

Municipal Entrepreneurialism in Rural Canada



2023

Phase 2: Case Study Report

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Availability of Reports

Copies of the report may be accessed through:

Greg Halseth, Canada Research Chair in Rural and Small Town Studies, University of Northern British Columbia: <http://www.unbc.ca/greg-halseth/canada-research-chair-in-rural-and-small-town-studies>.

Sean Markey, Professor, Resource and Environmental Management, Simon Fraser University: <https://www.sfu.ca/rem/people/profiles/markey.html>.

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Kelly Vodden, Professor (Research), Environmental Policy Institute and Associate Vice-President Research and Graduate Studies, Grenfell Campus, Memorial University: <http://ruralresilience.ca>.

Project Reports

- Impacts of Municipal Reform on Small Municipalities Across Canada: Phase 1 Final Report
- Entrepreneurial Local Governments in Canada: Innovating for Rural Resilience: Phase 1 Final Report
- Entrepreneurial Local Governments in Canada: Innovating for Rural Resilience – Phase 1 Case Study Report

Contact Information

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Municipal Entrepreneurialism in Rural Canada

PHASE 2: CASE STUDY REPORT

INTRODUCTION

Local government reform has accelerated since the early 1980s, with municipalities learning to adjust to changes in local government responsibilities as they cope with the socio-economic restructuring pressures that are challenging the viability and sustainability of small communities. However, local governments struggle with outdated financial and jurisdictional structures even as senior governments ask them to become more 'entrepreneurial' for a broader range of responsibilities and approach to operations (Grant and Dollery 2010; Tennberg et al. 2014). The future resilience of small municipalities and their communities may depend upon entrepreneurial strategies to support independence, resilience, and new pathways to economic renewal (Dannestam 2008; Skelcher 2017). For the purposes of our research, municipal entrepreneurialism refers to investments in innovative processes, regulatory actions, and/or actual enterprise development to provide services or leverage economic conditions to generate new revenues or establish new streams of income to the local government. These actions only become entrepreneurial when there is a level of 'risk-taking' and 'leveraging' that requires a change or shift in how municipalities operate, with a greater emphasis on research, strategic hiring, deployment of entrepreneurial or business skills, and risk management.

The goal of the research is to learn more about how fiscal, public policy, and legislative frameworks may be impacting municipal entrepreneurialism. The lessons learned will help to inform broader structural and policy changes that are needed within local and senior levels of government. This research was carried out as a part of a 3-year project spearheaded by the University of Northern British Columbia in collaboration with researchers from Simon Fraser University, the University of Lethbridge, the University of Guelph, and Memorial University.

Building upon the experiences in British Columbia, Alberta, and Newfoundland and Labrador, this report presents a series of case studies about how small local governments are pursuing municipal entrepreneurial strategies to support community and economic development. In 2022 and 2023, key informant interviews were conducted with elected officials, CAOs, economic development officers, and planners with local governments, as well as management and board members of municipal enterprises. There were a total of 30 participants in 6 communities (Table 1). In the remainder of this compendium report, the appendices assemble a summary of key entrepreneurial initiatives identified by each of the case studies. These one-page summaries capture more nuanced insights into these entrepreneurial strategies.

Table 1: Case Study Locations

Municipality	Type of Municipal Entrepreneurial Initiative	Name of Municipal Entrepreneurial Initiative	Sector of Municipal Entrepreneurial Initiative
British Columbia			
Burns Lake	Municipal enterprise	Burns Lake Community Forest	Forestry
Dawson Creek	Public-private partnership	Dawson Creek Water Reclamation Project	Water
Alberta			
Canmore	Social enterprise	Canmore Community Housing Corporation	Housing
Forestburg	Municipal enterprise	Forestburg Gas Network	Oil and gas
Newfoundland and Labrador			
Bonavista	Social enterprise	Bonavista Townscape Foundation	Real estate
Grand Falls-Windsor	Social enterprise	EXCITE Corporation	Health and IT

Moving forward, there were a series of recommendations that emerged from this research that can be used to inform debates and develop supportive legislation, policies, and related supports to these collaborative, innovative, and entrepreneurial endeavors. These focus on issues related to planning and development, risk management, and policies to better position small municipalities to be entrepreneurial (see final report). For example, municipal legislation needs to provide clarity about the conditions under which municipalities may develop municipal enterprises and P3 partnerships to address public debates about competing with private sector interests and potential conflict of interests for municipal staff and elected official engaged in these ventures. As municipalities are encouraged to be more collaborative, innovative, and entrepreneurial, provincial governments need to provide more outreach, training, logistical and legislative support for small municipalities. This includes top-down provincial supports through regional teams to advise and guide municipalities as small municipalities develop and manage entrepreneurial initiatives. Programs and training supports are needed to develop negotiation skills and risk management expertise. These changes would better equip and position small municipalities to be agile and responsive to the challenges and opportunities associated with rural change.

This research highlights entrepreneurial pursuits that are leveraged throughout the appendices in this report to stimulate debates at the municipal, provincial, and federal government levels about the opportunities and constraints for municipal entrepreneurialism to support rural resiliency. As demonstrated through the breadth of strategies that are used, there is no single model or set of municipal tools to address the pressures that are impacting municipal operations. The context of each municipality will shape the capacity, options, and potential structures of municipal enterprises, policies, and assets that are leveraged to address community and economic development.

APPENDIX A: BC CASE STUDIES

Village of Burns Lake
City of Dawson Creek

Burns Lake Community Forest

Burns Lake is a forest-dependent community with a 2021 census population of 1,659 located along the Interior Plateau of BC, roughly 225 km from the regional centre in Prince George. In the late 1990s, the community has experienced forest industry restructuring pressures that have produced risks for the local economy and municipal operations. This prompted the municipality to develop the Burns Lake Community Forest proposal in 1998 to generate more revenue to address community and economic development needs. Shortly after, the Burns Lake Community Forest (BLCF) became the first community forest in British Columbia in 2000 following a signed agreement with the province and approval of its management plan. Initially, the BLCF was 23,325 ha in size, with an annual allowable cut of 54,026 m³ (McIlveen and Bradshaw, 2005/2006). The size of the community forest would eventually expand to 92,000 ha to log areas impacted by the Mountain Pine Beetle epidemic.

The Village provided several contributions to support the early stages of development. One estimate suggested that the Village contributed between \$150,000-\$250,000 (CDN) in hard costs and in-kind costs for corporate legal fees to understand risks and liabilities, office and meeting room space, long distance calls, photocopying, staff time, and consultation. This included the allocation of \$150,000 in start-up capital from municipal reserves.

The BLCF is wholly owned subsidiary of the Village of Burns Lake. Comfor Management Services Ltd. was formed as a parent company to address administrative functions of the community forest while the BLCF focused on operations. Comfor Management Services Ltd. is governed at arm's length by 6 board members, including three community-at-large members and representation from the Ts'il Kaz Koh First Nation, the Wet'suwet'en First Nation, and the Office of the Hereditary Chiefs of the Wet'suwet'en. Dividends generated from the BLCF are equally distributed amongst the Village of Burns Lake, the Ts'il Kaz Koh First Nation, and the Wet'suwet'en First Nation as the BLCF operates within their traditional territory. Key staff members include the community forest manager, a GIS analyst, and an executive assistant. Due to limited staff resources, tasks such as timber supply analyses are contracted out to larger or more specialized firms in the province. Harvesting is contracted out to smaller local companies. Roughly 62 full-time equivalent jobs are produced from BLCF activities each year. A silviculture liability reserve fund was established to ensure the BLCF could meet responsibilities to manage the forest until it reached a 'free to grow' status (a legal requirement of approximately 20 years). An operating reserve was also put in place. Revenues have fluctuated over the years due to changing commodity prices, the Mountain Pine Beetle epidemic, and the COVID-19 pandemic. More recently, in 2021, however, strong commodity prices generated strong revenues and \$5,296,274 in profits despite lower harvest levels (Comfor Management Services Ltd. 2021). The municipal share of these dividends has supported economic development staff and physical infrastructure.

The availability of funds for a community donation program is also market driven. On average, the BLCF provides between \$200,000 and \$300,000 in donations each year. These funds have supported food bank operations, a mobile food bus, sports teams, theatre repairs, teen programs and IT staff at the library, high school scholarships, a forest simulator to support high school and college forestry programs, literacy programs, a fire training facility, and a mountain bike park.

Website: <https://blcomfor.com>

Dawson Creek Water Reclamation Project

Dawson Creek has a diversified economy in oil and gas, construction, manufacturing, government administration, and services with a 2021 census population of 12,323. The City is located in northeastern BC, roughly 76 km from Fort St. John and just over 400 km from the larger regional centre in Prince George. In the mid-2000s, the City of Dawson Creek experienced rapid growth and development associated with the Montney gas field. These exploration and hydraulic fracking processes in the surrounding rural regions increased the demand on potable freshwater from the City of Dawson Creek. At the same time, the City experienced environmental pressures from consecutive drought years and wildfires. There was also an expansion of urban development that intensified pressure on physical infrastructure and potable water supplies.

In response to water shortages, droughts, and rapidly growing demand from industry, the City of Dawson Creek started monitoring how much water was being consumed by fracking and to research strategies to expand the water infrastructure to address these pressures. City staff proposed a possible solution by finding a better use for treated effluent released from the City's sewage lagoons. The Dawson Creek Water Reclamation Facility was developed to take less water from the water supply and make better use of reclaimed water for industry and broader community purposes (City of Dawson Creek 2020). Reclaimed water could also be used for street cleaning, watering soccer fields and ball fields, and water plants.

Following a series of public meetings in 2010, a request for proposals was issued and Shell Canada was selected as a partner for the project (City of Dawson Creek). Shell invested more than \$11 million in the project, with the City of Dawson Creek contributing \$1.5 million to the project initially estimated between \$12 and \$13 million (Hamilton 2012). The City needed to complete public consultation to obtain public approval for this investment. The costs of the project would increase to an estimated \$19 million, with Shell Canada providing additional capital to complete the project. A design committee was formed that included the Mayor, senior City staff, and representatives from Shell Canada. Shell receives roughly 3500 cubic metres out of a total of 4500 cubic metres of the reclaimed water under a 10-year agreement. The remainder of the reclaimed water was available for the City of Dawson Creek to either sell or use for municipal needs.

The P3 partnership agreement between the City of Dawson Creek and Shell Canada expires in October 2022. At this point, Shell Canada's capital investment will be recovered. Shell continues to have access to roughly 4,000 cubic metres of water, but Shell Canada now pays for access to that reclaimed water. There is potential for this P3 partnership to be transformed into a municipal enterprise, providing an additional \$2 million to then be added to municipal revenue annually. Total revenues from sales of reclaimed water will be influenced by the unpredictable boom and bust industry cycles. Shell Canada would continue to be a key customer for the potential municipal enterprise. The pipeline infrastructure established by Shell during the P3 partnership to transport reclaimed water will also provide Shell Canada with an opportunity to purchase water from the City and resell it to other industry stakeholders (i.e. Ovintiv) in the surrounding rural areas.

Website: <https://www.dawsoncreek.ca/departments/infrastructure/water-environmental/water-reclamation-waste-water>

APPENDIX B: ALBERTA CASE STUDIES

Town of Canmore
Village of Forestburg

Canmore Community Housing Corporation

Canmore has a tourism-based economy, with significant activity in construction and services with its close proximity to Banff National Park. With a 2021 census population of 15,990, the town is located roughly 25 km from Banff and just over 100 km from Calgary. Canmore has been one of the fastest growing communities in Canada. Canmore developed Canmore Community Housing (CCH) ([canmorehousing.ca](https://www.canmorehousing.ca)) to build affordable rental and ownership-based housing that was not provided by the private sector to strengthen the recruitment and retention of workers that support economic development. Residents must meet a threshold test to access CCHC programs. For homeownership, the household income threshold is \$147,000 and the household assets threshold is \$143,000. Rental thresholds are determined by bedroom type. For a 3-bedroom unit, the income threshold is \$118,000.

The CCHC is a solely owned subsidiary of the town. The CCHC is a unique municipal enterprise that is a Part 8 corporation. This allows the social enterprise to generate profits. The Town of Canmore, its primary shareholder, does not receive a dividend. Instead, profits are reinvested back into the CCHC's mandate. The municipality contributes approximately \$450,000 per year and provides operating space. This contribution has decreased over time. To support this contribution, the Town of Canmore created a mill rate to support perpetually affordable housing. This mill rate is referred to as the Vital Homes Program. The CCHC requests financial support through their budgeting process that is drawn from this mill rate. The Town will also guarantee loans for homeownership developments. This guarantee makes it easier for the CCHC to obtain capital from private lenders and banks, without the requirement of pre-sales.

The Town of Canmore, as the primary shareholder, appoints members to the CCHC board of directors. Once the board is established, though, the board members have full autonomy over their decisions without due influence by the Town of Canmore. The Managing Director is responsible for overseeing project management – a task that is outsourced until a sufficient number of units are developed to bring this function in-house. The operations are strengthened by operating reserves, as well as replacement reserve funds for two purpose-built rental buildings. A special initiative reserve is also in place for master site planning for large parcels of land to support new development.

Canmore has been involved, especially during the pandemic, with emergency responses, such as rent assistance, matching down payments, and food aid. Reserves were set aside to respond to the pressures of tenants whose jobs were impacted during the COVID-19 pandemic. These reserves helped the CCHC to reduce the rent of tenants by 25% in April 2020, by 20% in May 2020, and by 15% in June 2020. Rental rates were restored in July 2020. Based on an agreement between the CCHC and the bank, homeowners of units obtained through the CCHC were able to defer mortgage payments for three months. The CCHC was also engaged in a large development that generated more revenue than anticipated. The revenue surplus was reinvested to match down payments for people in need (<https://www.canmorehousing.ca/housing-programs/#matchingdown>). The CCHC's Accessory Dwelling Grant Program will also contribute up to \$20,000 or 75% of the total costs to assist homeowners to convert non-legal suites or municipally approved legal suites. Their current inventory consists of 141 homes for ownership and 120 homes in the rental program (Colgan 2021).

Website: <https://www.canmorehousing.ca>

Village of Forestburg

Forestburg is a coal-based power production community in transition, with significant economic contributions in agriculture and oil and gas. With a 2021 census population of 807, the Village is located about 150 km from Red Deer and roughly 180 km from Edmonton. Forestburg is amongst several Alberta coal industry towns attempting to rally after the 2015 announcement of the provincial coal phase out. Forestburg's coal operations had been active since the 1950s and accounted for 60 percent of its economy in 2016 (Cattaneo 2016). These restructuring processes led to depopulation, a declining school population, deteriorating infrastructure, limited economic development investments, and a reduced tax base. In response, the research team explored two municipal entrepreneurial initiatives in Forestburg, including the Village's ability to leverage municipal policies to strengthen investment and recruitment and retention strategies, as well as the Forestburg Gas Network to generate revenue.

The Village of Forestburg provides a \$1,000 credit towards household taxes or utilities for any resident who is able to successfully attract a business that employs two or more people and builds a new building. Residents who successfully attract a new family of two or more people who build a home within the community will also receive a \$500 credit towards their taxes or utilities bill. To encourage investment to renew the housing stock, the Village offers a residential building incentive through the Community Improvement and Consolidation Program. Any resident who demolishes an older home and develops a new home is eligible to receive a municipal tax exemption for up to three years.

The Village also established a community bursary program in 2021. The goal was to stabilize and grow the school population. Students receive \$1,000 for each year of their grade school education (grades K to 12) towards their post-secondary education (up to a maximum of \$12,000). The program was initially supported with a \$100,000 endowment, with additional fundraising generating a total of \$200,000 in equity that can be leveraged for the program.

Forestburg is the owner of the gas network in the area, known as the Hwy 36 Gas Pipeline, which contributes to revenues every year. The Forestburg gas line was purchased during the 1960s and became part of the Federation of Gas Coops Ltd. Municipal leadership was seeking a more equitable relationship with gas companies that could reduce uncertainties or unfavourable conditions with fluctuating terms. By purchasing the gas line, municipal leadership was able to leverage the asset to negotiate more mutual benefits for the community. The natural gas system used to be completely managed by municipal staff. This changed approximately ten years ago when operational and maintenance duties were contracted out to Phoenix Gas, a private sector company, in response to new regulations and training that was required to be compliant with those regulations. The company provides gas at no cost to Forestburg in exchange for them using the Hwy 36 pipeline (Huxley 2020). However, billing, financing, and capital upgrades continued to be addressed directly by the municipality within their public works department. There is no advisory committee related to the gas network. Instead, a community economic development committee is in place to address a range of economic development issues. The gas network is largely managed by the Chief Administrative Officer and the assistant CAO. The gas network generates roughly \$200,000 in revenue each year. Ultimately, it produces financial benefits for the small municipality that would not have been possible if the gas line was owned by another operator.

Website: <http://www.forestburg.ca> <https://www.fedgas.com/our-members>

APPENDIX C: NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR CASE STUDIES

Town of Bonavista

Town of Grand Falls-Windsor

Bonavista Townscape Foundation

The Town of Bonavista is a fishing and tourism-based community with a 2021 census population of 3,190 located just over 100 km from Clarenville and roughly 311 km north of St. John's. In 1992, the cod fish moratorium led to layoffs in the local fishing industry. As the population and the municipal tax base was shrinking, there was a need to stabilize the population and attract new entrepreneurs and investment. In 1994, the Bonavista Historical Society proposed the establishment of heritage districts in the town to protect their existing built heritage stock. In response, the Town worked with the Bonavista Historical Society to create the Townscape Foundation as an arm's length social enterprise to support community vitality, as well as business and revenue growth. The Townscape Foundation addresses heritage restoration for commercial / residential spaces, public art gallery spaces, and creation of business spaces. As a non-profit, the Townscape Foundation was positioned to apply for funding for restoration projects – which the municipality would not be positioned to do. The municipality would need to enter cost-sharing arrangements with municipal grants.

The Townscape Foundation's board of directors includes 3 councillors. The Town of Bonavista provides a subsidy of roughly \$40,000 to \$50,000 per year to support operations (i.e. pay the manager, etc.). The Town also usually offers at least 10% for heritage projects. In 2001, with support from ACOA and the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador, the Foundation received approval for both a pilot project of Historic Properties Investment Program (HPIP) and the Historic Church Street Revitalization Project. In a town of less than 4,000 people, there are more than 1,000 municipal, provincial, and federal designated heritage buildings. Following the moratorium, the Townscape Foundation was able to acquire real estate incredibly cheap through tax sale, bankruptcy, philanthropic endeavors, free houses, heritage buildings being transferred, etc. The Garrick Theatre was also transferred to the Townscape Foundation for a donation of \$1. A \$6 million restoration was then completed to make it a year-round theatre for live performances. An annual grant has also been provided for the Garrick Theatre, which broke even last year. Since 2001, the foundation has completed several major streetscape or harbour-front development projects, and either restored directly or contributed in some way to the restoration of about 100 heritage structures. This strategy became possible as the Town has reinvested revenue from the restoration and rental of historic buildings in heritage grants and townscaping. The Townscape Foundation is now working on a \$1.8 million harbour front project.

Mayor John Norman and his affiliates created Bonavista Living and Bonavista Creative, with the support of roughly 50 trades employees (see: <https://www.bonavistaliving.com>; <https://www.facebook.com/bonavistaliving>). This private enterprise purchases older, historic homes and buildings for restoration. The synergies between this private enterprise and the Townscape Foundation have allowed the community to advance their goals at a faster pace – all while using local labour.

The Townscape Foundation has had a positive impact on economic development. As more residents and businesses are moving to the area, the Town of Bonavista has increased its revenues between 7-12% annually for six years. Roughly \$40 million in development has been generated since 2000, with restoration projects supporting new heritage woodworking, trades, and painting industries. Tourism numbers have also increased and attracted new investment.

Website: <https://townofbonavista.com>

Grand Falls-Windsor EXCITE Corporation

Grand Falls-Windsor is a former pulp and paper town with a 2021 census population of 13,853, located almost 430 km northwest of St. John's in the central region of Newfoundland and Labrador. Forest restructuring pressures prompted the Town of Grand Falls-Windsor to establish the EXCITE centre in 2001 as a social enterprise with a goal to diversify its economy by strengthening its position as a genomics-health research, technology, and innovation centre. The EXCITE corporation is governed through a board of directors that includes representation from the municipal council, as well as three community-at-large members (i.e. Grant Thornton, the College of the North Atlantic, and Newfoundland Power). The Executive Director is the only employee and reports to the Town's Economic Development Manager.

The focus initially was to recruit start-up tech companies to rent space in this incubator hub in the community. For example, the Town attracted DPSI, a computer hardware and software wholesaler that had between 20-25 employees in sales, support, and development working out of the EXCITE Corporation building. The Town then decided to pursue other opportunities through its municipal enterprise, guided by a more place-based philosophy of identifying more localized assets, relationships, and opportunities. The Town has supported investments in research and development for health innovation. The goal is to generate research that will help to attract and retain health care professionals, improve the quality of life of residents, and provide opportunities to develop intellectual property that can lead to private sector initiatives. For example, the Genomics-Based Research and Development Centre for Hearing Science in the EXCITE Corporation building identified four genes that will be important to address hearing issues for aging residents. A new collaboration with the Faculty of Medicine at Memorial University will examine imbalance issues, as well as develop the Rural Health Simulation Centre to support the retraining and recruitment of physicians, nurses, and other health care professionals.

Over the years, the main source of revenue from the EXCITE Corporation comes from tenants; although, the corporation also pursues provincial and federal grants to support specific initiatives or partnerships. During the early years of operation, there was a 300-seat call centre for almost 15 years that provided stable rent revenues. Some of the tenants have included Keyin College, a private post-secondary school, Central Health, and DPSI. The Genome Project and Memorial University are provided with in-kind space to support health care innovation. There are preliminary discussions to provide space to support a nursing school for Central Newfoundland. Unlike arm's length municipal enterprises, however, this internal municipal enterprise's budget comes from the Town's budget. Revenues were strategically reinvested into the EXCITE Corporation building. For example, funds were used to pay the mortgage and complete maintenance for the building and surrounding landscape. Renovations were also made to accommodate new tenants, as well as to purchase a back-up generator.

Moving forward, the Town is interested in using the EXCITE Corporation to diversify their economy. There is a renewed emphasis to redirect the priorities of EXCITE to facilitate the development of the IT sector through relevant training programs and partnerships with the local colleges.

Website: <https://www.excitecorp.nf.ca>

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