

Sustainability manual a boon to area non-profit groups

[Final Edition]

The Record - Kitchener, Ont.

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Date: Jun 29, 2004

Section: ARTS

Text Word Count: 707

Document Text

Sustainability is one of the four broad categories of themes covered in the Kitchener Culture Plan II work sessions. Basically, this means the capacity of an organization to fulfill its mandate effectively and consistently over time. (There is also the challenge of making a living working in the arts, but that's a different, although not entirely unrelated, question.)

A noteworthy new development in this area of concern is a publication entitled Building Sustainable Non-Profits: The Waterloo Region Experience, which was officially launched in Waterloo last week.

The idea of creating a sustainability manual aimed at providing non-profit organizations with practical strategies for ensuring their ongoing viability was first put forward almost five years ago. The original impetus came from Opportunity 2000, a network dedicated to reducing poverty in Waterloo Region. With funding from the Ontario Trillium Foundation, two local agencies, the Centre for Research and Education in Human Services and the Social Planning Council of Cambridge and North Dumfries, were contracted to do the research and develop the final product.

The project is unique in several respects. To begin with, the manual is designed to serve organizational needs across the full range of community-based endeavours, from arts, culture and heritage, through sports, recreation, education, health and the environment, to social service and community development. And although the manual is intended to be useful to non-profit enterprises anywhere, it is based on findings from actual experiences here in the region complemented with an examination of the growing body of literature on sustainability issues.

The end result is a 94-page guide that offers practical strategies, examples from local practices, complete with worksheets, tips and lists of other relevant resources.

The work was originally conceived to meet the challenges of changing circumstances, including a dramatic growth in the number of non-profit agencies, increasing pressures to become more efficient and accountable, reductions in public funding, a trend towards shorter-term grants and contracts, and funding practices that favour projects rather than core operational support.

The conclusions are based on stories gathered from a diverse range of organizations, which were followed up with more intensive, face-to-face interviews with representatives of six groups, including the Waterloo County and Area Quilt Festival,

the Grand River Conservation Authority, Cambridge Youth Soccer, Extend-a- Family, Community Health Helpers, and the Christopher Champlain Community Centre.

There is, of course, no magic formula for capacity building that can be neatly packaged to suit every need and circumstance. But out of the information gleaned from these stories and interviews, four categories of factors that strengthen sustainability emerged, which became the themes around which the manual is structured: relationships and partnerships; organizational culture; planning and leadership; and organizational relevance.

Relevance, of course, is fundamental: Every organization that is dedicated to serve the public in some way has to remain in tune with community. The worksheet for doing a needs assessment may not be suitable for most arts organizations, which are generally dedicated to fulfilling possibilities rather than meeting needs or solving problems. But an evaluation of the value of their work to the community at large, and communication with the general public about what they do is equally if not more important in the cultural sphere.

Partnerships, relationships, strategic planning, leadership, volunteerism: these are familiar areas of concern. Here is where the commonalities are strongest, and perhaps of particular interest to organizations involved in culture-related pursuits, which tend to operate in isolation from other parts of the non-profit world.

The most interesting section of the manual is the discussion of the significance of the specific culture of an organization -- its symbols, ceremonies, rituals, habits and traditions. Basically, culture is the personality or style of an organization. It is difficult to define or describe precisely, or to change in an intentional way. But an awareness or understanding of the culture of an organization and how it evolves over time is often the key to effective strategic planning.

A limited number of hard copies of Building Sustainable Non- Profits: The Waterloo Region Experience are available at the Centre for Research and Education in Human Services in Kitchener (741- 1318) and the Social Planning Council of Cambridge and North Dumfries (623-1713). The manual can also be downloaded, free of charge, at www.crehs.on.ca or www.socialplanningcouncil-cnd.org

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