ALBERTA: A COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT HERITAGE ALTERNATIVE

BY FRITS PANNEKOEK

Since 1980, twelve new heritage attractions have been constructed by the Province of Alberta with three new facilities opening since 1990 despite a major recession. All but the Royal Tyrrell Museum and its Field Station were built by the Historic Sites Service of the Department of Culture, formerly of the Department of Culture and Multiculturalism, and now a branch of the Department of Community Development. On the average, these facilities have cost some $10 million each. Along with five sites built before 1980, they attract some one million visitors annually, and contribute over $25 million to the local and $55 million to the provincial economies.

While the capital funding for these projects was typically approved in full, the manpower and other operating resources required for these developments were usually cut in half, and then further reduced through annual government budget reductions. Indeed, in the last ten years the Historic Sites Service has lost 57.6% of its budget. Downsizing has been a normal and constant experience. However, the Historic Sites Service has been able to meet these challenges using a community development model.

The Historic Sites Service and each of its sites have always seen themselves as part of the wider Alberta business, cultural and museum communities. Initiatives both during planning, construction and operations were intended to provide strong creative linkages with geographic and special interest communities to create a broad ownership for these facilities. The approach was intended to produce institutions without walls. Everyone became an ambassador for the facility in an industry where word-of-mouth advertising accounts for nearly 50% of visitation. Business ties led to cross-promotion and integration of these facilities into the regional economies. Regional cultural communities brought new perspectives on facility and programme development, helping to ensure a "client and community driven" cultural product rooted in community reality. The intent was to create a seamless organization in which everyone shared, everyone participated and in which there were no barriers between volunteers, paid staff, contractors, community groups and businesses.

The particulars of the approach are traditional, although the vigour and the extent of the mix is unusual. Some 1,400 volunteers assisted at the various facilities. They contributed, some in supervisory capacities but most as front-line staff, simply because they wanted to be associated with world-class facilities. Eleven cooperating societies or Friend groups were established to allow citizens a chance to work together as a group to develop complementary initiatives and to demonstrate and marshall community support for the facilities collectively. Several hundred members now belong to these associated groups. In some instances, existing community groups undertook to become friends. There was a spontaneous outburst of community affection and commitment.

These cooperating societies also had access to significant resources that were beyond the mandate of the provincial government. They levered numerous federal manpower and foundation programmes and normally sponsored several major projects per year. In some instances machinery, equipment, supplies or manpower were donated to complete a heritage fairground, or to build an interpretive centre. The Friends of the Oil Sands Centre raised approximately $2 million in kind and dollars to relocate and restore Canada's largest land-based artifact *Cyrus*, the bucket wheel excavator.

Most of the facilities also have community advisory boards appointed by the Minister of Community Development. These advisory boards always include the Member of the Legislative Assembly as an *ex officio* member, the president of the associated Friends group, a representative of the chamber of commerce, representatives of community cultural groups, and several members-at-large. The intention is to include everyone who has a real interest in the facility or project. This generally includes those who might be highly critical of the

project as well. Critics often have genuine concerns and have for the most part made sincere and valuable contributions to improve the projects. Appointments to the boards are generally for no more than two terms to ensure that the widest possible representation from the community occurs over time.

Cooperation does not end with the immediate communities, but extends ever outward, typically including post secondary institutions. Thirty interns annually come from a cooperative venture with the University of Calgary. This programme offers an opportunity for students and communities to participate in both formal classroom learning as well as work experience in the heritage field. While its primary user is the Historic Sites Service, other students have enrolled and it now has an independent following as well. Many people throughout Western Canada have become part of the heritage system without walls.

The individual facilities also changed the way in which they did business. Each developed a business plan based on "small business" principles. It was emphasized however, that our "business" was heritage – not making money. At the same time, the Historic Sites Service realized fully that without adequate resources, the cultural vitality of the system could not be maintained. Equally important, the communities that comprised the heritage system also demanded that they operate on a businesslike basis. This demand was reflective of the community way of doing business. So the system undertook to generate revenue from gate charges. Legislative changes were enthusiastically supported by local elected representatives, also considered to be important members of the heritage community. Over sixty staff are now paid from these revenues. Facility operation is not the only mandate of the Historic Sites

Service. The Service is also responsible for the management of the 70,000 buildings in the province built before 1945. This is done either through designation or through the Historical Resources Impact Programme. The agency also has the responsibility for the province's geographic names.

The same solutions to ensure inclusion of all communities were applied to these activities. The Inventory of Historic Building Programme has worked with communities to publish walking and driving tours. The service's architectural inventory is sponsored by the Alberta Association of Architects, and the Edmonton Society for Urban and Architectural Studies has become "Friends" of the inventory programme assisting in computerizing the inventory and in ensuring public access. The Friends of Geographic Names have broadened that programme so that it is the first in Canada to publish a complete study of provincial names, entirely self-financed. More importantly, they have introduced educational material to every classroom in the province through the development of a geographic "Seek n'Name" game.

The key to "re-engineering" heritage management has been to eliminate the concept of "we" and "they." The key has also been to build on strength, whether the strength comes from paid staff, volunteers or community. The Historic Sites Service attempted to remove barriers of all kinds by developing diverse approaches. We used all types of formal and informal mechanisms to ensure that those previously considered external partners became intimately involved with the network of facilities. While it is true that most heritage institutions use these techniques, the variety and scale employed by the Histocie Sites Service are distinctive. More importantly, our partners are not considered as "service" agents in a subordinate or support position.

Rather, the broadest community is the heritage institution. While some professional conservators and heritage planners might shudder, there is no reason why competent conservation specialists in the community cannot undertake technical projects. The Service developed a "Foster Wheels" programme in which individual objects could be adopted by individuals or groups for conservation and restoration. Of course, all potential "parents" were carefully interviewed and their skills assessed before completing an agreement. And yes, there were a few accidents, but no greater than those which occur in the back rooms of the great museums.

The Historic Sites Service sidestepped the effects of recession and other problems by creating a community and operating a resource base that was as diverse as possible. There was a clear effort to avoid dependence on any one resource. Equally important, it became a more customer-driven organization. For the most part, staff buy-in was real, and for the most part universal. There were and are traditional problems. For example, agencies always want some form of "control," which now has to be shared. There will always be problems of "we" and "they." But in the end, the process will be successful because it is based on a cultural and experiential reality. In the end, there is general flexibility throughout the system with arrangements which make sense to the local situation. The principle is that every approach is unique, that every situation must be geared to the culture of the community, and to the way that community expresses itself. By giving power to everyone, the power of heritage has grown everywhere. It is a strong concept that in the end can envelop everyone in the cultural and heritage experience.

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