

Keeping Rural Community Halls Alive

Cooper Institute and ARCH, the Association of Rural Community Halls.

Montague October 27th, 2011 and Kinkora Oct 19, 2011

WORKSHOP REPORT

Workshop Goal: To develop an understanding of the opportunities and challenges associated with maintaining rural community halls in Prince Edward Island, and to come up with some ideas to overcome those challenges.

Some community hall successes:

Volunteers contribute energy, reduce costs

Activities and events which raise money, bring community together and attract tourists

- Kitchen parties and concerts, celidhs
- Bingo, cards to raise funds and provide
- Beach parties, children's parties, movie nights
- Community suppers, brunches, socials
- Dances
- Canada Day celebrations , Remembrance Day events
- Auction Sales
- Karaoke
- Farmers Market
- Summer camps
- Arts and Theatre classes
- Lectures and seminars

Partnership with other organizations (Seniors, Women's Institute) to get funding (projects, grants) through government programs; with Department of Environment, Energy and Forestry to create natural space around the hall – planting native species, involving young volunteers (Katimavik, 4H) – interpretative area (tree ID tags); with UPEI

Festival of Small Halls, resulting in increased awareness and tangible benefits to the halls (e.g. sound systems)

Weddings, anniversaries and other parties – for many people, an affordable, comfortable location, close to home – where they have a connection

Skills PEI internship program – allows for development of a marketing plan, using social media to improve visibility and bring in new events

Using a community newsletter to highlight events at the hall

Benefits of community halls:

Highlighting local culture

Attracting and keeping tourists in regions “off the beaten path”

Money raised for community and individuals (travel for off-Island medical services)

Money raised for individuals and organizations (eg QEH) outside of the community
Engaging community, volunteers have a sense of purpose
Highlighting local culture (music, theatre) for the benefit of residents and tourists alike
Kitchen parties and concerts, draw in tourists and contribute to the economy
Building community by creating and strengthening partnerships with other organizations (e.g. Seniors Clubs)
A home for essential services (e.g. Fire Department)
Creating passion, community spirit, among volunteers and others

The Stories of Two Halls: New London Community Complex

Leonard spoke about his own experience, volunteering in many different capacities, from dishwasher to board member to coordinator. He spoke about the value of halls in communities that had over the years lost traditional centres of activity – stores, churches and schools. In many cases the hall is the only physical piece of the community that remains.

In terms of keeping the halls going, Leonard noted the importance of a strong association – ARCH could serve as a means of sharing information, and it could be a strong voice speaking for halls across the province. Funding is necessary, and in New London, money is raised through regular brunches, hosted on a rotating basis by each of the nine communities that share the hall. Volunteer commitment is essential – this is based on each volunteer’s commitment to their home community.

Some of the challenges that New London has faced include the aging of the core group of volunteers, rising costs, the substantial amount of time required to keep things going, occasional lack of understanding (on the part of board members) of the role of the hall in a community, and “restricted imagination” or a tendency to keep doing the same things the same way year after year.

Leona Dalton, St. Mark’s Hall, Lot 7

Leona talked about her own experience in relation to the community hall in Lot 7, which started in 2001 when her husband was asked to build a new altar for the church. She organized a celidh to raise money for the materials. It proved to be so successful (they raised over \$2,000.00) that a committee was struck to organize regular celidhs at the hall. These have been going for eleven years now.

With her connections to musicians across the Island, she has always been in charge of booking the entertainment. One of the challenges she faced was ensuring that local musicians were well-represented in the line-up. As time went on, the hall gained a good reputation as a place to play – musicians say they really enjoy performing in Lot 7 and come back time after time.

A key to the success of the celidhs, Leona said, is sharing the workload and assigning specific tasks to people. One person is responsible for set-up, and someone is always in charge of the lunch, which is in itself a key to success – the lunches are generous, thanks to the volunteers who prepare them, and well-appreciated by all who come to hear the music.

Another important thing is that it needs to be fun – otherwise people won’t want to volunteer their time. It’s important to focus on the positive, and not get bogged down by negative attitudes.

Leona said that it’s been estimated that over the past eleven years, over \$54,000.00 has been raised in her community hall. Tourists and summer residents as well as people living in West Prince (and further afield) attend the celidhs – there is probably an economic spin-off as they spend more time in the area because of this.

3. What do you need to keep rural community halls going?

Financial Resources – for upgrades, accessibility, maintenance and equipment

Momentum – the hall needs to be used; regular events and activities

Visibility – people in the community are aware of the hall and events taking place; people need to know about you, and about how to find you, physically and to contact (email, telephone)

Community participation – volunteer committees, boards and helpers

Leadership – an individual who is willing, passionate and available

Positive Attitude – focus on moving ahead

Variety of events – to appeal to residents and non-residents, young & old

Promotion – of the hall as well as for events and activities taking place there

Accessibility – for people of all abilities and ages; physical (ramps, washrooms, etc)

Equipment – to meet the needs of users (projector, sound system, etc)

Vitality – the hall needs to be used

Responding to community needs – you need to know what people want

4. What are the strengths, or opportunities that exist in communities, that support community halls?

Diversity of halls across the Island

Charm

Partnerships with other organizations (Seniors – Fascinating Ladies)

Funding sources (government)

Sense of history of the community

Festivals (small halls, etc.)

Experienced and knowledgeable volunteers

Media – no-cost opportunities such as The Buzz, Coffee New, CBC, Newspapers

ARCH

Tourists

Emergency Measures Shelter (JEPP funding)

Community Services Bursary to attract student volunteers

Community Council offices in hall

5. What are the challenges associated with sustaining rural community halls?

Engaging younger volunteers and those with specific skills and expertise (eg accounting)

Shortage of volunteers willing to take responsibility (financial, legal)

Volunteer burn-out

Dynamics within volunteer committees – negative attitudes and desire to control

Increased costs – fuel & maintenance

Competition with larger venues (Confederation Centre) with access to more funding

Lack of local support for events

Costs of making buildings accessible

Kitchen inspections – codes for certification

Getting equipment (ie sound) and someone with skills to run it

Population shift from rural to urban and effect on communities

Fear of that there will be no-one to keep things going after we step down

6. Strategies for sustaining rural community halls:

Increase visibility

Signage – temporary sandwich boards

Large signs outside hall to announce events – can be rented to other groups

Facebook

Small Halls Festival

Promote the facilities as well as activities and events

Community newsletters

Websites and social media

Traditional media – Public Service Announcements and media releases

Coffee News

Look at who is coming to the events – target promotion efforts

With community partners, investigate potential funding programs

New Horizons (Human Resources and Social Development Canada)

http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/community_partnerships/seniors/index.shtml

Enabling Accessibility (Human Resources and Social Development Canada)

http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/disability_issues/eaf/cfp/index.shtml

Island Community Fund (PEI Fisheries, Aquaculture and Rural Development)

<http://www.gov.pe.ca/fard/index.php3?number=1037730&lang=E>

Skills PEI (PEI Department of Innovation and Advanced Learning)

<http://www.skillspei.com/>

Farm Credit Canada Agrispirit Fund (Farm Credit Canada)

http://www.fcc-fac.ca/en/aboutus/responsibility/agrispiritfund_e.asp

Joint Emergency Preparedness Program (Public Safety Canada)

<http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/prg/em/jepj/index-eng.aspx>

<http://www.gov.pe.ca/jps/index.php3?number=1005259>

150th Anniversary Charlottetown Conference (Canadian Heritage – Patrimoine Canada) pei150.com

Diamond Jubilee and Canada Day (Canadian Heritage – Patrimoine Canada)

Seek out opportunities for corporate support

Ask local businesses for funds and for goods, materials

Be strategic in recruiting volunteers

Don't be afraid to ASK people

Ask them to take on short-term projects

Make a schedule so that they know what's expected, and when

Make sure what you are asking them to do is something that will be interesting and fun and that it suits their skills and knowledge

Create different groups or sub-committees to take on specific tasks

Create a youth board to attract younger volunteers

Register with the Community Services Bursary program (PEI Department of Innovation and Advanced Learning) – students get credit for volunteering

Recognize Volunteers' Contributions

Hold a celebration

Network and share information with other Island halls

ARCH to use newsletter to provide information about:

funding possibilities

other opportunities (i.e. Small Halls)

events and activities

successes

Become an emergency relief centre

Funding available through the Joint Emergency Preparedness Program (*ends in 2013*)

Support and host a variety of events and activities

Events such as weekly card parties may not raise a lot of money but they give members of the community a place in the heart of their community a place to meet and socialize, and a reason to support the hall – appealing to different people, of different ages and interests may be helpful in recruiting volunteers down the road

Look into opportunities for paid help

Internships through Skills PEI

Engaging younger volunteers

Aging of core volunteers

Increased fuel costs

Costs of making buildings accessible

Population shift from rural to urban and effect on communities

Lack of transportation for residents and tourists

Increase visibility

Develop signage, with a consistent design, for each hall, could be coordinated by ARCH but funded by government

Telephone numbers posted on hall/signs

“Community Halls” heading with hall numbers listed in telephone book

Festival of Small Halls – at each event, present about the hall and its history

Websites and Facebook

Promote Festival of Small Halls collectively (ARCH) and individually

Promote the facilities as well as activities and events

Community newsletters

Websites and social media

Traditional media – Public Service Announcements and media releases

pei.kijiji.ca/ and www.usedpei.com/

Implement group buying to reduce costs

ARCH look into possibilities for group-buying (fuel, office supplies, printing, insurance)

Share information with other Island halls

ARCH to use newsletter to provide information about:
funding possibilities, other opportunities (i.e. Small Halls)
events and activities, successes

Explore ways to cooperate with other halls (100-Mile Yard Sale)

Develop partnerships - Seniors groups, Fire Department, Women's Institute, 4H
University of Prince Edward Island, Katimavik, Canada World Youth, Community Councils,
Tourism Associations

Develop and maintain an effective provincial association

Highlight ARCH membership (plaque on the wall of each hall)

Find out what people want

Conduct a survey of community members about their needs and hopes and to find out what role they want the hall to fill

Highlight the history of the hall and the community

Photographs

Presentation when events, concerts are introduced (Festival of Small Halls)

7. Evaluation

Participants said they enjoyed **getting together and sharing ideas, challenges and solutions**. They appreciated the chance to see that other people have the same challenges in keeping their halls going and in keeping the community involved.

There seemed to be **serious concerns** about what would happen to community halls when the current set of **volunteers finally stepped aside**. This was reflected in the discussion of challenges – volunteer burn-out and getting new people involved.

Participants suggested that future workshops could focus on recruiting new volunteers, keeping them involved, and on strategies for succession (from one group of volunteers to the next).

In general, participants found the workshop was interesting and that it provided a good chance to share information with other supporters of rural community halls. It helped in terms of understanding the challenges that communities face in maintaining their halls, and they learned new ideas for keeping rural halls alive.

In their comments, participants said what they liked best about the workshop:

Sharing of information – ideas and experiences

New ideas, like Facebook, signs and telephone listing

Keeping to schedule and overall organization

Everyone had a chance to speak

All the ideas to take back to the community about ways to use the hall

Hearing ideas from various halls

Folks attended!

Making contact with people – a chance to network and ultimately grow community halls

For improvements, it was suggested that participants could divide into smaller groups for the discussion and report back.

Participants suggested that ARCH organize more workshops, and send emails and newsletters to its members on a regular basis.