

Volunteer Capacity-Building for Horticultural Activities: A Model for Small Ontario

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Abstract

The observations and processes of this research are more the record of experiences than the comparison to work in other municipalities or jurisdictions. This project was originally implemented under the mandate of the Sustainable Rural Communities research program, University of Guelph (SRC, 2002), as part of the development of sustainable responses to municipal restructuring, and of sound economic activities, in rural communities of Ontario. It was furthermore seen to be a unique continuation of educational activities at Ridgetown College, with the JJ Neilson Arboretum offering to diploma graduates practical work experience opportunities and career advancement potential. The results have been more outstanding than anticipated - the communities involved have moved from none or little organized horticultural activity to participants in a Communities in Bloom project begun this year, and interns involved in the program from 1999 to 2001 have benefitted greatly, and thus help prove the value of structured post-diploma employment partnerships.*

Volunteerism

Volunteers undertake a great deal of the horticultural and gardening activities in smaller communities across Ontario. Horticultural societies, garden clubs, and various service clubs and interested individuals work with (or without) municipal departments, to help create and maintain sometimes extensive beautification projects. This has been experienced in Ridgetown, Ontario, in the ongoing relationship between the College and the local Horticultural Society. The involvement of these volunteers comes from their avid interest in horticulture and community beautification, and from the declining budgets of many communities where these municipally-managed activities were gradually reduced or eliminated. The decline in available volunteers, due in part to an over-abundance of opportunities for volunteering, to the aging of the population, and the increasing responsibilities shouldered

* Much of the background information may be anecdotal, either from conversation with local volunteers, or from personal experiences of the author.

by these groups, has resulted, in many cases, in a need for professional assistance and direction. The Ridgetown experience resulted in College staff taking a leading role in horticultural programs in the community, and in providing student workers on occasion for specific projects. Funding came from local sources (service clubs) rather than municipal coffers. This experience of nearly two decades duration was somewhat typical of many of the smaller communities in southwest Ontario.

Studying the Horticultural Activities

Within the Sustainable Rural Communities research program (SRC) at the University of Guelph, supported by the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food (formerly OMAFRA), a mandate to address rural issues led to approval of a specific research project in 1999. Since “The overall objective of the SRC Research Program is ... addressing vital research issues in rural Ontario that have been defined ... as significant for community prosperity.” (SRC, 2002), then the beautification of rural communities, done in many instances by volunteers, could be considered a viable study. Quality of life experiences relating to nature (as observed by most people to mean plants, including flowers) bonds humans and other living things (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989). For the local resident and for the tourist, pedestrians in the core areas of smaller communities, having “...nature at the doorstep...” (Kaplan, 1985) is a tie to the natural environment and an important ‘aesthetic experience’ (Chenowith and Gobsten, 1990). Volunteers understood this, and were endeavouring to keep up traditions and a cared-for appearance with horticultural improvements.

The project fit into the first two goals of the SRC: “... to strengthen economic growth, entrepreneurship and business efficiency... while achieving improved standards of living.” and “... to understand, facilitate and assist rural communities ... in response to change and restructuring.” (SRC, 2002). The amalgamation of twenty-three communities into the Municipality of Chatham-Kent in 1997 was one such restructuring, where many services previously provided locally were now either centralized or missing altogether. These included horticultural projects, already reduced in previous years through cutbacks, and now managed in many instances by volunteer groups.

From Pilot Project to Full Study

A pilot project in Ridgetown that included volunteers, grade-school children and college graduates, and involved the ‘downtown’ core area planter boxes and flower beds, evolved into examining many of the twenty-three communities that were amalgamated into Chatham-Kent. This was undertaken at the request of the Municipality, when requests for funding for the Ridgetown projects was in discussion. Funding for the close look at the communities came partly from the SRC research

program, and partly from the JJ Neilson Arboretum (JJNA). Information on each community's projects, funding, personnel, and groups involved was pulled together, for presentation to Municipal Council. The result was that four of nine localities with a defined horticultural component were organized in 2001 under the leadership of the JJNA. Existing volunteer groups were represented in Community Beautification Committees, and included Booster Clubs, Horticultural Societies, Kiwanis Clubs, BIA's and Chambers of Commerce, and Community Associations, among others.

Municipal Council authorized an area-rated local improvement budget allocation for each of the four projects, based on a November 2000 submission by the JJNA on behalf of the Committees. The local committees then took responsibility for project operations and management, overseen by JJNA staff using horticulture student Interns. Project work included the preparation and maintenance of annual planting beds, planter boxes, and hanging plants, the installation of landscape features and their subsequent maintenance, and additional discussion regarding future developments and planning for horticultural activities. A fifth locality took its own proposal to Council and was approved, operating outside of the JJNA program.

Several meetings took place at which local representatives gathered to discuss the overall possibilities. Local meetings were also held throughout the season, to keep on top of the project work and any problems that developed, and to help the groups manage the workload. Payroll management and project specific aspects (purchasing, scheduling, labour allocations) were completely handled by JJNA staff, and directed through the local committees. A tour in late summer of all four communities by representatives from each locality created a further excitement and acknowledgment that the projects should carry on into the following year. The JJNA prepared summaries for each locality, followed by a detailed proposal submission to Council for the next year's seasonal activities. Each locality's projects were shown separately, and a letter from the local committee requested funding based on the individual summaries.

Results

The four projects of this segment of the study were successful, and the submission to Council for the 2002 season received approval. Results of the first year of the program's operation included the successful hiring of two student interns, the planting and maintenance of over 10,000 annual plants, and the installation of new landscape features in one location where little had previously existed. Local committees grew in their understanding of their relationships to the Municipality, and also learned more about the coordinated efforts that made formerly individual horticultural projects a larger, more manageable entity. The funding permitted the hiring of interns, who showed a great deal of interest and enthusiasm for the as-

pects of horticulture that had previously been poorly addressed, such as weeding and watering.

Details of the four projects were presented to Council in a November 2001 submission, where funding was requested for 2002 and subsequently approved. A measure of the volunteerism could be shown, and was calculated as 900 hours (a value of \$10,800), and local contributions amounted to nearly \$40,000. Municipal tax allocations of just under \$50,000 were raised in each locality under the separate heading of 'horticulture'. For the four projects, a total of over 2,500 paid hours was invested, and two pickup trucks with self-contained watering systems and hand tools were provided. Each of the four 'original' committees has evolved to manage their own contracted personnel, and with an ability to carry more responsibility in dealing with the Municipality directly.

The volunteerism aspects, once valued (using a modest \$12 per hour and adding estimated mileage, telephone, and other costs), were compared with the 'real' costs of the projects in each community. This component included local volunteer time and costs, and management/overseeing aspects by JJNA staff, for each project, and averaged an impressive 35% of the total (\$90,000) calculated value. Of the \$60,000 actual funding received, 83% came from Municipal tax bases and the remainder from local sources (service clubs, etc.). The overall project consisted of 55% labour and 10% materials costs along with the volunteered components of labour 28%, materials 4%, and other costs 3%. Budget outlines for the 2002 season were almost identical to 2001, with slightly more local funding expected, more expenditures due to increased work loads, an increased volunteer labour component, and a drastically decreased JJNA management component. The volunteer aspects overall were forecast to decrease by almost 5% of the total budget, however, the expectation is that this will actually increase.

Overall, there were six main results of note in these projects:

- local Community Beautification Committees were established;
- an area-rated local improvement taxation system was implemented;
- community involvement in (previously) municipal horticultural aspects increased;
- local committees increased in their management capacities;
- trained and interested horticulture graduates were involved in community projects and performed well; and,
- career development opportunities for graduates were provided.

A New Dimension for 2002

In late Fall of 2001, Council approved the funding for a Communities in Bloom (CIB 2002) project for Chatham-Kent. This was to be an initial attempt at organizing and

implementing much the same beautification project work as had been undertaken in the study previously, but with a broader scope. It was also intended to bring the amalgamated communities closer together in a common cause. Funds for the hiring of a Community Beautification Coordinator to oversee these four projects and several others, and to develop new projects and increased community involvement as part of the CIB proposal, was set aside. The total package of \$150,000 in funding would also cover student wages, judging costs, training, and assistance to communities where (new) projects would be undertaken. The CIB project was set over the existing beautification projects, where nothing really changed except for some additional student worker assistance during the summer, although the help was intended for additional work not already existing.

Hiring of the coordinator was delayed, and finally in early April the research assistant for the beautification projects studies of 2000 and 2001 was given the position. With an already well established background in the horticultural projects, and with in-depth knowledge of the local groups and their structures, this individual could readily fit into the program even with a late start. A steering committee of four (Municipal representatives from Public Works, Horticulture, and Social Services, and the JJNA research leader) was established, with a larger committee chaired by the coordinator and including representation from each of the nine communities involved.

Integration of the summer students and the existing programs was slightly unsteady at first, due to unclear mandates and the slow start in spring. Not until late May were eleven students hired and in place, and some horticultural training set up at the JJNA. Additional municipal training in safety and specific workplace protocols were handled by the Municipality. Each locality received instructions on chains of communications, and project work commenced. A flyer outlining the Chatham-Kent Communities In Bloom project was created, and posters available from the CIB office were put on display in public places in the various communities. Presentation of the overall project has been planned for each locality over the summer, and the late-summer judging serves as a dry-run for a full involvement in the competition in the future (CIB, 2002).

The Model for Small Ontario Communities

The model as developed in the communities of Chatham-Kent is presented for other small localities across Ontario, under a mentorship program of the JJNA. While Ontario's small communities may not be any different than those in other provinces or even US states, the mandate of the SRC research program is provincial. No formal activity in preparing the model for use outside of Chatham-Kent was underway as of the date of this presentation, however, it is expected to be implemented in 2003.

A format for the model, developed as of Spring, 2002, consists of six main points, each achievable in small communities. The ranges for the financial arrangements have been based on the Chatham-Kent experiences.

1. Volunteer Organization - 'Community Beautification Committee'

- consists of representatives from interested groups and service clubs, such as:
 - Horticultural Societies, Garden Clubs and/or related groups;
 - BIA and/or Chamber of Commerce;
 - Master Gardeners; and
 - service clubs and organizations.
- requires a formal committee structure and banking arrangements

2. Trained and Interested Leadership

- horticulturally trained graduates of diploma or degree programs:
 - are already committed to horticultural projects;
 - are experienced in horticulture-related activities; and,
 - bring expertise and professionalism to volunteer activities.

3. Private Funding Opportunities - 20% to 50% of total

- involve individuals, local groups and businesses in project funding:
 - gives incentive to municipality to assist; and,
 - creates an atmosphere of ownership of projects.

4. Municipal Funding Opportunities - 50% to 80% of total

- may be very specific arrangements with (new) area-rated taxes, or through existing departments and budgets; and,
 - specifically allocated towards these projects.

5. Management Assistance by Impartial Experts - +/- 5% of total

- may be required if in-house expertise is not available; and,
- is the basis for the JJNA Mentorship program.

6. Sustainability Program

- funding needs to be ensured over several years;
- volunteer organization needs to have recruitment and growth programs;
- projects need to be viable for the long term; and,
- mentorship aspects should be able to phase out over time, with responsibilities and expertise developing with the organization.

Development and refinement of this model will be undertaken over the 2002 season, as the Chatham-Kent projects progress. The CIB program is not necessarily the final goal of the model, however, it lends itself very well to that eventuality. Enhancing the local environment through horticultural efforts is a popular item, judging by current trends (increased retail spending for lawn and garden of 11% in 1999 (TGO, 2000); horticultural business activities increased 14% to 17% between 1999 and

2001) (Nentwig, 2002). It is hoped that this model will also lead to enhanced career development for students in horticulture-related programming in Ontario, through the integration of education and on-site skills development.

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