

Saskatchewan Municipal

Best Practice

Sacichawasihc Relationship Agreement

CONTACT

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THE PRACTICE

The project was initiated as a response to consistently high crime rates within the Battlefords region and a desire to address the systemic causes of them. This included (but were not limited to) racism, poverty, addictions, food security, and mental illnesses. These issues are far too large in scope for a single Municipal or Indigenous Government to deal with on their own, nor do they have the authority to address issues as many are the purview of the Provincial and Federal Governments. Eventually it became clear that systemic change was required and that this could only be accomplished by aligning the four orders of Government: Federal, Indigenous, Provincial, and Municipal.

Further, it was recognized that these issues impact entire regions. Concerns like economic development, growth, social issues, crime and other areas of mutual interest to the regional partnership are areas where no single community can operate as effectively as the region when it works together.

The Sacichawasihc Relationship Agreement provides a way for Indigenous and Municipal Governments to work together in a spirit of reconciliation and collaboration. It goes beyond working together based on personal connections and creates a framework that can flourish even while leadership and personal connections change in the various governments.

Specifically, the framework:

Set a strong foundation for the Parties to establish and maintain co-operative government-to-government relationships.

Develop a forum for meaningful, effective and transparent communication on all issues of mutual interest.

Establish government-to-government committees comprised of political appointees and staff to foster health, growth and well-being of the residents in the Regional Community of the Battlefords.

Establish government-to-government committees comprised of elected or appointed officials and staff to ensure the socio-economic sustainability and vibrancy of the regional community.

THE PROCESS

Although the project formally started with the City of North Battleford's Mayor and Council, it quickly grew to be a collaboration of Chiefs, Mayors, Elders and administrative support staff who worked together to find an approach to work on issues that are regional in scope.

Initially the Mayor of the City of North Battleford invited the Chiefs of the neighbouring Indigenous governments and the Mayor of the Town of Battleford to a meeting to determine if there was an interest in regional cooperation. The City provided support staff for the project and sought federal funding for a consultant that would work with all parties to develop an understanding of how each might wish to participate.

After the initial meeting three Indigenous Governments and the City of North Battleford agreed to develop a process of cooperation and collaboration. This led to subsequent meetings to further develop a Framework, and over the course of a year the Town of Battleford and two additional Indigenous Governments joined the discussions. The project became a project owned by the participants, not a single Municipal or Indigenous Government. Leadership moved as needed and each of the participants worked in the spirit of reconciliation to rebuild a sustainable and formal approach to working together.

The work was shared among the participants. For example, although the City of North Battleford provided administrative and support functions for meetings, numerous Elders, Council members and Band Council members participated in the meetings leading up to the development of the Agreement. The Agreement was written by a volunteer Elder and a Municipal Administrator who developed the Framework based on the conversations that had occurred and presented the agreement to the Chiefs and Mayors for consideration.

The resources involved included Chiefs and Mayors from the partner communities, Elders from the Indigenous communities and varying Band Council members and Municipal Council members. In addition, a consultant was hired to arrange and facilitate in the meetings. The City of North Battleford supplied a resource person to assist with the meetings and the two municipalities involved their senior administrators on the project.

What makes this project unique is the way in which it developed. The City of North Battleford, although it started the process, had no desire to create a traditional top down project. Instead, the initial meetings were done without traditionally prescriptive agendas. Although it takes a bit longer to create meetings that are fully collaborative, the process paid off with an Agreement that was respectful of the local Indigenous cultures and practices and became a learning experience for all the governments involved. The municipalities had to gain a better understanding of the issues, authorities and processes that the Indigenous communities employed, and the Indigenous governments had to understand the limits of Municipal governments. The agreement also allows for other Municipalities and Indigenous governments in the region to join and to work on issues including:

- a. Intergovernmental relationships
- b. Cultural prosperity
- c. Collaborative economic development
- d. Collaborative land use planning
- e. Social enhancement – for example housing, health and wellness, poverty reduction and community safety
- f. Environmental stewardship and climate change
- g. Service utilization and agreements
- h. Infrastructure development
- i. Joint advocacy on regional issues
- i. Education and training

THE RESULTS

Over the short-term, this project brought the region together during a time of strong racial tension and division. It provided a chance for regional leaders to get together and talk about their issues and gain better understanding of the other leaders and governments. In the long run, common issues have a place where they can be discussed, but more importantly worked on with the full backing of the Governments within the Battlefords Region. It is hoped that in the near future the Provincial and Federal Governments can be engaged into the discussions of the partners.

The project has not had a formal evaluation. A formal evaluation would be of little value for the first few years of the agreement.¹⁰ The biggest challenge was to build trust and to understand the issues faced by the other governments, dealing with cultural differences, and moving from being friends and acquaintances to developing a Framework that is designed to outlast those who participated.

LESSONS LEARNED

Likely nothing would be done differently, but potential partners need to all understand that it will take time to deeply understand the issues, the cultural difference, the differing powers and connections of other government types (Indigenous as compared to Municipal). The region has a long history together which has featured significant issues over time. We operate with different authorities (Treaties vs Provincial Acts) but we share many things in common. This process takes far more time than might be assumed from a municipal viewpoint. To truly work cooperatively requires that the partners become comfortable with and trust each other and that no partner takes the

lead, rather leadership moves as needed and each party works toward respecting the other party as a regional participant who is willing to help the other.