

NPI: Success happens when communities work together

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Community based regional economic development initiatives are key to the future stability and growth of Northern Ontario, a recent report concludes.

The Northern Policy Institute (NPI) has released a report from author Jamie McIntyre, which identifies best practices for community based-regional development in the North.

McIntyre, an Algoma University graduate of community economic and social development studies, concludes that communities and First Nation communities are more successful when working together.

“Identifying development strategies that have worked for Northern Ontario communities and First Nations is imperative to the advancement of Ontario’s northern regions,” McIntyre says.

In order to be successful, McIntyre said communities need to understand their needs, market and assets, acknowledge and make use of existing community capital, use knowledge and connections, measure and communicate impact and be prepared for change.

The research, conducted in 2015 over a four-month period, examines the status of economic development in Northern Ontario through a series of more than 70 interviews to determine how municipalities and First Nations are faring socially and economically, the report summary states.

The 22-page document concludes that community who develop partnerships with their neighbours and stakeholders have more resources to draw upon in building capacity.

It concludes First Nations see a greater return of investment by partnering with communities and working around existing restrictive legislation. Reciprocal relationships between communities and organizations and individuals are viewed as the key to advancing development.

A third finding suggests that a diversified economy doesn't always mean community growth but it does protect communities from the booms and busts of resource-based economic shifts.

McIntyre notes that Northern Ontario continues to face challenges with aging demographics, infrastructure and programming for Ontario's forests.

McIntyre couldn't be reached for comment Thursday, however NPI President Charles Cirtwill said while there is not a lot of surprises in factors exploring Northern Ontario, the main question of the study was centred on whether Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities were partnering for economic development and if so, how.

Cirtwill said early research indicated that it was most disappointing in the early stages of the research that this was not the norm and that partnerships often consisted of merely lip service with no meaningful discussion at all.

"There are lots of folks up there who have been in economic development for 30 or so odd years and are still content to do what they have always done in an environment that is fundamentally different from when they have started," he said.

But as McIntyre continued her research and interviews during the second year, it was easier to find best practices starting to take shape, especially in Algoma and the mid North like Sioux Lookout and Timmins, Cirtwill said.

"The cooperation that people had been talking about for the past 10 or 15 years seemed to finally have been starting to take root," he said. "By the last round of interviews it became clear that things were changing and the partnerships were beginning to form."

The change is attributed to the slow turnover of the younger generation, with less baggage, taking decision making positions and experienced economic development professionals coming to the end of the careers passing on the knowledge they have learned and mentoring the younger executive.

Cirtwill said greater access to professional training – although still not as much as that experienced in southern Ontario – also played an impact in forming partnerships.

Dan Hollingsworth, executive director of business development at the Sault Ste. Marie Economic Development Corp., said the report's findings are consistent with the EDC's experience.

"Partnering results in success and that often helps with maximizing impact," he said.

The Sault EDC has partnered and included its neighbouring communities, the Garden River First Nation and the Batchewana First Nation, in many of its opportunities.

Earlier this month a joint job fair was held to highlight a number of opportunities to continue building and supporting business development and entrepreneurship.

In April 2016, the Port of Algoma, Garden River First Nation and Batchewana First Nation signed a Reconciliation and Prosperity Accord, then considered a landmark agreement reached with cooperation and consultation that set the stage for an economic development partnership. The partnership was launched at the request of the Garden River First Nation.

Both communities also submitted letters of support for Sault Ste. Marie's bid package for Noront Resources proposed ferrochrome processing facility.

Hollingsworth said that he envisions more partnership in the future with the city's neighbours, especially as the Ring of Fire development gets underway.

First Nation communities are the fastest growing communities in Northern Ontario, according to another Northern Policy Institute study.

Cirtwill said McIntyre is working on another study on how to structure and grow partnerships is now underway.

He expects NPI will return to this study again in the future for further comparison. It's already examining options to conduct a cluster analysis for the north and look at how effective the North has been in these investments and taking advantage of the advantages the North has.