

# What is an ideal community?

## FOUR PERSPECTIVES

**W**hat does an ideal community look like? Does it have enough adequate housing? Does it have a lot of support services? Do people feel respected, heard and understood? It turns out an “ideal” community needs all those things and quite a few more. A plenary session at the recent AMM annual convention offered the opinions of a number of people representing a variety of demographic groups to help us answer this question. The perspectives given were those of:

- New Manitobans
- Older Manitobans
- Young Manitobans
- Manitobans with Disabilities

The moderator of the session was AMM Past-President **Ron Bell**, Mayor of the Town of Birtle.

### YOUNG MANITOBAN PERSPECTIVE

**Wayne Kelly** is a student and practitioner of community development and a champion for youth leadership at local, provincial, and national levels.

Kelly noted that the first step in defining what youth want is defining who youth *are*. Youth today are made up of 15-30 or 35 year olds, not the 15-20 year olds of days gone by. These youth represent 20-25% of Manitoba’s population, or 230,000 people across the province.

Youth are the future of communities and it is important to remember they are future community members, so the community of the future has to be better for the people that are young today. Youth are our future taxpayers, our future business owners, our future mayors, reeves and councilors – and you don’t want them leaving your community tomorrow.

As a youth growing up in rural Manitoba, Kelly drew from his own experience in describing why youth leave communities. Understanding what youth think about the community BEFORE they leave is very important and very instrumental in getting them back. “If youth feel the community was a positive place, one in which they were welcomed, they will want to return. If it was a place where they felt excluded, not heard, not respected, or

treated as a “problem” they will not want to return,” he explained.

Kelly stressed that generally youth want the same thing everyone else wants – economic opportunities, employment opportunities, vacation opportunities, recreation opportunities. But the million dollar question is what *type* of opportunities? And the easiest way to find this out is to ask them. He suggested using surveys, questionnaires, focus groups, invitations to council meetings, or simply asking your sons and daughters and their friends what they would like in their community and to identify what things will make their community a place they would like to live in long term.

### THE 10 ELEMENTS

There are 10 interrelated elements that make up livable and inclusive communities.

- Health & well-being
- Support services
- Leisure/recreation
- Spiritual/cultural
- Education/training
- Employment/jobs
- Outdoor environment
- Housing
- Transportation
- Volunteerism

*Canadian Centre  
for Disability Studies*

Kelly also pointed out that when trying to engage youth, having one youth council member or representative is a great start – but it is not enough. Remember that youth represent one quarter of the population, and that is a good target to shoot for. Kelly asked the audience, “wouldn’t it be great in a few years to see 25% of the people in the AMM delegate body represented by people under 30?”

Finally, Kelly mentioned youth complain a great deal about “tokenism” – being allowed to say their piece and then sitting down and nothing further happens. Stressing development, planning, and commun-

ity-building are skills that take time to build, Kelly explained youth sometimes put forth ideas that may not be realistic. However, it is up to community leaders and those trying to engage youth to take the time to explain the planning process, how decisions are made, how projects are chosen. Not all ideas will be appropriate for the community, but helping youth figure out which ones ARE will go a long way to engaging youth now and into the future. As Kelly stressed, working together and including their ideas and opinions – “not on behalf of them, not for them...but with them” – is the key.

### MANITOBANS WITH DISABILITIES PERSPECTIVE

**Dr. Olga Krassioukova-Enns** and **Laura Rempel** are with the Canadian Centre on Disability Studies. Their focus is on livable and inclusive communities, visitable housing and aging with disabilities.

Dr. Krassioukova-Enns began by pointing out that every age group in every generation has the same desire – to have a high quality of life; access to environmental, cultural, and human resources; a broad range of opportunities; be involved in planning; and to feel safe. They want to live in a place that fosters good schools, housing, public transit, and jobs.

These desires are not only for people with disabilities, not only for people who are aging, and not only for young people. But at some point in our lives it becomes more important to us as we lose the capacity to be included.

Dr. Krassioukova-Enns stressed we will all experience at least temporary or partial disability at some point in our life. In fact, by 2010, Baby Boomers will spark 1.4 million increase in the number of working age Canadians with some form of disability. Currently, 4.4 million (14%) of people have disabilities. The incidence of disability increases with age, and 1.75 million (43%) of persons with disabilities in Canada are 65 yrs or older. Because the percentage of the 65+ age group is growing (estimated to be 23% by 2041), the percentage of persons with disabilities is growing, too.

Persons with disabilities face a number of issues, including social isolation, income and housing issues, transportation issues,



inadequate design of products and services, and attitudinal issues, among others.

Dr. Krassioukova-Enns and Ms. Rempel stressed the importance of livable communities and how visitable housing fits into this concept, explaining the concept of “livability” as inclusion, diversity and social and environmental sustainability for all generations. Some of the things that make a community livable are access to appropriate housing, housing, transportation and support services; connection to family and friends; public spaces; and recreation and cultural services.

Dr. Krassioukova-Enns pointed out that, when you visit a neighbour’s house, you need to be able to do several things to consider the home “visitable.” You need to get in the door, first of all. You need to be able to visit your friends or family and share a meal. And finally – “you have to pee!” Zero step entrances, wider doors at entrances and bathrooms, and a bathroom on the main floor are all things that make a home “visitable” by all persons.

Promoting visitable housing also keeps people in their homes longer. This has many benefits including an increase

in social inclusion, economic stability through aging in place (not needing to move to institutions), better health, and added value to homes. In other words, it benefits everyone: friends and family, seniors, and youth.

For more information on visitable housing, see the article *Visitable Housing towards Livable and Inclusive Communities* in this issue.

#### NEW MANITOBAN PERSPECTIVE

**Mamadou Ka** is the Vice-Chair of the Manitoba Ethnocultural Advisory and Advocacy Council and Vice-President of the AFMM, the organization representing new Manitobans from a francophone background.

Mr. Ka described immigration as “something in Canada which nobody can deny.” Over the past three years, Manitoba has welcomed almost 10,000 immigrants and it is projected that we will see 20,000 immigrants per year by 2015 or 2020. “So we can’t close our eyes right now,” Ka explained.

Using Winkler, Morden, and Steinbach as examples of communities with high numbers of immigrants settling

and trying to find jobs, Ka explained there are five important factors that need to be understood to assist new immigrants in a community. One of the first factors, not surprisingly, is finding employment. The second factor is offering an EAL (English as an Additional Language) program, and the third is affordable housing for new immigrants.

While jobs, housing, and language barriers may be three initial difficulties that municipalities can assist new immigrants with, the situation is far from simple, according to Ka.

Pointing out that immigrants generally live below the poverty line, he also explained that when refugees come to Canada, they are required to pay back the funds for their plane tickets. So many people find themselves working at a minimum wage job, taking care of their families, and trying to pay back the government for their plane ticket, which all add up to a very difficult financial situation. “What this means is that immigrants that come to Canada are generally going to be poor for the first 5-10 years,” said Ka.

This factor creates another problem in immigrant families. Ka noted that the fourth factor for new Manitobans is employment, training and programs for 12-16 year olds. This demographic is the age group most vulnerable to gang recruitments. Young people coming from African countries like Somalia and Sudan have parents who are working night and day to support their families and pay their bills, and their children are being recruited into gangs. Ka described this as one of downtown Winnipeg’s biggest problems.

“One of the things any municipality should think about is programs for 12-16 year olds, and developing social sup-

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port for these children,” said Ka, noting that jobs are not enough. There are many immigrants that come to Canada from war afflicted areas, and often these refugees are suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome.

“You can’t just accept people to Canada and give them housing and food. Those people, most of the time, have seen unimaginable things. One of the things nobody should expect is to see those kids integrate easily. We need to help them. They need those supports.”

### OLDER MANITOBAN PERSPECTIVE

**Connie Newman** is Executive Director of the Manitoba Association of Multi-Purpose Senior Centres. She also proudly told the audience, “I’m involved with skateboarding, and I’m 61 years old and loving it!”

Newman began by stating, “What do we want as we age? We want independence. Independence, independence, and independence!”

Quoting an advocate for seniors, Newman explained some of the things each of us can expect as we age. “Aging is a journey that awaits each of us. We will age and our senses may fail us – a hearing loss, a puzzling change in our taste buds, a need for reading glasses, a sensitivity to textures and to temperatures. We will age and our senses will still delight in the sounds, colours and textures in the world around us.”

According to Newman, by 2015 there will be more seniors 65 years and older than there will be 9-14 year olds. “For the first time in history, we as seniors are going to dominate the population.” She then asked:



Plenary session participants included (L-R) Connie Newman, Wayne Kelly, Mamadou Ka, Moderator Ron Bell, Dr. Olga Krassioukova-Enns, and Laura Rempel.

“What will that do to your community, city, town, village or RM? Are you ready for the changing demographic in your area?”

Because transportation is very important for seniors, Newman stressed the importance of Handivans and told the audience: “This is something municipalities have to think about.” As well, wheelchairs, walkers and scooters are common forms of transportation for not only seniors but others and are being used on busy streets, causing safety issues. “I’ve been in contact with at least five communities in Manitoba where this has become an issue,” she noted.

Access to public buildings is also important. Doors must be wide enough for walkers and wheelchairs. Staying physically active is also important. In cold weather, seniors need access to indoor programs. They need to know how to get there. They need access to medical services, and may need transportation to doctor appoint-

ments. As Newman put it, “As seniors, we want to continue to do it all, for ourselves, for as long as we can”.

Aging in place is important, as most people feel the same way – “I want to stay in my own home as long as possible.” They need to be able to hire local businesses for repairs and yard work at a reasonable cost. On the other hand, if their families are not nearby, some seniors experience isolation. They need access to assisted living units. Older Adults/seniors want safe, affordable housing with additional supports.

These are just some of the issues seniors have, and that we will ALL have as we age. Newman suggested a good starting point for councils is to look at the priorities of local age-friendly groups and commit to work together. After all, most seniors want the same thing: “They want to stay in their own community”. ■

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