First Nations Community Planning Model

Few people would argue that community planning is easy. But one only has to read between the lines of the First Nations Community Planning Model to see how extraordinarily difficult it is. To engage hard-pressed communities, such as those of Atlantic Canada's first nations, in a truly participatory process that helps them seize control of their futures requires great skill, intelligence and perseverance.

In a foreword to the First Nations Model, Frank Palermo, who directed its production, describes just a few of the obstacles: "There isn't enough time; there aren't enough resources; it's not considered important…but the most significant barrier is that many communities don't know the difference it makes and don't often understand how to do it." It is this last difficulty that the First Nations Model sets out most directly to address.

The model emerged from an initiative of the Wagmatcook First Nation and the Joint Community Planning Committee (JCPC), a group that combines first-nation representatives with representatives of Canadian federal departments. According to Palermo, "rather than continuously reacting to government programs and day-to-day crises," first-nations individuals came to the committee seeking help in developing a more forward-thinking way to manage development issues.

On one level, then, the model addresses the need to improve the effectiveness of Canadian-government development programs. As a model, it attempts to do this by establishing a replicable framework for action beneficial to both funding agencies and first-nation recipients. But to see this as all that is involved would be to miss its potentially much greater impact, Palermo says.

First-nation communities in Canada suffer from many of the same problems as their counterparts in the U.S. Among these are untreated health problems such as diabetes and drug and alcohol abuse, poor housing and infrastructure, high dropout and suicide rates, and unemployment. A sense of hopelessness is further fostered by an all-too-apparent disconnect between traditional values and the pressures of the modern world. The First Nation Model proposes that an integrated process of physical planning can actually be an important tool by which to address such larger issues.

A Question of Process

The First Nations Model was created by the Cities and Environment Unit within the Faculty of Architecture at Halifax's Dalhousie University. Jurors reviewed the first edition of its overall program guide and documentation of three initial pilot projects at the Abegweit, Metapenagiag Mi'kmaq, and Pictou Landing communities.

As the pilot efforts indicate, this is not glamorous, high-profile work. Instead, it involves the nitty-gritty of small-town projects done on something more than a shoestring. Yet, as the model points out, these projects have importance both in their own right and as indicators of a larger process of empowerment intended to build self-reliance, self-esteem, and leadership skills.

Such an emphasis on process spurred considerable discussion on the jury. One juror argued that EDRA/*Places* planning awards should principally recognize projects with exceptional physical outcomes. But others felt the awards should also recognize superior initiatives where specific physical impacts may be of less importance. In some circumstances, the establishment of a clear framework for community outreach and decision-making may have a more profound impact on qualities of place than a gloriously illustrated design plan, they said. And, while the physical outcomes of the First Nations Model pilot projects might seem unimpressive in an urban context, they would likely have greater meaning in bypassed, rural communities.

As part of their discussion, jurors also noted that it has now become almost routine to consider the building of tribal casinos as a panacea for the troubles of native communities. With money, talented outside design professionals can also be hired to create a pastiche of symbols that fetishizes first-nation identity. But the most significant efforts may ultimately be those that arise from within a community itself, several jurors pointed out.

Furthermore, while planning efforts today routinely herald the staging of "community meetings," rarely do these rise to the level of true participation, several jurors said. At the same time, experience worldwide has now shown that such an additional level of engagement, combined with the ability to "ask the right questions," is crucial when working with native communities.
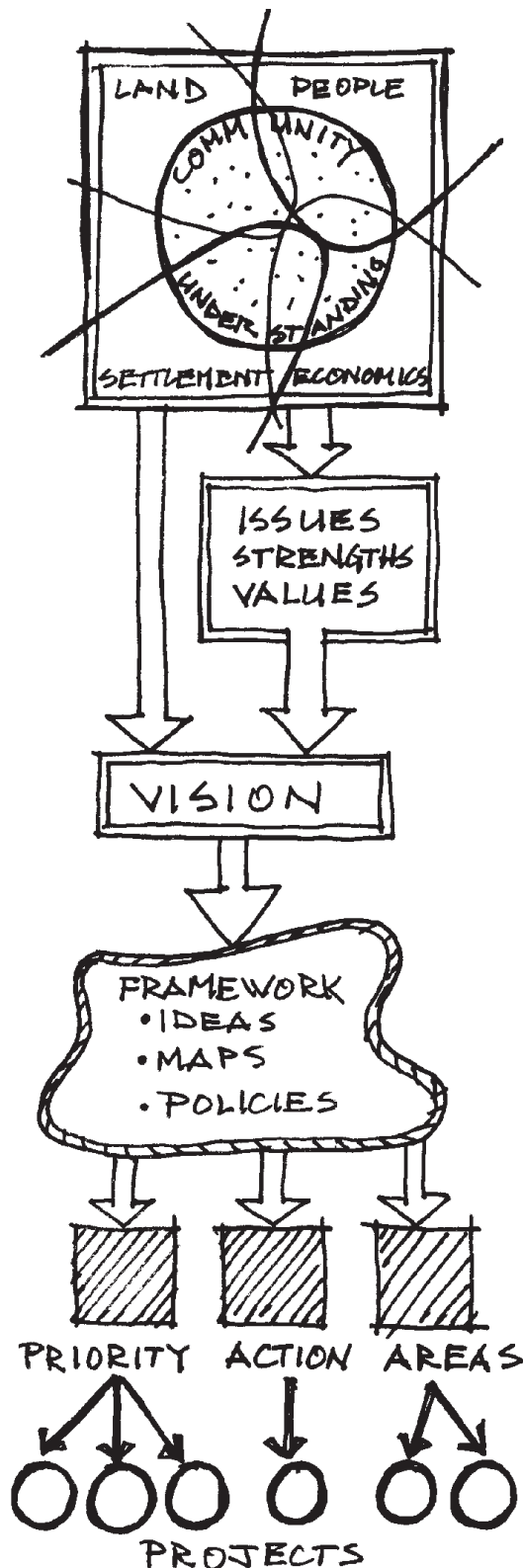
A Simple Framework

The ultimate beneficiaries of the First Nations Model are some 32 first-nation bands in Atlantic Canada, ranging in size from 100 to 3,000 residents. "Standing still is not a choice" for these communities, the model argues. "A community can be pushed by the constant current of local pressures and global forces or it can take control over its own destiny."

There is a season for planting and one for harvesting; for repairing traps and for hunting; for preparing the boat and for catching fish; for tapping trees and for collecting the maple syrup; a time for working and playing and resting and celebrating.

Canada. But it is so politically organized it would be very difficult to pull it off here. **ALS** On the other hand, a lot of Native American communities could gain from following such processes. I don't see it as so farfetched. **WM** I was wondering about the outcomes. Maybe there just isn't the capital to produce something really slick. **ALS** But they do have a series of policies. And actually they show what projects were implemented. **SL** We have seen so many projects that either have no information on community process or say, "we had public hearings"—just the minimal amount of participation and community outreach without explaining how you actually go about doing it. Those of us who do it know that it's really difficult to get serious participation. So here's a project that clearly describes what was done, adds to our knowledge base about how to do it,

Projects build on each other to implement the Framework, reinforce the Vision, and improve the local quality of life.

We understand these cycles and prepare ourselves to take appropriate action at the right moment. Our survival depends on it. Both individually and as a community we need to be ready. We need to get the ground ready, to find the right equipment, to identify the best location, to decide on the best time. We need a plan of action.

Where this community-based planning effort differs from past government-sponsored initiatives, however, is that it argues against employing outside professionals for other than the most difficult and/or technical stages. If planning is to succeed as a larger source of inspiration and motivation, a premium must be placed on a community's willingness to direct its own effort.

Toward this goal, the model offers a simple framework of action consisting of eight separate, but sequential, stages: Gathering Background Information; Identifying Strengths & Issues; Searching for Connections; Establishing a Vision; Building a Framework; Developing Projects; Implementing Projects; and Monitoring. These stages are further broken down into subsections dealing with Principles; Steps and Methods; Expertise and Skills; Involvement; and Products. Finally, the main text is augmented with conceptual diagrams, illustrative photos, and sidebars that expand on the best practices of other first nations.

Pilot Projects

To date, three trial uses of the model have been completed, each lasting roughly sixteen months. And based on their initial success, another eight projects are underway. Each pilot application to date has been led by a project coordinator from the Cities and Environment Unit—typically a recent graduate of the university's planning program. In addition, members of first-nation communities from throughout the region have been included on project teams to help build community contacts and a reservoir of training and skills.

Completed and contemplated projects from the three pilot communities are extraordinarily diverse. For the Metapenagiag Mi'kmaq Band of Red Bank, New Brunswick, completed projects included a community playground and outdoor adventure lodge. A heritage park was in design and development, while renovation of an old band office as a youth/training center was under consideration.

At Pictou Landing, on Prince Edward Island, completed projects included the cleanup of a river, a beach, and a schoolyard and improvement of a trail that will provide a first link in a more extensive network. Progress

was being made toward construction of a new health center and band office. Construction of a new sidewalk along the main road through the settlement was also under consideration.

Work with the Abegweit First Nation, in Nova Scotia, had produced a long list of suggested projects. These were grouped into such areas as Health and Recreation, Youth, Education, Environment and Resources, Housing and Growth, Economic Development, and Governance.

Under "Community Connections," for example, the plan recommended construction of a Mawi'dum'kewey Building in each of the band's three principal reserve areas. It argued that through architectural design (for example, using traditional bent-wood structure) these buildings would be significant in helping identify each community as Abegweit.

Other actions proposed under "Community Connections" were less tangible in terms of physical traces, but were thought to be equally important in the establishment of a sense of band identity. These included the intimation of a shuttle service between the reserves and the creation of a formal calendar of events to "reintroduce traditions of gathering, celebrating, and participating in community events."

Ongoing Engagement

Unlike stand-alone studies, another significant feature of the First Nations Model is that it proposes that community-based planning become a permanent activity of each band. Thus, a community's engagement with the planning process is not complete when a framework of action emerges. Rather, application of the model continues through the development and execution of projects; the review, renewal, and/or alteration of plan goals; and the creation of subsequent cycles of action.

To sustain such an ongoing commitment, the model proposes that the completion of each stage be accompanied by the creation of specific products, and that each moment of completion be marked by a public celebration. The model also stresses the need to tell the story of the planning process through news reports, public displays, and bulletins. If some people prefer not to actively participate, they will at least hear about the effort and feel included. If they are participating, public recognition of their efforts is a key reward for their commitment of time and effort.

Each stage of the model also mandates specific opportunities for public input, particularly that of elders, schoolchildren, and young adults. As Palermo points out, the special identity of first nations will only be preserved if new links can be established between younger band members and older people who may be the repositories of traditional knowledge and values.

Over time, the model will change to reflect ongoing experience, says Beata Dera, a Community Planner and Research Associate who worked on the Pictou Landing pilot project. And already, a second edition is under production that will simplify the model from eight stages to seven.

One problem so far, Palermo notes, has been the heavy reliance of the model on the leadership of a planning work group. First-nation communities do not have "a huge tradition" of volunteering, he says. And even though there is a high level of unemployment, people with the interest and skills to serve effectively on such a body tend to be overextended already.

On the other hand, Palermo points out, there have been few political difficulties in applying the model. Quite the opposite, its implementation has invigorated tribal councils. People seeking election to these bodies are now proud to say, "You know, I worked on 'the plan'."

Based on the initial work, "a new kind of spirit" is also already evident in the three pilot communities, Palermo believes. And beyond Atlantic Canada, the model has begun to attract attention from other universities, professional planners, and native communities.

— *David Moffat*

Upper left: Implementation map from Pictou Landing pilot project.
Lower left: New platform with benches marks the beginning of an improved trail network at Pictou Landing.
Upper right: The Abegweit pilot project imagined a bridge using traditional bent-wood construction.
Mid-right: bridge under construction.
Lower right: using experience and knowledge from within the community is both satisfying and efficient.
All Images courtesy of Cities and Environment Unit.

the very few projects that doesn't see design as a sort of isolated activity. There is thinking here about economic development, about bringing resources back to the community, about homeownership problems. **WM** And it's planning for native communities that doesn't come up with a casino. **ALS** Economic development that doesn't come up with a casino.

LEGEND
■ Completed projects
▨ Projects in progress
□ Projects under consideration