

#7 “Coffee with the Neighbours”
Discussions of Recreation Management Issues & Future Planning
SUMMARY

On Monday evening, October 10th, 2011, Gayle Stewart (VP, WDRA) welcomed the approximately 25 attendees, including representatives from neighbouring Recreation Associations and Whitewater Council.

Ms. Stewart began by suggesting that this evening we search for all sorts of Possibilities that could better serve the recreation needs of our communities. The best way to uncover Possibilities is to ask questions. Not for specific answers, but for open-ended conversations that will uncover all Possibilities for the future.

Conversation #1: What Vision do you have for Whitewater Recreation Associations?

To get everyone thinking what the recreation associations might consider doing in the future, we identified what we thought our present Roles and Mandates were.

- **Roles** of Recreation Associations:
 - Top of mind comments: Westmeath – to run the hall and rink complex, Forrester’s Falls – to manage the outdoor rink and baseball diamond, Beachburg – to manage the rink and ball diamond. No delegate from Cobden was present.
 - Other comments identified secondary roles (eg. event programming and fundraising), and suggested roles that should/could exist, to develop the community. A comment was made that the associations should provide leadership to find out what the needs of the community are, and work to meet those needs.
- **Mandates** (political authority):
 - Local communities have a mandate from the Township of Whitewater Region to deliver recreational activities to their citizens.
 - Laws, building codes, safety must be met
 - Finances need to be auditable
- **Vision** for future:
 - Various people suggested that the municipality could become more involved in the management, co-ordination and delivery of recreational activities, through centralized programming, administration (eg. payroll), and communications (eg. website, newsletter).
 - A comment was made that a swimming pool for the Township would be a great benefit to all ages.
 - Beachburg thought they could do more with the facilities they already have (eg. Soccer Field)
 - Fundraising is critical for the associations to make sure the bills are covered. Perhaps major events could be partnered or centralized.

Conversation #2: Currently recreation is organized and managed in Whitewater through the Recreation Associations. How is that working for us?

- **Strengths:**
 - Volunteers – low labour cost
 - Local facilities - close to clients - cohesion
 - Sense of community & community building
 - Sense of Ownership
 - Support groups/clubs; eg. Riverview Social Club

- Successful fundraising
- Weaknesses:
 - Limited volunteer base
 - Segregation of communities- silos
 - Competition overpowering Co-operation
 - Distances between Cobden, Beachburg, La Passe and Westmeath
 - Lack of communication
 - Focus on “Own Back-Yard”
 - Aging equipment (and people)
 - Lack of Funding
 - Overlapping goals to fund events
 - Focus on single events / shallow programming
 - Small population
 - WDRA newsletter limited to Ward 2
 - Need for higher level/central co-ordination
- Opportunities:
 - Use of the municipal website for central source of information. May require a central co-ordinator.
 - Wider distribution of the WDRA Newsletter could increase advertising revenue.
 - Wider opportunities to tap into greater volunteer base.
 - Greater use of existing facilities: Theatre Co., Emergency Centre, other uses
 - Sharing of knowledge and resources
 - Eliminate Ward councillors
 - Summer intern to co-ordinate Recreational activities
 - Various Clubs: eg. Youth Club
 - Develop and share resources (eg. Land, electricity)
- Challenges:
 - The Recreation Assoc. tends to be known only as a rink management group
 - Raising sufficient funds
 - Maintaining a Volunteer Base
 - Establishing effective partnerships
 - Aging population
 - 35-50 yr olds limited involvement in planning/management process
 - Involving private enterprise
 - Knowing the trends and thus needs
 - Involving youth more
 - Leadership

Conversation #3: What are the Possibilities of better Partnering?

The following possibilities came out of the discussion:

- Enhance outdoor opportunities through partnering with private white-water rafting companies (eg. biking, kayaking)
- Partner more with the health & safety community. (eg. Flu shots, first aid training)

- Again the notion of a centralized leadership team at the municipal level came up. That team could:
 - be responsible for partnering regarding recreational purposes,
 - source corporate funding
 - bring in private enterprise partners (eg. Unopened road allowance agreements)
 - oversee that all laws, codes and safety issues are met for all facility assets.
 - Standardize delivery of services (eg. Ice rental prices, insurance)

Conversation #4: Can the Recreation Associations enhance our Social Capital?

Ms. Stewart drew from sociologist Robert Putnam's meaning of Social Capital. It is a cohesion that exists between its citizens, giving the community a sense of well-being and success. Those communities with strong internal networks, individual participation, feelings of trust and safety, strong moral values and outlook, with a sense of citizen power, and a sense of giving and getting back, tend to have higher Social Capital.

Discussion comments:

- "in small communities, it's difficult as a newcomer to feel a part and be accepted"
- "all-inclusivity builds social capital. Having a community contest that encourages people participation (eg. A Garden/Bloom Contest) allows anyone to participate in their own way"
- "the Westmeath based Riverview Social Club (Sr's Club) is very innovative, welcoming, and a catalyst for social capital".
- "a similar club for younger people could also add to the social fabric by enhancing inclusivity, participation, and sense of belonging by that demographic"
- "a Welcome –Wagon goes a long way to help newcomers feel welcome and a part of the community"
- "the schools can play a much larger role in building social capital"
- "volunteers need to be handled better"

Conversation #5: How is Social Capital impacted by moving from a local recreation association to a municipal managed recreation department?

Ms. Stewart drew from U.S. university researcher John McKnight in defining a Citizen as someone who produces a future – he or she is a builder/owner. Out of a feeling of ownership comes nurturing and a willingness to be engaged for the sake of the community.

Consumers on the other hand give power away and expect their needs to be satisfied by others; elected officials, managers and such. They don't believe their action can impact the future and thus don't participate.

An example was given regarding an incident in Muskoka District. A local recreation association (and fire halls) was taken over by the township, and volunteerism and social capital dropped substantially. Petawawa Parks & Rec Dept works very hard to obtain and retain volunteers through special monthly volunteer nights and booster programs. Still, when their new strategic plan for the town was presented, only 7 people showed up.

Someone commented that there is a difference between “taking overall control” of something, vs “co-ordinating” something. Whatever the case though, it was agreed that any management group needs to work really hard at supporting a volunteer base.

Conversation #6: How many regulations can volunteer staff be expected to manage?

Ms. Stewart re-iterated the fact that there are some 50 pieces of legislation that cover the management of recreation facilities. Other regulations and codes, insurance requirements, risk management issues, possible litigation scares, all tend to hurt volunteerism. Although things like a Police Check are deemed essential, they can also be seen as deterrents.

Perhaps the township could provide workshops to help recreation associations be aware of various types of “must-know” information. Another suggestion was to form an executive between all recreation associations to trade ideas, compare notes and support each other in understanding the issues.

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Note: Much of the material on community building for this session was drawn from the fine work of Peter Block and his book “Community”. To hear more from Peter Block in his own words go to

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jZxbx7ke7wg&feature=related>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MTpSLKr7xao&feature=related>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YYRMhCtU54A&feature=related>