

Conversation . . . . . Partnerships . . . . . Revitalization



*Conference Report*

Manitoba Association of Agricultural  
Societies  
22<sup>nd</sup> Annual Conference  
January, 2009



*"Together We Can Choose Our Future"*

## *Summary*

The 2009 MAAS conference was fun, interactive, and engaging community and organizations in creating and implementing a vision for positive change, innovation and revitalization.

Participants at this year's conference came from many different backgrounds. While the majority of attendees were representatives of Agricultural Societies, a broader spectrum of the community also attended.

Recognizing the need for organizations to collaborate for revitalizing rural communities it is important for economic development, rural councilors, conservation districts and others to see the benefits of coming together for the betterment of community.

There was representation from economic development, conservation, immigration and employment services, and municipal councils. The message was loud and clear – for organizations and communities to thrive we all need to work together. Each and every one of us is a community builder and has a role to play in enhancing our community.

This conference was an opportunity for different sectors to come together to dream, to plan, and to explore new ideas to make our organizations and community a place where we all want to live and work.



## *Community Engagement & Mobilization*

### *Our Work is Important. Why?*

Paul Born of the Tamarack Institute opened the session by getting the participants to identify the importance of their work and how each of us is interconnected in ensuring quality of life in our communities. A common theme emerged from the participants:

#### **For People**

Utilize people's specialties  
Gets youth working together  
Education

#### **For Communities**

Brings community together  
Develops partnerships  
Improves community

## *What Roles Do We Play?*

Participants discussed the role that Agricultural Societies play within their community. Traditionally fairs were a mechanism for educating citizens to improve agriculture and a means of bringing the community together. While many aspects of this tradition remain true today, Ag Societies recognize the need to explore ways to introduce new trends into their fair to continue to address the community's culture and values.

Participants discussed the challenges that their organizations are facing within their communities including dual income families with less time for volunteering, the differences between how the senior members and youth of a community communicate, declining populations and infrastructure, and the changes in the values and norms of communities by the settlement of new cultures and members to the community.



## *How Might We Work Differently?*



Ways of working differently was explored amongst the groups. The excitement in the room began to build as participants brainstormed various ideas. These included:

- Ways to involve youth and new people with new ideas.
- Letting go of old ideas to accept something new.
- Immigrants must be included.

## *Suggestions*

1. Introduce a "mini-folklarama" at our fair.
2. Use the fair to showcase pride in community;
3. "Do simple, well" - do less to do more;
4. Be more open to fresh ideas of youth
5. Develop new, young leaders
6. Limit terms of leaders/chairs;
7. Avoid traditional style vs. new fresh ideas;
8. Change focus of volunteers by offering short-term volunteer positions
9. Identify and encourage gifts in others.
10. Respond to new ideas positively - negativity stops the growth of a group and leads to volunteers leaving the organization.

# *Conversation Café*

The groups had the opportunity to participate in and observe how a conversation café was carried out. This is an informal process that can be adopted by organizations and community to encourage dialogue and build relationships. It is only through relationship building and community conversation that we can really identify the needs and assets of the community. A simple question was asked of each table.

***What is my best experience ever of people in my community working together to make a difference?"***

Conversation was animated and people brought many different experiences to the table including:

- building community buildings (hospital, rink, library, community centre);
- hosting the MB Summer Games or World Curling;
- establishing a breakfast program at school
- being part of the organization of Canada Day celebrations.

The central theme was that people come together for the betterment of community and the pride that is instilled in the volunteers.



***My dream for community is . . . . .***

The next stage of the process led the participants through a visioning exercise in seeking the kind of community where they would like to live and work.

A common theme emerged . . . ***“a community where people worked together, where healthy living and a drug free environment was promoted, where people had community pride, and was welcoming and inclusive.”***





## *How might our Ag Societies mobilize our community to help realize this dream?*

- Education & affordable family activities
- Promote values and quality of life
- Seek out and begin conversations with government, agencies, or other groups with whom you need to work
- Invite other cultures to participate
- Collaborate with other groups instead of competing
- Develop a succession plan for community
- Attract young people to area by sponsoring students to get education and return
- Keep doors open and keep talking
- Be open to change
- Get community's opinions and follow through with suggestions
- Appreciation & Communication
- Sustainable growth
- Identify skills within community



## *Learning Outcomes*



We all need to work together; however, to encourage and support that process we first need to bring people together in community conversations. It is only through conversation that we can develop relationships and understanding. Community conversations provide a forum for innovation and change and involve those who might not be normally included.

## *Update*

Since the conference we have three communities (two Ag Societies and one municipality who are making plans to run a conversation café.)

## *How Can We Help?*

If you are interested in setting up and running a Conversation Café please contact your local Rural Leadership Specialist from Manitoba Agriculture Food and Rural Initiatives or Liz Roberts, Superintendent, at 726-6195 for assistance.



# *We Made The News!*

**Brandon Sun Agriculture**  
Wednesday, January 7th, 2009

## Conference draws Ag Societies

Matt Goerzen - Faced with a declining pool of volunteers across the province, Manitoba's agricultural societies need to work together with each other in order to revitalize their operations. And one of the best ways to start would be the 2009 Manitoba Association of Agricultural Societies (MAAS) conference in Brandon this weekend.

"I don't know any organization that can go it alone in any community," said Liz Roberts, the superintendent of agricultural societies for Manitoba Agriculture. "They have to work together."

The 22-year-old annual conference is specifically designed to support local agricultural societies, helping them make plans that will not only survive, but thrive. Last year's conference drew 120 representatives from 59 member societies across the province, and MAAS organizers have also invited rural municipalities and regional conservation districts to attend this year as well.

Groups such as the Red River Exhibition in Winnipeg, Brandon's Provincial Exhibition and all the other small agriculture societies in the province do more than just put on local

fairs, Roberts said. "They put on events for youth in 4-H. They put on workshops and seminars. One ag society works with another group in putting on a music festival."

This year's featured speaker is Paul Born, a storyteller and president of the Tamarack Institute for Community Engagement who has been internationally recognized for his innovative approaches to community building.

## Fresh Ideas for Rejuvenating Country Fairs

Daniel Winters, **Cooperative Staff**

The volunteers who log countless hours organizing community fairs should not lose sight of why they got involved in the first place, community development expert and motivational speaker Paul Born says. "Caring is the most important thing that you can do," Born told the MB Association of Agricultural Societies annual conference in Brandon in early January.

"So much of our work has become so technical. We're worried about meeting our budgets for setting up the food displays so people don't get sick, and involving young people; everyone gets so bogged down in the issues of putting on fairs and the business of it that we forget why we're actually doing it," he said.

Keeping the fundamental principle in mind makes it easier for community organizers to change with the times, because

then they are able to keep in sight the root from which all their efforts grow. The old adage: think what you always thought, and get what you always got, also applies to community fair, said Born, who co-founded and now directs the Tamarack Institute for Community Engagement based in Waterloo, Ontario. "How do we begin to feel OK about thinking differently?"

### Conflict

Because agricultural societies have been around for over a century, the need to remain relevant to community life often conflicts with a desire to maintain important traditions. But in fact, ag societies weren't originally created just to put on fairs, he noted. They were intended to promote excellence in rural life.

This could include showcasing improved agronomic practices, animal husbandry, and food preparation and preservation techniques. "Today a new method in canning is novel, but certainly not life changing. But when canning was a large part of sustaining your life during the winter, and someone showed you a new, safer way, that was very important," he said.

People who care about their towns generally agree that their goal is achieving community well-being. According to Born, this aim rests on five pillars: healthy people, a dynamic economy, a sustainable environment, a vibrant culture, and engaged citizens.

Using those criteria, community groups can better identify their specific needs and create events to match.

## **Canning**

Using the canning example, which originally targeted sustaining the health of citizens in an earlier era, its modern counterpart could include an exhibit on the subject of staying healthy in modern times.

“What if Brandon was going to do a fair exhibit on healthy people? It would be a damned interesting exhibit,” he said.

And you could probably get it paid for by the companies that are selling different kinds of health equipment for fitness or for seniors. There could be chiropractors, or people giving massages, or displays on the science of physiology. It could be very interesting if you work on it.”

“To promote an engaged citizenry, displays could be designed by the local municipal or town council with a look at voting, the patterns of voting and why voting is important.

If building a dynamic economy is the goal then volunteers could seek to augment the existing agricultural display with fresh ideas for diversification.

“so we envision the community that we want to be and start putting together a celebration that helps us get to what we want to be,” said Born.

If an agricultural fair isn’t advancing the goal of the community well-being, then all it is doing is “being what it has always been,” he added.

## **Gimmicks**

“Then we have to put more and more gimmicks in place, like midways and horse racing, just to get people to come,” he said. “We think we can just dazzle and wow them, but it’s getting harder and harder.”

Doris Fletcher, president of MAAS, said that the debate over the future direction of agricultural societies is ongoing as part of

the association’s strategic planning. But she disagrees with the trend away from agriculturally based events in favor of more entertainment. “I would like to see more agriculturally oriented things, but I don’t know how to do it,” she said. “Our last two generations have forgotten how to cook, how to garden, how to sew, how to can. They never were trained to do it, unlike us who had to do it out of necessity. I think we need to do more of that “ said Fletcher. “My gut feeling is stay true to your rural roots.”

The need to bring in a younger generation of volunteers is gaining urgency, she said, noting three struggling ag societies lost their charter last year and are now no longer eligible for provincial grants. The loss brings the total number of active groups down from 62 to 59. “We don’t want to lose anymore ag societies” she said.

## **Ag Societies Eager For New Role**

**Robert Arnason, Brandon Bureau**

While some may wonder if agricultural societies are still relevant, given that the average Canadian can’t tell a sow from an ewe, Liz Roberts believes the groups are more important than ever. “Ag societies haven’t reached their potential yet,” said Roberts, superintendent of ag societies for MB Agriculture. “I think we have huge opportunities to connect with our urban neighbours.”

How ag societies can evolve to take advantage of such opportunities was discussed at the annual MB Association of Agricultural Societies (MAAS) conference, held Jan 10-11 in Brandon.

The theme of this year’s meeting which attracted representatives from 26 of Manitoba’s 59 societies was communication and building partnerships in the community.

Over the last few years, Roberts said, Manitoba ag societies have been trying to reinvent their role in the community. They no longer want to be defined by the rides and concession stands at the annual summer fair. “The message we are promoting is that at one time ag societies were considered just fairs, they they’re not,” said Roberts, who works out of Brandon. “They can provide much more because they’re natural community builders.”

As part of that effort to evolve and reconnect, MAAS invited the founder of the Tamarack Institute for Community Engagement, Paul Born to lead a workshop at its conference in Brandon. Through the Tamarack Institute, which is based in Waterloo, ON., Born’s mission is to mobilize people across Canada and help them build healthy and vibrant communities.

When asked about the potential of ag societies, Born said the historical role of fairs might point the way to the future. “How do we use these points of celebration as we used to?” Born said in a telephone interview before the conference. “That’s what fair used to be . . . celebrating the life of the community, celebrating excellence in agriculture, the best cow, the best turnip, the best pies and the best quilts. And, in a sense, what they did is they captured the economic and social life of the community . . . and (people) learned from each other.”