

Social Environmental Scan and Development of an Integrated Plan for North Dumfries Township

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Executive Summary

Since 1988, the Social Planning Council of Cambridge and North Dumfries has actively engaged in community-based social planning and, over the past few years, has connected with a variety of initiatives to assist in the process of identifying and addressing the changing needs of North Dumfries. With support from the Regional Municipality of Waterloo, the Social Planning Council has developed key partnerships with various community groups to develop a social environmental scan for the North Dumfries Township. Findings from this scan were used to map the development of a community-integrated plan. The project has been rooted in Healthy Community principles, which underscore the importance of assessment based on a holistic understanding of a community's economic, environmental and social factors.

The project **objectives** were twofold:

- (i) to conduct a social environmental scan of North Dumfries, and**
- (ii) to begin the development of an integrated plan based on the findings.**

In 2002, the Social Planning Council met with representatives from six community groups that had evolved in North Dumfries since 1998, and collected information about their goals, membership, expected outcomes and data collection processes. These groups were chosen because each was in the process of conducting individual evaluations, needs assessments and/or developing proposals for social change. An additional objective for this project was to learn from these findings, as applicable, in order to gain a fuller understanding of the current issues and trends in North Dumfries. The North Dumfries initiatives included in this project were: Access North Dumfries, Ayr Community Plan, Ayr Community Recreation Study Group, Community Support Services of Ayr & North Dumfries, Community Health Centre Steering Committee, and the Rural Health Study located within the Community Health Department in the Waterloo Region (initiated by Region of Waterloo Public Health).

In general, this project was used as a means to “check the pulse” of the community and provided an opportunity to explore the potential for integrated human services specific to the emerging challenges and capacities of North Dumfries. Overall, the findings suggest that **North Dumfries is a community in which there is great need for collaborative partnerships to reduce the stress and vulnerabilities inherent to rural community development.**

In 2003, efforts were made to reconnect with the groups to assess their progress. Recent communication with these groups has illustrated that, while some groups have managed to meet their stated objectives quite successfully, others have faced significant challenges. Various outcomes were apparent for those under stress. Some of the groups are no longer active, and others were very inaccessible to the public. Even during the short time-span of this particular project, common themes have emerged among North Dumfries initiatives. These themes are summarized below:

- Many groups appear to be overburdened, especially smaller groups that depend on one or two key personnel (who often volunteer their time in addition to working full-time elsewhere). Thus, there is a **need to improve the community's ability to meet the needs of its residents through promoting the sustainability of existing groups and by fostering new group development within a supportive community environment.**
- Much need stems from **lack of resources**, especially related to people and their time.



Spatial and geographical constraints also present challenges for community groups; accessibility remains an ongoing concern.

Efforts to share existing resources, plan for the future based on a common vision, and learn from the experiences of fellow rural community development initiatives should serve to reduce the **isolation** felt by many individuals and groups in North Dumfries. A preliminary plan that suggests a **network model approach** to address this community need is included in the final chapter of the report.

Healthy Community Implications

The Healthy Community model emphasizes health as determined by a multitude of factors, including those that are social, economic and environmental. Community health is a common theme for all North Dumfries groups, whether “health” is defined in the context of barrier-free access to community resources (Access North Dumfries), rural health assessment (Rural Health Study), a rural community health centre (Community Health Centre steering committee), outreach to and among community members to match resource and need (Community Support Services of Ayr & North Dumfries), recreation (Recreation Study Group), or assessment of the impact on infrastructure and the environment as a result of population growth (Ayr Community Plan).

North Dumfries represents a community where aspects of the Healthy Community model are already in place, as reflected by the multiple interest groups that have formed in recent years to enact social change in the community. The opportunity for active engagement in mutual support among these existing connections, and others, can be founded on the principles of Health Communities. To do so would serve to reinforce North Dumfries’ capacity to manage aspects of their own well-being, and to participate in the creation of a common vision among social organizations. This vision can be articulated, at least in part, through an emphasis on a broadly defined concept of “rural community health” initiatives.

Community Trends

Multi-faceted growth. Recently released Census data shows continued growth on the whole for North Dumfries Township (12.2% over the past five years) as well as for key populations (e.g., seniors, youth and lone-parent families). This growth creates opportunities for increased engagement with new members of the community, but also places stress on systems that support and sustain the community’s social, economic and environmental infrastructure. Above all, **growth signals that it is prime time to facilitate a strategic plan for the future**, so that groups can work collaboratively under a common vision, maximize their use of resources, and advocate for services and programs that reflect the emerging needs in the community.

Need to adequately address issues of diversity. Interestingly, the number of persons whose first language was not English or French has dropped to 9.0% in 2001 from 10.5% in 1996. This corresponds to a similar reduction in the proportion of persons in North Dumfries who consider themselves members of a visible minority. Perhaps this trend reflects North Dumfries’ ongoing challenge with issues of multicultural diversity and social inclusion.

Issues of Sustainability. Sustainability can be defined as “the degree to which a program or organization can mobilize resources from one or more sources consistently over time to respond effectively to local needs.”¹ Given the vulnerable nature of rural community development, it is not surprising that sustainability is of primary concern in North Dumfries. The potential negative impact of human resource constraints, competition in the allocation of resources, demand for space, and isolation can be reduced through an understanding of how sustainability can be enhanced. **Building partnerships among community initiatives can serve to increase the strength of organizations and the likelihood that they will survive.** The success of the interaction between the Community Health Centre and the Rural Health Study outlines the importance of connecting between groups in the form of partnerships.

A North Dumfries Network?

A preliminary plan for North Dumfries could be based on the model of a *network* for sustainable community development. Networks can be used to foster collaboration among groups in the community as a strategy

¹ Sustainability manual project with the Centre for Research and Education in Human Services and the Social Planning Council of Cambridge and North Dumfries, 2003.



toward **reducing duplication, improving communication, and building partnerships**. Cost-effectiveness is an important aspect of collaboration, particularly in communities such as North Dumfries where factors such as limited resources are a reality. Partnerships can also help to reduce the isolation felt by many community members in rural areas. A North Dumfries Network could help to increase community capacity to meet its current challenges through the development of **key partnerships, an emphasis on sustainability and strategic social planning, and facilitation of access to information** for all North Dumfries initiatives. Key concepts of the proposed network are:

- The network should include partnerships from all four townships and stakeholders in the community.
- Participation in the network should be flexible to increase involvement from persons and groups with varied levels of resources and strengths.
- The network should facilitate a process of effectively sharing existing resources, linking newer partnerships with those more established in the community and nurturing natural leaders within the community.
- The network could also coordinate separate requests for funding so that larger sums can be secured under the broader goal of building a healthy community.
- It will be important to have external support to sustain the network itself.
- The network could act as a catalyst for leadership development in North Dumfries. Ongoing leadership for the network should remain within the community in the form of a steering committee.
- It is suggested that a steering committee consisting of partnership representatives from all communities in North Dumfries be struck after the Community Forum in August.

Conclusion

Findings from the social environmental scan illustrate that North Dumfries would benefit from a coordinated effort to enhance its community capacity, especially in terms of leadership development and increased human resources. It is hoped that this report will be used as a tool to engage North Dumfries residents in the process of developing and implementing a plan to ensure ongoing sustainability of its community initiatives.

Please refer to the full report for further details concerning the social environmental scan and integrated plan. Copies of the report are available through the Social Planning Council of Cambridge and North Dumfries.

Next Steps

The **Community Forum on August 5, 2003** will feature an overview of this report's findings as a means to introduce the networking model, to highlight current groups in the community, and to identify common issues, themes and resources among them. The forum will also develop the groundwork for a North Dumfries Network by providing the time, space and opportunity to develop a working definition of North Dumfries' Community Vision. It will be important to ensure that the forum includes a broad range of community members and adequate representation from all North Dumfries communities. The Visioning exercise can include a process of identifying partnership representatives for the steering committee. A process of affiliation should also be identified at that time so that internal groups understand their role within the Network and external groups know how to join.

Resources

As noted above, an underlying, priority need is for both human and financial resources to support the Network. Many individuals and groups in the community are already overburdened. Several groups are still in the working phases of developing their initiatives and have not reached a sustainable plateau in which extra time and resources can be devoted to establishing a North Dumfries Network. Therefore, the resources required to develop and implement the Network must come from additional, external sources.

A Phase 1 proposal will be drafted if there is sufficient community buy-in to the process of establishing a North Dumfries Network. Timing of Phase 1 would be post-Forum, up to and including discussion and implementation of the proposed Community Plan, which is estimated as a one year time commitment. A proposal for Phase 2, which would include Plan Implementation, is estimated to be an additional one year time period. See Appendix B in the report for an outline of the proposed work plan.

