship in local municipal elections. Through discussion, the planning team realized that the traditional process for a Candidates’ Forum did not match the participatory and collaborative values of CDS, and it did not match an asset-based community development method.

What we mean by a ‘traditional’ Candidates’ Forum is one where spatial and conversational interaction is tightly controlled. For example, the candidates sit in a row at the front of the room, often behind a table, removed and apart from the audience. Candidates speak to pre-screened questions that members of the audience may have been permitted to submit. The design is formal, often oppositional and may be adversarial between audience and candidates as well as between the candidates themselves. A new design, based on CDS’ philosophy, was developed. This accepted that knowledge and solutions were constructed through the dialogue of everyone, rather than an elite few; and defined their strengths, capacities and relationships. What began as planning for Candidates’ Forums quickly changed to planning for Community Forums.

Western Rocky View has 5 electoral districts or wards: Due to limited resources, CDS decided to combine Springbank and Elbow or Divisions 2 and 3 at one forum and hold 1 forum each for Beaupre for Division 9; Bears paw for Division 8 and Bragg Creek for Division 1.

Drawing on a community network of relationships, CDS sought out those who could contribute skills, knowledge and expertise. In such a manner, local moderators/MCs and other volunteers were found as well as assistance with advertising at other community locations and events.

Hall locations were chosen from the same list as voting station locations so that those who attended would know where to go on voting day.

Redrawing the Boundaries

The process to be followed at each forum was designed to replicate what a participatory community looks like. In a participatory community many people are involved and business is the work of everyone, not just a few elite leaders. Involvement is open to everyone but the responsibilities are divided up according to the special talents, interests and enthusiasm of the individual participants and organizations.

In participating communities there is no such thing as a bad idea. Rather all ideas are treated with respect, as a source of inspiration and considered with an open mind. All people are welcomed regardless of differences and indeed different perspectives are actively sought out and discussed. All this leads to more broadly appropriate decision-making, meaningful roles, and valuable volunteer opportunities that develop and sustain the community (Reid, 2000).

Hence, those in attendance were asked to actively participate and share their special talents, interests, enthusiasm and ideas. They were asked to listen with an open mind and respect everyone’s contributions. In particular, they were asked to seek out other people’s perspectives and to contribute to creative solutions where they could see a meaningful and valuable role for themselves. Ground rules for participation were drawn from those used in ‘Conversation Cafés’ or ‘World Cafés’ (Banff School of Management, 2007).

Photo 1 – Registration table at the CDS “Community Matters” Forum

Preparing the ground

Considerable attention was given to ensuring an atmosphere at the forums that encouraged active participation. For example, all attendees were welcomed at the door by CDS staff and volunteers. Name tags were created for everyone. Attendees were given a program for the event that outlined the agenda (see Appendix 1), questions, and provided short biographies of the candidates. Their permission was requested for photographs to be taken.

Each table was set up with 8 or 9 chairs, a large map of western Rocky View, coloured pens and markers, a ‘table top tent card’ with the agenda and ground rules for participation (see Appendix 2), flip chart paper with headings, red licorice and candy dishes full of mints. Refreshments were available throughout the evening.

Evaluation forms for the event were developed and given to each participant (see Appendix 3).



Photo 2 – Roundtable set-up at forum



Mapping the landscape of community

An introductory exercise was designed to help participants get to know one another and begin to focus on what they valued in their community or locale. Each roundtable was provided with a large map of western Rocky View. First, participants were asked to introduce themselves and mark where they lived on the map. Second, they were asked to say and mark on the map what it was that they valued most in their community. This exercise not only highlighted participants’ values and connections to place, but also fostered connections between participants as they drew themselves into the landscape.

All markings on individual maps were transferred onto all maps so that later forum participants could see what had been contributed at earlier forums. This allowed us to build up a complete map representing the locations of all who attended and what they valued most in their communities.

Roundtable dialogue

Working in their roundtable groups, participants were directed by the moderator/MC to complete the following:

1. Using an index card provided, please write down the top issue you would like your councillor to address in the upcoming term.
2. In turn, each person state their top issue. (Please no discussion at this point).
3. Together, choose one of these issues to discuss as a group.

This fostered participation by everyone and practice in shared decision-making.

Each group was asked to work through the following questions and summarize their discussion on the flip chart paper provided.

1. What are the different perspectives on this issue in your group?
Given that . . .
 your councillor has to balance the interests of community members in his/her electoral division with the interests of the municipality as a whole . . .
 - a) What challenges can you foresee for your councillor?
 - b) What strategies can you suggest for their solution? How can you help your councillor address your issue?

These questions were designed to encourage participants to look at the issue from a number of viewpoints and consider the implications. They also encouraged participants to go beyond the already known and begin to create new solutions together as well as make visible their personal potential for action.

Table Reports

A spokesperson from each table presented the issue discussed at their table highlighting different perspectives on the issue, challenges for their councillor and their strategies for working together towards a solution. Key points from each table were written on flip charts for everyone to see.

Candidates' Participation

Invitations to participate were mailed to candidates at least 4 weeks before the forum date. Information was included regarding the forum agenda and process, as well as a request that they make a short presentation (about 5 min.) in response to the following questions:

2. What strategies will you use to work with the people in your electoral district?
3. What strategies will you use to work with other councillors?
4. How will you balance the interests of your community with the interests of the municipality as a whole?

Lastly, they were invited to display campaign material at the event and asked to send a short biography for use in the event program.

At the forum, after the first exercise, candidates were asked to move from table to table and listen in on the roundtable conversations. After hearing the table reports, each candidate was asked to make their presentation and encouraged to respond to what they had learned from the table discussions.

Evaluation Design

All artifacts (maps, index cards, table reports, evaluation forms) developed at the forums were collected and treated as data for analysis. The index cards and table reports were transcribed and entered into N6, a qualitative analysis software program (Richards, 1998) for thematic coding and analysis. Quantitative analysis was completed for the evaluation forms using a simple EXCEL software program. Each forum was treated as a case study.

4 Findings

Community response

Four forums were held in Western Rocky View. In total, 157 residents participated in the forums assisted by a moderator and CDS staff.

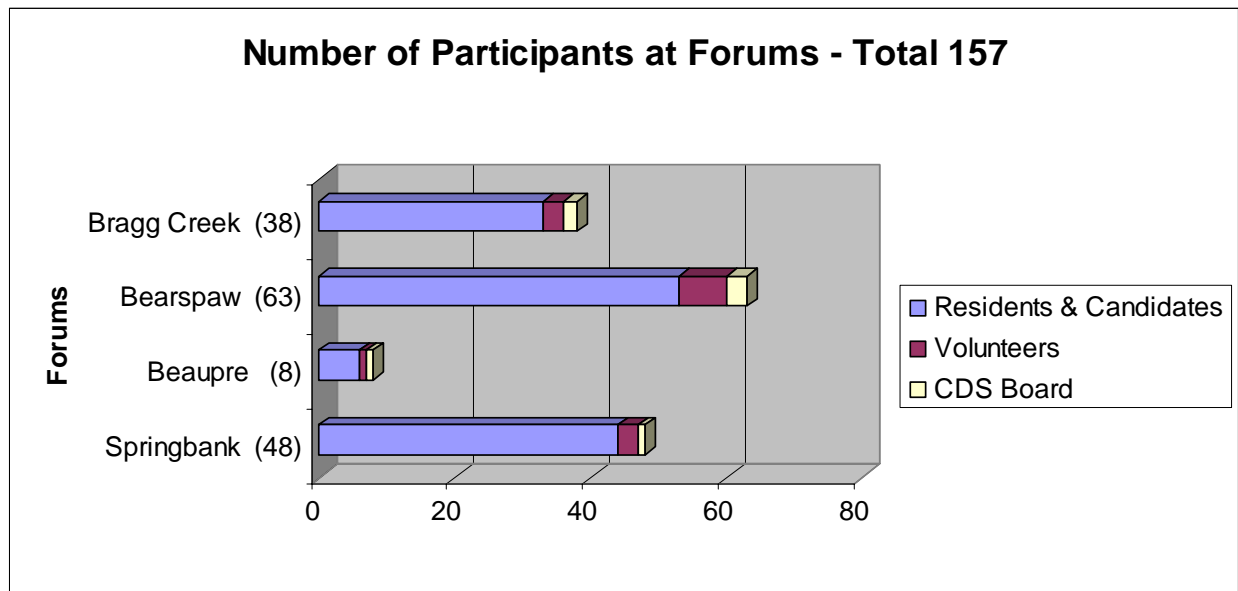
At Springbank (Divisions 2 and 3) 41 residents, 1 acclaimed councillor, 1 incumbent and 1 candidate attended. There were 3 volunteers, 1 board member and a moderator from the area.

At Beaupre (Division 9) 6 residents attended. There were 1 volunteer, 1 board member and a moderator from the area. The councillor, who was acclaimed was unable to attend due to a prior engagement that was overlooked by CDS when booking the event. As an alternative, the councillor sent a written presentation that was read to attendees.

The forum at Bearspaw (Division 8) was attended by 51 residents, 1 incumbent and 1 candidate. There were 7 volunteers, 3 board members and a moderator from the area. A number of children attended this forum and made up a roundtable discussion group.

At the forum in Bragg Creek (Division 1) 30 residents attended as well as 1 incumbent and 2 candidates. Additionally, 3 volunteers, 2 board members and a moderator from the area assisted with the process.

Chart 2 – Number of Participants at Community Forums



Mapping the heart of community

In turn, going around the table . . .

1. Introduce yourself to everyone at the table.
2. Mark where you live on the map.
3. Describe what you are most proud of in your district (write or mark it on the map).

For example, if you had to choose one thing to tell or show a visitor about this area, what would you choose?

** Draw, mark, doodle or label it on the map. Please use the markers provided.

Photo 3 – Participants mark where they live, what they are most proud of



Participants marked where they lived on a map and wrote what they were most proud of in their district. Marks on the maps showed that respondents included large and small landowners as well as residents of subdivisions. In total, 84 comments were written on the maps over 4 forums. These fell into 4 themes described below in order of frequency.

Natural environment

The value of and pride in the natural environment including wildlife was most often noted. For example, one respondent wrote “One of the most beautiful and natural spots in the world” (BC:46). Another noted “Wildlife; natural treed areas” (BPW:56). Similar comments were made 31 times and at all forums.

The rural life

Pride in community and rural community values were mentioned 23 times across all forums. These included comments such as, “Peace, quiet, tranquility and country living” (BPW:53); “Pioneer spirit” (BPW:78); “Land, family, community” (BR:78); “Investment in our history” (BR:18); “Sense of community” (SB:15)

Open vistas

“View of the Rockies” (BPW:54) “landscape” (BR:10) and “Sweep of the lands to the mountains” (SB:11) were examples of the pride expressed by many respondents in the vistas and space available in Western Rocky View. These were mentioned 17 times across all forums. Indeed, when ‘space’ was noted, it was most often qualified with ‘open’. Examples include “Wide open spaces” (BPW:52) and “Space to breathe” (BSP:77(\)).

Recording solo voices: Individual issues

Selecting the issue:

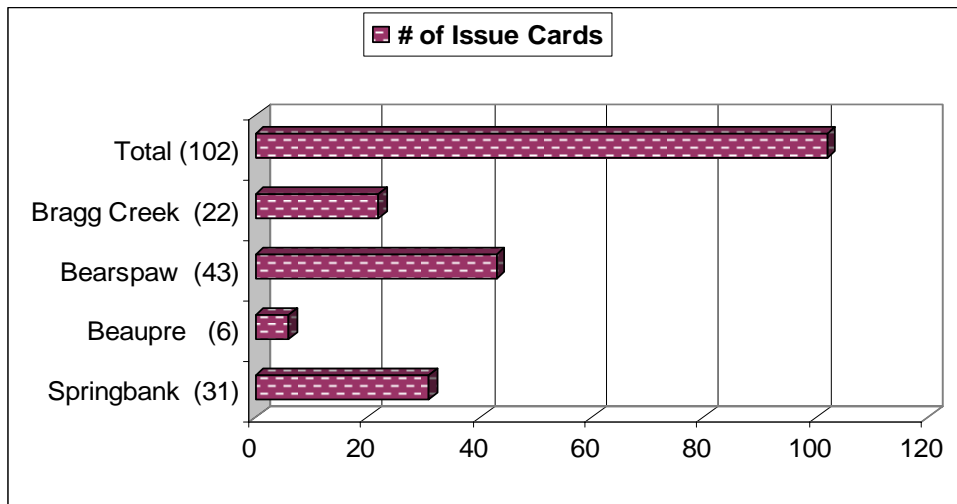
1. Using an index card provided, please write down the top issue you would like your councillor to address in the upcoming term.
2. In turn, each person will state their top issue. (Please no discussion at this point).

All participants were asked to take an index card and write their top issues of concern. One hundred and two index cards were collected with 306 topics listed. Many of the topics were duplicated across the cards.

Photo 5 – Participants write their issues on index cards



Chart 3 – Number of Issue Cards



Respondents expressed concerns at all the forums regarding development and its consequences. Density and ‘city creep’, water and other infrastructure requirements (roads and services) and the need for thorough and long-term planning were most often identified. Indeed, ‘development’ as a topic was listed 44 times. Examples of comments included: “Over development” (BSP:81), “Amount of development in the area” (BR:38); “Managing development especially on rural/urban fringes” (BR:17); and “Too much high density development” (SB:103). One respondent asked “Allow smaller parcels so our kids can afford to buy” (BSP:98).

‘Water’ was noted 35 times. Examples included: “Water supply and drainage” (BSP:106); “Housing density affects ... water quality, storm water” (BSP109-10); “Concerned about provision of water and sewer for new developments - where is [the] water coming from? Where is sewer going?” (SB:131-2)

The need for planning was noted 23 times. “Better planning” (BC:43), “careful planning” (BSP:49) and a lack of “long term planning” (SB:123) were illustrative comments.

Four other concerns were frequently voiced at all forums. Respondents wanted councillors to be “honest and open” (BSP2:162), have integrity, uphold the bylaws and apply the by-laws consistently. The lack of recreational facilities such as walking, biking and riding paths was noted. Eleven respondents identified the need for seniors’ housing. Similarly, 11 respondents noted the preservation of open space and raw or agricultural land. For example, one asked, “How to preserve open space?” (BC:64). Another noted the “loss of agricultural land, loss of natural areas [and] open space” (SB:101)

Concerns less often stated, but shared at 3 forums (Springbank, Bearspaw and Bragg Creek) were the need for communication with MD residents and their input into development decisions; loss of agricultural lands; and appropriate taxation. For example, one respondent asked, “We have to come to you always. How can you hear if you don't seek opportunity to solicit input?” (BSP:168-9). Another stated “Ensure resident involvement” (SB:31). Development of agricultural lands was seen as problematic by some respondents, as a loss of food production and open land, while others wanted the freedom to “maximize values” (BSP:96-7) and have developers cover more infrastructure costs.

Weeds were a concern at 2 forums. The need for residents to travel to Calgary for employment and clear cutting were identified as issues at 2 forums.

Table 4 – Individual Issues Listed in Order of Number of Responses

Issues - in order of #s of responses	Springbank	Beaupre	Bearspaw	Bragg Creek
Density	✓	✓	✓	✓
Infrastructure	✓	✓	✓	✓
Planning	✓	✓	✓	✓
Councillor behaviour	✓	✓	✓	✓
Recreation	✓	✓	✓	✓
Seniors housing	✓	✓	✓	✓
Preserving space	✓	✓	✓	✓
Resident involvement	✓		✓	✓
Agricultural land issues	✓		✓	✓
Taxation	✓	✓	✓	
Wildlife & Habitat	✓		✓	
Zoning			✓	✓
Weeds	✓		✓	
Community identity	✓			
Job creation		✓		

From the topics identified above, participants worked together to choose their “top issue” for the roundtable discussion.

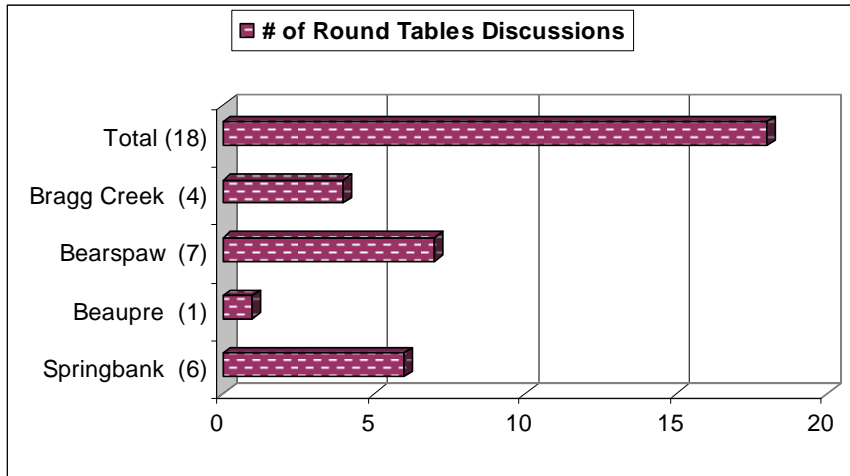
Speaking together: Roundtable responses

Each forum had a different number of roundtables based on the number of people attending. In total, 18 round table discussions were held.

Photo 6 – Residents participate in roundtable discussions



Chart 5 – Number of Roundtable Discussions



Top issues

Together, choose one of these issues to discuss as a group.

As with the individual issues, there was duplication of topics chosen as “top issues” within and across the forums. Development was identified as a top issue at all forum locations. Long-term planning, water, infrastructure, and recreation were also identified as key issues at two or more locations and groups. Council and staff integrity was a priority issue for one group. The full list of roundtable top issues is given below.

Table 6 – Top Issues Discussed at Round Tables

Springbank	Beaupre	Bearspaw	Bragg Creek
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➔ Development pressure ➔ Long-term planning of infrastructure & development ➔ Outcomes of high density ➔ Infrastructure & water before development ➔ Properly designed communities ➔ Community centre 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➔ Pace of development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➔ Development ➔ Long-term planning & development ➔ Land use planning & development ➔ Keeping rural lifestyle ➔ Council & staff integrity ➔ Recreation for kids ➔ Lack of high school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➔ Stewardship & development ➔ Long-term land use and financial accountability ➔ Water supply ➔ Water & sewer

Discussion pertaining to the topics listed above led to identification of challenges for councillors in taking these concerns forward.

Challenges for candidates

Given that . . .

your councillor has to balance the interests of community members in his/her electoral division with the interests of the municipality as a whole . . .

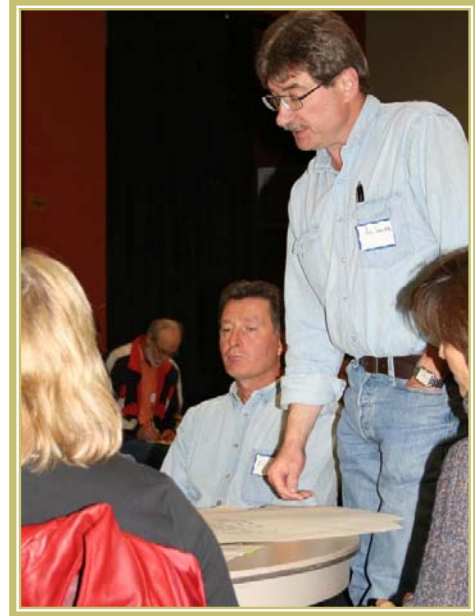
What challenges can you foresee for your councillor?

Photo 7 – Table spokesperson addresses challenges

While working on the top issues, 3 common themes were identified as challenges for candidates in taking the issue forward to Council. These were ‘collaboration with constituents’, ‘relationships with government bodies and businesses’, and ‘financial challenges’. Details are presented below.

Collaboration with constituents

The most often documented challenge for councillors was the need to collaborate with constituents through ongoing dialogue. This was noted at all forums and by 8 roundtables. The following comments are illustrative: “Meaningfully listen to community and involve expertise in community” (BSP:41) “Educational forums are now usually ‘after the fact’” (BR:20); Get viewpoint from constituents [and] Get council to listen to staff and constituents” (BSP:68-9).



Relationships with government bodies and businesses

“Working effectively with provincial government” (BC:30) was an example of the second challenge identified at 3 forums and by 5 roundtables. This focused on the need to develop positive relationships with other governmental bodies such as the City of Calgary, the provincial and federal governments and have appropriate relationships with developers.

Sound financial management

Lastly, financial challenges were also identified at 3 forums and 5 roundtables. These included the need to obtain grants, raise funds through levies, manage debt and understand financial management. For example, “Obtaining financial support from all levels of government” (BC:91) was suggested by one respondent.

Solutions and strategies

Given that . . .

your councillor has to balance the interests of community members in his/her electoral division with the interests of the municipality as a whole . . .

What strategies can you suggest for their solution? How can you help your councillor address your issue?

The solutions and strategies offered at roundtable discussions to resolve the challenges formed three themes. These were planning approach, communication, and leadership style. They are described below.

Approaches to planning

Photo 8 – Table spokesperson recaps issues, challenges and solutions



Most roundtable groups at all forums suggested that planning should be long-term, require development to be environmentally orientated, sustainable and maintain the unique character and identity of the local area. In addition, plans for water management and other infrastructure such as schools should be in place before developments were approved. “Infrastructure BEFORE development not visa versa” (SB:30);

Respondents noted the need for councillors and the MD to have better information in order to develop the kind of planning the respondents requested. It was suggested that the MD required better information on water availability and sustainability, environmentally sensitive areas, and the implications of development on physical and social infrastructure. They suggested that the MD plan to provide more education to landowners on options regarding large parcel

development; to homeowners on eco-friendly development, water, energy and sustainable practices and to newcomers on rural living.

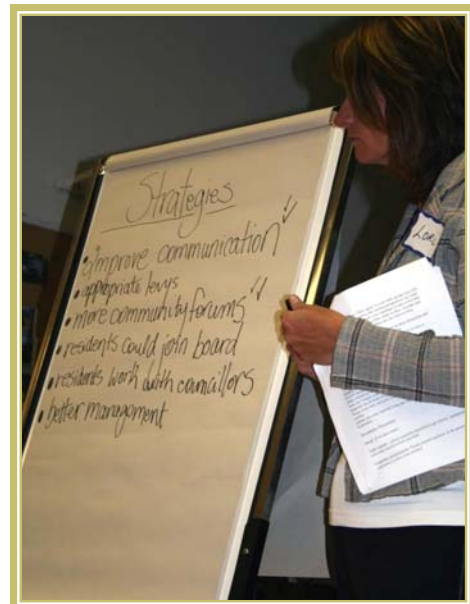
Lastly, it was suggested that the MD plan to make better use of Municipal Reserve lands. Suggestions included creating pathways (walking, biking, riding), cutting the grass so that children could play on them and creating special areas such as outdoor skating rinks, skate parks and bike parks.

Communication strategies

Photo 9 – Strategies are recorded for all to see

Most roundtable groups at each forum saw a need for and suggested ways to improve communication with residents and to involve them. Many wanted “Real community input that matters politically” (SB:43) and suggested that councillors “Meaningfully listen to community and involve expertise in community” (BSP:41). Others suggested “each electoral division have a citizen advisory group to councillor” (BC:68), “Hold periodic (monthly) “town hall” meetings with residents to seek an up-date and share views on key issues” (BSP:140-1) and “forums” (BSP:100).

Written forms of communication were also suggested. These included websites, blogs, notice boards, regular emails from councillor to residents with responses from residents, community polls, as well as newspaper columns and reports.



Ways to improve communication with other groups was identified as needed and strategies were suggested. Collaboration with neighbouring municipalities, school trustees and all levels of government were recommended in order to facilitate future planning.

Valued leadership styles

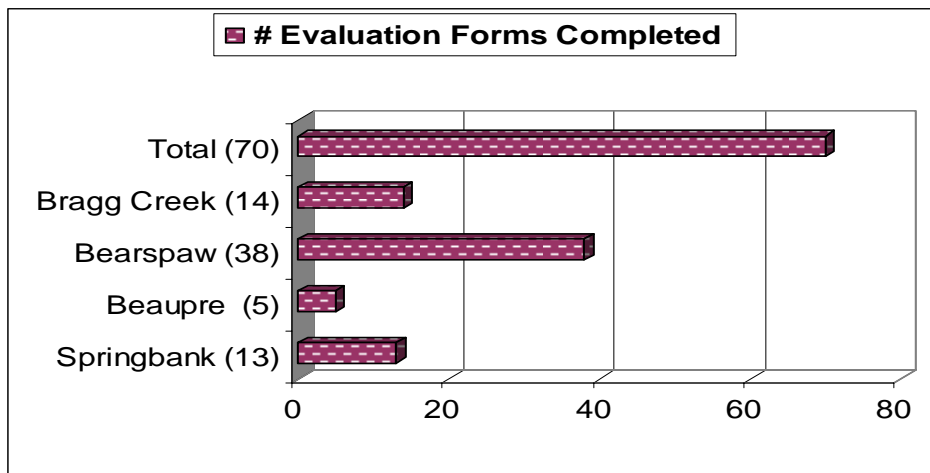
Roundtable groups at Bearspaw, Beaupre and Bragg Creek forums suggested ways that councillors could demonstrate a valued leadership style. These included finding out residents’ values and respecting their perspectives; being “honest and open with your constituents” such as declaring conflicts of interest, and representing “the views of your constituents fairly – not your own” (BSP:135-6). Further, they suggested that consistency and abiding by existing by-laws were important in addressing issues.

Evaluations of the Forums

A total of 70 evaluation forms were completed. This comprised 52% of the residents who attended the forums.

Eighty-four percent of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they had a better understanding of the issues that residents considered important. Seventy-seven percent believed that they were in a better position to make a decision on voting. Sixty-nine percent reported that they had made new connections by attending the forums. Eighty-seven percent believed that community planning was important and 76% were strongly satisfied or satisfied with their experience at the forums.

Chart 7 – Number of Evaluation Forms Completed



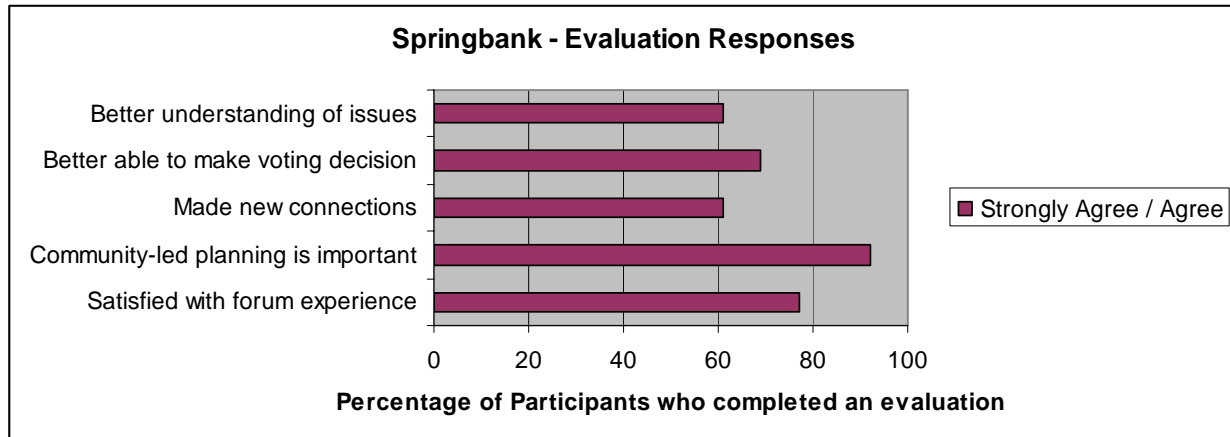
Springbank forum

Thirteen respondents completed the evaluation of the Springbank Forum.

- Of the 13, 8 (or 61%) strongly agreed or agreed that they had a better understanding of the issues residents considered important. Two were neutral and 3 disagreed.
- Nine or 69% strongly agreed or agreed that they were in a better position to make a decision about who to vote for. Four were neutral.
- Eight or 61% strongly agreed or agreed that they had made new connections by attending. Five respondents (38%) were neutral.

- Twelve or 92% strongly agreed or agreed that community led planning was important to success. One respondent did not respond.
- Ten or 77% strongly agreed or agreed that they were satisfied with their experience at the forum. One person was neutral; 1 did not answer and 1 disagreed.
- In response to Q7A, 3 respondents offered to help with community visioning and 2 with seniors.

Chart 8 – Sprinkbank - Evaluation Responses

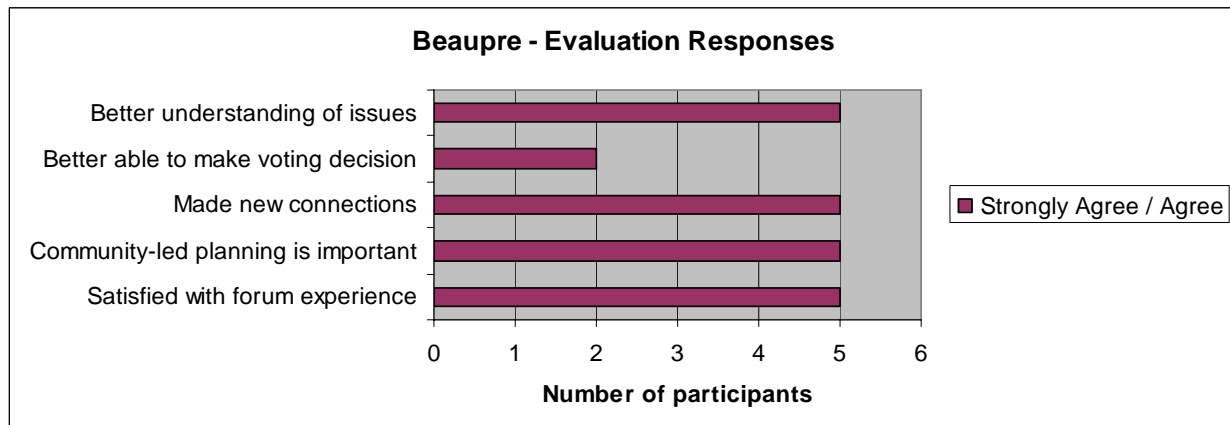


Beaupre forum

Five of 6 participants completed an evaluation of the Beaupre forum.

- Two strongly agreed and 3 agreed that they had a better understanding of the issues residents considered important.
- One strongly agreed and 1 agreed that they were in a better position to make a decision about who to vote for and 3 did not answer (note the incumbent was not present).
- One strongly agreed and 4 agreed that they had made new connections by attending.
- Three strongly agreed and 2 agreed that community led planning was important to success.
- Three strongly agreed and 2 agreed that they were satisfied with their experience at the forum.
- In response to Q7A, 2 respondents offered to help with Community visioning and with social venture capital.

Chart 9 – Beaupre – Evaluation Responses

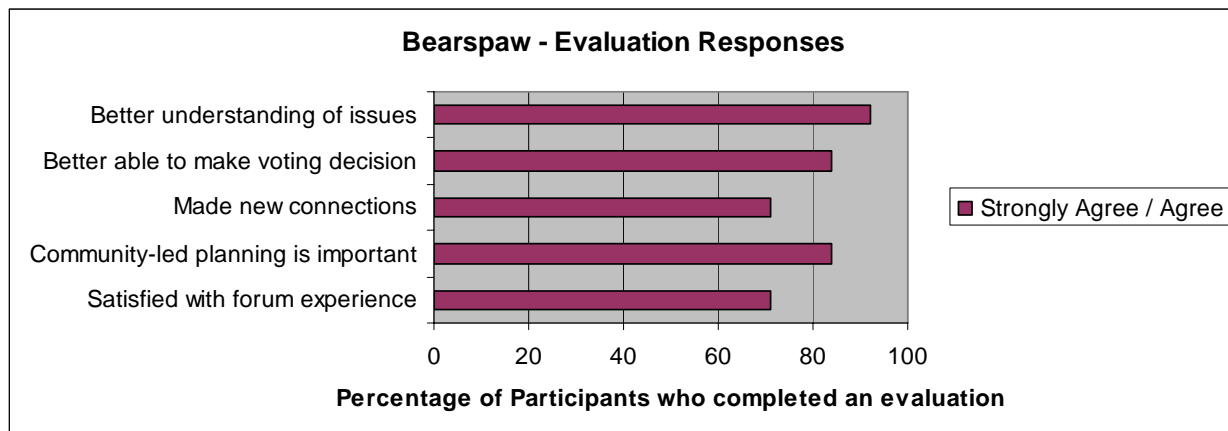


Bearspaw forum

Thirty-eight respondents completed the evaluation at Bearspaw Forum.

- Of the 38, 35 (or 92%) strongly agreed or agreed that they had a better understanding of the issues residents considered important. Two were neutral and 1 did not respond.
- Thirty-two or 84% strongly agreed or agreed that they were in a better position to make a decision about who to vote for. Two were neutral, 1 disagreed and 3 did not respond.
- Twenty-seven or 71% strongly agreed or agreed that they had made new connections by attending. Nine respondents (23%) were neutral.
- Thirty-two or 84% strongly agreed or agreed that community led planning was important to success. Four were neutral and 2 did not respond.
- Twenty-seven or 71% strongly agreed or agreed that they were satisfied with their experience at the forum. Seven or 18% were neutral. Two did not answer and 2 disagreed or strongly disagreed (5%)
- In response to Q7A, 2 respondents offered to help in any or all positions. 2 respondents offered to help with seniors; 3 with community visioning; and 1 as a board member only.

Chart 10 – Bearspaw - Evaluation Responses

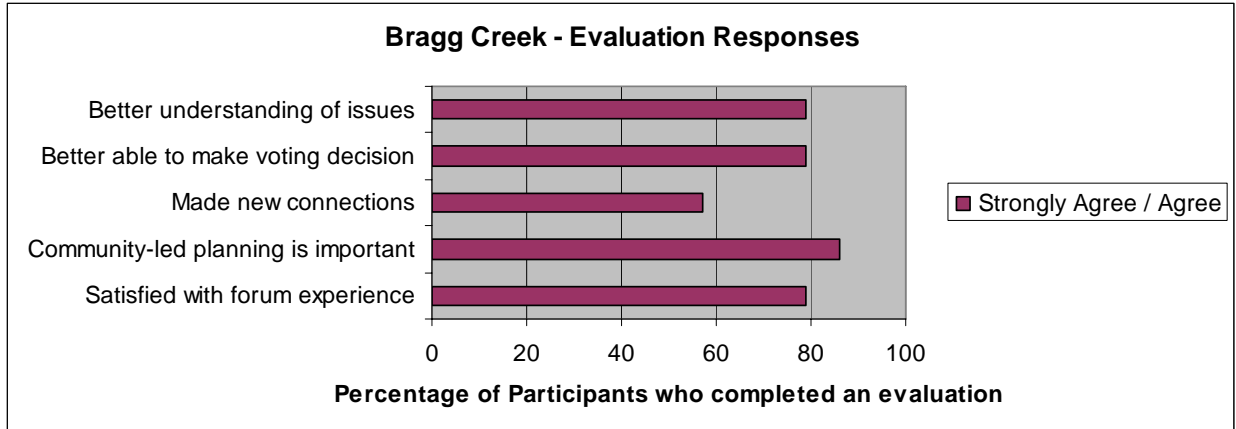


Bragg Creek forum

Fourteen respondents completed the evaluation of the Bragg Creek Forum.

- Of the 14, 11 (or 79%) strongly agreed or agreed that they had a better understanding of the issues residents considered important. 2 did not answer and 1 was neutral.
- Eleven or 79% strongly agreed or agreed that they were in a better position to make a decision about who to vote for. 3 were neutral.
- Eight or 57% strongly agreed or agreed that they had made new connections by attending. Five respondents (36%) were neutral.
- Twelve or 86% strongly agreed or agreed that community led planning was important to success. One was neutral and 1 did not respond.
- Eleven or 79% strongly agreed or agreed that they were satisfied with their experience at the forum. 2 people were neutral; 1 did not answer.
- In response to Q7A, 1 respondent offered to help with seniors; 1 wanted more information before making a commitment.

Chart 11 – Bragg Creek - Evaluation Responses



A comparison of responses across the forums

The tables below illustrate a comparison of responses to evaluation questions between the respondents at each location.

Chart 12 – Q1: Have a better understanding of the issues residents consider important

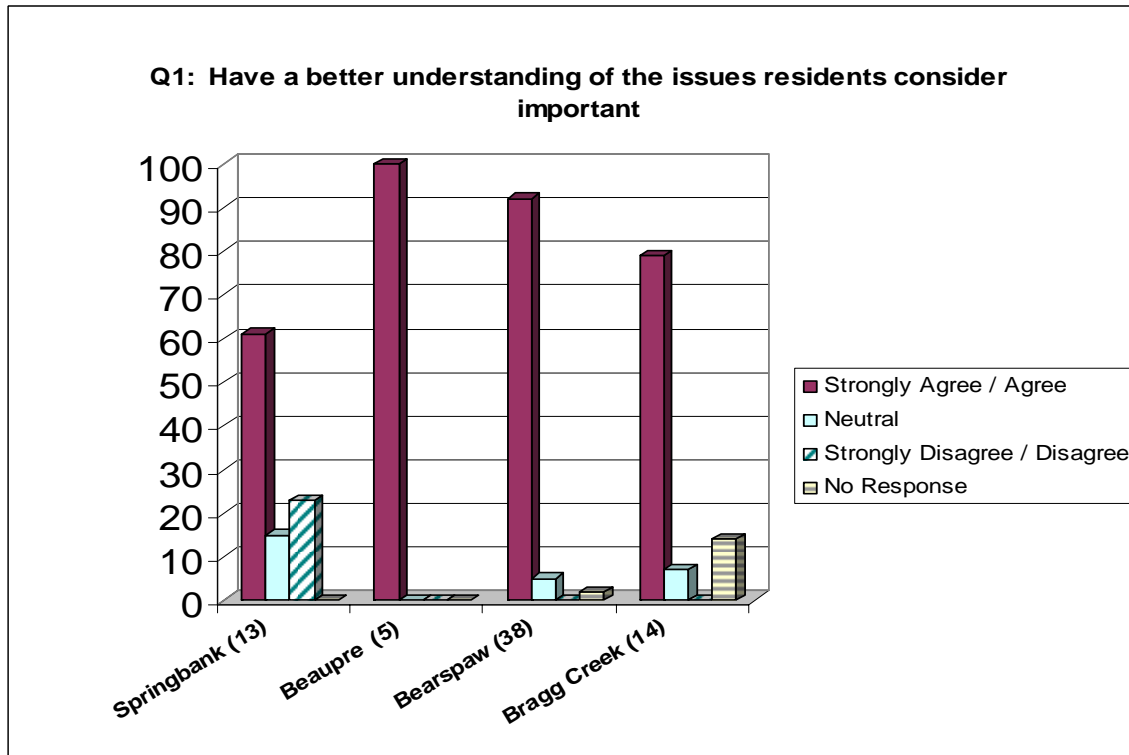


Chart 13 – Q2: In a better position to make a voting decision

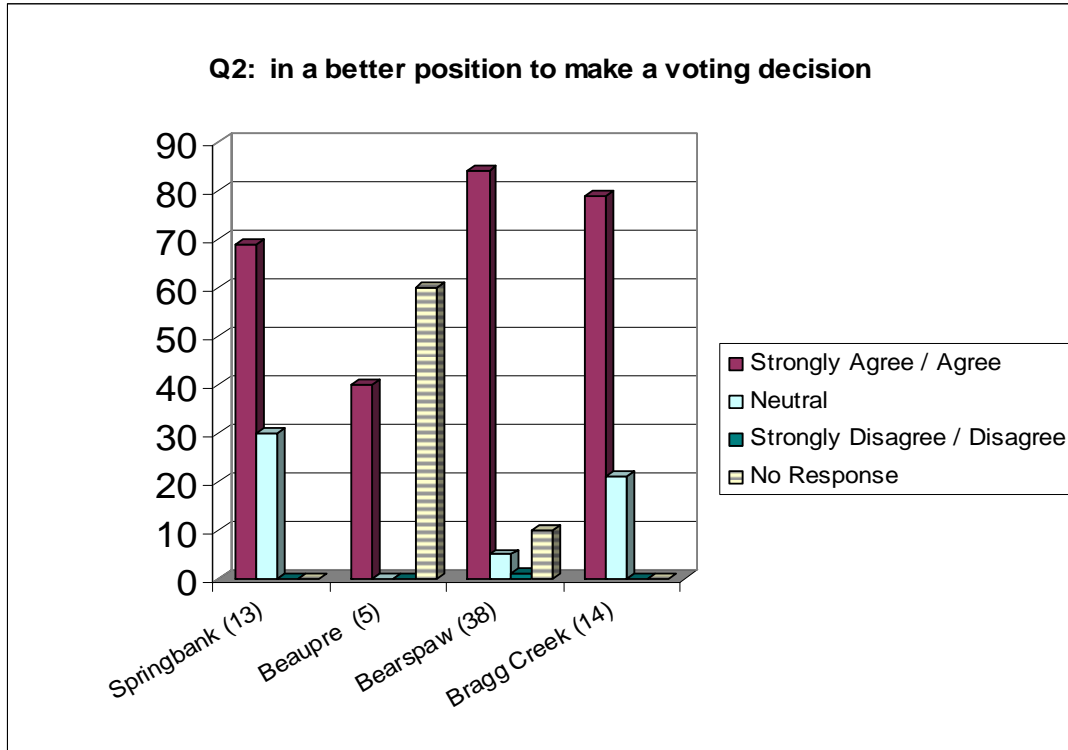


Chart 14 – Q3: Made new connections by attending the forum

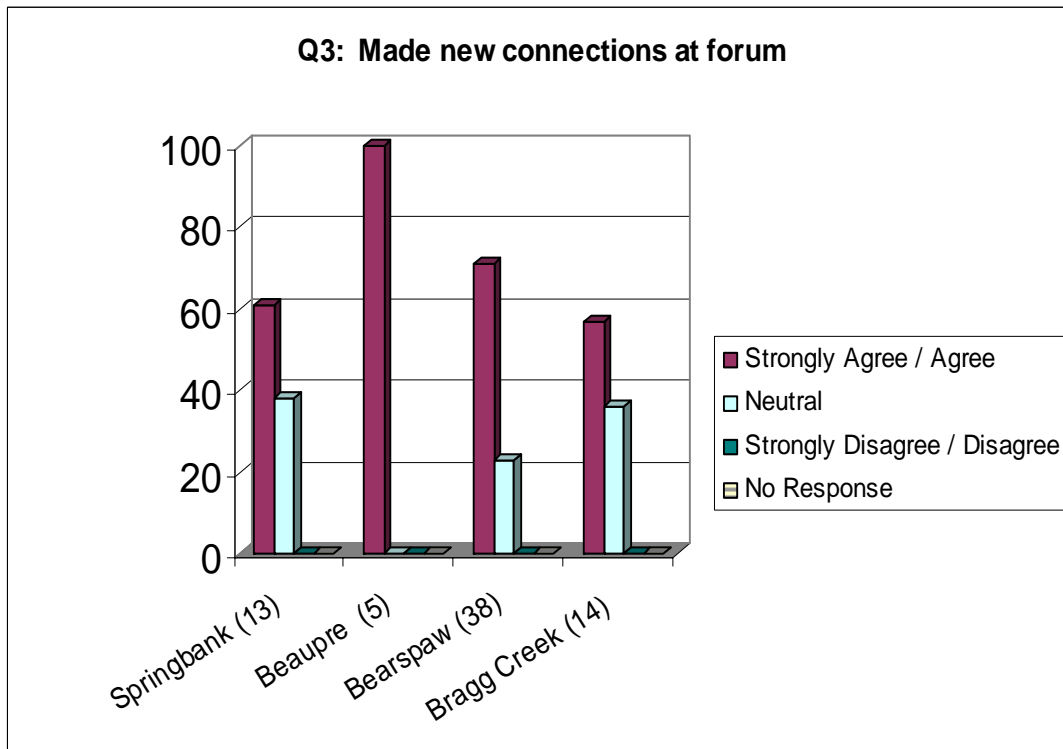


Chart 15 – Q4: Community-led planning is important to success

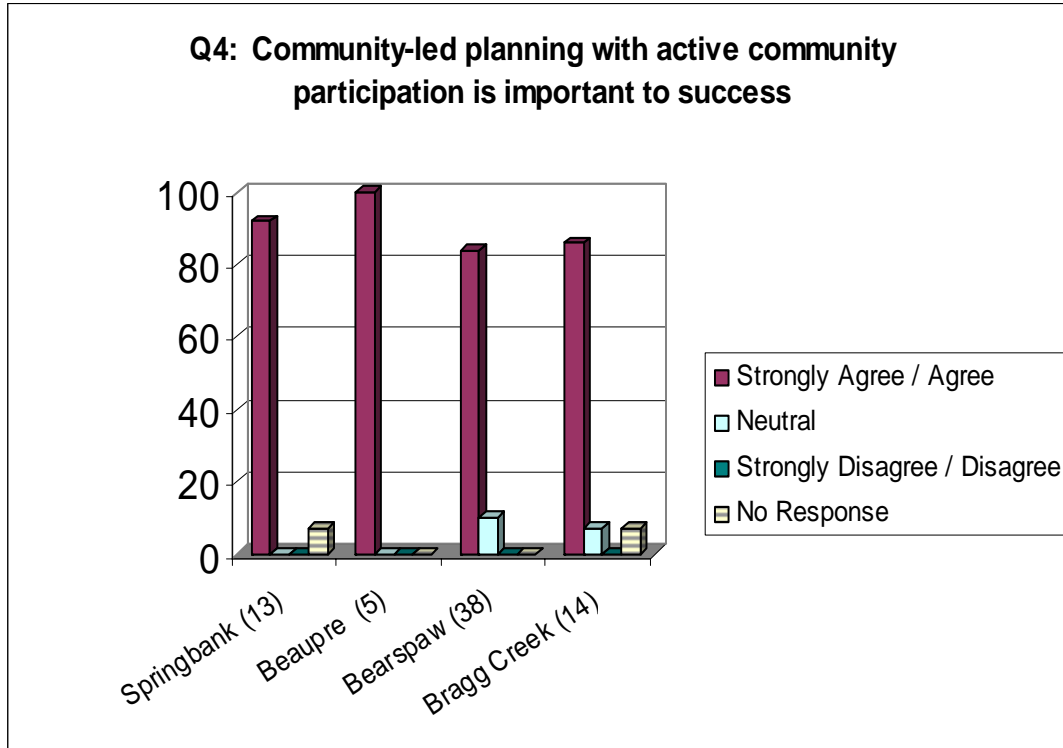


Chart 16 – Q5: Satisfied with my experience at the Community Matters Forum

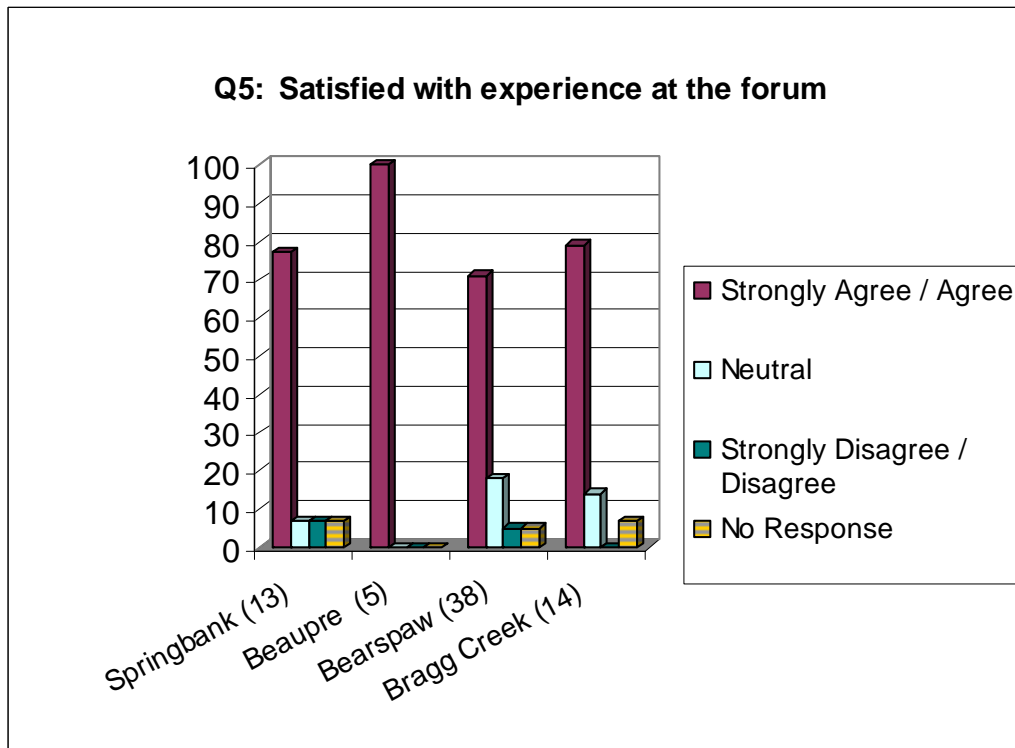
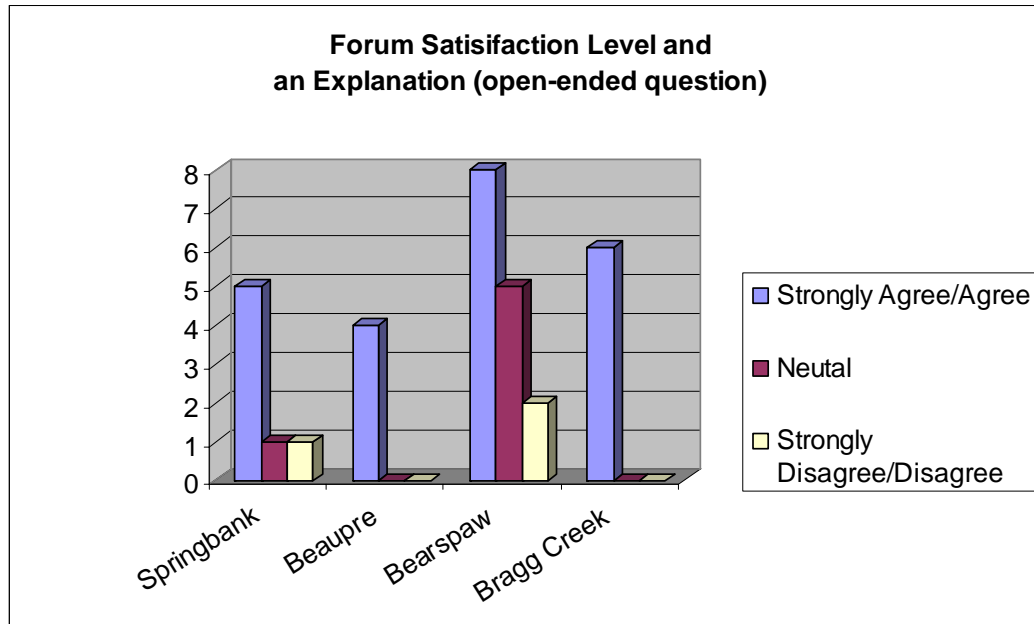


Chart 17 – Satisfaction with Forum Experience and Explanation (open-ended question)

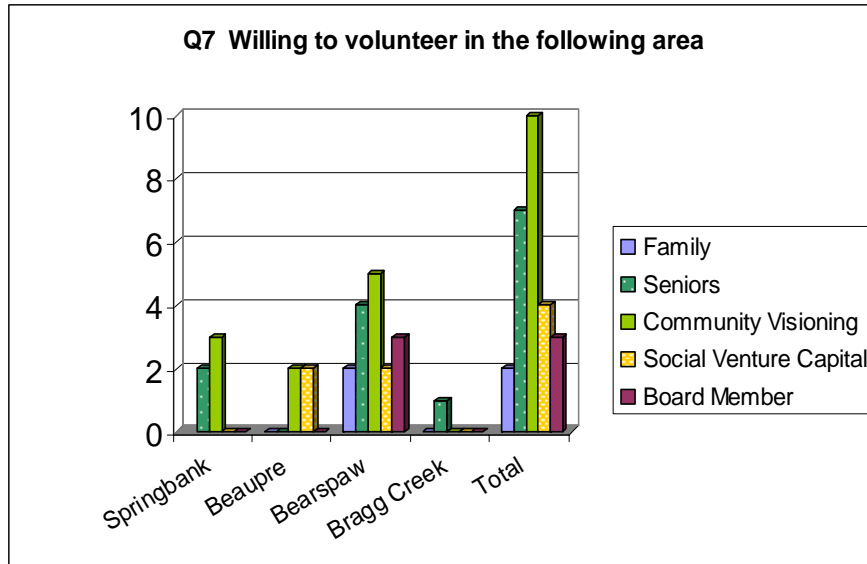


Most participants who selected Strongly Agree or Agree wrote comments on the evaluation form. Respondents from Springbank and Beaupre reported that they had most valued the opportunity to hear from others and to find that they shared concerns. For example, “It was a great opportunity for individuals to share differing and common perspectives” (SBK); “I enjoyed hearing the view of others in the community” (SBK) and “Knowing that my issues are the same as others” (BR) are illustrative.

The format of the forum was most valued by respondents from Bearspaw and Bragg Creek. For example, one respondent stated, “This forum should be an example on how to proceed in the future: people coming together to hammer out plans for the future” (BPW). Other respondents wrote, “Good environment for meaningful discussion. Good balance of structure and flexibility. Open and respectful. Good location and room set up” (BPW); “It was good to hear from the candidates and also the different issues and solutions brought forward. Thank you for putting the event on” (BPW), and “I thought this was a great idea” (BC)

Only 3 comments were connected with Disagree and Strongly Disagree. These reflected an expectation that the forum would follow ‘traditional’ lines and therefore comments expressed disappointment. For example, one participant wrote, “Not really. I wanted to hear from the two candidates and hear their platforms. I’m here to get information to help me chose the right councillor for my district not to beat a dead horse” (BPW)

Chart 18 – Prefer to volunteer in the following areas:



Over 20% of participants and 38% of those who completed evaluation forms indicated that they were interested in volunteering with CDS in some capacity.

Considerations and Recommendations

Community attendance

As this type of mobilizing strategy for elections had not been done before in Western Rocky View, there was no way of predicting how many people might attend. One councillor stated that, in his opinion, town hall meetings did not work because residents did not attend them. Hence, we might have expected only a handful of residents at each forum. While this was so at Beaupre (Division 9), three other factors may have influenced the low turnout. First, the incumbent councillor was acclaimed. Second, local advertising was difficult in this area. For example, there was no one central gathering spot in the Division and there appeared to be few formal group or organizational networks that we were able to access. Third, the municipality had held two local land planning events in the division in the past two years.

At the other 3 forums, however, attendance was better than might have been expected. This may have been due to election competitiveness or compelling local issues, which have been shown to influence voter turn out (Tindal and Nobes Tindal, 1995). Indeed, Divisions 1, 2 and 8 had challengers to the incumbent councillors. Divisions 2 and 8 had experienced recent and contentious large development proposals and Division 1 had experienced the recent development of a contentious Area Structure Plan.

Most councillors and candidates appeared to embrace this approach. Indeed, all the candidates (excluding incumbents) except one readily responded to the invitation to participate. Responses from incumbents appeared less immediate, perhaps because they were more careful about where they spent their campaign time. Obtaining biographies from incumbents, however, was most problematic. It appeared that none had these readily available. This was in variance to the candidates who had all prepared documents. Perhaps, once in office, the need to tell others of your suitability for the position or the demand from others to know it fades away.

Youth are reported to be a particularly difficult group to engage in community decision-making (Vital Signs, 2001). It is worth reflecting, therefore, on the children’s experiences who participated in the Bearspaw forum. Aged between approximately 8 and 12 years old, they enthusiastically formed their own table with 1 adult and 1 staff member. They worked through all the exercises and developed their table report, which one child, as volunteer spokesperson, delivered to the audience. Most of the children reported a very positive experience and several adults commented on the value of their involvement. Hence, it appears that the type of activity offered at the forum could easily be utilized for teaching about municipal elections and civic engagement, and obtaining children’s input.

Photo 10 – Children involved in forums



Generally, the numbers of supporters of CDS who came to the events, such as volunteers and board members, grew as time went on. This was, perhaps, due to the increased advanced notice to later events. In summary, residents of Western Rocky View, including candidates, councillors and youth demonstrated that they were interested in and willing to attend forums where they were able to participate fully in discussion and decision-making pertaining to issues that affected them.

It is recommended that CDS actively promote community gatherings where citizens are able to participate fully in information-sharing, discussion and decision-making pertaining to issues that affect them as a method to increase citizen participation and strengthen the community.

Further, it is suggested that CDS and the public actively encourage youth to become involved in community planning and civic engagement.

The value of mapping

Although there was no specific, formal evaluation of the mapping exercise, informal feedback and observation showed this to be extremely useful preliminary exercise to further participation and discussion. Participants commented frequently at their pleasure in seeing ‘their’ map. In the first forum, it appeared that such a large, pristine map almost prevented them from marking it up, but with encouragement these participants quickly got into the swing, writing, drawing and marking out their

places of value. Later forums, where participants could see what earlier participants had ‘mapped’, had no difficulty in making their own contributions.

Mapping, according to Nigel Penn, is a tool for knowledge production and therefore a part of the fabric of society’s power structures. “The mapper, in mapping, simultaneously exercises power over the charted terrain and gains enormous empowerment through having assimilated it as a field of knowledge” (Penn, 1993, quoted in Henkel & Stirrat, 2001). Further, maps are more than pictures of the structure and form of landscapes and passive illustrations of objects. Rather, they are “refracted images contributing to dialogue in a socially constructed world” (Harley, 1988, p.278 quoted in Henkel & Stirrat, 2001).

Indeed, CDS staff noted that the exercise facilitated a sense of control as well as dialogue among participants. It allowed individuals to focus on the assets in their neighborhood. Many of them shared stories and one person’s values prompted another’s. The building up of marks within an area or division helped to build ‘community’ around the table as connections were made. Hence, it appeared that this exercise had a strong positive effect in helping to prepare the groups to move on to a positive discussion of issues.

It is recommended that CDS provide information and educational resources on key strategies to build stronger communities.

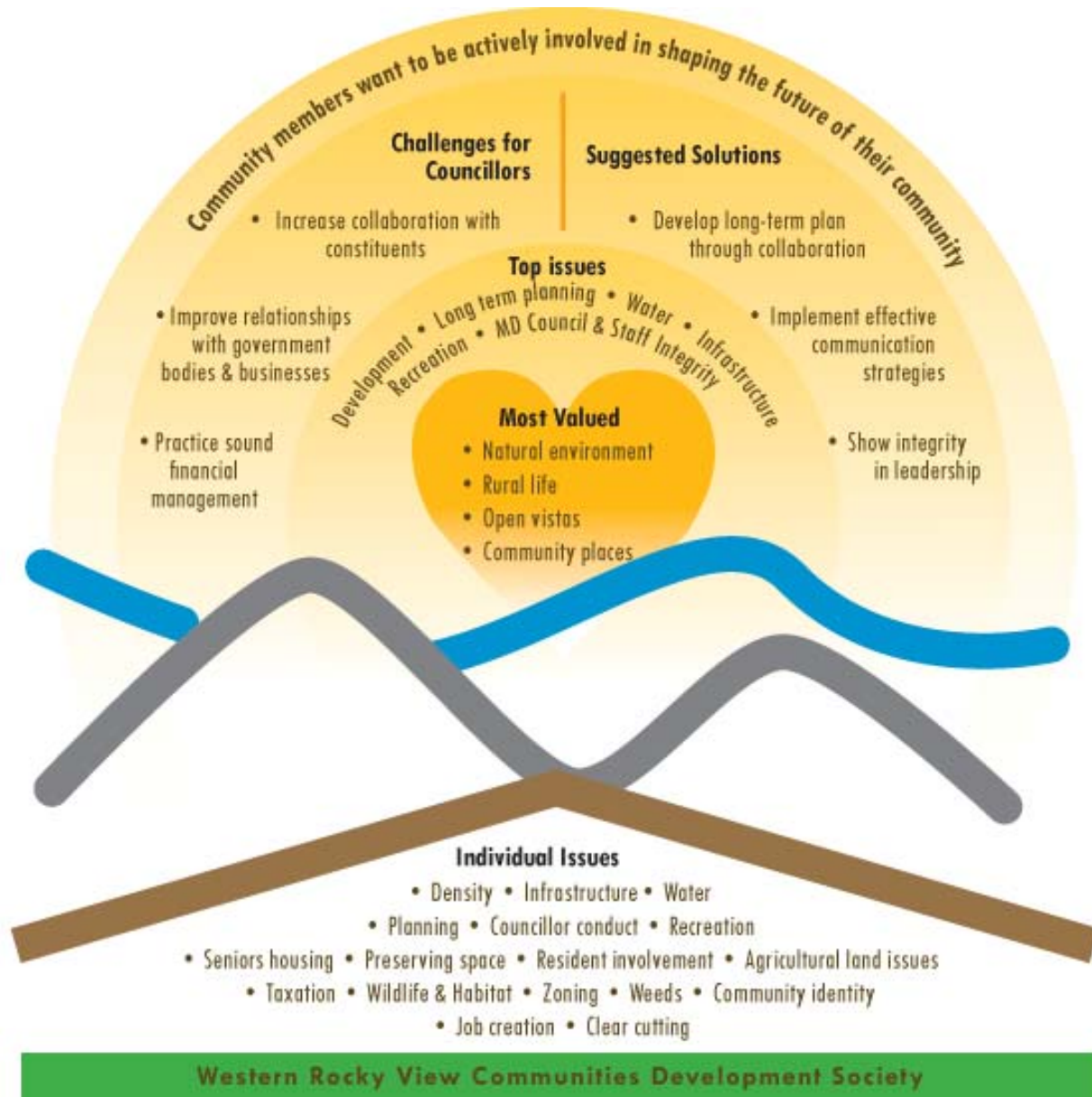
The heart of the story

Results from the exercises at the forum display a strong central theme. The uniformity or similarity of responses from the 157 participants may be seen as a clear description of their values and wishes. The resounding message from the 157 residents echoed within and across the forums was this: Only when core values including the stewardship of non-renewable resources, are placed at the centre of any development plan, can development be sustainable. It was the participants’ belief that these core community values and resources would shape and ensure appropriate infrastructure development, which would, in turn, strengthen and vitalize the community.

Residents wanted to be actively involved in developing land use planning strategies to guide prospective growth. This meant that municipal leaders should communicate with and engage residents (all stakeholders) throughout the process, which would lead to sound decisions and achieve better results.

Whether these views reflect the views of a wider population of Western Rocky View remain to be seen. However, it is recommended that the findings of this report be published and an invitation made to the public to respond so that further clarity may be gained. Additionally, such clear responses within and across the forums may provide Rocky View’s councillors with some direction as they begin a new term of government. Respondents provided a clear list of issues they consider need to be addressed and recommendations for how Council should work. Hence, the responses from the forums provide both an agenda and a method for addressing the agenda.

Figure 19 – The heart of the story



Katherine Graham (1998) suggests that candidates for municipal office have generally steered away from higher order issues, such as how to preserve or build a vibrant community in the changing economic and social order. While there is a connection between local governance and such issues, she suggests that it is “poorly understood by many candidates for local office as well as voters.” (p.97) The findings from this study suggest that voters, at least, are beginning to recognize the connection between local governance and sustainable communities and demanding that their candidates also understand this relationship.

Some of the participants’ recommendations may provoke anxiety for some council and staff at the MD (e.g. increased interaction with and involvement of residents in decision-making; engaging with residents to gain their knowledge and expertise). As noted earlier, however, the World Bank (Bhatnagar, 1992) suggests that the risk of citizen participation should be weighed against the dangers of ignoring these constituents’ recommendations.

The agenda proposed by forum participants and their preferred method for Rocky View Council to address the issues is particularly relevant as the MD moves forward with the Growth Management Strategy. The MD aims to achieve a central point or “balance between [the two extremes of] community values and future growth and development” (Team ISL, 2007), which reflects a linear, conceptual map. In contrast, forum participants place their community values at the centre or core, which shape all other issues. Consequently, considerable dialogue may be needed to achieve a shared viewpoint and an acceptable solution.

It is recommended that CDS publish and disseminate the findings of this report to MD Rocky View residents and seek further input and suggestions for action.

Further, it is recommended that this report be shared with Council, administration and those charged with leading the Growth Management Strategy development (Team ISL) so that they may incorporate what has been learned into their plans.

It is recommended that CDS explore opportunities for ongoing community discussion, planning, decision-making and visioning in cooperation with the Growth Management Strategy Team.

Election learning

Given that most time at the forum was spent in residents talking to each other and less time spent in listening to candidates, it might be expected that evaluation responses did not reflect learning about the election. While some evaluations did reflect the wish to have heard more from candidates, most responses expressed agreement or agreement with increased learning regarding the upcoming election. It suggests that learning about community issues from one’s peers is an important piece of preparation for election participation. This is supported by studies that show that contentious issues raised voter turnout (Tindel & Nobes Tindel, 1995).

It is not known how much effect the forums had on voter turnout. Yet, it is interesting to note that voter turnout increased by approximately 60% from the 2004 elections in each of the Western Rocky View divisions where there was an electoral race ¹ (B. Van Fraanssen, personal correspondence, October, 25, 2007). Indeed, in each of these divisions the incumbent was defeated. While holding the forums may have not increased voter turnout, it is unlikely that they decreased it.

Making connections

When members of a community come together, especially when advertising is done through existing networks and at central locations, it may be expected that many people will already know each other. Hence, it is somewhat surprising that more than half of the evaluations from each forum strongly agreed

¹ This does not account for changes in numbers of eligible voters.

or agreed that they had made new connections by attending the forum. It may be that participants came to know each other anew as issues were discussed and solutions created.

It is recommended that CDS seek out and use local expertise, resources, skills and finances that exist within the community to address issues that are important to residents.

The value of community-led planning

The value of community-led planning is strongly supported by those who provided feedback and by the literature. Yet such an approach is not easily undertaken. Too often, it is forgotten that communities are not homogenous and participation alone does not redefine the relationships between the community and those in governance (Frazer & Lacey, 1993; Cooke & Kothari, 2001). Hence, it is critical that those who genuinely wish to pursue this approach do so with insight and knowledge.

Although we did not ask respondents formally about the moderator, appreciation was expressed for a locally known and respected person in this position. This is supported in the literature (Rosol, 2006).

Effective community development and leadership are based on dynamic relationships and interactions among a diverse group of community members working toward collective goals. Given that a fundamental building block to strong, healthy communities is local leadership, it is worth underlining the importance of seeking out and supporting local leaders.

It is recommended that community members participate in developing a community vision and a community plan.

Further, it is recommended that residents support and promote local leadership by encouraging participation from all segments of the community.

Interest in CDS

Photo 11 – Residents view CDS display table



Over 20% of the participants expressed interest in volunteering with CDS and additional numbers requested more information. This suggests that the structure and content of the forums were pertinent and the CDS organization and its initiatives were perceived positively by participants. Follow up questions regarding what appealed to them would provide further direction to CDS in its goals of increasing community mobilization and its support base.

It is recommended that CDS survey community members wishing to volunteer to provide direction to CDS in its goals of increasing community

mobilization and its support base.

Measures of success

In comparing the findings with the proposed measure of success, it appeared that this project met its goals. Attendance by residents, candidates, volunteers and the CDS board was achieved at all forums, except Beaufre, where the incumbent was unable to attend. Completed evaluation forms showed that increased learning regarding the upcoming election was experienced by most respondents. Participation was reported to result in increased connections with other community members and feedback was obtained on the value of community-led planning. Increased numbers of volunteers were available to CDS as an outcome of the forums. Hence, enlargement of CDS’ community asset inventory database was achieved.

At the roundtable discussions, local and regional issues as defined by residents were shared and discussed. Different perspectives on issues were expressed and solutions to community issues were developed.

Many participants viewed the displays showing CDS initiatives and consequently gained an increased awareness of CDS initiatives. Eight newspaper articles in local papers acknowledged and described the forums resulting in increased public awareness of CDS.

Summary List of Recommendations

It is recommended that:

1. CDS actively promote community gatherings where citizens are able to participate fully in information-sharing, discussion and decision-making pertaining to issues that affect them as a method to increase citizen participation and strengthen the community
2. CDS and community members actively encourage youth to become involved in community planning and civic engagement
3. CDS provide information and educational resources on key strategies to build stronger communities
4. CDS publish and disseminate the findings of this report to MD Rocky View residents and seek further input and suggestions for action.
5. CDS share this report with the MD of Rocky View Council, administration and those charged with leading the Growth Management Strategy development (Team ISL) so that they may incorporate what has been learned into their plans.
6. CDS explore opportunities for ongoing community discussion, planning, decision-making and visioning in cooperation with the Growth Management Strategy Team.
7. CDS seek out and use local expertise, resources, skills and finances that exist within the community to address issues that are important to residents
8. Community members participate in developing a community vision and a community plan

9. Community members support and promote local leadership by encouraging participation from all segments of the community
10. CDS gather volunteer direction on its goals of increasing community mobilization and CDS’ support base

5 Conclusion

This story began with a description of the rationale and supporting literature, design and implementation of a strategy to increase citizen participation in a semi-rural community. Utilizing the upcoming municipal election as an opportunity to strengthen community capacity, forums were designed to facilitate conversations regarding community issues. Two sets of findings were described: conversation content and information collected on the evaluation forms. The content of the conversations included naming central values, key concerns of both individuals and groups of citizens, identifying the challenges for elected officials as well as making recommendations for their resolution. Second, findings from the participants’ evaluations of the forums’ structure were presented. It was shown that most respondents had found the forums very useful and that the goals of the project had been met. The report concluded with a discussion of the findings and recommendations for future actions.

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7 Appendices

Appendix 1: Forum Agenda



Forum Agenda

- CDS Introduction
- Moderator Comments
- Icebreaker Activity
- Round Table Conversations
- Coffee Break
- Table Report
- Candidates' Presentations
- Closing Remarks
- Social



Appendix 2: Ground Rules



Speak up!
What matters to you?

Table Top Etiquette

- Let everyone speak
- Don't interrupt
- Listen with an open mind
- Don't hog the floor
- Start a stampede with your solutions!

Appendix 3: Evaluation Form

Evaluation - "Community Matters" Forum

Will you please take a few moments to fill out a short evaluation. We are interested in your feedback.

Please check one.

	Strongly Agree		Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	N/A
1 I have a better understanding of the issues residents consider important in the MD of Rocky View.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2 I am in a better position to make a decision about who to vote for in the October 15th municipal election.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3 I developed new connections by attending the forum.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4 I think community-led planning with active community participation is important to community success.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5 I am satisfied with my experience at the Community Matters Forum this evening?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please explain. Feel free to comment on any part of the forum.

6 I would like to receive a follow-up to the forum and information about other CDS initiatives by email or mail.

If yes, please provide your contact information below.

Name:

Address:

Town, Prov, PC:

Home phone:

Email:



7 I am willing to share my skills as a volunteer with CDS in some capacity.

If yes, I would prefer to volunteer in this area.

<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No	<input type="checkbox"/> Seniors	<input type="checkbox"/> Community Visioning	<input type="checkbox"/> Social Venture Capital	<input type="checkbox"/> Board Member / Advisor	<input type="checkbox"/> Other
<input type="checkbox"/> Family / Youth	<input type="checkbox"/> Event Listing	<input type="checkbox"/> At an event	<input type="checkbox"/> Poster	<input type="checkbox"/> Assoc. Newsletter	<input type="checkbox"/> Email	<input type="checkbox"/> Radio
<input type="checkbox"/> Ad in Newspaper	<input type="checkbox"/> Invitation card	<input type="checkbox"/> At an event	<input type="checkbox"/> Community Group	<input type="checkbox"/> Ward of Mouth	<input type="checkbox"/> Other	<input type="checkbox"/>

8 I found out about the "Community Matters Forum in the following way.

Please check one.

Thank you for taking the time to complete this evaluation and for attending the Community Matters Forum. We appreciate your participation!