

Whistler-Mount Currie Learning Communities Project

At first glance, a booming tourist destination like Whistler might seem an unlikely community to be looking for assistance in developing an Office of Learning Technologies (OLT) project. Some of the impetus for Whistler's work in this area was provided by a village administrator who recognized how well the program description fit with his community's statement of core values. The program encourages the direct participation of Aboriginal community groups, and members of the nearby First Nations community of Mount

Currie already had initiated several efforts which would benefit from involvement in the project. In 2002, they convinced BC Transit to establish a bus route to join the two communities; increased service at off-peak hours is an issue which still needs to be resolved. They also had initiated discussions with Whistler business owners on ways to increase their representation in the resort's workforce. Mount Currie community leaders saw the OLT submission as a means to further these discussions.

All parties involved in preparing the OLT project application agreed that Mount Currie residents would benefit greatly from increased access to employment at the resort – from entry-level positions to management. Whistler businesses would, in turn, benefit from access to a larger, well-trained employee pool. Concerned that the Olympic Games in 2010 might exact heavy social costs as well as provide a financial windfall, representatives from Mount Currie and Whistler realized that the stresses and challenges posed by the Olympics offered them an opportunity to improve ties between their communities, using OLT as a springboard.

Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) created the Office of Learning Technologies (OLT) in 1996, in order to encourage innovative, technology-based learning. HRDC staff and representatives from the (then) British Columbia Ministry of Community Development, Cooperatives and Volunteers, in cooperation with community leaders, tailored an OECD model to incorporate lifelong learning concepts and lessons from the learning cities work carried out in the UK. This Caledon series of community stories profiles several communities in BC that secured OLT funds in order to strengthen and extend their community capacities to deal with socioeconomic challenges.

Whistler's history

Beginning in 1914, mountain scenery, sport fishing opportunities and a lively community quickly established Whistler's reputation as a vacation destination. The surging popularity of downhill skiing and improvements in ski lift technology led to a construction boom during the 1960s. Whistler became the first designated resort municipality in Canada in 1975 and, by 2002, the population had grown to 11,000; more than 68 percent of the population is under age 35. The town's tourism-based economy employs 30,000 people in the region and Lower Mainland of BC. Whistler contributes \$2 billion to the provincial economy each year.

Throughout its history, Whistler has attracted forward-looking entrepreneurs who saw the potential of this spectacular valley location. The community is committed to providing the type of service expected in a world-renowned, all-season resort location, and continuously seeks ways to strengthen its reputation. As the municipality's vision document states: "The health of our community depends on the economic viability of the resort. Likewise, the continuing success of the resort is only possible through the support of this strong, flourishing community... the interdependence of the community and resort business is essential" [Resort Municipality of Whistler 2002].



Whistler's planners seek to balance development with environmental stewardship.

As Whistler's reputation has grown, its view of itself has expanded beyond town limits. A member community of the Squamish-Lillooet Regional District (SLRD), Whistler representatives have been involved in developing a Regional Growth Strategy. This initiative ensures a concerted effort toward achieving goals, while recognizing the concerns and desires of each affiliate community.

Mount Currie's roots

Mount Currie is home to members of the Lil'wat First Nation, which is in turn part of the St'at'imc Nation. Over the last 30 years, the community's population has grown from fewer than 1,000 residents to more than 1,800. During that period, an influx of people back to the community and a growing number of younger families made it essential for leaders to work for improved housing, infrastructure and social services. Today, those efforts have borne fruit, and the local leadership continues to extend its relationships with nearby Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal business and community organizations. More work remains to be done on improving infrastructure and providing greater educational and employment opportunities.

This fall's flooding destroyed a number of the area's older homes. These dwellings, the gravel road which joined the older and newer sections of Mount Currie, the community's burial grounds, livestock, harvested hay and caches of frozen fish (for commercial and private use) were damaged or washed away by October's rains. Provincial disaster relief funds will be slow to arrive; help for the 300 residents made homeless by the flood has come from within the community.

"Our people pull together in this type of situation," says Christine Leo, Director of Mount Currie's Community Advancement Pro-

grams. "In many ways, we are already a good example of a learning community. Many of our existing services – Aboriginal human resources development, education and health initiatives – already have a good level of integration and cooperation. When we respond to a crisis, everyone understands that we're all involved and that we all will have to help out in some way."

Sustainability: The common thread

The issue of social, economic and environmental sustainability is vitally important to both Whistler's and Mount Currie's futures. Growth has consequences; too much human traffic can threaten the natural processes that sustain the area. John Millar, the man credited with attracting a settlement to Whistler in 1911, left for greener pastures when the rail line came to nearby Pemberton – the town had become too settled for him. Planners continually must seek to protect the area's physical beauty while managing its continued, high levels of economic growth. While the importance of both environmental and economic sustainability are well understood and addressed by a number of initiatives in the two communities, the OLT project will help strengthen the area's social fabric.

Social sustainability implies continuity of relationship and is linked with notions of social justice and social equity. Social equity means more than equal opportunity; it implies opportunities for adequate housing, health care, education, employment and mobility [Roseland 1998]. In Whistler's case, social equity is best served by partnering with nearby localities for mutual gain.

Whistler, like all resorts, attracts large numbers of seasonal employees who come to work and take advantage of the area's recreational opportunities. Due to the transient nature of this type of employment, staff turnover is

high and businesses are on a continuous cycle of hiring and training new employees. In order to manage properly this type of workforce while providing the continuity and training opportunities necessary for excellence, planners began to recognize the benefits of an improved relationship with the residents of Mount Currie. Developing a well-trained, inclusive workforce from among the residents of the nearby First Nations community also would achieve many of the goals of the SLRD Regional Growth Strategy. In addition, this work would strengthen Whistler's commitment to developing a strong, healthy community in which "...the diversity of people is celebrated, and where social interaction, recreation, culture, health services and life-long learning are accessible to all" [Resort Municipality of Whistler 2002].

Social sustainability also implies a high level of cultural and historical awareness within a community which, in turn, encourages mutual respect and appreciation. Mount Currie residents realized that increased cultural awareness within both communities would help prospective employ-

ers understand differences and accommodate needs. "We have to understand each other better if we're to make real changes in the way we interact with one another," says Christine. "Cultural education provides the mechanism to do just that. The OLT work will help to keep this objective on the front burner."

The role of Learning Communities

In late 2001, a Learning Communities submission was made to OLT by a partnership made up of the Resort Municipality of Whistler, the Mount Currie First Nations band, Capilano College, the Whistler Chamber of Commerce, School District 48 and the Whistler Public Library. Millennium Place, an arts and culture and youth gathering place, joined the partnership after the initial submission was made. Stephanie Wells was the Director of Training at the Chamber of Commerce. She assisted in developing the OLT submission and is now managing the Whistler-Mount Currie Learning Communities Project on



Mount Currie's Xit'olacw Community School.

behalf of the partner organizations. Work officially began in the spring of 2003.

To date, the project has created a website within the Whistler Chamber of Commerce site, established a community hub on the website which acts as the local clearinghouse for skills and training opportunities, and begun developing workforce training components with representatives from Mount Currie. These have included résumé writing and interview presentations; a mentorship program is now in the planning stages. “Grooming people for management positions is much different from offering them minimum wage jobs, especially when transportation costs are figured in,” says Christine. “We’re looking at our population to identify strong candidates and employers are now beginning to consider which jobs they can turn into mentorship opportunities.”

Improvements to the local transportation system must still be made. “In the past, it was difficult for people from Mount Currie to get to Whistler unless they owned a vehicle,” says Stephanie Wells. “Now that the band has secured bus service to join the two towns, we can work together to improve off-hours service to better meet the transportation needs of shift employees.”

Construction will begin in April 2004 on a First Nations Cultural Centre in Whistler, and First Nations leaders hope that their people will be well represented in the crew that builds, and later staffs, the facility. Some 20 full-time and 15 additional peak season jobs will be created when the centre is opened. For the residents of Mount Currie, these jobs prospects promise a brighter future.

Though not originally outlined in the OLT proposal, another project is in the works that will provide continuous feedback about community initiatives as well as direction for future

work. The Whistler Chamber of Commerce will introduce community value cards for residents in April 2004. These are essentially loyalty cards which will support area businesses by encouraging residents to shop locally. Each card has an annual purchase fee of \$40, and residents are required to fill out an online survey at the time of purchase. The surveys will be designed and modified annually by the Learning Communities partners as a way of guiding strategic planning. “We’re looking at new ways of conducting community consultation,” says Stephanie. “Traditional community meetings usually are attended by a small number of people, so we’re hoping that this initiative will attract a broader representation of community opinion and encourage people to become more active in community affairs.”

Another creative way of reading the community pulse is through a learning circle now conducted by resident William Roberts. Director of the Whistler Forum for Innovation through Dialogue,¹ William collects information on community and social issues, sends it out to his e-mail subscriber’s list and then facilitates a discussion or ‘Dialogue Café.’ These discussions take place at different venues throughout Whistler. Stephanie is interested in finding ways of applying the forum’s process to Learning Communities communications work, perhaps by developing it into an on-line learning circle. In addition, work is moving ahead to use the Internet to deliver more distance education courses from universities in Vancouver.

Ongoing evaluation of Learning Communities work will be conducted by Bernie Lalor-Morton. Her first evaluation report will be presented in March 2004.

Says Stephanie: “Though we might not fit the typical profile of a Learning Communities initiative, Whistler-Mount Currie is a good

example of how the unique features of an area shape the types of programs that are needed to allow for healthy growth.”

The high-octane excitement that will carry Whistler-Mount Currie forward to 2010 already has permeated every aspect of life in the area, and there is pride in the commitment to making these the biggest, most sustainable Olympic Games ever. The commitment to ensuring a healthy community after the games finish is equally evident, as the Learning Communities’ plans and programs testify.

Anne Makhoul

Anne Makhoul coordinates the ‘community stories’ series for the Caledon Institute of Social Policy.

Stephanie Wells can be contacted at (604)932-5922, ext. 34. The Chamber of Commerce website with Learning Community links is: www.whistlerchamberofcommerce.com

Christine Leo, Director of Community Advancement Programs, Mount Currie, can be reached at (604)894-1733 or by e-mail at: cleo@whistlerweb.com

Endnote

1. The recently established Whistler Forum for Innovation through Dialogue is building on the experiences and successes of the Whistler Centre for Business and the Arts, which is developing partnerships with Simon Fraser University’s Centre for Dialogue and the Aspen Institute. Forum members currently are developing a three-year business plan which will focus on the promotion of lifelong learning and programs designed to enhance citizenship, democracy and social capital. The forum’s e-mail address is whistlerforum@whooshnet.com.

References

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1600 Scott Street, Suite 620
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1Y 4N7
Phone: (613) 729-3340
Fax: (613) 729-3896
E-mail: caledon@caledoninst.org
Website: www.caledoninst.org