



Taking the pulse: Top ten needs in rural and Aboriginal western Canada

Notes from the Co-operative Innovation Project — December 2015

The Co-operative Innovation Project asked western Canada's rural and Aboriginal communities: what does your community need in order to have a better life? Some of the answers are familiar, some surprising.

Canada's citizens look first to their communities to get what they need for everyday life. It's time to listen to what communities in western Canada have to say.

The Co-operative Innovation Project

From 2014-2015, the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives at the University of Saskatchewan led the Co-operative Innovation Project, looking into the possibilities of co-operative development in rural and Aboriginal communities in western Canada.

Through on-line and telephone surveys and open events in rural and Aboriginal communities in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia, the Co-operative Innovation Project asked: what are the needs in your community? And, what do you know about co-ops?

What we heard: rural and Aboriginal western Canadians defined their lives first by place, and their needs flowed directly from their outlook and perspective on their local community. We present the top ten needs, as defined by citizen respondents during community events.

Health Care

Accessing quality health care in rural regions is a long-standing concern; after all, the roots of Medicare are in rural western Canada. While rural doctor services (along with other professionals) are of major concern, respondents reported the most important health care need in rural and Aboriginal western Canada is mental health and mental health services.

Housing

Winters are long in Canada. Good quality housing is always needed. In rural and Aboriginal western Canada,

nearly every community identified housing as a major need. Whether booms have raised housing and rental prices beyond what is affordable for local residents, or there are logistical or zoning reasons for fewer building starts, or there is a shortage of financing or skilled trades to develop and build new units, more housing is needed.

There is a shortage of low income and good quality rental housing in rural and Aboriginal western Canada. While it may be thought that the majority of rural residents own or wish to own their property, there remains a critical need for rental housing for those transitioning into or out of home ownership (early career and retirees), young families, and those working in service, seasonal, or transient industries.

Support Services

There is a shortage of support systems in place in rural and Aboriginal communities. These supports will help residents live a healthier life, where they are. A range of issues require support: "Treatment services, abuse (physical, mental, sexual), youth centre, suicide support/prevention, help line (local), bullying (all ages), workshops, medication training, anger management." Parenting, budgeting and financial awareness, counseling services, elders' support, support for the homeless, income assistance, newcomer integration, services for families, services for children, social groups, and women's services were among the top concerns. Where these services are available, demand can overwhelm availability.

Industry and business development

There are business opportunities in rural and Aboriginal western Canada – but sometimes it's a matter of knowing how to get started. Communities request development

support to grow local businesses. Of related concern was a mismatch between local businesses and community needs: a restaurant or grocery store that closes at 4:30 cannot serve professionals and commuters returning home in the evening. Matching business development with local needs is a must.

Community Barriers

Most communities, both rural and Aboriginal, have community barriers that might hamper change and growth. Community barriers were unique in each community, but included divides between community members, inadequate capacity, rapidly-changing culture, the effects of colonialism and residential schools, a lack of community engagement, lack of integration, or local politicians or gatekeepers hindering growth or abusing power.

Seniors' Services

Seniors' services were amongst the top ten needs in rural and Aboriginal western Canada. Of particular concern were solving issues related to long-term care and aging well in place, where seniors remain near family and friends in a familiar cultural and social setting. Aboriginal communities in particular noted a need for care facilities embracing Aboriginal traditions. Services related to preserving the dignity and well-being of aging residents, including home care, access to health services and affordable housing, are needed.

Transportation

In rural and Aboriginal western Canada, distance is a fact of life. Society presumes that all rural residents have both a license to drive and access to personal transportation, but that is not always true. Rural community residents face barriers to getting around, limiting opportunities for many rural residents, including young families and seniors, low income residents and those on Aboriginal reserves. Innovations in transportation, from taxi services to public transport, are needed.

Accessing Services

Rural residents understand the need to travel to access services that are not offered in their community – but wish that such travel was not necessary. The need to travel cascades across other aspects of rural life. Appointments in urban areas means traveling in all conditions, part or full days of work lost (sometimes several, if the community is not within a one-day commuting distance), rearranging

schedules, and extra expenses. Those without transportation rely on family members or other community volunteers to take time off work.

In other cases, rural residents must travel just to meet basic needs: fresh food, banking, jobs or day care services, schooling or job training, and end of life requirements such as funeral services. Declining local services has a reverse spiral effect: a community with fewer services has trouble attracting growth and development.

Volunteers

There is an assumption that rural and Aboriginal communities enjoy a higher level of volunteerism than urban regions – but that assumption is incorrect. The Co-operative Innovation Project discovered an acute volunteer crisis. There are fewer and fewer volunteers available to work with existing services, programs, and recreation. Those that remain are rapidly burning out. Volunteering is a learned behaviour, and communities are worried that volunteerism is dying.

Recreation

Community and recreation facilities are important places for residents to gather and play. Many of these facilities are aging and require upgrades. Other communities are growing and require new buildings. Furthermore, because rural communities tend to be spread out, communities need to access multi-seasonal recreational offerings within driving distance from their local community.

At the same time, recreational activities are becoming more difficult to supply, since in many cases they are closely tied to volunteerism, which is in crisis.

Where to go from here?

The Co-operative Innovation Project noted that the co-operative business model is a good fit to solve almost every one of these community needs – in fact, many communities spontaneously identified co-ops as a potential solution. Government policy and support toward promoting and growing the co-operative business model is an important element in addressing the identified needs, as co-ops work toward finding community-based solutions, and building community from within.



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