

Best Practice

A New Attitude: Run the Town like a Business

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THE PRACTICE

Over the past few years there had been very little growth in Battleford and area. Modest growth was realized as far as new homes but an actual drop in population was noted in the last census. A new mandate for council was brought forward with municipal elections taking place in November 2006.

THE PROCESS

A new mayor and three new councillors were elected on the mandate of change. The one election promise everyone was looking forward to was no tax increases for the full three year term but also the promise of making the community a better place to live, which included the opportunity to work, play and raise a family.

Early into the new mandate, the mayor and council attended a sustainability conference, sponsored by the Saskatchewan Urban Municipalities Association (SUMA). A second provincial conference was hosted by the Town of Battleford in November of 2007, where Mayor Chris Odishaw opened with his vision for sustainable development in Battleford. Entitled "Past, Present and For the Future," it marked the first time that this vision was shared outside the community. Sustainability was quickly becoming one of the fundamentals of council and items from water conserving toilets to energy audits, recycling and retrofits to development agreements became common place.

The new council had to act quickly and used the land and development committee that included all six councillors and the mayor to make some decisions. A plan with the Ministry of Highways was quickly signed and a new residential subdivision that had been contemplated was upgraded to include not only cul-de-sacs and unique design, but also "view" lots that included walkouts and lots that opened to large park and green areas. The land and development committee even worked with the town engineer to develop more pleasing landscapes by doing some major excavations. Several land deals were quickly closed with developers and council employed local real estate agents to sell every in-fill lot and vacant building that was town owned. The interest and excitement was building.

The first ever lot draw in the town was a huge success and using a policy of one year to begin building, shovels starting hitting the dirt. The town subdivision was complimented by a local developer offering more lots and eventually leading to another developer from Alberta (who had purchased some commercial land) taking an interest in a residential subdivision.

THE RESULTS

The results to date have been:

- Population growth;
- Increases in assessment;
- A lack of vacant properties and visible changes to the landscapes;
- New subdivisions and new businesses;
- Increases in building permit numbers and an increased tax role are only a few of the specific measurable outcomes.

Building permit numbers show totals of \$10,728,331 for 71 permits in 2008 and \$9,327,999 for 63 permits in 2007, the first two years of this council's mandate.

LESSONS LEARNED

The lesson learned is that municipal government must be active in shaping their own future. Municipalities should not look to higher levels of government to set an example or to lead growth. Why should a council of a town not have the same vision as a business owner? Entrepreneurs are well known for their ability to react to the changing needs of their customers, always searching for new opportunities for success. Friendly competition and a "raising of the bar" is good for every other sector, why not municipal government?