A Case Study of Harbour Breton’s Strategic Development Plan

Strategic planning has become one of the most critical approaches to planning. One region that has adopted the strategic planning approach is the community of Harbour Breton, Newfoundland and Labrador. The town, located in Fortune Bay on the south coast of Newfoundland, is the largest municipality within the Coast of Bays Economic Development Zone and the service center for the area. With a population of less than two-thousand people, it was one of the first rural communities in Newfoundland and Labrador to develop a strategic economic plan in 20011.

The main reason the town decided to implement such a plan was to help the town's economy, which was critically challenged due to the closure of the cod fishery in 1992. Prior to the cod moratorium Harbour Breton was one of the “richest towns per capita in the province”2. The main resource that the economy had thrived on throughout its history, like other surrounding communities, was the fishery. After the cod fishery closed in 1992 and the government support and transition programs that followed ended in 1998 the town realized that its economy needed to become more diverse and also that they needed to strengthen their management role in the fishery. Thus the strategic plan “Building on a Tradition” was created.

This idea grew out of a Capacity Building Forum during May 2000. The forum was attended by more than 300 residents concerned about the future of their community3. After the forum, the Town of Harbour Breton decided to implement a five year strategic planning process to strengthen their economy. During the first year they completed the initial plan, which would be implemented in subsequent years. A survey was first launched to gather needed information on demographics, employment, education, skills and volunteering. It also considered people’s personal views about out-migration, services, community spirit, and most importantly assets that could contribute to development. The purpose of the survey was to understand the views of individuals across a wide spectrum of the community and gain insights that would help create a common vision and set of ideals. A public meeting was also held to identify key issues

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2 Ibid.
and develop a vision statement for the community, which was then made available for public input. After the public had time to provide input, a second public vision statement was then re-issued.

After creating an appropriate vision and identifying key issues, the plan outlines a mission statement for achieving this collective vision, as well as specific goals and related action tasks. This is critical in terms of strategic planning. Without achievable goals, then the plan has a high risk for failure. For each goal, the EDC also created action plans and related cost estimates so that each goal could be achieved in a financially sound and realistic way.

Nine key components were identified. The first component was related to citizen engagement. “The town believed it needed to engage people in consensus building and to buy-in to what needs to be done notably for the fishery, tourism and youth/senior initiatives." The idea was that once people take ownership of plans, the prospects for future success will grow. The eight other components included: the Fishery (largest goal), Aquaculture, Tourism, Business Capital, Human Resources, Youth, Seniors and Volunteer Capacity Building.

The town did not create this plan by itself. The Harbour Breton strategic development plan was created based on input provided by a wide range of local stakeholders, organizations and individuals. As a result the process of developing Harbour Breton’s strategic development plan was lengthy, but enabled residents to have a say in how their economy would be run. In order to achieve the stated goals, the community’s Economic Development Committee (EDC) worked together with the Coast of Bays Regional Economic Development Board and the Canadian Executive Service Organization (CESO), an organization of volunteer professionals, to develop the plan. The fact the EDC is local and CESO is a national organization is an important distinction which shows that even small communities like Harbour Breton can communicate with, and harness the resources of, larger agencies such as CESO. One of the most important partners was arguably ACOA (Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency), which provided funding to cover travel and administrative costs related to the strategic planning process and allowed various individuals and organizations to participate in active advisory roles during the different stages of the process. Staff members from the provincial Department of Development and Rural Renewal also helped by facilitating public meetings.

Several important lessons can be learned from the Harbour Breton strategic planning experience. The closure of the cod fishery and later of the fish processing plant in Harbour Breton demonstrates the risks associated with dependence on one resource for your economy to thrive on. Another lesson that can be taken from this case is that planning early, before a crisis happens, is crucial. The town’s early involvement in strategic planning enabled the community and support agencies to respond quickly with

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4 Hunt, "Harbour Breton develops 2nd strategic plan: New five year plan"
5 Harbour Breton News, "Building an Outport for the Twenty-First Century"
the 2004 closure of the local Fisheries Products International fish processing facility. Because a plan had been created prior to the closure projects contributing to long term economic development were already underway and funding proposals for new projects could be generated quickly. Finally, local involvement, partnerships and the consideration of a plan document as a ‘living plan’ for the community were also key aspects of Harbour Breton’s successes.

The community continues to strive to diversify its local economy away from the predominantly fishing-based economy and to respond to both new uncertainties in the fishery and new opportunities. The fishery still occupies the largest sector of the economy. Today's fishery, however, incorporates new emerging fisheries and aquaculture along with eco-tourism. Local economic development efforts continue to help diversify their economy just as the strategic plan was put in place to do. With many of the 2001 action items completed, the Town released its second five-year Strategic Community Economic Development Plan in 2009.

In today’s economic situation in Newfoundland and Labrador, can we use this case study to further our knowledge about planning for the future? To map out scenarios for our oil industry, for example? Just as Harbour Breton depended on the fishery for many years, the economy of Newfoundland and Labrador currently depends on the oil industry. Can we create a strategic plan that would outline possible strategies for coping with the scenario of dwindling oil resources, since it is a non renewable resource? In the news, the oil industry is portrayed as a continuously and plentiful source for Newfoundlanders and Labradorians, but we cannot forget to plan for the future. Strategic planning can help a community, or a region or a province avoid an economic collapse based on reliance on a single resource industry as we have seen in small towns throughout the province.

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7 Ibid.
References


About this Community Development Toolkit

This community development toolkit was created by Nathan Cotter, with editorial review by Kelly Vodden, Ahmed Khan and Gail Collins. The toolkit was created as part of a community-based research project undertaken by students in an undergraduate course at Memorial University, Department of Geography, instructed by Dr. Kelly Vodden (Geography 3350 – Community and Regional Planning and Development). The project was completed in partnership with the Central Region Community of Practice – Community Development. Using a Community of Practice’ learning approach the project aimed to provide resources that introduce students and practitioners to several key community development tools and concepts. Financial support for from the Rural Secretariat-Executive Council and the support and participation of Regional Partnership Planners Linda Brett and Tanya Noble are gratefully acknowledged.