



CASE STUDY | REIMAGINING RURAL COMMUNITIES USING ASSET-BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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In the past, rural communities across Canada depended on settlers to build the roads, infrastructure, schools and institutions, business and housing so communities could thrive and be prosperous. Fast forward 100 years and rural communities are now looking to re-imagine themselves in the face of changing demographics, resource industries disappearing, radical changes in technology and centralized government services. This case study outlines how small, rural and remote communities along the east shore of Kootenay Lake in BC brought residents together using an Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach.

OVERVIEW

In a partnership with the Columbia Basin Rural Development Institute (RDI) of Selkirk College, the local planning team and the Economic Development Commission (EDC) residents were led through a process of identifying assets and bringing residents together to plan how to attract, and retain residents as well as jobs in the Kootenay region of BC. They were concerned about the 10% decline in population (over three census periods) and a disturbing demographic gap between a rapidly ageing population and fewer young families. In response, a local planning group was formed and included the Regional Director as well as residents with varied skill sets.

The planning group applied for support from the RDI of Selkirk College, and Area A became a pilot project to use [Asset-Based Community Development](#) to understand how local assets can be linked and leveraged to attract and retain new residents. Recognizing that the communities in Area A did not have an inventory of assets, a TEC internship grant was secured, and a Selkirk College GIS program graduate was hired. The intern

Area A of the Regional District of Central Kootenay (RDCK).

The rural communities of East Shore/Wynndel are officially known as Regional District of Central Kootenay (RDCK) Electoral Area A - Wynndel/East Shore Kootenay Lake. Area A is among the 11 unincorporated electoral areas in RDCK which, under the governance structure imposed by the Province of BC, do not have a mayor and council like most municipal governments. They have one elected regional director who sits on the RDCK board with 19 other regional Directors. The small communities from Riondel in the north, through Kootenay Bay, Crawford Bay, Gray Creek, Boswell, Wynndel with many smaller neighbourhoods between, lie along an 80 km stretch on a winding highway along Kootenay Lake. The full-time population is 1930.

gathered information from individuals, organizations, businesses and services to create an asset inventory. This information was then compiled into a map/website which acts as a repository of up-to-date contacts and data for residents, the EDC and other organizations.

The next step was to get community input on the issue of declining population and collect their ideas on how to retain and attract residents. Eight kitchen table meetings were held in homes, halls and restaurants, and engaged various individuals - seniors, new-comers, youths, young families, recently retired, longtime residents, and part-time residents. Results were posted in the local newspaper and submitted as input to the regional Economic Action Partnership (Creston and district) process that was taking place at the same time.



The last step was to host two events called Opportunities for Action to bring residents from all communities together to start knitting the communities culturally, through awareness and relationship building, and to create an area-wide digital communication tool. The process included residents working together as communities, reports on their assets and current projects, and participation in cross-community conversations. Information was displayed as it was collected, and there were action projects up on the walls that people could sign on to.

This project used ABCD as the approach for collaborating with the community. The framework was created locally and is called Asset-Based Rural Development. There were 5 steps used to gather community assets;

- Mapping capacity and assets
- Building relationships and trust
- Mobilizing assets for development and information sharing
- Pulling the community together to build a vision and plan
- Leveraging resources to support defined priorities



OUTCOMES

The project followed steps that provided space to gather information, build relationships and awareness among residents and communities, and create a digital hub. The project uncovered a cultural character of the communities that suggested they have a resistance to technology, with a preference for personal contact. However, newer residents and younger people tended to rely more on technology. The Eastshore.Life website used the information gathered during this process to evolve into a platform that brings awareness among residents about the assets and activities that happens in each of the smaller communities. A surprising result of the platform was the discovery of various activities and interesting projects happening in the communities that no one knew about.

The project deepened the connections between communities through face to face discussion. Residents gained awareness of active volunteers and projects throughout the communities, and most were surprised at the capacity, ingenuity and passion expressed. The evaluations from the events indicated a desire to continue to meet in cross-community events to support businesses and non-profits. The project has recommended that the EDC continue to evolve the community conversation model.

Lastly, the project brought to light the appreciation amongst residents about the strength of the volunteer sector and a deeper appreciation of the need for volunteers to be involved in the planning and development of communities. Volunteerism, for the local planning team and the EDC, came to be an incredible strength and force within the communities, however, they also recognize that volunteers are tired and ageing. Through local participation by the EDC in larger partnerships and planning processes, Area A has secured part-time staff positions in the tourism and economic development sectors. Below are some other outcomes from the different activities.

Asset Mapping

- Reached 415 businesses, organizations, services for database
- 21 in-depth studies of community infrastructure - halls, marinas, special sites and community-owned facilities
- Established www.eastshore.life a central website, blog, newsletter, to improve communications, maintain asset listings, and provide base information for EDC and RDCK analysis and planning.

Community Engagement events

- 8 kitchen table focus groups - 53 people engaged with 10 communities represented
- Spring Opportunity for Action event: 80 local participants and 8 regional support organizations/funders.
- Fall Action Opportunities event: 40 individuals and 13 presentations from community organizations
- Video produced about the spring event in collaboration with Westward Communications Inc.

Other

- Partnership development with RDI, Columbia Basin Trust, RDCK, Community Connections, Economic Action Partnership to fund and support the Asset-Based Rural Development project.
- Economic Action Partnership (EAP) of Creston, Area A, B.C and Lower Kootenay band - we provided information and support to their research and gained a part-time economic development staff person for Area A which can enable follow-up for ideas/processes/issues identified in the Asset Mapping project.
- Enhanced Education and Tourism Project through Rural Dividend (provincial funding) which resulted in the Building East Shore Tourism (BEST) initiative for experiential tourism and increased collaboration between tourism businesses. Together a Welcome Map was published for new residents, a cultural map of Area A inviting their participation.

NEXT STEPS

1. **Ensure communication between communities** – maintain funding and support for the database on Eastshore.Life website, blog, newsletter and Facebook page.
2. **Continuing connections** – provided recommendations to EDC and the RDCK to continue to bring residents together from the area with two annual events; a new business forum and non-profit meet-up and training.
3. **Mobilize the plan** – Recommendation to EDC to follow up on expressed concerns and potential projects within a unified vision and strategic plan.
4. **Develop a community conversation model** – Recommendation to Area A EDC to develop a community conversation model to deal with assets, issues and opportunities as they arise in the region. The model should bring diverse players together in a structured conversation where you seek understanding of the assets and points of view and reach agreements on next steps.

LESSONS LEARNED

Building Partnerships: The technical assistance from the Columbia Basin RDI of Selkirk College and TEC internship grant was invaluable. The dedicated, trained student enabled the project to gather assets, past studies, and in-depth descriptions of our community-owned and operated facilities. Community halls, for example, play a huge role in the rural communities – for recreation, meeting spaces, and a focus for community life. The hall committees struggle on their own to maintain these facilities and, recognition, attention and support by the larger community are very appreciated.

What to do with the assets collected: There needs be a plan on what to do with the assets and data. There were attempts to work with existing websites and regional mapping initiatives, but ultimately a new website had to be created. The absence of a plan meant more work as data was incomplete, and had to be sanitized and reworked for the website. Know what the outcome will look like and where it will be housed, to avoid having to re-do or add significantly to the data.

Collaboration: Each small community tends to function on their own, often with little awareness of what the other communities are doing. To plan for the region, everyone needed to know what everyone is doing, and share the information among residents. Residents appreciated the experience of hearing firsthand from involved community members and, many new connections were made on an individual and organizational level. This step was crucial to the process and helped lay the foundation for future planning and continued community engagement.

Residents lead: Each community is unique, and volunteer organizations do much of the work usually done by governments or other agencies in larger centres. How each area moves ahead as a community depends on the individuals and organizations that are willing to volunteer. The events, as a result, were open-ended



Youth taking part in the events from Friends of Kootenay Lake, a regional non-profit.

containers where residents put their minds together to imagine new possibilities, to hear what others are doing, and to get to know some of the resource providers and funders. The seeds planted in these events continue to sprout in new initiatives; many resulting from the connections, relationships, inspiration shared.

Thinking together: Appreciation for who Area A is and what it has as a regional community was an underlying principle in the ABCD process. When residents are proud of where they live and actions that happen in their community are community-driven, they will naturally attract people who will want to live there. Throughout the process, there was careful consideration to enable residents of all ages to attend (childcare, food, and car-sharing were offered), time to express gratitude and celebrate the wonderful community work being done and appreciate the individuals who give their time and energy generously.

CONCLUSION

ABCD is a useful tool for rural communities who want to generate growth based on the values of the people and the organizations who live in the community. To have real, meaningful conversations with each other, to reveal the gifts and assets of residents, to learn to listen to those with different opinions, to imagine into the future together, this leads to endearing relationships and ideas. A basic tenant of the ABCD approach is that communities imagine and define their future, use their assets and gifts to make change happen and, when needed, seek out agencies and institutions to support them.

Using the ABCD approach in rural communities takes more time and resources as you will need to go to where the residents are and not ask them to come to you. Residents appreciated the small focus groups held in people's homes or local halls or restaurants. With refreshments, a diverse group of people and a few questions, they responded sincerely and honestly leading to exciting conversations and new relationships and links.

Asset mapping is not just about mapping, it is about finding the individuals, organizations, businesses and services who are our community assets and engaging them to build them up and strengthen them, and to link and leverage assets for mutual benefit. Each community is different, there is no cookie-cutter approach except recognizing the strength coming from people expressing their needs and desires and working together to build their dreams in the community. In a rural area, the assets in one town could help another so assets should be brought together so that the whole area can benefit. In the larger events, people worked together as communities and reported out on their assets and current projects, then they worked in cross-community conversations. Information was provided as data was collected and action projects were up on the walls for people to sign on.

In each community, there are champions and connectors who are influential and can help to bring credibility to the project. Engage and connect with those champions and invite them to host conversations. The fact that the Regional Director attended the focus groups, lent credibility to the process and also educated him on real issues from real people.

This project intended to attract new residents and there will need to be a waiting period to see if this happens. The communities are clear about some of the challenges people face to move to the area such as affordable housing, lack of transportation options, some deficits in internet service. Residents have learned to appreciate who they are as communities; they have acknowledged the good care residents take of

community assets; and they have clarified values - to protect the lake and mountains, to maintain community spirit, and work to live in healthy sustainable communities.

Further information

- Blog post: <https://eastshore.life/see-your-neighbours-in-action/>
- Video link: <https://vimeo.com/301537149>
- ESL link: <https://eastshore.life>
- Welcome Map:
<https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/hubfs/Resources/Case%20Studies/welcomeGuide.pdf>



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