

BUILDING THE FUTURE

RURAL INFRASTRUCTURE &
REGIONAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

REPORT FROM 'BUILDING THE FUTURE' PROJECT LAUNCH AND WORKSHOP AT THE 2019 ONTARIO GOOD ROADS ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE

S. Ashleigh Weeden

*PhD Student,
School of Environmental Design & Rural
Development
Ontario Agricultural College
University of Guelph*

Ryan Gibson

*Libro Professor in Regional Economic Development
School of Environmental Design
& Rural Development
Ontario Agricultural College
University of Guelph*

On February 26, 2019, Ryan Gibson (Libro Professor in Regional Economic Development) and Ashleigh Weeden (PhD Student, University of Guelph) launched the *Building the Future: Rural Infrastructure and Regional Economic Development* research initiative with a workshop at the 2019 Ontario Good Roads Association (OGRA) Conference in Toronto, Ontario. The *Building the Future* research initiative has been designed to investigate the capacities of rural Ontario communities to respond to infrastructure pressures and opportunities and how that capacity (or lack thereof) affects a community's current and future long-term economic development and aims to provide three key benefits to rural Ontario communities: Enhanced understanding of the diversity and varying levels of rural community capacities to address and manage infrastructure; improved and more responsive public policy that supports the needs and goals of rural communities in Ontario; and enhanced rural infrastructure development programming that responds to the needs and goals of rural communities in Ontario.

The workshop hosted at the 2019 OGRA Conference attracted participation from approximately 125 delegates during a 75-minute session. This high level of participation indicates strong interest from municipalities in the *Building the Future* research initiative and an appetite for investigating the connection between infrastructure and regional economic development in rural Ontario.

Dr. Gibson and Ms. Weeden briefly introduced the rationale for the research initiative before inviting participants to discuss three key questions and provide their feedback. Participants were asked to discuss one of the following three questions with colleagues at their tables:

- Do rural communities face different infrastructure challenges (or opportunities) compared to urban communities? What are they?
- Does your community connect infrastructure planning to economic development? How?
- What are the biggest immediate challenges or opportunities that might affect rural communities' long-term economic development opportunities?

Highlights from participants' responses to these questions included the following:

Do rural communities face different infrastructure challenges (or opportunities) compared to urban communities? What are they?

The lack of broadband connectivity/infrastructure and natural gas infrastructure were repeatedly mentioned as a major impediment to both immediate and long-term economic development, particularly for attracting and retaining families and businesses to communities, supporting the needs of schools and health care institutions, and supporting the demands of the modern economy. These demands continue to add to the challenges of managing increasing service demands against changing demographics (out-migration, aging, different types of residents) versus a limited tax base that has not kept up with the need to build new infrastructure or maintain or replace existing infrastructure, as well funding opportunities that have not kept pace with changing expectations and demands. While these were commonly noted challenges for all types of rural communities, participants also commented that different types of rural communities face different challenges, with some very small municipalities offering no/very limited soft infrastructure services but struggling to maintain core infrastructure while municipalities that are mixed rural/urban struggling to manage competing demands against large geographic variation and distribution. Participants noted that rural communities offer more opportunities for expansion, quality of life, and affordability – and that these qualities are attractive for investment.

Does your community connect infrastructure planning to economic development? How?

There were considerably fewer participants who volunteered to share their responses to this question, perhaps indicating that more groups discussed the other questions posed in the workshop. Of the limited reported responses, participants noted opportunities for leveraging existing infrastructure and natural features for tourism and economic development (such as the Trail Towns initiative along the Trent Canal) as well as methods of setting specific budget targets for asset investment and ensuring that economic development plans, infrastructure management and servicing plans connected debt capacity to growth opportunities.

What are the biggest immediate challenges or opportunities that might affect rural communities' long-term economic development opportunities?

One of the notable comments made by a participant was that rural municipalities “need to get over ourselves and work together before the government forces us to do it through amalgamation.” The process of developing regional relationships and collaborative partnerships, both with neighbouring municipalities and with other levels and jurisdictions of government, was highlighted by many participants as a major challenge and opportunity considering previous experiences with amalgamation and the potential for future amalgamations of rural municipalities. The need to develop creative approaches to collaborative frameworks for managing regional infrastructure reflects a changing rural landscape that is being shaped by demographic changes, technological innovation, and the tensions of balancing the qualities and attributes that are uniquely rural (such as proximity to nature, open spaces, and community culture) with the demands of attracting and retaining new residents, businesses, and opportunity to develop.

NEXT STEPS

The feedback and insights shared by participants in the workshop at the 2019 OGRA Conference will be used to inform and direct a more in-depth survey and future case studies as part of the three-year *Building the Future* research initiative. The research team anticipates launching the survey in the late spring of 2019 and exploring case studies in early 2020.

This research initiative is funded by the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs through the Ontario Agri-Food Innovation Alliance with the University of Guelph. The research team would like to thank the Ontario Good Roads Association for their support and the opportunity to deliver this workshop to delegates at the 2019 OGRA Conference.