

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Number of individuals engaged: ~90

Number of stakeholder groups represented: 12

In the community:

- Facilitated two public engagement sessions
- Held interviews with community stakeholders and representatives of various stakeholder groups
- Engaged stakeholders at the regional level representing government, education, and non-profit sectors
- Participated in an on-air radio broadcast discussion to raise awareness of the project
- Toured the community by vehicle and on foot

OVERVIEW

The 13 Ways team returned to Elk Rapids for a second on-site visit and community assessment Sept. 14-18, 2021. In light of a cancelled connecting flight, the project team's arrival was delayed by a full day. In spite of this, community members and stakeholders were tremendously helpful and flexible in rescheduling engagements because of the delay. As a result, the project team was able to carry out all planned engagements with the exception of a small few, which were either postponed until the next visit or scheduled to take place online in the interim.

The team's work during the visit focused on further exploring some of the challenges and opportunities that had been identified during the first visit (in August) and further engaging with the stakeholders that had been identified as having a role within those challenges and opportunities. As well, efforts were made to develop an understanding of the community from a regional context, ultimately allowing the project team to conduct a regional comparative analysis and generate a better awareness of competitive advantages and unique challenges.

Engagements with local media and the general public offered the ability to raise further awareness of the project, and allowed the project team to invite and encourage interest and participation from those community members who may have not previously been aware of the overall undertaking. We continue to be available to anyone in the community who wishes to participate, and they need only reach out to us at info@13ways.ca.

SUMMARY & OBSERVATIONS

This round of discussions with stakeholders and community members confirmed the nature and extremity of dysfunction that exists between, and among, various key groups and agencies, and

between particular people, within the community. Factors contributing to this dysfunction include, but are not limited to, the following observations:

- Disrespectful dialogue that quickly becomes deliberately antagonistic and inflammatory language used at public engagements, events, and meetings
- Lack of adherence to existing processes/procedures for decision making and public input
- Outdated, or absence of, important processes/procedures for decision-making and public input
- General negative/defensive/aggressive/confrontational behaviour as the default behaviour
- Little, if any, agreement on collective goals and mandates, or a vision for the community

It is important to note that the above observations are not limited to any one specific stakeholder group. Many individuals have toned down their language to be more civil and that has changed the tone of discussions significantly. They have openly recognized the need to focus on the future of Elk Rapids, and that working together can create success, while the vicious language and personal assaults that have been dominating the public discourse in the past are hurting the community.

Others have said they would try to change the discourse, but have yet to demonstrate that through action and words. We remain hopeful that everyone in the community can subdue their own egos and personal animosities as that is what poses the biggest challenge threatening the community, and will ultimately undermine its ability to thrive and prosper. We will continue to offer advice and assistance to those willing to take it, but ultimately, the future of Elk Rapids requires people to recognize their anger and hostility is not improving the community, but distracting from it.

Communications & Engagement

Community dialogue and citizen engagement are essential components of a healthy community. The processes through which this dialogue and engagement is facilitated need to be revisited, clarified, and followed. Then, communicating those processes to and among stakeholders — ensuring they know *how* to engage and *when* to participate (and are aware of the mechanisms through which they may do so) — will be essential to ensuring the success of any new efforts to enhance communication between and among government, citizens, businesses, advisory committees, and other key community stakeholders.

Constant malicious accusations need to stop. Standards and expectations must be set — through policy or otherwise — around how fruitful and respectful engagement is to take place. Continuous jumping to the conclusion that there are always evil or ulterior motives of others in

disagreement, or that everything is done in secret or with an eye to harm others, is causing irreparable damage to the reputation of the community.

We have also found no evidence that there is a deliberate attempt to ignore public feedback or limit public engagement. There are issues with communications and decision making processes in various organizations within the community, but it stems from one of three places — exhaustion and fear from historical personal attacks, gaps in communications and engagement protocols, and decision reversals based on after-the-matter criticisms.

Communications and engagement policies need to be constantly refined to adjust to new realities, people need the opportunity to provide constructive feedback, and once decisions have been made following the clearly articulated engagement processes, they need to be followed through on. Not everyone will agree on every issue, but they need to be heard, everyone needs to be respectful, and the community needs to move forward.

It needs to be noted, however, that there are different expectations for members of the public, and those in the public domain. There is no rule in place for members of the public to be professional, beyond a social obligation to show respect to others, especially those who publicly serve the larger community. However, public leaders of boards, commissions, and committees are subject to a reasonable degree of public criticism and feedback, and they should expect it, and approach it professionally. The manner in which this feedback is sometimes addressed contributes to, rather than diminishes, the animosity built into the dialogue happening in the community. We are not saying that some of the personal attacks are not vicious and unwarranted, but as community leaders it is important to address those attacks with diplomacy and leadership, not equally vicious unwarranted attacks.

Board & Committee Governance

The 13 Ways project team has identified a need for certain community boards and committees to revisit (or *establish*, where appropriate) their respective terms of reference to ensure alignment with their original overall intent and objectives. Recommendations will be forthcoming for particular agencies with respect to the role and mandate of board members, good governance practices and training, and the role of staff that serve that board. We have recognized, and we recommend, all boards and agencies undertake a governance review and seek specific governance training, as a healthy reminder of their roles and responsibilities.

We also will have recommendations forthcoming with respect to ethics guidelines, public disclosure, codes of conduct, board representation, public notices, and more. In the interim, we recommend every board or agency in the public domain review their policies and procedures regarding these areas.

Housing Gaps & Labor Shortages

The project team further explored gaps in both housing and labor — and set out to understand their contributions and limitations for the future of Elk Rapids' economy. We identified this as a significant issue to the community and its future, and we anticipate having recommendations on next steps to address these issues. In the interim, we applaud the community and its leadership for restarting the Housing Task Force to address these issues.

Although each item represents a complex issue in and of itself, there exists opportunities to explore the interconnectivity of them both, and to implement innovative, collaborative solutions that address them concurrently. Failure to do so will pose a very real threat to the long-term sustainability of the community. Accordingly, understanding and addressing both items remains very much a priority of the overall project and will be part of our final assessment.

Opportunities & Looking Forward

Over the course of both trips, the 13 Ways team has encountered and experienced what can only be described as a genuine passion for the Elk Rapids community. In your hands is a community with boundless opportunities. You need only pick a direction, a course, a way to go. Community members, regardless of their stances and opinions on matters, appear to be united in their desire to see their community flourish. There are simply, passionately differing opinions (as there should be) on how to do so. The expression of those opinions need only return to being respectful and focused on the future of the community, not on individuals.

Fostering a culture and an environment that is welcoming to, and inclusive of, a diverse array of opinions and ideas will benefit the community immensely. Establishing and refining the processes that enable such a participatory forum will prove most challenging — but not impossible. It has become evident that there is an indelible energy to be captured; that there are community champions and willing participants to be mobilized; that there is potential to be leveraged and capitalized on. Elk Rapids truly is a success story in the making, as long as it can learn, once again, to be civil and respectful in its discourse.

NEXT VISIT

The 13 Ways team will continue to make arrangements to meet with and engage stakeholders representing a variety of interests and sectors. In the next visit we will emphasize time on improving the community discourse, as well as the opportunities presented in the east side of the community. We also anticipate one significant public forum/presentation will take place,

which will require pre-registration to ensure venue capacity and public health and safety compliance.

Anyone wishing to provide input or otherwise participate in the ongoing community assessment project is invited and encouraged to contact 13 Ways to make arrangements to do so. Please send an email to info@13ways.ca with the subject line, 'Elk Rapids Interview'.

PREVIOUS TRIP SUMMARY

August 18-21, 2021

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Number of individuals interviewed: 37

Groups interviewed: 4

In the community:

- Toured and assessed neighborhoods on the west side of the river on foot and by car
- Toured and assessed the library and island grounds
- Participated in 'Evening on River Street' with a booth, free books, and a lot of conversations
- Visited and talked with vendors and patrons at the Elk Rapids Farmer's Market at Rotary Park and mainstreet businesses
- Toured and assessed the harbor and boat launch
- Toured and assessed Veterans' Memorial Park

OVERVIEW

We brought three members of our team to Elk Rapids for the first round of interviews, engagements, and assessment. Each brings a different area of focus and expertise in our community building work. Heather Thomson specializes in consumer behaviours, retail economics and mainstreets. Stuart Fullarton specializes in economic development and communications strategies. Doug Griffiths brings 20 years of community building experience to the project.

FIRST VISIT SUMMARY & OBSERVATIONS

Library: There are some challenges in the community between organizations and individuals, particularly over the library expansion proposal and fundraising campaign. That has seeped into other work and other initiatives in the community. While those involved in the situation have not let it go because they feel it is important, the majority of the community recognizes the damage being done to the reputation of the community and progress on other issues, and is ready to move on.

Reputation: The negative attention being generated as a result of the library matter appears to be causing considerable harm to the public/external perception of Elk Rapids, and is likely inhibiting the community's present and future ability to attract new businesses, visitors, and residents to the area. In light of a steadily declining population — and to ensure the community's long-term sustainability and success — restoring the community's reputation to achieve growth and sustainability should be treated as non-negotiable.

Population Changes: As full-time residents retire and sell properties, they are purchased by part-time vacationers and retirees. Seasonal residents and visitors don't add to the permanent resident roster, the school population, the available workforce, or the volunteer base. This is supported by a recorded steady decline in the general population of the community and a steady decline in the student population in the schools.

Workforce Changes and Business Viability: With a slow and steady reduction in permanent full-time residents, there is a decline in the available workforce. Businesses find it difficult to provide service during the summer months with such a small available workforce, and struggle for viability the rest of the year with such a small permanent population base. As businesses lose viability those temporary closures can become permanent.

Volunteer Base: Volunteers create events that continue to attract residents, visitors, and tourists but those volunteer numbers are declining with the loss of permanent residents. That puts the continuation of those events at risk as volunteers retire or face exhaustion. There are a limited number of volunteers and most contribute to multiple events, which means it is not just one event at risk of suddenly not running, but all of them.

With the loss of services, businesses, and events the community will find it more difficult to maintain and attract new permanent residents, but eventually it will also face difficulties attracting tourists. The loss of permanent residents and the potential decline of a robust tourism industry due to a lack of services available would double the negative impact on the community.

The loss of businesses and permanent residents will eventually reduce the resources available to the Village Council to support or fund quality of life and economic growth initiatives, and challenge the sustainability and viability of other organizations like the Chamber of Commerce, the Downtown Development Authority, the Library, and the School Board to provide services to the community's permanent and seasonal residents.

From our experience, this process of decline moves slowly until it reaches a tipping point. Then it moves so suddenly it feels instantaneous. This happens because the community is currently bustling, it is beautiful, and it is engaging. The challenges are not easily observable, so they can be easily ignored. People are moved to action when things visually look bad. It is difficult to move people to action when things appear to be good, as they do in Elk Rapids right now.

We believe the community needs to focus its attention on actions and initiatives that can sustain or grow the permanent resident base in the village and the larger region. This work is key to ensuring the sustainability and viability of the village, business and service offerings, events, the local economy, and the quality of life of residents.

**It is important to note these are our initial observations of the situation with Elk Rapids and the region. As we continue meetings and interviews, continue collecting data and information, and continue to analyse the situation our understanding and recommendations will deepen.*

PRELIMINARY RECOMMENDATIONS

Library: The library expansion and fundraising campaign remains controversial. Continued pursuit of that issue will not bring harmony to the community. Focus should be put on resolving current issues regarding ownership of the property and validity of the contract. The very notion of expanding the library should be put on hold.

Communication and Public Disclosures: A policy review around communication and public disclosures should be undertaken to identify where gaps exist relative to recent issues that have been identified. This is to ensure the public is aware of what they are entitled to and where to find it, administration is aware of the processes for dissemination of information and decisions, and boards and trustees have a coordinated and deliberate approach to public queries.

Processes and Public Engagement: A clearly articulated public engagement policy, and a clearly articulated process for making decisions will ensure public confidence in the decision making process, but also ensure they know when and how to make submissions. This will not ensure individuals will get what they want, but it will ensure confidence they will have input that will be considered. Any existing related policies should be reviewed

for validity and effectiveness, and/or a new one(s) developed, where appropriate. Doing so will maximize accountability and understanding in the decision making process.

Relationships with Neighboring Municipalities: Elk Rapids is not an island unto itself. It is imperative that the Village begin work immediately to rebuild trust and relationships with neighboring municipalities. The community's future is intertwined with its neighboring municipalities on issues like the library expansion, but also with regard to administrative viability issues like zoning and ordinance enforcement, and potential growth initiatives in housing, economic development, and marketing, to name only a few.

NEXT VISIT

Recommendations: With respect to communication and public disclosures, processes and public engagements, and relationships with neighboring municipalities we will be working with the appropriate organizations to review policies and implement actions that support our recommendations.

Housing: A strategy to sustain or grow permanent residents requires a deliberate housing strategy. We will gather more information on land availability, capacity for growth, and opportunities to improve targeted housing in anticipation of making some recommendations on how to proceed.

Library: We will continue to gather more information as we anticipate making some recommendations on how to proceed.

Downtown Development Authority (DDA): We are aware the DDA has recently initiated a strategic planning initiative. We will meet to share information and coordinate the development of strategies to ensure alignment and a shared vision of a successful Elk Rapids.

Interviews and Meetings: We will meet with individual residents and business owners, as well as small groups of citizens to learn more about the community's challenges and opportunities. We will also meet with community organizations to ensure a common understanding of challenges and opportunities and alignment of strategies. However, we will also seek to diversify those we meet with by adding more residents who have young children, as well as young professionals and entrepreneurs in the community, to our interview roster. If you are interested in participating in this process, please let us know: email info@13ways.ca with your contact information and 'Elk Rapids Interview' in the subject line.

Public Meeting: We anticipate two public meetings open to attendance from anyone in the community or the greater region. We will request pre-registration to ensure the venue has capacity, that we can use an effective process to gather feedback, and to ensure the safety of all participants given the ongoing pandemic. Watch for announcements and registration details soon.