



Case Study 7: Canmore Seniors Association ~ The Greening of the Greys

The Organization

The Canmore Seniors Association was founded in 1976 with a mandate to help citizens 55 and older meet their social and recreational needs, and to benefit all seniors by advocating for them in the community. Today the association has close to 500 members, or about 20 percent of Canmore's senior population.

The association is a volunteer organization that provides programs and services from the Canmore Seniors Centre, a building owned and operated by the Association. The Centre was built in 1978 and expanded in 2000. Today, the facility incorporates a drop-in centre, meeting rooms, offices, and a large assembly room (Creekside Hall) that accommodates up to 240 people. Creekside Hall is used by the seniors for exercise classes, floor games and socials, and is available to the community for community functions.

The Canmore Seniors Association is financed through membership dues, hall rentals, tenants, and casino funds. It is debt-free and self-financing.

Overall, Canmore's seniors are a very healthy and extremely active group. A large percentage of them enjoyed successful business and professional careers and have moved to Canmore for their retirement. As movers and shakers, they make great things happen in Canmore and around the world. Locally, they sit on a variety of boards, volunteer for community events ranging from World Cup races at the Nordic Centre to Canmore's annual folk festival, and they were instrumental in establishing the Bow Valley Community Foundation, which manages an endowment fund to support charitable activities and to encourage and facilitate philanthropy in the valley. Internationally, they travel the world as volunteers to assist international sustainable development projects initiated by yet other seniors. Projects range from installing water filters and efficient stoves in Central America to providing solar-powered LED lights in schools as far afield as Asia and South America. In this respect -- using a phrase coined by the locally run Hearts and Hands Foundation -- the Canmore Seniors Association has cultivated a strong culture of "travel with a purpose."



The Natural Step to a Sustainable Canmore

Lee DeSoto, a retired high school teacher, is an active member of the Association who was introduced to The Natural Step several years ago. At the time, he was sitting on Canmore's Environmental Assessment Review Committee, a joint Town-citizen's board that provides advice and assistance to the Council on the Town's environmental policies and procedures. In that capacity, Lee heard representatives from The Natural Step Canada recommend that the Town consider adopting The Natural Step as a planning framework.

Today he admits to assessing The Natural Step as "a fluffy concept" at the time, and he didn't think more about it until he was asked to represent the Canmore Seniors as an Early Adopter in The Natural Step to a Sustainable Canmore. Although a self-described "doubter, his curiosity was piqued by the conversation and events leading up to the training, and he signed on along with his friend Neil Simpson, a retired physician from Saskatchewan. "We started out treating the training as a fun thing to do," says Lee, "but then we discovered it was actually very interesting, and we started taking it a lot more seriously."

Throughout the training, Lee and Neil both took turns playing Devil's advocate, summoning their younger counterparts and "true believers" to think critically about the information presented. The pair engendered some heated discussion while bringing the voice of experience and an historical perspective to the workshops. In one of the sessions, one of the resource experts jokingly referred to Lee as "my colleague from the Canmore Curmudgeons' Association."

Lee found that particular workshop – if not that particular conversational exchange – to be a turning point in his experience. The workshop, in which the Early Adopters were shown how to create a "compelling sustainability vision" for their organizations, featured a number of professionals who had expertise in widely different domains relating to sustainability. "I was impressed," Lee remembers. "Having those resources at hand, the way people were networking – these were real people making real money in the real world, using sustainable development as a basis for their work. It was a real eye-opener."

Baseline Evaluation, Sustainable Practices

The baseline evaluation was a difficult exercise for Lee and Neil, partly because the Canmore Seniors Association, as a service organization, has little quantifiable



input and output to analyse, and partly because, Lee says, “it was hard to get a handle on how to analyse the organization using systems thinking.”

Seeing The Big Picture. . . .

Systems thinking is a discipline for seeing wholes, recognizing patterns and interrelationships, and learning how to structure that interrelationship in more effective and efficient ways.

Peter Senge, The Fifth Discipline

They were not alone in finding systems thinking challenging; several of the Early Adopters struggled with the concept when asked to put it to practice in thinking through their baseline evaluations. As The Natural Step trainers had suggested in the first workshop, learning sustainability and its concepts is like learning a new language. Given time and exposure, most people will come to understand it, but they will achieve different levels of fluency in talking about it and putting it to practice.

Although Lee and Neil decided to forgo the baseline analysis for the Seniors Association, they became increasingly comfortable with the “new language” as the training proceeded. Their understanding and fluency is evident in both the Action Plan and the Seniors Association display that the two men

developed for the sustainability forum (Appendix A).

Sustainability Vision

As did each Early Adopter organization, Lee and Neil created a sustainability vision for the seniors:

The Canmore Seniors Association will become a sustainable service organization – a leader, a model and an advocate of sustainable practices in our community.

Action Plan

Backcasting from their vision statement, Lee and Neil developed an Action Plan that encompassed several domains of association activities.

1. Responsible Use of Facilities

- Promote recycling
- Encourage use of reusable containers
- Mandate use of green cleaning products
- Create and distribute hall rental hand-out, outlining green rental practices



2. Energy Audit

Initiate an energy audit of the Seniors Centre in collaboration with the Town of Canmore. Focus areas to include:

- energy saving lighting
- reduction in heating
- conservation of water

3. One Tonne Challenge

Partner with the Biosphere Institute of the Bow Valley to sign up Canmore Seniors for the One Tonne Challenge

4. Communities in Bloom

- Work with the Town's Parks Department and Communities in Bloom to manage our gardens using sustainable practices
- Install Communities in Bloom rain barrel to set an example for our membership of good gardening practices.

5. Solar Water Heater

Canmore Seniors Association will work with the Town of Canmore to fund and install a solar water heater, which will be mounted on the roof of the Seniors Centre.

- Deliver savings in water heating costs for the facility
- Promote and showcase solar water heating to the greater community

6. New Horizons for Seniors

- Working with Family and Community Services to seek provincial funding for a project to promote the empowerment of seniors in our community.
- Potential project – transportation for seniors both locally and within the Bow Valley, and to Calgary.
- Project will offer environmental and social benefits, as well as serve to strengthen the Canmore Seniors Association

Although Lee and Neil did not include it in their Action Plan, other Early Adopters noted the seniors' extensive volunteerism could be counted as action in support of The Natural Step's System Condition Four – that in a sustainability society people are not subject to conditions that systematically undermine their capacity to meet their needs. Whether it be local or global, volunteering connects and strengthens communities, teaches values like kindness, empathy, respect and tolerance, teaches new skills, improves communication and creates common goals and shared community visions. As Lee has



noted, "You can't have a sustainable community without volunteers."

Implementation

The seniors have made good progress in implementing parts of the Action Plan since completing the training.

1. Responsible Use of Facilities

The Association purchased and set up recycling bins in Creekside Hall for use by both seniors and the people that rent the hall for various private and community functions.

Although many renters know how to use the recycling bins and do so, others have been either less knowledgeable or less responsible; a state of affairs which on several occasions has resulted in Lee sorting through the bins to recover what he can and redirect it to the appropriate containers. To address the situation the seniors are creating a Hall Rental Handout that will explain how to use the hall in ways that contribute to sustainability.

2. Energy Audit

A programmable thermostat was installed to save energy by automatically lowering the heat at night when the building is empty. However, association members, as well as renters, tend to crank the heat up when using the facility. Scheduled activity

times vary from group to group, day to day, and season to season, making programming the thermostat a challenge. As a result, the thermostat usually ends up on an override setting. Lee has suggested it may help to include instructions to turn down the thermostat when leaving the building on the Hall Rental Handout.

3. One Tonne Challenge

The seniors were working with the Biosphere Institute towards hosting group "webinars" that would coach seniors on how to take the One Tonne Challenge. To support the work, they had installed a wireless network in the hall and were rounding up laptops when the One Tonne Challenge program was discontinued.

4. Communities in Bloom

Many of Canmore's seniors have an affinity for gardening, which has resulted in several actions in the Communities in Bloom category.

- Lee assisted the supervisor of Canmore Parks and Green Spaces in building several rain barrels from salvaged and donated materials. The Seniors Association will install one of the barrels at the Centre as a demonstration to promote water conservation.



- The Association has also installed a computer-controlled “water wise” sprinkler system for the sizeable lawn and garden area in the back of Creekside Hall.
- The Seniors won the Canmore Communities in Bloom “Best Container Garden” award in 2005.

New Horizons

While the solar hot water heater and the transportation project for Bow Valley Seniors remain in the conceptual phase, the Canmore Community Foundation has become a reality, with office space in the Seniors Centre.

Last Words

One challenge the Canmore Seniors Association faces as a volunteer service organization is that all of its initiatives are realized through volunteer effort. Successful projects result from substantial membership buy-in and generous donations of time and materials. Projects that fail to attract a champion are relegated to the back burner.

In that context, The Natural Step has shown up not so much as an officially sanctioned program of the Association as an educational opportunity for Lee and Neil as members of the Association. Still, the program interests both of them

personally, and they have been willing to use the framework to boost both the Association’s sustainability performance and its membership.

Both men report they gained a better understanding of sustainability through the training, and say it helped them identify and describe the sustainability practices in which they are presently engaged. Such understanding serves to strengthen their current practices and lends momentum to the incorporation of further such practices into their personal and public lives.

Canmore Seniors Appendix A: Sustaining Canmore Display




Canmore Seniors

ASSOCIATION

- An all volunteer organization of 465 members
- Focus on helping seniors (55+) in the community meet their social and recreational needs
- To act in an advocacy role for the senior community in Canmore

FACILITIES

- Two halls (100 and 240 capacity), kitchen, board room, office, patio and garden
- Halls available to community when not used for senior activities
- Volunteer members provide management and maintenance of facilities



Canmore Seniors

OUR VISION

Canmore Seniors Association will become a sustainable service organization – a leader, a model and an advocate for sustainable practices in our community.

KEY AREAS

- Waste Management
- Energy Management – efficient and sustainable energy use for the Association's building, as well as for membership transportation services
- Sustainable Services – green rental and hall utilization
- Purchasing – environmentally-friendly cleaning and gardening supplies
- Communications – spread the "sustainability message" to our membership and the senior community

Canmore Seniors

PROGRAMS

- Hiking, Alpine and Nordic Skiing and Snowshoeing
- Monthly Birthday Celebration
- Chamber Music Ensemble
- Banff Centre Concerts
- Alberta Senior Games
- Drop In Centre
- Monthly Social
- Fitness classes
- Trailminding
- Garden Club
- Quilting
- Cards
- Choir
- Golf

