

SMART SPECIALIZATION IN NON-METRO CANADIAN REGIONS

The Boundary: Preliminary Findings on a Small Innovation System



APPLIED RESEARCH
& INNOVATION
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1. INTRODUCTION

The overall project objective is to set up a framework that small rural communities can use to make living, renewable innovation strategies for their communities. While rural communities are an important part of Canada's society and economy, they have faced an extended period without reinvestment and substantial economic change. In order to design the future they want, communities need support.

Our hope is to help communities identify their own strengths and areas of potential action, and create the most suitable strategies to pursue innovation based on these characteristics.

We see innovation as the development of new processes, products and services delivered to the market and community. Part of this will be done by recognizing that communities have their own knowledge specialties and experience, but that they might also need to build networks to obtain any expertise or resources they don't have. The goal is to help the Boundary region be more independent and build on your values.

To date:

- We've interviewed members of the community and tried to get a picture of the region's make-up, key stakeholders, and some of the challenges and opportunities that you've identified.
- We've also had a virtual workshop with community stakeholders to further our understanding of what's happening and broach the subject of envisioning the future of the Boundary.

We welcome you to read this preliminary report and encourage you to provide us with your thoughts, feedback, and views on the Boundary's strengths, weaknesses, and possible ways forward to achieve the Boundary you want.

2. WHY THE BOUNDARY?

When deciding where we wanted to work, there were a number of factors that drew us to the Boundary, including:

- It is a distinct rural region;
- There is no major urban influence in the region;
- The economy includes a mix of sectors (agriculture, forestry, industry, small business); and
- The region's experience with disaster recovery indicates a high level of resilience.

3. PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The research team is working towards:

- Identifying and strengthening community networks to better pursue innovative regional growth and regeneration;
- A practical framework for regional strategy building;
- Creating opportunities for community stakeholders to learn and test this approach;
- Co-create a strategy for the region; and
- Provide participants with regional reports, and a proposed regional strategy.

The value to participants lies in:

- Learning new ways to find collaborative opportunities or possible economic niches;
- Strengthened networks with community members; and
- An improved understanding of current opportunities and challenges in the community.

4. FINDINGS TO DATE

Social Connections and Social Capital

The Boundary has powerful social connections in its sense of community.

- From a large number of not-for-profit organizations operating in the region, to the volunteerism of local citizens in different areas of governance (e.g. chambers of commerce, Grand Forks Downtown Business Association).
- “Know-who” along with “know-how” is a strength of the community.

The social capital (i.e. trust and collaboration) that emerges from these connections :

- Helps the local businesses community weather tough times by encouraging local initiatives (e.g. shop local initiative)
- Facilitates connections that allows for problem solving and solution finding (e.g. creation of Food Hub, knowing who can solve a problem)
- Creates a wide understanding of the different challenges facing the community (e.g. housing, insurance, access to markets).

“Multiple Hats”

The Boundary is a place where people wear multiple “hats” and take multiple roles in society.

- They may run a business, run a small farm, and work in a local organization
- They may volunteer, own a small business, and help organize local events
- They may be professionals who run an international business, and then help local businesses and organizations.

The experience and knowledge implied by these multiple roles stands as a key strength of the region

- Practical knowledge to solve problems
- Ability to explore new opportunities, and a natural entrepreneurialism to see them through.
- It also implies interconnected networks across economic and social roles that can be accessed if needed.

Businesses in the Boundary

The boundary has a wide variety of businesses, and the variety seems to be increasing – agriculture and food production, outdoors and recreational, bricks and mortar, and new online business. While there are a few large businesses, the majority are small, local, and owner-operated.

Some things to note:

- Mix of traditional and cutting edge;
- Bricks and mortar shops are encouraging people to shop local, but there are also new online businesses opening-up in the Boundary;
- An emerging Food Hub, but currently with limited processing ability; and
- Small, community-oriented businesses alongside large employers that seem less involved in the day-to-day (though sponsoring some community events).

Limited private investment capital in the region

- Do you go outside the region, or do you look for other ways to finance?

Potential and Strengths

In a community workshop the following strengths were discussed:

- Geographic advantages
 - Pleasant climate, natural amenities and assets, good growing season, beautiful trails
- Arts/Culture/Recreation
 - A good number of festival and events, good trails and outdoor recreation, strong heritage, and local artisan community
- Social Capital

- Community spirit, a supportive business environment and resilient community, and people with experience both from work in the Boundary and from abroad.
- Entrepreneurship
 - A combination of young and experienced innovators exist in the area
 - Local resources are being used for new business ideas
 - There is a growing food hub and related agricultural businesses
 - Local and high-tech businesses both exist in the region
- New Community Members
 - There is a migration of people to the region
 - Remote work is possible, and becoming more so as internet access improves
 - Attractive location relative to urban centres.

What do you think makes the Boundary unique?

Challenges

The challenges discussed at the same community workshop were as follows:

- Geographic challenges/environmental
 - large distances, some degree of isolation, and a dispersed pop.
 - Increasing risk from climate change, including flooding and wildfires
- Communication challenges
 - Some communication challenges due to location, isolation and distance
 - Communication across organizations in different economic spaces could be improved
 - There is a lack of exposure outside the region,
 - Challenges re marketing and outreach
- Infrastructure Challenges
 - Severe Housing shortage with more people moving in to the region
 - Broadband and cell coverage needs expansion
 - Aging infrastructure, including water systems
 - Lack of transportation/transit across regional distances
 - Regulatory hurdles re power, zoning, building use and construction are noted
- Culture-based Challenges
 - Tendency towards isolationism and an inward focus
 - Fear or reluctance towards change
- Regional Direction
 - There is a lack of unified goals and calls for coordination
 - No shared leadership direction/vision for the region
- Financial Resource Challenges
 - There are capital intensive industries in the region, but access to funding/capital, in particular risk capital is limited
 - There is a current dependence on grants
- Human Resources
 - While there is experience in the region, available training and skills development is limited.
 - Attraction and retention for roles can be a challenge (links to housing, etc.)
 - Issues of poverty, homelessness, and addiction are noted in the region.

A hidden challenge?

While social capital and people's experience from wearing "multiple hats" has been noted as a strength, we have to ask:

- Are people in danger of burnout?
- What resources are stretched thin, and how can they be relieved or strengthened?

5. BOUNDARY FUTURES?

Projecting Current Challenges into the Future

With the current challenges faced by the community now, the following features may characterize the Boundary in the Future:

- Unaffordable housing, transforming the Boundary into a bedroom town for larger communities.
 - New young families can't afford to settle into the area.
 - Are people being pushed out?
- New large businesses use local land and resources but focus on external markets with minimal community links.
- Small businesses can't survive increased insurance costs and risks from floods and fires.
- Food hub and food industry growth is stunted by lack of local processing ability.
- Isolated Boundary communities compete for resources amongst each other, and with neighbouring regions, missing synergistic growth opportunities

Possible Desired Future Features

Based on workshop discussions, the following were possible futures:

- A Green Growth-oriented, region-wide community, capitalizing on natural assets while building resilience and adapting to natural disasters (e.g. floods, fires).
- A region-wide culture of knowledge and resource sharing, and regional self-sufficiency
- A thriving food industry incl. production, processing and distribution.
- A strong set of networks beyond the region, creating access to knowledge and capital resources, as well as new opportunities.