

Community Disempowered: A Narrative of a Failed Community Development Attempt

Communities that are empowered provide members with meaning, belonging and democratic control over their own futures. But there are vested interests who oppose community and sometimes those interests win. This is an account of an attempt to build community at Kikinahk Friendship Center in La Ronge, Saskatchewan, Canada that came up against political interests and the interests of individuals who benefited from their connection with those politicians and bureaucrat from outside of the community. This article may be considered as a progress report subsequent to the more hopeful article published earlier in this series entitled "Developing community."

You have probably heard the saying that if you give a man a fish you feed him for a day, but if you teach him to fish you feed him for a lifetime. In the first case, the man is dependent on the welfare of others, in the second he is independent and capable of feeding others. The friendship center movement was created to build empowered aboriginal communities in urban areas capable of deciding on their priorities and taking action to meet their needs. Empowered communities feed themselves.

Providing services without community development is like giving a man a fish – it may be a good thing to do in the short term but over time it builds dependency and destroys community. I fear we may have come to that point with our very own friendship center. For example, Kikinahk attempted to hold a community conference this past January but it turned out to be an inter-agency meeting. While there was good discussion on a variety of topics including addictions, poverty, recreation and cultural issues the well-meaning people at the conference were service providers who asked repeatedly, "Where are the people that actually use these services?"

The Kikinahk society does not have many such people in its membership. Membership is small, usually 30 to 40 people consisting of staff members, existing board members and their families. If a new person who believes in the principles of the friendship center movement shows up at a general meeting, they are allowed to buy a membership but they are not allowed to run for the board. Such a person has to attend the subsequent AGM to have that privilege. Yet the existent board has the power to fill vacancies on its own. This is not a system of governance geared toward building community.

As the former chair of Kikinahk's community development committee, I did my best to attempt to rectify this disconnect. We completed a survey last fall to find out what our community thought and discovered that increasing opportunities for youth recreation was a high priority in your minds. It was a shock, therefore, to learn some six months later that Kikinahk was forced to off its youth recreation staff due to changes in federal government funding. Staff asked that I write a letter of support for youth recreation to the Northerner.

The Kikinahk policy manual authorizes board members to communicate with our community about issues affecting the friendship center. It also states that board members will not breach confidentiality in making such communication. I was careful to use information that was already publically available, but my first draft was highly critical of the federal government and its policies and procedures leading to this cutback.

This draft was discussed by the Kikinahk board before it was published. Concern was expressed that a letter written by a board member critical of the federal government would endanger future funding. As a result of this input, I revised my letter in support of youth recreation to be clear I was writing from my perspective as a psychologist and I eliminated any direct criticisms of the federal Conservative Party.

Despite my careful craftsmanship, my letter received a negative personal response in the Northerner from our member of parliament. Although Kikinahk subsequently publically declared its support for youth recreation, I was removed from the board at a meeting to which I was not invited on the pretext that I had divulged confidential information.

I recently learned that the Kikinahk Friendship Center board has officially dissolved its community development committee. This is an honest decision if it has no intention of developing community. The opposite of community is bureaucracy wherein the bureaucrats determine what is needed even to the point of defining what the community thinks. We have all seen how the old Indian Affairs Branch in using this model was so destructive of community. It is interesting that this controversy flowed from a decision of the federal government to transfer friendship center funding to the same bureaucracy that administers the Indian Act.

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The story is, of course, not yet over. The point is the vested interests realize that their power relies not on their relationship with the bureaucracies, not with the people and they will fight by all means at their disposal to maintain their privileges.