

Selling Quality of Life:
Making the business case for
civic indicators

A Presentation to
The Canadian Sustainability Indicators Network
Annual Conference

By
Ken Coulter, Executive Director
Community Quality Institute

March 2010

Summary

Civic indicators programs are being developed across the country at an unprecedented pace. While national and provincial studies currently capture most of the headlines, it is becoming increasingly evident that research at the community level will stimulate and inform real positive change. Municipalities need to be able to identify their own unique assets, opportunities and challenges, and develop measurable action plans to achieve success.

The challenge facing most communities when considering the development of a civic indicators program is funding. The municipal downloading that has occurred over the past decade has left many small cities and towns struggling to balance their budgets while responding to ever-increasing pressure to deliver a wider array of services. Quality of life research and planning can easily be seen as an unaffordable luxury in an environment of fiscal restraint.

What needs to be proven is the return on investment in civic indicators research to a community. In this workshop, the following issues will be presented:

- Communities are in competition with each other across Canada to attract newcomers and keep youth from leaving. This competition will ultimately determine which communities thrive, and which ones decline.
- Communities, like businesses, are an amalgam of various operations providing services in the fields of education, health care, arts and culture, economic development, environmental protection, social services and more. It is critical to view a community in a holistic sense, recognizing the interplay of these various operations, and understanding that the ultimate goal (or product) of any community is superior quality of life for all citizens.
- The most successful businesses invest heavily in quality improvement methods and practices. They clearly identify all the various processes involved in product or service delivery, and use specific tools to improve operational efficiencies and reduce errors. This investment in continuous quality improvement pays off with a product or service that is superior to its competitors, ultimately translating into higher profits.
- Civic indicators programs are a community's answer to a continuous quality improvement process. The return on investment will be realized through such benefits as an increased tax base, higher enrolment rates in schools, and a larger customer base for local businesses. Moreover, an indicators program can inform long term planning using evidence-based decision-making, allowing communities to take a proactive approach to future developments.

The decision to live in a community is no longer made primarily by considering employment opportunities. More and more, individuals and families are placing a higher priority on such issues as public safety, quality education, recreational and cultural opportunities, and environmental health. Communities, like businesses, need to offer proof to existing and potential citizens that they can provide a quality product, and are committed to improving quality of life over the long term.

Proving the Need

Canada is an attractive destination for immigrants. It is a good thing too; according to the 2006 Census, the number of people aged 65 and over increased by more than 446,700 compared with 2001 (+11.5 per cent), topping the 4 million mark for the first time (4.3 million). This is nearly four times as many seniors as in the first census in 1956. This represents an outflow from the work force that must be balanced, if not outpaced, by an inflow.

On the positive side, Canada had the fastest population growth among the G8 nations from 2001 to 2006, with an increase of 5.2 per cent. The United States ranked second, with a 5.0 per cent growth. On July 1, 2007, Canada's population had reached 33.0 million, 2.0 million more people than in 2001.

Two-thirds of this growth is due to international migration: an average of 240,000 newcomers have arrived each year since 2001. By contrast, 60 per cent of the population growth in the United States stems from natural increase—that is, more births than deaths. Births in the United States averaged 2.0 children per woman over the last few years, the highest of the G8; Canadian women have an average of 1.5 children (Statistics Canada, 2008).

In short, people are “buying” the idea that quality of life in Canada is good. Citizens have become customers, comparing communities across the country for the best lifestyle and opportunity. While it is currently the major urban centres that are attracting the lion's share of immigrants to set down roots, smaller rural communities are also competing for citizens. According to the Martin Prosperity Institute's paper *Innovation and creativity on the periphery: Challenges and opportunities in Northern Ontario*, small urban centres in Northern Ontario have what it takes to attract the “creative class” to live and work in these centres. As the authors state, “Quality of life attributes offer an alternative to ‘big-city’ living and attributes like affordability and the natural environment play a central role in this appeal.” (Hall & Donald, 2009, p. 20).

If we accept the idea that immigrants (both primary and secondary) are “customers,” then it can be argued that communities are the “merchants,” attempting to lure these customers in to their shops, selling their version of a superior quality of life. In this new creative economy, it is critical for communities to understand the needs of their customers, if they are to succeed in attracting the best and brightest.

Just what is it that these customers want? High wages are no longer the key determinant in the process of deciding where to live. Social interaction, opportunities for creative expression, a healthy environment and access to natural spaces are a few of the criteria that heavily influence this decision. For a community to compete—and win—it needs to not only develop these assets, but continuously monitor them and enhance them, utilizing a process of continuous quality improvement and reliable measurements. This is where civic indicators play a critical role in community development.

Community as a Business: A holistic view

Traditionally, it has been common practice to view communities as being comprised of various independently functioning sectors. Numerous organizations are involved in activities in such fields as economic development, health care, environmental protection, social services, education and so on. Each has its own unique mandate, strategic plan and performance indicators.

In this context, it can be difficult for economic development agencies to consider the activities of homeless shelters, for example. Homelessness and poverty are challenges addressed by the social service sector; economic development instead focuses on job creation, diversification and investment attraction. Similarly, social service agencies do not typically concern themselves with environmental degradation. Each sector understands their unique issues and concerns, and sets out to address them according to their own values, standards and intended outcomes. Other community issues are seen as externalities; in other words, they are “someone else’s business.”

The shortfall with this approach, however, is clear: these different components of community life are not independent, but are in fact interrelated. Each influences the others in myriad ways. Poverty impacts the overall health of a community, and directly effects education levels and skills of the labour market. Education institutions influence settlement patterns in communities; and the natural and built environments impact community health, industrial development and the creation of social capital.

Understanding this, it can be argued that a community is not dissimilar to a business. It has customers (citizens) that desire an end product (high quality of life). It has processes (health care, education, culture/arts, job creation, etc.) that collectively play a role in producing this end product. And each of these processes, like departments in a business, work within a common environment, connected by geography, values and goals, with the ultimate mandate of creating a community that offers everything citizens need and want, in a way that is sustainable for future generations.

In this holistic view of community development, it is easy to understand the importance of ensuring that all the various processes in a community work together in harmony. Cooperation and collaboration are embraced, resources are maximized, and the quality of work is not only regularly measured, but continuously improved upon.

The Return on Investment

Determining the return on investment of a quality assurance program in a manufacturing business is a fairly straight-forward, mathematical process. Increased sales, reduced material and labour costs, and other such metrics can be calculated to determine the impact on the bottom line. Quantitatively assessing the value of a civic indicators program to a community is far more challenging. The benefits of implementing such a program are often not realized for a number of years. More to the point, the program is not intended to provide a direct return, but instead serves as a catalyst to creating measurable progress. As such, while the indicators program can inspire action and direct resources, it cannot be solely credited for the resultant improvements.

This is essentially the crux of the matter. It becomes critically important to recognize that a civic indicators program is part of a larger process of continuous quality improvement; it is the “check” component in the “plan-do-check-act” cycle:



Of course, plans can be developed and action taken in the absence of a civic indicators program, but they will lack the holistic view of community, and the deeper knowledge of the various interrelationships that exist. Ultimately, it is this new perspective that will inform existing planning processes, and help build measurable strategies for sustainable community development projects. Furthermore, if indicators are chosen carefully and used consistently they can be used to identify which efforts are producing results, and which need to be improved or abandoned. This ability to track progress over time provides a greater return on investment in community-building efforts by directing limited funds toward successful efforts.

The bottom line is this: developing a civic indicators program requires a re-thinking of current planning processes and community development activities. It can, if used properly, be an invaluable tool for civic leaders, clarifying where the community currently is, and where it is going. Perhaps most importantly, it can connect policy-makers with the people they serve, improving transparency and accountability within the numerous organizations dedicated to improving quality of life in the community.

The Demand for Quality

The world has changed dramatically in the last fifty years. People are more mobile than ever before; communications technologies have shrunk the globe, cementing the concept of the global village. It is not unusual for individuals and families to move half way around the world in their search for the ideal community in which to live and raise a family. The Internet and other high-tech telecommunications systems enable people to live in one place and work in another. The measure of a superior quality of life today includes far more than high pay.

Declining birth rates have resulted in fierce competition for human resources among communities in Europe and North America. Ultimately, success in this competition will be achieved by those communities that address quality of life issues in a methodical way,

testing, improving and re-testing all those components that add value to the lived experience.

In the immortal words of W. Edwards Deming, “In God we trust; all others bring data.” It is common knowledge that we cannot manage what we do not measure. If a community wants to manage its ability to provide the best possible quality of life experience for its citizens, and keep and attract the best and brightest, then developing a system of continuous quality improvement is not only a good investment, it is an absolute necessity.

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