



Building back better: A 2019 Social Innovation event and workshop became the inspiration for research into how smaller municipalities could build more resilient, inclusive, and sustainable communities post-pandemic.

Mapping our road to recovery

How COVID-19 shifted the thinking for small communities – and five recommendations for recovery

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When the world as we knew it shut down in March 2020, it was clear that small communities needed to map their own road to recovery. While the federal and provincial governments focused on keeping the broader economy alive, small towns were going to require a unique approach to “building back better” than their larger suburban and urban counterparts.

Through its Mapping Our Road to Recovery Series, the Institute of Southern Georgian Bay brought together experts from four sectors – business, philanthropic, non-profit, and municipal – to develop recommendations for how smaller municipalities could build more resilient, inclusive, and sustainable communities post-COVID-19. Informed by these discussions, the Institute presents five key recommendations for smaller communities:

1. Adopt “collaboration” as a necessary part of every solution.
2. Realize that flexibility is key.
3. Focus on how needs can be met locally.
4. Understand that technology has emerged as the most powerful enabling factor.
5. Recognize that Social Finance can play an important role in addressing the anticipated capital shortfall for recovery.

1. Adopt “collaboration” as a necessary part of every solution.

It is important to look for opportunities to collaborate not only within your sector, but also more broadly. Look for allies in other sectors, the community, and the surrounding area who may have a unique perspective or who may be able to lend their voice to your issue. Others who may have already dealt with a similar issue might have suggestions.

One of the online discussion series participants, Shirley Keaveney, Deputy Mayor of Meaford, put it best: “Collaboration is the new leadership.”

Our expert panel described what collaboration was beginning to look like and what could happen to accelerate progress:

- Economic Development staff from different towns sharing ideas and moving quickly together to support their downtowns and tourism sectors. Collaboration generates more ideas, quickly.

Leaders from all four sectors talked about looking more closely at what clients or constituents actually needed to survive the crisis and then acting on that new information.

- Parks staff from across the region working together to figure out the best way to re-open parks, trails, and conservation areas. This led to the development of new best practice solutions.
- Senior staff in several municipalities noted the advantages of creating a roundtable of local CAOs. This would allow for the sharing of information and the identification of aligning objectives while recognizing the uniqueness of each community. Collaboration enables knowledge exchange and sharing of resources to do more.
- A discussion between the four sectors highlighted that the sectors are inextricably linked. There is value in having discussions between municipalities as well as across sectors. One take-away: An understanding that arts and culture are essential to the area's tourism-based economy. This has led to the creation of the Regional Arts Action Network, which is now moving ahead on a number of initiatives – including cultural mapping, a regional marketing strategy, and its own four-part virtual series.
- The Town of Collingwood is now convening a virtual round table of 45 social service organizations from across the region. These organizations are putting aside their differences and sharing issues, needs, and experiences. Solutions are developing toward increased benefits to the greater community being served.
- An acknowledgement that many municipalities are too small on their own to arrive at solutions on boundary-spanning issues, such as transportation and housing. Collaboration can lead to results that otherwise only municipal amalgamation can solve.

2. Realize that flexibility is key.

Overcoming resistance to “new” and allowing novel strategies to move forward is critical. Examples brought forward

during the discussions included the following:

- One philanthropic organization in The Blue Mountains realized that, if it followed its usual granting process, it would take too long to get funds into the hands of those who needed it. It moved ahead quickly to revamp and simplify its application process to be one page. It also increased the number of recipients who would share in the annual distribution, thereby helping more people during this difficult time. Being flexible allowed them to move forward in a new way, which helped more people, faster.
- In some municipalities, being flexible led to overcoming the traditional reluctance to lose main street parking and, at the same time, embrace a new expedited permit process to support local restaurants that needed that outdoor space to survive.
- Leaders from all four sectors talked about looking more closely at what clients or constituents actually needed to survive the crisis and then acting on that new information. Flexibility can mean solving problems through a new lens.

3. Focus on how needs can be met locally.

Solutions are often close at hand. It was revealed that:

- One local entrepreneur in Collingwood quickly turned his talents to creating a solution for the town's retailers by developing a free platform that would allow for online sales and marketing. This is something many of them had not previously provided for their customers. This generosity and know-how enabled the quick pivoting needed for local businesses to survive when customers started shunning indoor shopping.
- Several vodka factories turned to manufacturing hand sanitizer. Without local sourcing of this product,

residents in the local communities were faced with a severe shortage.

- A local toy company is starting to make N-95 equivalent, reusable, and recyclable masks. We all learned that off-shore sourcing of N-95 masks left our local needs unmet.
- A local seamstress moved from hemming pants to producing PPE, a pivot that has resulted in a new business line under contract to the local hospital. Embracing local was win-win for the small business and the local hospital.

4. Understand that technology has emerged as the most powerful enabling factor.

People have turned to technological solutions to gather, make decisions, and reach audiences. Numerous changes have occurred:

- The move to virtual participation via Zoom and similar platforms has removed the barrier of distance and the corresponding need to travel. Technology has expanded everyone's ability to participate.
- The non-profit Georgian Triangle Lifelong Learning Institute reported how they shifted their lecture series, registration, and payment systems online for a predominantly older population group. In doing so, they realized their lectures were no longer limited to the number of people they could seat in a lecture hall, which had become a significant barrier to expansion. Technology allowed expanding reach without expanding floor space. As municipalities turned to technology for the greater sharing of information and for holding council and committee meetings, the result has been greater transparency and distribution of information. Technology advances good governance.
- An influx of people to the communities of Southern Georgian Bay has occurred as people seek more open space and lower population densities.

With people being able to work from home and attend virtual schooling, newcomers choosing our communities are leading a real-estate boom, an inflow of younger people, and new interest in co-working spaces and technological support. Technology allows more and younger people to live in smaller communities.

However, it was stressed over and over again that limited access to quality internet service is a significant problem in many parts of the region, and even within the boundaries of smaller communities. For recovery efforts to be successful for everyone, it is clear that quality internet access must be seen as an essential infrastructure provided at the local level, like water and roads.

5. Recognize that Social Finance can play an important role in addressing the anticipated capital shortfall for recovery.

In the last decade, operators in the Social Finance field have redesigned traditional for-profit mechanisms for purchasing, lending, and investing to also meet social objectives in communities. In larger urban communities, organizations are creating community loan funds, community bonds, social procurement processes, and social enterprises to build community capital through a “social value” marketplace.

Yet, few small towns are aware of how this might work. It was discovered that more discussion needs to focus on innovative models, such as community loan funds, which could provide small loans immediately – particularly to small businesses and non-profits that have trouble obtaining traditional sources of financing. As another example, a regional community investment strategy would have the potential to quickly move locally sourced resources to support critical sectors, such as the arts. In order to embrace Social Finance and help local businesses and organizations, small communities need to learn more about how these innovations are helping other municipalities.

Four key strategies should be undertaken to create an enabling environment for Social Finance:

- tell the stories of local model projects that already exist (for example, social enterprises, the “B” corps in the community – Chickapea Pasta is well-known and local to Southern Georgian Bay – as well as those donating a portion of their profit to social good – and many are);
- develop language about these financial innovations that nurtures a greater understanding;
- generate municipal interest in incorporating “social purchasing” as part of their procurement policy (for example,

preference can be given to local sources and social enterprise businesses); and

- create a platform that matches investors to social investment opportunity (this could include the establishment of a community investment fund as well as an entity to handle micro-lending).

In addition, a few municipalities are now examining the idea of a community foundation, a long-term traditional philanthropic strategy. Although not a Social Finance tool, community foundations allow for a longer-term endowment strategy, and the ability to network and learn with over 190 local community foundations in Canada that are doing “good” where they are located.

For those new to the world of financial innovations to meet community needs, a Social Finance Primer for Communities summarizing new instruments and processes, can be found on the Institute of Southern Georgian Bay’s website.

New Virtual Series to Generate Ideas

The Institute is building on the ideas generated through the “Mapping” series with a new virtual series launching in 2021: Our Sustainable Future: Get Inspired, Get Informed, Get to Work!

Please join the discussion. [MW](#)

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