BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

With approximately 40% of the country’s arable land, Saskatchewan is often referred to as the bread basket of Canada. While agriculture has been the backbone of the economy over the last century, more recently the development of Saskatchewan’s vast potash and uranium resources have been attracting investments and fuelling growth in the province. The impact of this rapid growth has been acutely felt by surrounding towns and communities, particularly where municipal services and infrastructure were inadequate to keep pace with the increase in population and growing demand for health care, education and emergency services.

Local governments in these rural and remote regions of the province often lack the financial resources to be able to manage growth so in 1968 Saskatchewan implemented the Municipal Tax Sharing (Potash) Act in recognition of the fact that mines have impacts on surrounding municipalities. The initiative allowed for the redistribution of municipal property taxes on potash mines to be shared with eligible rural and urban municipalities within a 20 mile (approximately 30 kilometer) radius of a potash mine’s headframe. Cities with a population greater than 5,000 were ineligible. In recent years, this initiative has generated roughly $20M a year which is being shared between 130 eligible municipalities.

CASE STUDY: Rapid Growth Community Teams, Saskatchewan

The Saskatchewan case

What can municipalities do when the development of a new mine nearby threatens to overwhelm their modest infrastructure and service delivery capacity?

One Canadian province has piloted an innovative approach which involved mobilizing multi-ministry teams of front-line service providers to work directly with municipalities to help them be better prepared to manage growth and development in their communities.

The City of Humboldt is a community located in the central part of the province of Saskatchewan, in an area where there are a number of potash mines. Incorporated as a town in 1907, Humboldt’s became a prosperous farming community which later spurred the development of agriculture related businesses including a robust agricultural manufacturing sector. Over the last 40 years

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the discovery and development of potash mines around Humboldt added to its growth and expansion which resulted in it becoming Saskatchewan’s 13th city in 2000.

Over a period of less than ten years, Humboldt’s population grew from 4,996 (2006) to 6,644 (2013) and it has become the main urban center for more than 30,000 people that rely on the city for health care, higher education, retail, as well as other government and commercial services. In an effort to support communities undergoing rapid growth as a result of the commodity boom, in 2012 the province put in place a multi-ministry Rapid Growth Communities Team (RGCT) to provide services and support directly to municipalities experiencing rapid growth. With BHP Billiton’s decision in 2010 to develop Saskatchewan’s newest and largest potash mine at the nearby Jansen site, it became clear that the City of Humboldt would be front and center in managing both the challenges as well as the opportunities associated with the $5.0 billion investment.

As a result, the Humboldt area was selected to pilot the Rapid Growth Communities Team since it combined 22 municipalities (1 city, 6 towns, 7 villages and 8 rural municipalities) that were considered to fall within the main sphere of influence (roughly a 40 kilometer radius) of the new Janzen potash mine.

1. **Identification of Rapid Growth Areas**

As an initial step, the Ministry of Government Relations works in cooperation with the Ministry of Economy to complete a scan of the present and forecasted economic activity in order to map out zones of potential rapid growth. The provincial team considers a number of factors including the drivers behind the growth, its scale and whether the consequences of not responding will place other public investments at risk. The Humboldt region was selected to pilot the team’s implementation because of its experience in managing growth, and the increased economic activity associated with the BHP Billiton potash mine development.

2. **Team Composition**

A first-of-its-kind working group, the RGCTs is comprised of select provincial ministries, crown corporations and agencies that have a frontline role in supporting municipalities to deliver critical service. The team consisted of representatives from: the Ministries of Economy, Social Services, Education, Environment, Government Relations, Health, Highways & Infrastructure, Justice & Attorney General, as well as the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation, Water Security Agency, SaskEnergy, SaskTel and SaskPower. A representative of BHP Billiton participated directly with the team throughout its development and deployment in the Humboldt-Jansen region.

3. **Municipal-Provincial Consultations**

The team then met with local leaders and staff from Humboldt and the surrounding municipalities to better understand their concerns and to identify any gaps in their capacity to manage growth. This step focused on better understanding the municipalities’ needs and abilities, particularly in terms of land use and community asset planning, inter-municipal cooperation and regional economic development.
4. Situational Assessment

The Rapid Growth Communities Teams worked closely with the municipalities to prepare a comprehensive assessment to determine the capacity of the local infrastructure and municipal services to meet the present and projected future needs of the community. Areas of focus for the assessments included: Supply and treatment of water, along with wastewater treatment facilities; Solid waste facilities; Select municipal governance capacities and land use planning; Transportation and related infrastructure; Human services; Emergency services; and Housing.

5. Ongoing Communications and Information Exchanges

The Ministry of Government Relations held regular meeting and developed an e-newsletter to keep all of the participating municipalities informed on progress. Team members met quarterly to maintain links and to enhance coordination and cooperation.

6. Presentation of Results

Once the assessment was completed, the Rapid Growth Communities teams met with the municipal officials and local authorities to present the findings and to explore possible options for the both the province and the municipality to factor them into their respective planning and budgeting processes.

7. Next Steps

The assessments identified the results for each area of focus and included preliminary and potential next steps that could be taken that would respond to particular areas that required strengthening. The municipalities will then work with the province and other stakeholders to identify the priority areas they want to focus on for future provincial-municipal cooperation and investment.

RESULTS

The mobilization of Rapid Growth Community Teams was a significant departure from the traditional model of service provision between the province and municipalities; from one that had been quite passive and reactive to a more targeted and pro-active approach. A number of interesting results can be identified from this model of inter-governmental cooperation:

- Strengthened Inter-Governmental Relations

By bringing representatives from the province's ministries, crown corporations and agencies together with municipal leaders and administrators the RGCTs helped to make valuable people-to-people connections that facilitated the development of better inter-governmental (municipal/provincial) working relationships. The benefits include a more open and direct conversation that had greater purpose and strategic relevance for both sides. Building on the initial dialogue, municipalities were then able to request more in-depth and focused discussions or workshops to address specific issues of concern to the region.

- Integrated Planning

By using a team approach that brought together multiple ministries and agencies, municipalities were able to take a more integrated approach to finding solutions to their problems. This also benefited the province as it had a tendency to break down silos that existed between ministries and encouraged greater coordination in the provision of services to municipalities.

- Regional Assessment

The development of a Regional Assessment for Humboldt provided a comprehensive baseline that provided all of the participating municipalities with a situational report on the state of their community readiness and the capacity of their infrastructure, plans and bylaws to meet future needs. This has been a valuable tool to guide planning and decision making, both at the local and regional level. The Humboldt region was generally seen to be well equipped to manage current and future growth although the assessment did identify some challenges facing surrounding municipalities in areas such as waste-water treatment, solid waste, health care and housing.

- Planning Districts

Two new planning districts were established in the region (Mid-Sask Planning District and the Humboldt and Area Planning District) as a result of local leadership efforts. The development of these planning districts have established a badly needed regional planning capability and enabled the participating communities to address obstacles to growth, strengthen inter-municipal cooperation, collaboration, capacity building and dispute resolution.
Planning is Critical
Most of the municipalities involved didn’t have a planning capacity and many didn’t see the value in investing in planning, particularly for the rural municipalities. The support of the RGCTs created the impetus for many of the participating communities to understand the importance of planning as a critical tool for managing growth which resulted in them pooling their resources to share the cost of hiring a regional planner (e.g. Mid Sask Municipal Alliance).

Commit to Planning Early
When BHP Billiton started to engage with communities surrounding their Jansen potash mine to assess their level of readiness, they placed a very high priority on a municipality’s planning and service capability. Where it was seen to be insufficient they provided funding to help communities undertake infrastructure and asset management plans, official community plans and strategic plans early on in the mine development process.

Think Regional
The lack of a cohesive regional plan or vision was seen as a major obstacle to leveraging growth opportunities, capitalizing on regional strengths and collectively finding solutions to common problems. To do this required a shift in focus from looking at the strengths and weaknesses of individual municipalities to looking at the combined assets and needs of a cluster of municipalities to develop a regional strategy for social and economic development. This can be greatly facilitated by the creation of a district planning committee to support planning at the regional level. Still, there is a sensitive role that larger urban centres (i.e. Humboldt in this case) have in working in the regional context with smaller villages and rural areas: relationships based on good communications and building trust so that no one is seen as “the boss” of the region but as one of the partners.

Communication
Regular on-going communication during the deployment of the RGCTs was important to keep municipalities informed and to facilitate information sharing amongst the multi-ministry teams. To enhance communications the Ministry of Government Relations prepared monthly e-newsletters and conducted direct follow-up to ensure that even municipal representatives who could not attend an event were kept aware of on-going developments.

• Growth Readiness Checklist
The Ministry of Government Relations developed the Municipal Growth Readiness Checklist as a tool for municipalities to self-assess their ability to respond to growth. The checklist provides a basic scan of “growth readiness” and helps raise awareness between administration and council about a number of factors that will influence the municipality’s ability to respond to growth opportunities. It asks municipal officials to consider their growth readiness in terms of: Land Use Planning and Governance; Administrative Capacity; Fiscal Health; Service Delivery; Public Safety; Infrastructure; Demographics and Economic Trends; and Regional Partnerships. The checklist was developed to be useful to municipalities of varying size and experiencing varying levels of growth, and took into account the time and resource constraints of local governments.

» LESSONS LEARNED
The initial piloting of the RGCTs in Humboldt has since been expanded to include an additional five areas of Saskatchewan that are undergoing higher levels of growth as a result of mining or other resource development. The use of RGCT’s has allowed the province to better understand the needs of municipalities while strengthening coordination and collaboration between different levels of government on policies, programs and practices. Some of the lessons learned that can be identified from this approach include:
Community Engagement
Communities have a wealth of social capital, however, mobilizing it can be challenging. It is important to encourage strong citizen participation in the planning process, particularly from groups and organizations that bring different perspectives and which have different needs such as the Chambers of Commerce, First Nations, youth, seniors, etc.

Monitoring and Performance Measurement
Getting buy-in from political leaders and community stakeholders for new approaches requires more than anecdotal evidence so it is important to design a performance measurement frameworks that can demonstrate results. It has been important that the RGCTs have remain engaged with the initial pilot areas even once they have moved on to other sites so that they can continue to monitor and assess areas of new and emerging needs for municipalities.

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The Sustainable and Inclusive Communities in Latin America (CISAL) Program is an initiative of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) that seeks to strengthen local governments in mining contexts of Colombia and Peru to achieve greater social benefits and sustainable economic opportunities for communities. The Sustainable and Inclusive Communities in Latin America program is undertaken with the financial support of the Government of Canada provided through Global Affairs Canada.