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University-Community Partnerships as a Pathway to Rural Development: Benefits of an Ontario Land Use Planning Project

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Abstract

A growing body of research has demonstrated that rural communities can achieve highly positive outcomes when they engage in local planning and development through the use of 'bottom-up' and place-based' strategies. However, many communities lack the capacity to do so for reasons such as a shortage of financial resources, an absence of local residents who understand how to initiate and carry out development projects, or even an absence of social cohesion that prevents the community from working together. At the same time, university-based researchers have increasingly been called upon to engage with communities outside the academy in order both to demonstrate the practical relevance of their research activities and to provide their students with hands-on experience that might help them secure employment after graduating. Thus, there is an excellent opportunity for universities to partner with rural communities to address their respective needs. This article documents one such initiative, a five-year project where the author and a total of seventeen Brock University Geography students worked with the Township of South Algonquin to create its first ever land use plan. Among other benefits, this initiative provided a much-needed set of formal land use policies for the municipality, a rich body of rural development research data for the faculty member, and career-oriented community planning experience for the students.

Keywords: rural development; university-community partnerships; service learning; action research; rural land use planning

1.0 Background

Economic and population decline have been long-standing concerns in many rural parts of Canada and other industrialized nations (Blake & Nurse, 2003; Bryant, 2010; Bryant & Joseph, 2001; Ilbery, 1998; Slack, Bourne, & Gertler, 2003). These problems can be traced to several concurrent processes of change. The most significant economic factors include the shrinking or disappearance of primary resource-based industries and, with this, a decline in local job opportunities and a reduction in municipal tax bases that are critical to the provision of local community services. Population decline has generally followed as a consequence of these economic challenges and has been characterized primarily by the out-migration of unemployed workers and their families, as well as local youth (Bryant & Joseph, 2001; Epp & Whitson, 2001; Slack et al., 2003; Sumner, 2005; Troughton, 1995). The ensuing issue that rural municipalities experiencing economic and population decline have had to address is how these communities might be revitalized, such that they can be sustained indefinitely as viable places in which to live, work, and play.

A growing number of researchers have begun to examine the notion of place-based development as a potential solution to this quandary. Place-based approaches involve harnessing the particular strengths and assets of the community, which can include a broad range of economic, cultural, environmental, and other resources, for development purposes (Bruce, 1997; Bryant, 2002; Dawe, 2004; Garrod, Wornell, & Youell, 2006; Lowe & Ward, 2007; Markey, Halseth, & Manson, 2008; Ray, 1998; Sharp, Agnitsch, Ryan, & Flora, 2002; Wiggins & Proctor, 2001). Some communities are better prepared than others to engage in place-based development. Many rural communities do not have the capacity—be it financial, administrative, leadership, or some other form of capacity—to devise and implement planning and development initiatives (Bruce, 1997; Bryant, 2002, 2010; Douglas, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004; Langille, Munro, Romanow, Lyons, Bull, & Williams, 2008; Markey et al., 2010; Slack et al., 2003; Sumner, 2005). The need to address this shortcoming has become more urgent in recent decades, however, as central governments have increasingly delegated responsibility for rural development to the rural communities themselves and have often also reduced the number of staff whose mandate it is to serve as rural development facilitators.

The delegation of planning and development responsibilities to rural municipalities themselves does not necessarily force these communities to go it alone. Instead, there are excellent opportunities for members of the academic community to help fill the aforementioned capacity voids. In recent years researchers have identified numerous means through which rural scholars can work directly with communities in decline, with various forms of action research being prescribed most frequently (e.g., Douglas, 2003; Markey et al., 2010; Ryser, Markey, & Halseth, 2013). Through such projects, researcher(s) can contribute “to the resolution of issues and priorities that are particularly important to [rural] communities and populations” (Bryant, 2010, p. 147). Appeals for rural scholars to engage directly with communities are part of a broader trend in which observers situated within and outside academia have called for faculty members to demonstrate the relevance of their work beyond “the ivory tower” (Bruns et al. 2003; Conway-Gomez et al., 2011; Grunwell & Ha, 2014; Loveridge, 2002). Terms such as “knowledge mobilization”, “community-engaged scholarship”, and “university-community partnerships” have become part of the lexicon in many government and institutional documents. Also often included in appeals for more extensive faculty-community engagement has been a stated desire for college and university students to be provided with more applied, “real-world” learning opportunities than has traditionally been the case at the post-secondary level (Bednarz et al., 2008; Bridger & Alter, 2006). As Grunwell and Ha (2014, p. 36) have noted, by strategically focusing higher education’s many resources [...] universities can improve their core intellectual and academic work—in part by giving students and faculty real-world experience which can impact both research and teaching.” Indeed, there is great potential for researchers and their students to engage in forms of “public scholarship” with rural communities that can ultimately become “win-win-win” situations due to the number of benefits that this can bring for all parties involved (Cantor & Lavine, 2006).

While much has been written about the need for enhanced rural community development capacity, for more community-based action research, and for the provision of applied student learning opportunities, rarely have these been discussed in the literature as needs that might be addressed simultaneously. However, by engaging more closely with communities in tackling the problems they face, and by involving their students in such processes, rural planning and development scholars

can bring about a valuable experience for everyone involved. Accordingly, the purpose of this article is to illustrate the ways in which rural researchers' action research activities can assist communities and universities in achieving multiple goals. While the variety of opportunities for faculty members and their students to actively engage with rural communities is virtually infinite, this article documents, reflects upon and considers the positive outcomes of the author's experience working with several undergraduate Geography students and the community of South Algonquin, Ontario, on a project that culminated in the adoption of a much-needed land use plan for the municipality.

2.0 Case Study Context

One area where little in the way of university-community collaboration appears to have been conducted falls within the realm of rural land use planning. And yet, many of the challenges facing rural places today—such as, for example, the decline of downtown main streets, the deterioration of the housing stock, or the increasing construction of seasonal residences on local water bodies—have physical development implications. Thus, as Marcouiller, Clendenning, and Kedzior (2002, p. 519) have stated, “Applied research that looks into the process of rural land use planning can assist in framing the tangible development issues and addressing key conflicts between involved stakeholders.”

Local governments often do not have the necessary technical capacity to conduct land use planning projects on their own. Furthermore, they may also not have the financial capacity to hire an outside consulting firm to engage the community in any sort of meaningful planning exercise, such as the formulation of a downtown redevelopment scheme, a comprehensive local housing policy, or a land use plan. Such was the case in the Township of South Algonquin in 2007, when a councilor from the municipality first approached Brock University's Department of Geography to determine whether there was an interest in helping the community to create its first-ever Official Plan, a document that would set forth the township's land use development priorities and policies over a 20-year planning horizon.

The Township of South Algonquin is located in northeastern Ontario's District of Nipissing and straddles the southeast boundary of the world-famous Algonquin Provincial Park. South Algonquin's demographic characteristics are typical of most rural municipalities in Ontario situated outside of rural-urban fringe regions, whereby it has a small and aging population that has been dropping steadily over the past several years. For example, the township had 1,278 year-round residents in 2001, but this had fallen to 1,211 by 2011, a decline of 5.2% in just one decade.

The main source of employment in South Algonquin throughout its history has been the forestry sector. The municipality is home to two lumber mills, one in the hamlet of Whitney and one in the hamlet of Madawaska. Tourism has also played an important role in the local economy, albeit to a much lesser extent than logging. Although Algonquin Park has attracted millions of tourists over the past century, with visitation sometimes coming close to one million people per year (Mulrooney, 2003), South Algonquin has not tapped very deeply into the potential economic development opportunities that one might expect to exist with such an iconic destination at its doorstep. Municipalities in the District Municipality of Muskoka and the County of Haliburton, both of which are also located adjacent to Algonquin Park, have developed numerous tourism linkages with the Park, such as the supply of accommodations, restaurants, gift shops and other amenities. However, park

visitors travelling through South Algonquin find a much smaller selection of such businesses, with only a handful of accommodations facilities, a few restaurants, and a limited number of other tourism-oriented businesses. Furthermore, many of these are open for only a small portion of the year, thus limiting their economic contributions to the municipality.

Up to now, a lack of formal planning controls for the community has frequently resulted in the incompatible mixing of land use activities and the denial of land use severance and subdivision applications by the provincial government, which has argued that it cannot approve such requests without first knowing how compatible these proposed activities are with the township's planning and development priorities. At the same time, the township has faced a declining year-round population, a stagnant and uncertain economy, and increased pressure for second home development on many lakes. There has also been growing conflict and competition in the use of local recreational amenities, such as that between snowmobilers and cross-country skiers and between ATV users and hikers on the municipality's extensive trail network. Unfortunately, the two options that would normally be considered by a municipality faced with such a predicament were not feasible for South Algonquin. Hiring a private consulting firm to undertake the formulation of an official plan was beyond the financial means of the township and, at the same time, the municipal staff did not possess the planning expertise required to conduct such a process as an in-house project. Through some creative thinking, however, a township council member conceived another possible option, which was to invite a university faculty member with an expertise in land use planning to spearhead the process of creating an official plan in collaboration with the Township Council, South Algonquin residents, and other stakeholders. With the agreement of his Council colleagues, the councilor (himself a retired Brock University professor) contacted the Department of Geography at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario, to inquire whether any faculty members might be willing and able to work with South Algonquin. A faculty member who had both training and practical experience in rural planning and development (Christopher Fullerton) agreed to take part.

Following an initial visit to South Algonquin by the faculty member in July 2007, it was decided that the most fruitful arrangement for everyone involved would be to offer fourth-year undergraduate students in the Department of Geography's Honours Internship course with the opportunity to work as planning interns under the supervision of the faculty supervisor. The working arrangement, then, was such that the faculty member would serve as the project lead, several students would assist with the project each year as it evolved, and the community would be directly involved in the planning process as extensively as possible. Community engagement can take place at any stage of a student's education, but, as Bednarz et al. (2008) and Dorsey (2001) have pointed out, such engagement is likely to be more beneficial for everyone involved if the project is interesting and relevant to the students' course of study. With this rationale in mind, and given the fact that students enrolling in the internship course were expected to secure placements in fields directly related to their career aspirations, this was deemed the most suitable means of maximizing the benefits of this nascent university-community partnership.

As noted earlier, the cost of engaging in any planning or development endeavour can be prohibitive for smaller rural communities. However, the potential cost savings associated with this project, in comparison to hiring a planning consultancy

to complete what was agreed by most to be a badly-needed project, convinced the Township Council to commit to covering any related costs incurred by faculty and students. It was expected that the bulk of these would be the travel expenses generated on trips between Brock University and South Algonquin, located over five hours apart by car.

2.1 Project Components

One of the shared tenets for any sort of community-based research and for the land use planning process, is that public participation is of paramount importance. This is especially crucial in order for both the process and the outcomes to be meaningful to the community (Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, and Donoghue, 2003). It was therefore important that the South Algonquin Official Plan Project (as it came to be known) be designed in a way that enabled the local residents and other stakeholders to make their voices heard, rather than this being a case where an academic researcher and his students created a generic, textbook-based land use plan for the community from within the confines of their ‘ivory tower’ at the university. As a result, the author of this paper and a total of seventeen Geography students engaged with the South Algonquin community in a variety of ways over the next five years to determine the most appropriate content for its first-ever official plan. What follows is a brief summary of the various activities that transpired in the creation of the official plan, followed by a discussion of how these benefited each of the three groups involved: the faculty member, the students, and the community.

As the planning process unfolded between 2007 and 2012, several means were used to generate the information and community input required to develop a land use plan that reflected the needs, values, and circumstances of the township (see Table 1). Each October, the students recruited to work on the project for that particular year travelled to South Algonquin with the faculty member in order to acquaint them with the community and to help them contextualize their planning work. The most important part of this trip was an extensive familiarization tour of South Algonquin, guided in most cases by a township councilor or employee, which led the students throughout the municipality’s hamlets, rural areas, and waterfront zones. The tours consistently served a valuable purpose by instilling an appreciation among the students regarding the challenges of putting together an effective land use plan for a relatively remote community that faced myriad economic, demographic, and environmental challenges.

Table 1. *Stages in Evolution of South Algonquin Official Plan, 2007-2012*

Academic Year	# of Students	Tasks Accomplished by Project Team
2007-2008	6	Community Profile; Planning Issues Report; Community Workshops/Report; Resident Survey
2008-2009	4	Youth Engagement/Report; Survey Analysis/Report; Focus Groups; Public Meeting
2009-2010	3	Finalization of Official Plan First Draft; Open House
2010-2011	2	Revisions to First Draft; Preliminary Zoning Maps
2011-2012	2	Revisions to First Draft; Open House; Statutory Public Meeting

During the 2007-2008 school year, six students created a community profile and a report outlining what they felt might be the most significant planning issues affecting the township. The latter document was assembled using information from the Community Profile and the students' notes about South Algonquin that they had compiled during the October tour. This 'Planning Issues Report' then served as a foundation for subsequent dialogue with the community. As part of its second trip to the municipality, the project group organized two community planning workshops, each of which was held in one of the township's two main settlements, the hamlets of Whitney and Madawaska. Twenty-five residents took part in each session, and both workshops followed the same agenda. To open, the students delivered a brief presentation that reviewed South Algonquin's demographic, economic, social, and physical characteristics, explained why a land use plan was being created for the township, and summarized the important roles that community members would ideally play within the overall planning process. Participants were subsequently asked to circulate throughout the room in order to view six thematic poster boards that encouraged them to think about various planning issues affecting the township. The themes were: property development; residential development; transportation; community services; economic development; and the environment. At this point they were also asked to start the dialogue by anonymously answering a few broad planning-related questions on post-it notes and then posting these on the poster boards. The participants were then broken into three focus groups, each led by two students. At this point, the post-it note responses were discussed among the group and recorded on paper by the students, without any mention of who had written each point. The context of the discussions ranged from transportation concerns, such as the speed of traffic travelling through the communities, through to issues regarding environmental protection and community aesthetics, such as the optimum size for cottage lots and whether billboards should be prohibited on local roads and highways. Upon their return to Brock University, the students synthesized their findings and wrote a "Community Workshop Report" for dissemination among the community and other stakeholders.

As a second step in the collection of community input, two further public meetings were held in the month of August 2008. The primary purpose of the meetings, which were facilitated by the project leader and two students, was two-fold: first, they were meant to provide the community with an update on the status of the official plan project; and, second, these were used as an opportunity to obtain more community input, this time with a greater likelihood that more second home residents could attend, given that the meetings were held in the summer. In this case, the attainment of public input came through a repeat of the 'post-it notes' exercise that had been employed earlier in the year, as well as a question-and-answer period.

Four students were recruited to take part in the South Algonquin Official Plan Project for the 2008-2009 academic year. After discussing what methods of community consultation the students might want to propose to the Township Council during their internship period, one suggested that the focus this time be on obtaining the insights of local youth. Her argument made sense: If there was a significant youth out-migration problem in the community, and there was also a notable lack of families with children in South Algonquin, why not ask the young people themselves what they thought of South Algonquin and what changes might make it a better place? After extensive planning and with the agreement of the school principals, one-hour workshops were conducted at all three elementary schools in South Algonquin during the month of October 2008. (Unfortunately, the lack of a

high school within the township prevented the project team from involving students in Grades 9 to 12 in such a forum.) All children in attendance on the day of the team's visit participated in the sessions and, at each school, the children were divided into two groups. The first group included students in Grades 1 to 4 (and, at one school, a child in Senior Kindergarten), while the second group included all children in Grades 5 to 8. Workshops were divided in this manner to ensure that age-appropriate activities could be conducted with each group of students. Teachers and teaching assistants remained in the classroom during each workshop in order to encourage and facilitate student participation. The main purpose of the workshops was to gain a better understanding of what the children of South Algonquin liked most about their community and what they liked least. This was an important component of the exercise as it was assumed this would help the project team to highlight particular areas of importance when creating the official plan. To gather this information the students took part in a number of exercises, including a 'mental map' activity, a compilation of students' likes and dislikes about life in South Algonquin, and a discussion of what changes they would make if they were placed in charge of running the township as the local mayor.

The 2008-2009 project team also prepared a report documenting the results of a questionnaire survey that was distributed among local residents for completion between January and October 2008. The survey, which was drafted primarily by the previous year's project team, asked South Algonquin residents to provide their thoughts regarding several land use planning and economic development issues. Once again, the primary intent of the survey was to solicit participants' perspectives and concerns in advance of the process of proposing potential land use planning policies for South Algonquin's official plan. The survey also gave the respondents the opportunity to express any needs or concerns they may have had regarding specific topics mentioned in the survey. Beyond simply providing yet another means of engaging the community in the planning process, another important reason for conducting the survey was to garner the input of the township's many seasonal residents, many of whom would not have otherwise been able to take part in the planning process. The university-based nature of the project was such that most of the project team visits, and the events they organized, took place during the school year, between the months of October and March; most second homes in the township, however, are only in use between May and August. Thus, by informing property owners whose principal residence was outside the township (via a printed notice enclosed in the mail with their annual tax bills) that they could access the survey through the township's website or by calling the township office to have one mailed to them, the public participation process became that much more inclusive. The 72 completed questionnaires provided the project team with a strong sense of local residents' feelings towards specific land use planning and community economic development issues. As with the earlier endeavours, the school visits and the collection of the surveys were followed by the completion of reports by the project group. These, again, were made available for public review and feedback on the township's website.

Energized by the success of their elementary school visits, the 2008-2009 project team was eager to partake in another community engagement initiative before the end of their internship period. Thus, in consultation with the Township Council, they decided that during their second visit to South Algonquin they would hold a focus group session that brought together locally-based key informants who might shed further light on some of the major issues that had predominated in the public consultations up to that point in the project. In this case, representatives from a

number of local organizations, businesses, and committees were invited, along with the municipal politicians, to participate in a two-hour focus group session. Once again facilitated primarily by the students, the discussions focused on a range of issues and helped the project team to interpret and understand in greater detail many of the planning issues raised over the previous year-and-a-half.

In order to expedite the planning process, particularly given the original (albeit, in hindsight, somewhat naïve) assumption that the project would take only two or three years to complete, the project leader devoted much of his research time outside of the school year to keep the project moving. Thus, several other activities transpired during these months that provided further insight into the project leader's interest in understanding the challenges of rural land use planning in a community such as South Algonquin. These included: the conducting of brief interviews with the operators of the two local lumber mills; a survey of local tourism operators; the holding of another August public meeting to consult with the community about the official plan project; participation in several Official Plan Committee meetings (either in person or by conference call); and the drafting of some preliminary official plan policies.

Three new planning interns were recruited at the start of the 2009-2010 academic year. The key task for this group was to help move ahead in drafting of the official plan. Much of this work was conducted on campus at Brock University; however, the students still travelled to South Algonquin in October for a tour and to take part in an Official Plan (OP) Committee meeting. By early 2010, a first draft of the official plan had been prepared, largely by the students and through frequent back-and-forth consultation with the OP Committee. In order to determine the community's level of agreement with the plan, as drafted, the students and project leader organized and held an Open House in South Algonquin in March 2010. After making some revisions based on the community's input, a formal draft was submitted to the provincial government for review in May 2010. Unfortunately, the province's feedback about the draft plan was only received at the end of October 2010, at the same time that a municipal election campaign was under way in South Algonquin. Under these circumstances, the planning process was put on hiatus until January 2011, once the new Council was settled in. Given this situation, the original plan was not to recruit any students as interns for 2010-2011; however, the resumption of work on the project in January enabled the project leader to add two new students to the project team after their original internship placements with other employers had fallen through. At this point, one of the students worked on creating land use maps while the other assisted with making some of the official plan policy amendments that had been suggested by the provincial government in its review.

In the final year of the project (2011-2012), two new students were hired and were assigned the main tasks of refining the official plan policies and preparing for the final set of open houses and the public meeting that would precede the formal adoption of the plan by the municipal council. This time, the students had to ensure that the plan was fully consistent with the province's planning legislation and policies, and also that the plan was written with as few ambiguities in the wording as possible. Two Open Houses were held in South Algonquin during the month of April 2012, as was the statutory public meeting required by provincial law.

The Township Council adopted the final draft of South Algonquin's official plan in July 2012, five years to the month after the project leader first travelled to the township to discuss the idea of a university-community planning partnership. While

a far cry from the two- to three-year process first anticipated by the project partners, a cursory review of planning projects in other Ontario municipalities revealed that this lengthy process was actually not that unusual, particularly where an entirely new land use plan was being created. The ‘blessing in disguise’ in this situation may perhaps be found in the myriad ways that the community, the students, and the project leader all benefited from the project.

2.2 Looking Back: Benefits of the South Algonquin Official Plan Project

Although participants encountered some challenges over the project’s five-year lifespan, the benefits of the project far outweighed these difficulties. Benefits to the community included: the creation of a much-needed and legally-binding land use plan for South Algonquin; the opportunity to use the project as a community-building exercise and, with this, a capacity-building exercise; the development of a more positive and optimistic mindset among local residents about their ability to tackle difficult challenges affecting the municipality. The seventeen students involved in the project also gained a great deal through their participation, including: practical and career-oriented community planning experience; an enhanced set of soft skills, such as the ability to work in groups, public speaking, and technical writing; and a greater understanding and appreciation of the problems affecting rural communities in Canada. Finally, the project also benefitted the faculty member by: allowing him to practise and sharpen his own community planning skills; providing him with an extensive body of research data that can be used to further examine and build knowledge about rural planning and development issues; and affording him an opportunity to build a strong rapport with a rural community that will enable the development of other applied research projects in the future.

Benefits for the community. Clearly the most significant benefit of this project for the South Algonquin is that it now has an official plan. This document, which contains an extensive range of land use planning and development policies, will serve as a guide for the future physical growth of the township. Its existence will open the door to new development activity that the provincial government had previously not approved due to the municipality not having an official plan. It will also lead to more orderly growth where there were once few controls in place, such as along the township’s many waterfronts and within its two hamlets. The plan has also enabled the municipality to have more independence from the provincial government in dealing with planning matters. The previous lack of an official plan had forced the municipality to give up control over many land use decisions, such as those related to lot severances, to the provincial Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing. Since the plan’s final approval by the provincial government in early 2014, however, South Algonquin has been able to successfully apply for the delegation of planning authority, whereby decisions on planning applications that were previously made at the provincial level can now instead be made by the municipal council.

It is also important to note that the Township of South Algonquin benefitted from this project in a financial sense. In the end, the project cost the municipality about \$35,000, most of which was spent within South Algonquin to cover the cost of project team accommodation, meals and fuel. Had it hired a private-sector-based planning consultancy to create an official plan, which for most rural municipalities is the usual approach taken, the municipality would have paid six or seven times this amount. Admittedly, the project would likely have been completed much more

quickly by consultants. However, it is doubtful that there would have been as much in the way of community input built into the planning process as there was through the partnership approach; as noted below, this would have amounted to the loss of a significant opportunity to build a cohesive South Algonquin community.

Although the project was originally conceived as a fairly straightforward and technical planning exercise, the creation of a land use plan for South Algonquin also brought about what may in the long-term be an important second set of outcomes for the community. As Arnold and Fernandez-Gimenez (2008) have noted, bringing groups together to work towards a common goal enables them to discuss their issues and concerns with one another. They also point out that this can build trust and nurture relationships among otherwise disparate groups that can lead to more effective land use and resource management. They wrote:

Prior to a participatory research project, individuals with shared interests in resource management might not even be aware of the others' existence, but after the experience, most have a clear understanding of the other individuals, their organizations, and their interests in the resource, an awareness that lays the foundation for future collaboration (Arnold & Fernandez-Gimenez, 2008, pp. 80-81).

These observations are particularly pertinent in the context of the South Algonquin Official Plan Project, which had the effect of generating extensive municipality-wide dialogue about important planning and development issues over the course of its duration. While focused primarily on issues of a physical land use nature, South Algonquin's new official plan has also provided an impetus for new community and economic development activities within the township. South Algonquin's forestry sector has fallen into hard times, tourism development has been limited despite its potential as a key component of the local economy, and a limited commercial sector in the township has prompted most residents to do their shopping in outside communities. These and many other economic development issues were discussed at length during the official plan-making process and, as a result, there is now a much greater awareness of these issues among community members. This has stimulated the generation of many ideas that could lead to enhanced economic development within the township.

Finally, and as a subsequent outcome to those noted above, it is clear that this project served as an important community-building and capacity-building exercise for the township residents. It was noted earlier in this paper that various deficiencies can impede the rural community development process, or prevent it from happening altogether. Many of the weaknesses that South Algonquin once possessed, such as a lack of clear direction of where the township wishes to go in the future, a lack of formal planning regulations, a municipal council and administrative staff who were not well versed on the intricacies and legalities of land use planning, and a lack of social cohesion across the community, have been at least partially addressed through this project. From the first public workshops in January 2008 through to Council's adoption of the finished plan in July 2012, members of the community were provided with numerous opportunities to discuss and debate the future of the township. There had been little such dialogue in the preceding nine years that had followed the municipality's formation, through a forced amalgamation of five separate townships (Airy, Sabine, Dickens, Lyell, and Murchison), in 1998. While at times throughout the planning process there was evidence of some underlying

tension between groups, such as between seasonal and year-round residents or between people living in different parts of the township, residents took advantage of these opportunities to share their views and to listen respectfully to those of others. As one participant in the February 2008 workshop noted on a comment sheet: "Getting together in different groups was beneficial. It was interesting to hear what others are thinking." Similarly, another wrote: "The meeting allowed people to come together and express feelings and concerns." In some ways, it was almost as if people were relieved to finally have such a forum in which they could express their views about South Algonquin's development. Given these comments, along with the many others of this nature that were received (such as "We need more of these"), it quickly became clear that this land use project could also serve as an important community-building endeavour as well. These early comments further strengthened the project team's resolve to work closely with the community over subsequent years and to provide as many opportunities for public input, dialogue and debate as possible. In the end, South Algonquin is much more confident and better prepared to control its own destiny today than it was before this project began.

Benefits for the students. The most significant way in which the students participating in the project benefited was through their receiving front-line experience within the community planning process. This is something that very few university students get during their undergraduate studies as it is generally only in planning school at the master's level that universities engage in any sort of client-driven research or community partnerships. The students developed hard and soft skills in a number of areas as part of their experience, but these occasionally differed from year-to-year. They gained experience by preparing materials for workshops, thinking about the right questions to ask, facilitating community dialogues, delivering presentations at meetings, and analyzing the collected data in order to write summary reports. The students also learned about the politics of the planning process by listening to multiple points-of-view, sitting at the Council table and attending Official Plan Committee meetings. They also learned about the various steps in the planning process and how a local land use plan fits within a broader planning framework (especially with regard to provincial legislation and policies). Finally, this experience enabled the students to learn more about specific planning issues, such as the impacts of property development on water bodies and other environmental concerns, housing affordability and supply issues, tourism development, and the politics of logging. Feedback given to the faculty member by the students further supports the argument that this project was a valuable experience for them. The 2008-2009 group of four students wrote in its end-of-year comments that their experience "has enhanced our intentions of becoming planners upon graduating from Brock", while a student in a later year wrote that "The interest I have in the planning field has undoubtedly been furthered by my internship experience. [It has] solidified my desire to pursue a career in planning." Although most of the students had expressed a desire a career in *urban* planning, a few pointed out that their experience in South Algonquin had prompted them to consider going into rural land use planning instead. Others, although committed to working in cities after graduating, noted that South Algonquin's smaller size meant that creating its official plan involved what was likely a less complex process than that involved in developing such a document for a larger city; this, they felt, made their learning more manageable and less intimidating.

Another important learning-related benefit of the project was how it exposed students to the nature of rural living in Canada today. Since most students had grown

up in the heavily urbanized regions of southern Ontario, few of them had ever spent much time in rural communities. This experience, several students pointed out, exposed them to the realities of rural life and the challenges that small communities located beyond the rural-urban fringe are facing.

Benefits for the faculty member. As the project lead and the liaison between the community and the university, the faculty member faced perhaps the greatest number of challenges throughout the duration of the process. The project took up an incredible amount of his time, as it required the supervision of 17 students in total, numerous long-distance trips to South Algonquin, and an abundance of paperwork, not to mention doing some learning of his own about new and revised planning regulations. Nonetheless, it was an incredibly rewarding experience, both professionally and in terms of the research that was accomplished. As a teacher, the project lead enjoyed mentoring the students and found it particularly rewarding to see how many of them indicated that the placement confirmed their interest in planning as a profession. As a researcher, the project provided valuable new insights into a largely neglected topic of study, rural land use planning beyond the rural-urban fringe. Indeed, the wealth of data generated will provide him with the foundation for a number of publications and other forms of dissemination.

The project also provided a form of professional development, of sorts, for the faculty member. As Bridger and Alter (2006, p. 175) have stated, an “important skill is the ability to listen closely to the motives and interests of different groups and individuals and facilitate dialogue and debate in ways that help to create those enabling settings that encourage people to meaningfully participate in the decisions that affect them and their communities.” Moving beyond the classroom and university campus and directly into a rural community provided the faculty member with the ability to build this important skill, something that he can now take back into the classroom and share with future students.

Finally, the success of the internship has also stimulated new partnership arrangements between the faculty member and the South Algonquin community. Arnold and Fernandez-Gimenez (2008, p. 76) have made an important observation in this regard:

In our experience, the most successful and rewarding participatory research projects are those that emerge from an existing relationship between researchers and communities, a situation that enables research priorities to develop comfortably from expressed community needs. These relationships take time to develop and to flourish and must be maintained and strengthened over months or years. It is often a challenge for researchers, and for community groups, to invest the necessary time to build relationships and get to know one another prior to launching a research project. [At the same time,] It is not unusual to come to the close of a particular research effort and feel as though the researcher-community relationship is just beginning to reach its potential.

Following the provincial government’s formal approval of South Algonquin’s official plan in January 2014, the faculty member and the community have agreed to work jointly on a number of other planning and development projects. An official plan is a ‘living document’ that must constantly be updated both to reflect changing community circumstances and to comply with amendments to provincial legislation.

Accordingly, two students worked with the faculty member and the Township Council in 2014-2015 to update the official plan, a task made necessary by the province's adoption of a new set of planning policies in April 2014 (a mere three months after the plan's initial approval). Starting in the 2015-2016 academic year, other projects will include the formulation of an economic development plan and the creation of a tourism marketing and development strategy for the township. At the same time, another group of students will assist South Algonquin in the creation of a zoning by-law, a document that will enable the township to legally enforce its official plan policies.

3.0 Conclusion

In light of the various benefits highlighted above, it is clear that university-community partnerships such as the South Algonquin Official Plan Project provide an excellent opportunity to further the rural development agenda. Most importantly, these collaborative arrangements can do much to enhance the prospects for effective rural land use planning and rural community economic development. Before the project began, development activities in South Algonquin were limited by the lack of a formal land use plan and, in cases where development was allowed to occur, it was often uncoordinated, environmentally-unsustainable, and/or aesthetically unpleasant. The adoption of an official plan for South Algonquin now provides the township with the ability to more strictly regulate planning and development activities within its borders, meaning it is better prepared to ensure that the community's environmental, economic and social sustainability are not jeopardized by poor land use decisions.

The South Algonquin Official Plan Project has the potential to serve as a model for similar university-community partnerships at a time when many rural municipalities are desperately in need of such assistance. Rural researchers inherently have a deep and vested interest in the fortunes of rural places; through this logical extension of their work, engaging in community-based research provides opportunities for faculty members and their students to make valuable contributions to rural planning and development. Furthermore, as Buckingham-Hatfield (1995, p. 144, cited in Conway-Gómez et al., 2001, p. 417) has observed about academic-community partnerships, "[i]f students did not do the work it might not be done at all." This may very well have been the case with the Township of South Algonquin, which had not had the resources necessary to prepare an official land use plan during its first eight years of existence. A project that might otherwise never have been completed was carried out from start to finish between 2007 and 2012, with myriad benefits having accrued for all project partners. Bednarz et al. (2008, p. 99) have argued that "community engagements should strive to be win-win-win" for the community, the faculty member, and the student. Despite facing some challenges in moving the South Algonquin Official Plan Project forward over the course of five years, it can certainly be said that the end result was one such win-win-win situation. Furthermore, the benefits accrued have the potential to last for many years. South Algonquin now has an official plan that will help to guide land use planning decisions over the next twenty years and beyond, while the planning process that led to the creation of its inaugural official plan has also brought the community together to discuss development issues for the first time since the township was created in 1998. The ideas put forth by residents and other stakeholders are sure to play an important role in shaping other community and economic development activities within South Algonquin well into the future. The students who have worked on this

project have benefitted from a “real world” experience that has no doubt contributed greatly to their educations and professional development. Given that most will likely work for 40 years or more after graduating, the experience they gained in working with the people of South Algonquin has provided them with a solid foundation for positions in planning and community development. In fact, several of the students were hired into planning positions immediately after graduation, thanks largely to having practical experience in land use planning on their resumes. The project leader has enjoyed his own sort of professional development by leading public meetings and workshops, by bringing together diverse groups that often held conflicting viewpoints on planning and development matters, and by completing a number of other community-based tasks that led to the creation of the township’s official plan. Furthermore, the body of knowledge generated through this applied research will help to inform planners, researchers, and policymakers about the challenges and opportunities associated with land use planning and community economic development in remote and economically-challenged rural regions.

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