

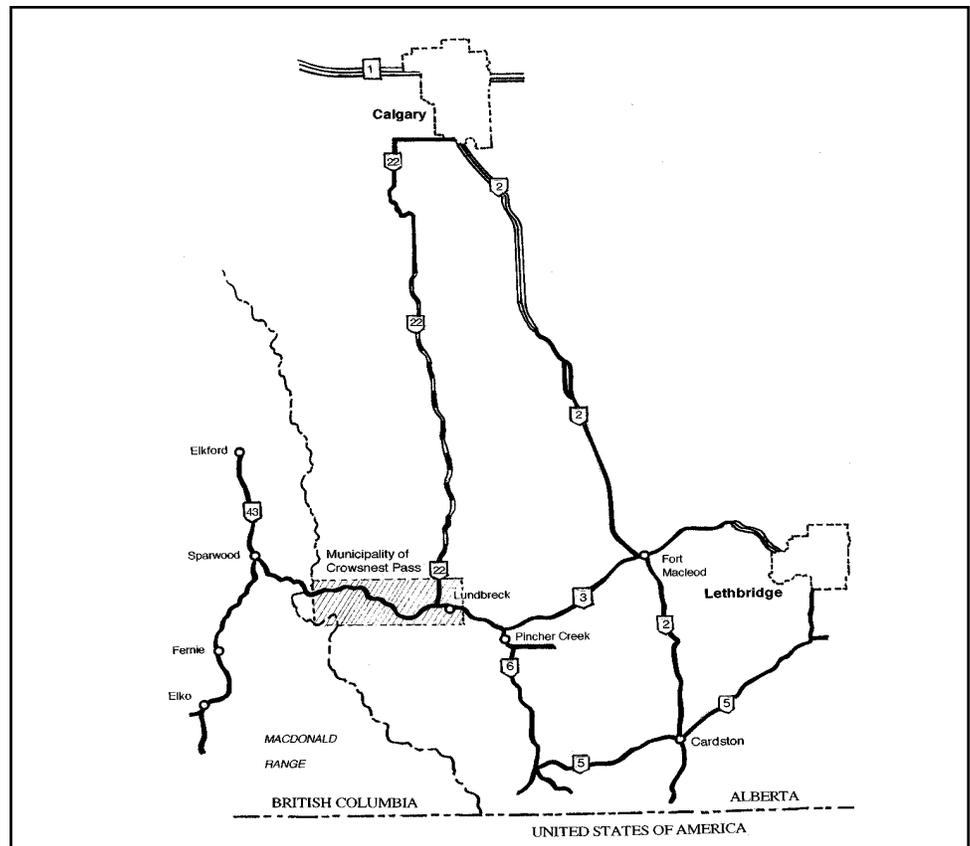
# Community Economic Development in the Crowsnest Pass 1985 - 1996

Faculty of Environmental Design • The University of Calgary

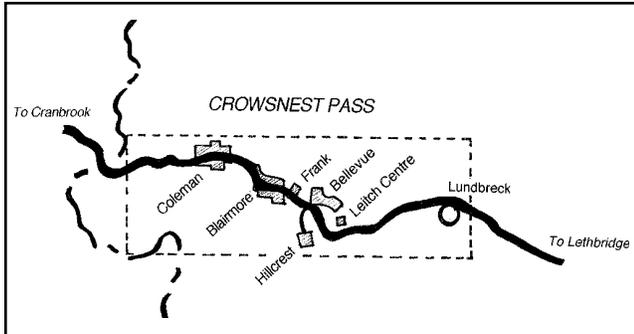
*Community Economic Development is the process by which communities can initiate and generate their own solutions to their common economic problems and thereby build long-term community capacity and foster the integration of economic, social, and environmental objectives. In this regard, the Faculty of Environmental Design at The University of Calgary has been working in partnership with the Municipality of the Crowsnest Pass (the Pass) since 1985. The partners have designed and developed a number of initiatives that have helped promote sustainable community economic development in the region. Capitalizing on the unique history, resources, and landscape of the Pass, projects have provided a renewed sense of hope for a community that has experienced economic difficulties. This case study reflects on the continuing development of a strong institutional-community relationship and the joint learning benefits that have resulted from it.*

## Introduction

The Municipality of the Crowsnest Pass (the Pass) is located in Southwestern Alberta. Extending from Lundbreck, Alberta in the east, and crossing the border to Elko, B.C. in the west, the Pass lies 269 kilometers southwest of Calgary and 125 kilometers due west of Lethbridge.



The arrival of the railway in 1898 was one of the most significant events in the history of the Pass, since it made possible viable coal mining activity. While ten communities developed over a distance of 14 miles, only five survive today, namely, Coleman, Blairmore, Hillcrest, Frank, and Bellevue.



The economy of the Pass has undoubtedly reflected the state of the coal industry in North America and its fluctuations over the course of time. Economic trends, world wars, and an unpredictable demand for coal have long affected the lifestyles of the people living in the Pass. The collapse of the coal industry began in 1950, culminating with the closing of the last operating mine on the Alberta side of the Pass in 1983. The economic and psychological impacts were devastating. It has been reported that the community has lost as many jobs since 1980 as there are people presently working. There are a number of examples that emphasize this job loss. When Coleman Collieries, the last operating coal mine closed in 1982, four hundred employees lost jobs. In 1985 a large cable manufacturer closed down and moved to Saskatoon, letting go of 260 employees. At one time they had about 440 employees.

**Planning and Design Issues:**

The five surviving communities in the Pass were amalgamated in 1979 to form one single municipality called the Crowsnest Pass. The amalgamation of the communities occurred as the mining industry declined and the cost of maintaining extensive facilities started to bankrupt the community. There were schools in almost every one of the communities, three arenas, and three curling rinks for less than 7,000 people. The issues of trying to afford these community services became more and more pressing over time.

Conversely, the Pass community profile is interesting in that an Economic Development Board has been operating since 1980, and works closely with

people involved in education and community services, local politicians, women’s groups, business persons, recreationalists, the local historical society, community associations, and service clubs. It was the first community in Alberta to produce a Tourism Action Plan, and to introduce management and service improvement training for the local hospitality industry. They have hosted a Commonwealth Winter Games and many provincially - or regionally - based cultural festivals and sporting events. The Pass also has a number of cultural and natural resources which provide an opportunity for significant tourism development.

**Central Problem or Opportunity:**

The problems that faced the Crowsnest Pass ten years ago were similar in part to those of many rural communities:

- declining economic structure,
- loss of jobs,
- young people leaving the community,
- a poor quality physical environment,
- strained municipal services,
- little awareness of what could be done,
- little sense of the power to change conditions.

The Pass also had considerable opportunities and assets:

- a cultural heritage with cultural tourism potential,
- a unique natural environment with significant tourism and recreational value,
- a hardworking population,
- a good inventory of municipal facilities,
- strong leadership.



*View of the Crowsnest Pass*

## Actors and Stakeholders:

There have been a wide number of actors in the revitalization of the Crowsnest Pass. They include:

- Alberta Culture (now Alberta Community Development) which initiated some of the first revitalization efforts,
- Cliff Reiling, the Economic Development Coordinator, who has played a pivotal community role and has been responsible for the Community Futures Program,
- The Economic Development Board,
- The Ecomuseum Trust,
- The Main Street Programme,
- Faculty members and students from the Faculty of Environmental Design at The University of Calgary,
- Staff from Alberta Economic Development and Tourism,
- Several mayors and council members,
- The Crowsnest Pass Chamber of Commerce.

The process of community economic development has brought these actors together in different forms throughout the ongoing planning and development process. The composition of decision-makers were made up of community members, employees, politicians, and volunteers. The provincial and municipal governments played an initiating and supporting role in helping community members to achieve objectives, while others provided a funding role. The Faculty of Environmental Design at The University of Calgary has provided assistance in the form of sweat equity, conducting studies, and providing ongoing support and advice.

## Planning Objectives:

There have been a number of objectives operating in the community:

- the creation of employment,
- the development of opportunities for small business creation,
- the generation of economic development,
- ensuring the ongoing quality of the school system,
- keeping taxes down,
- providing employment opportunities for youth in order to allow high school graduates to remain in the community,
- ensuring the preservation and enhancement of cultural resources,
- maintaining the environmental quality of the area.

## Options for Action

In order to ensure that the objectives of the community were to be met, a number of plans and strategies were employed. Some of these strategies and approaches were:

- The opening of the Frank Slide Interpretive Centre and Leitch Collieries by the Alberta Government in 1985. Over 100,000 people per year visit the Centre.
- The development of a Community Tourism Action Plan by the Community in 1986.
- The initiation of the Community Futures Committee by the Community and the Federal Government in 1988.
- The development of the Ecomuseum Plan by the Provincial Government, The University of Calgary, and Community in 1988. As recommended by the Plan, an Ecomuseum Trust was established. The Trust is responsible for the implementation of the Plan.
- The development of the 1988 Strategic Planning Exercise by the Community and The University of Calgary.
- The development of a plan for the reuse of the old, abandoned hospital into a training centre called the Crowsnest Centre, by the Community and The University of Calgary. The plan has been realized and the Centre has been operating for a number of years.



*Suggested scheme for historic area design*

Bela Syal

- A major reclamation project of Blairmore coal piles was carried out by the Government in 1988.
- The Community and The University of Calgary carried out a major marketplace development study in 1992 aimed at stemming trade leakage. The lessons learned from this process enabled the reduction of this leakage as well as encouraging business development opportunities. In 1994, the Crowsnest Pass had the second largest number of small business starts per capita in the Province of Alberta.
- As recommended by the Ecomuseum Plan, the Bellevue Mine site was restored and reopened for mine tours. The process began in 1993. The work was carried out by the Ecomuseum Trust.
- The Tecumseh Guest Ranch was renovated by a private sector investor in 1994.

- A 1,200 kilometer snowmobile network of trails was put into place by the Community in 1994.
- The Crowsnest Pass: Corridor Area Tourism Strategy was prepared by the Community and The University of Calgary in 1994.
- A new subdivision began in Blairmore in 1994.
- An Ecobusiness Strategic Plan was developed in 1994 by the Community and The University of Calgary.
- The back nine holes of the golf course were put into operation in 1995.

When one considers the state and size of this community, this level of activity is very impressive.

### Project Development Examples:

Five interlocking projects began in 1986-88 after the initial work in the Pass by the Faculty of Environmental Design. These were an Ecomuseum, Main Street Programme, the introduction of education and training programs, the creation of the business development centre, and tourism marketing campaign. All had been determined through a “strategic development options” exercise. Two notable projects provided different organizational and planning frameworks and are presented below:

#### a) Developing the Ecomuseum in the Pass

Ecomuseums by definition are “open-air” museums, bringing together the traditional concepts of collecting, preserving, studying, and exhibiting, merged with the notion of a living place or household. Within the Ecomuseum built and natural environments, the economy, social life, technology, and cultural patterns are presented and interpreted. The ecomuseum can be seen as:

- an expression of time,
- an interpretation of space,
- special places in which to stop and stroll,
- a laboratory, given that it contributes to the study of the past and the present of the population concerned and its environment,
- a conservation centre, as it helps to preserve and develop the natural and cultural heritage of the population,
- a school, as it involves the population and the visitor in its work of study and protection.

In the case of the Pass, the approach used placed emphasis on multidis-

ciplinary planning involving the interpretation of heritage, the restoration of infrastructure and the environment, and numerous community economic development approaches. A number of techniques and approaches were employed; industrial archaeology, Main Street Programme initiatives and the concept of historic districts. These approaches employed various methods of preservation such as the rehabilitation of historic resources, public improvements, marketing and promotion strategies, festival and events planning, business recruitment, hospitality training and the improvement of visitor services (eating, accommodation, and shopping).

The focal points were the Frank Slide Interpretive Centre responsible for the interpretation of the catastrophic landslide of 1907; the historic structures of Blairmore and Coleman; the Leitch Collieries (coal refinery); Hillcrest Cemetery; and the Ecomuseum’s initial venture, the restoration of the Bellevue Mine to develop underground tours. Closed in 1962, this former coal mine had been in operation since 1904, and at its peak employed 500 men. Visitors now don a miner’s helmet and lamp, strap on a battery pack, then follow guides down 1,200 feet of tunnel through the steeply pitching coal seam. Some 12,000 visitors toured the mine in 1990-91 and visitation was up 25% in 1992. The Bellevue Mine has continued to enjoy modest visitor increases, thereby contributing to the growth of tourism in the Pass.

The Ecomuseum has been commemorated by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada for its national historical significance and the Pass holds the distinction of being designated the first Historic District in the Province.



*Rehabilitated Main Street building in Bellevue*



*Rehabilitated building in Coleman*

#### **b) Strategic planning to establish an Adult Recreational Learning Centre**

The Blairmore Hospital, erected in the 1940s, was abandoned along with an attached nursing home, in the early 1980s. The combined floor space of the two buildings was 58,000 square feet, in a small town that was already well endowed with empty commercial buildings, under used school space, and derelict land sites. The Municipality's dilemma was rather typical in community development planning: short range management versus strategic thinking. With no ready demand for the building space and well-equipped residential facilities, prudent management would suggest that the Municipality "cut their losses," rid themselves of a political embarrassment, and try to sell off the hospital property.

Some members of the community rejected the idea of demolition, and after considering a number of options, decided that turning the hospital into an educational facility would be an appropriate option. The key concern in this case was to formulate a plan that would make the Learning Centre economically sustainable. Strategic thinking suggested a process that considered:

- the idea for the centre,
- the market potential and conditions for an educational facility,
- the architectural qualities of the buildings and the operational needs and conditions of a residential educational facility, and
- an organizational model.

By working with community groups and individuals and through research of similar revitalization projects in

North America, the Crowsnest Pass Adult Learning Resource Centre (ALReC) concept came into being. It was developed around the idea of creating a multi-purpose community development centre for learning, training, health, and human development which would:

- create a place, facilities, and services that could become a resource centre for any organization that wants to provide learning activities in a residential setting,
- generate employment and visitor spending in the community,
- create a community initiatives indicator,
- preserve and develop municipal assets to economic advantage.

It was suggested that the two structures could be used for purposes such as residential adult education, a hostel, business and management workshops, community archives and library, and cultural and arts programs.

It was considered significant that planning, implementation, and ongoing management must be placed in the hands of the community to ensure self reliance. In 1990, the ALReC concept - program, organization, architecture, and building restoration development - had been adopted by the Municipal Corporation, Economic Development Board, and Educational Consortium. Prior to moving toward the next stage of in-depth market research, building feasibility assessments and employment estimates were carried out. This process determined that such a centre would be feasible. As a consequence, the Crowsnest Centre was opened in 1992 and has been operating within its stated objectives ever since.

#### **Lessons Learned:**

The notion of achieving social and economic goals was seen as important from the very beginning with The University of Calgary helping to ensure that community economic development principles were in the forefront.

The benefits described earlier clearly point to a success story. Without a community based approach to dealing with the problems in the Pass, there would not be the success that can be observed; jobs provided, confidence raised, heritage resources preserved, and new business started.

It should be recognized, however, that deciding on community priorities is difficult due to the lack of a common community vision that all interest groups need to "buy into". As well, decades-long enmity between communities are not easy to resolve.

The Crowsnest Pass exhibits many of the important characteristics of partnering. The community has demonstrated a considerable ability and willingness to experiment and try new approaches to community economic development. It has always looked for innovative approaches as well as dealing with root causes. The community was one of the first to commission an import replacement study, knew when to involve experts, and when to trust in its own resources. It is too early to assess long term success but all indications point to a better quality of life in the community.

### Further Reading:

A number of articles have been produced on the Crowsnest Pass development experience. A sample list follows:

Heritage Canada. New Life for Rural Regions: Taking a Heritage Approach. Ottawa: Heritage Canada, 1995.

Jamieson, Walter. "An Ecomuseum for the Crowsnest Pass: Using Cultural Resources as a Tool for Community and Local Economic Development," Plan Canada, September, 1989.

Jamieson, Walter, MacDonald, Neil, and William T. Perks. "The Crowsnest Pass: Directions for the Future," Alberta Journal of Planning Practice, 1988.

Jamieson, Walter and Bela Syal. "An Ecomuseum for the Crowsnest Pass: Using Historic Resources as a Means of Economic Development." Planning in the West: Canadian and American Perspectives in the West, T.L. Harper (ed.). Calgary: Faculty of Environmental Design, The University of Calgary, 1988.

Jamieson et al. A Development Strategy for an Ecomuseum in the Crowsnest Pass, Alberta Culture, March 1987.

Jamieson et al. Feasibility Study for an Historic Area: Coleman, Alberta for Alberta Culture, 1985-86.

Perks, W.T. "Community Development and Strategic Thinking in the Crowsnest Pass," Plan Canada, 1990.

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