

communities and schools

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The Tisdale RECplex: (Almost) Everything Under One Roof

The town of Tisdale in northeastern Saskatchewan has a population of 3,500. Located at the crossroads of two small highways near the terminal of CN/CP rail lines, it is the home of the 100,000 square foot Tisdale RECplex, a joint-use facility which opened in 1997 and which offers a world-class model of partnership and community integration.

Short for Recreation, Education, Culture and Community Health, the RECplex houses a

middle and secondary school, a day care, college administration and adult education classrooms, a performing arts theatre, recreation administration space, a food concession capable of serving 500, a combined school and community library, and health district offices and clinical space. It is physically connected to an already existing recreation complex which includes a curling rink, a hockey and skating arena, a target range, meeting rooms, a preschool and the town auditorium. An outdoor pool, a second ice surface, walking trails and playing fields are all in the immediate vicinity.

In the late 1970s, funds from the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education and the Town of Tisdale were used to build an elementary school and the above-mentioned recreation complex which opened in 1982. Maurice Taylor, the town Mayor at the time, saw the community benefits of twinning services and he encouraged everyone to envision a much grander future for the facility.

*The **communities and schools** series was launched by the Caledon Institute of Social Policy with support from the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation. The case for education as a public good in Canada is compelling. Strong public schools and healthy communities that share responsibility for the well-being of youth are crucial to our country's future. Through stories and commentaries that link theory and practice, we hope to help inform citizens' understanding of education issues and engage them more deeply in their communities and schools.*

In 1995, Saskatchewan Education released funds for the construction of a secondary school in Tisdale. That event prompted Maurice (who was then the Board of Education Chairman) and other like-minded community leaders to initiate the partnerships which brought the RECplex into being.

Changing times

Saskatchewan's struggles to serve the needs of its increasingly urban-focussed communities in an era of reduced government funding have forced a reevaluation of how best to share social service dollars and avoid duplication in program delivery.

Irvin Brunas was the Director of Facilities Planning for Saskatchewan Education from 1977 to 1996. His department set budgets and standards for construction, and he had been involved in developing a prioritization process which took into account the value of joint-use projects.

Says Irvin: "There are significant efficiencies that can be realized when facilities are shared. We had been involved in Tisdale's first joint-use project in the 1980s, and we were very pleased with the results."

Tisdale School Division #53 had begun requesting a new high school in the late 1980s. At the end of 1994, word came that the request would be granted soon. Accordingly, school board members appointed a half-time project coordinator in December 1994 to start planning for what they thought would be a 1996 announcement.

Two weeks into 1995, the School Division was informed that the Ministry of Education had approved a facility on the condition that



Val Hvidston, Superintendent of Business, Tisdale School Division.

it be a joint-use project and that a conceptual plan was to be ready by March 31. In the intervening months, school division employees selected an architectural firm and a site, identified who would be interested in partnering on the project, developed a conceptual design and arrived at a cost estimate.

Val Hvidston is the Superintendent of Business for the Tisdale School Division and she worked on the project from start to finish. "Right from the start, we were offered challenges that required a real commitment to work together cooperatively," says Val.

Planning begins

As a first step, 90 group representatives were invited to an information and planning session sponsored by the School Division's Board

of Education. Church groups, social service organizations, community service groups, health representatives, educational professionals, government representatives – anyone and everyone who had a stake in the community’s life was invited to come. All of the invitees participated in the first day of a three day ‘visioning’ exercise during which they developed the idea of building a facility that would serve 80 percent of the community 80 percent of the time. On the second day of the exercise, about 25 people returned to continue discussions; these participants represented potential partner organizations. A third day of visioning included students, teachers, custodians and others who would use the facility.

The visioning work was summarized in a document that reiterates the participants’ commitment to community enrichment. It states: “Only by working together with a common vision may we hope to conserve that which is vital to the quality of life in rural Saskatchewan.”¹

Says Val: “The visioning exercise gave everyone an opportunity to express our ideas about what our community needed. Everyone knew that we were being given the chance of a lifetime, and we all wanted to get as much out of this building as we could.”

Many important decisions were arrived at throughout the visioning process. Issues and ideas were discussed thoroughly and decisions were made by consensus. By the third day, participants were ready to focus on practical design considerations. “The walls were covered with bits of paper which captured design ideas,” says Val. “Everything eventually got organized into a workable design plan that we handed over to our architect.”

All aboard

Four organizations came forward as partners and committed funds to the project – the Tisdale School Division, the Town of Tisdale, Cumberland Regional College and the Pasquia Health District.

“At the outset, we saw this project as a way of saving taxpayer money and avoiding service duplication,” says then Mayor Roland Zimmer. “The Town Council had decided that Tisdale needed one main library to serve the town and the surrounding area, and we were looking for ways to support our local arts and cultural community. A performing arts space was an early addition to the building plan.”

Cumberland Regional College had outgrown its expensive rental facility and administrators were quick to see the advantages of providing a continuum of educational opportunities and community services to all ages in a joint-use facility. “We were already involved in successful joint-use projects in three other locations, and we were impressed with Tisdale’s history of joint-use facility management,” says Steve Rudy, former CEO of Cumberland Regional College. “Maurice Taylor was the college Chairperson in 1997, and he was deeply involved in the RECplex planning from the beginning.”

In fact, Maurice was Chairman of the Tisdale School Division Board, Chairman of the Cumberland Regional College and on the Pasquia Health District Board. Previously, he had been Mayor of Tisdale for 25 years.

“From the Health District’s point of view, this project came at a really opportune time,” says Maurice. “On April 1, 1995, responsibility for

providing community health services was transferred from Saskatchewan Health to the local health district. We were paying a high rent for space in the Tisdale Mall, and our staff felt that a joint-use project would allow us to save money and have better access to students – a major target group of health district initiatives. We were already in a partnership arrangement with the Tisdale School Division in a Youth Initiatives project, so we knew the players and felt confident that everything would work out.”

Planning continues

The process of getting plans drawn up and approved involved a great deal of discussion and coordination. Keeping everything organized and everyone up-to-date required a lot of thought and effort.

At the RECplex opening ceremonies in 1997, Minister of Education Pat Atkinson recalled the words of Margaret Mead: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

All parties agreed that it takes a great deal of trust to move forward before operating and capital agreements are spelled out. Says Val: “I could say, ‘Don’t start building until you have capital and operating agreements in place,’ but I’m not sure how many projects would ever get built if that were a prerequisite.”

At the beginning of January 1995, the Board appointed one of its principals, Jim Weseen, to a half-time position as the project coordinator for one year. Six months into the project, Jim was made a full-time coordinator, and

he worked as the liaison between the four partner organizations and the design teams. As the design stage drew to a close and construction was about to begin, Jim resigned and the Board hired a consultant to oversee construction, explain pricing requests, suggest alternatives, and act as the liaison between the partners and the engineering team. The Board also hired a technology consultant to assist with information technology purchases, and a myriad of other committees were created to address different project components. Each committee had to negotiate and write its own operating agreements.

Says Val: “With so many people involved, we learned there was a need for the senior administrators to meet regularly to decide on all the things that didn’t fit into another committee’s job description.”

A solid foundation

Underlying all of the discussions and decision-making, there were core principles that governed the partnership. “We all wanted this project to work, and that goal carried us through many decisions that had to be made,” says Val. “We all had to give a little in order to get a little. At the end of our negotiations to establish an operating agreement, we were still friendly and still laughing – a major accomplishment after such a large undertaking.”

There were many challenges to overcome throughout the two-year planning and construction phases. For example, the Wapiti Regional Library Board was reluctant to blend its collection with the school collection. The Board was concerned that adults and seniors would not have free access to a school-based library, and that children would use mature materials without censure. Neither of these concerns was realized.

Saskatchewan Education was adamant that relocatable classrooms be part of the school structure to make sure space would not be wasted in the event of declining enrollments. Board officials in Tisdale were equally adamant that the facility would be well used and that portable structures would detract from the aesthetics of the plan. At the end of the project, Val agreed that the whole discussion was all part of learning to work together. “Really, unless you told people they were relocatable, they would not be able to tell,” says Val.

Costs and benefits

The RECplex is an expensive building to operate and maintain. Its size and the volume and variety of equipment it houses result in heavy energy demands. However, operating costs are only one part of the picture. The RECplex is well used and well appreciated. Says Val: “The lights

used to be on from 8:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., but now they’re on from 6 a.m. to midnight. This facility has become a true community hub.”

Says Maurice Taylor: “The RECplex has changed how we see ourselves as professionals. Everyone has the sense of working together for the good of the community. We offer a comprehensive set of services under one roof that link health and wellness with lifelong learning, culture and recreation.”

Expanding partnerships

Three years after the completion of the RECplex, Val Hvidston is pleased to report that a spirit of interagency cooperation has continued to grow and flourish in Tisdale. New programs and partnerships are springing up on a continual basis and an intricate program web is developing.



The RECplex library houses the school and Wapiti Regional Library collections and is open to the whole community.



The on-site day care facility provides a valued service to RECplex students and staff.

For example, a newly-created Inter-agency Committee has members from the School Division, the RCMP, Social Services, the Pasquia Health District, the Town of Tisdale, ministerial groups, service clubs, seniors groups, the Métis Association, the Cumberland Regional College and the Kinistin Indian Reserve. The aim of this committee is to strengthen existing partnerships and to establish new ones among community stakeholders in order to best manage the needs expressed by the Tisdale community.

The Enterprise Centre partners with the school division, the college, the Tisdale Chamber of Commerce and NewSask, a federally funded initiative aimed at promoting job creation. The Centre was created to encourage young people to develop an interest in entrepreneurship and start their own businesses.

The Pasquia Health District funds a Community Wellness Coordinator who works collaboratively with the schools and the community to provide families with information, intervention strategies and referrals to treatment personnel.

The School Division funds a School Community Liaison Worker who assists children and families in crisis, including preschool-age children. The liaison worker keeps the family, participating social service agencies and educational staff informed of developments.

Large distances and small enrollments mean that some students in small schools do not have access to specialty courses. The Tisdale School Division is now in the early stages of designing Internet courses that students can take by correspondence, and the potential exists to deliver the courses to other school systems.

Words to the wise

Commitment to a common vision saw the RECplex project through to completion, and all four original partners agree that trust and respect are key ingredients to continued success. Practically speaking, building and maintaining such a diverse and large facility requires a lot of coordination.

At the RECplex opening ceremonies in the fall of 1997, Post Secondary Education and Skills Training Minister Joanne Crofford said: “We are a province with a long history in partnership, but when it comes to partnership I think the folks in this town have written the book. I just know the next time I come to Tisdale, you’re going to have the whole place covered in a dome.”

A dome is an enveloping structure designed to protect those within from troublesome elements. Its form draws our eyes and our spirits upward. Thanks to the web of partnerships which originated from the RECplex vision, Tisdale residents already have their dome.

Anne Makhoul

Anne Makhoul works on the ‘community stories’ series for the Caledon Institute of Social Policy.

Val Hvidston is the Superintendent of Business for the Tisdale School Division. A copy of her report “A Vision for the Future” is available on the school division website at: <http://www.tisdaleschooldiv.sk.ca/RECplex.html>

This article is dedicated to the memory of Dwayne Brownridge, the Tisdale School Division Director of Education who worked tirelessly on the RECplex project. He died a few months after the complex opened. His family donated funds to help develop playing fields beside the RECplex.

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1600 Scott Street, Suite 620
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
K1Y 4N7
Ph: (613) 729-3340 Fx: (613) 729-3896
e-mail: caledon@caledoninst.org
website: <http://www.caledoninst.org>

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