ELK RAPIDS

Assessment, Engagement & Recommendations

13 Ways, Inc.
December 9th, 2021

In July 2021, a group of stakeholders in Elk Rapids, led by the Elk Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce, entered into an agreement with 13 Ways, Inc. of Alberta, Canada, for the completion of a community assessment project to comprise the following two primary deliverables:

1. **Engage the public in consultations:** Meeting with members of the community and the greater region, stakeholder and citizen groups, and businesses through interviews, focus groups, ad-hoc opportunities, and public meetings to gather opinions and information.
2. **Perform a community assessment:** Identify the community's assets, challenges, and opportunities, with recommendations to create a pathway to success for the community, its citizens, and its businesses.

The 13 Ways team conducted three visits to the community in August, September, and November to achieve these objectives. Beside public engagement, the team also assessed the community through guided tours, by vehicle and on foot, visiting and patronizing local businesses, assessing recreational activities, attending events, exploring the built and natural environment, and touring the surrounding area. The team also conducted online and telephone interviews with citizens and stakeholders between visits, monitored news reports, and surveyed social media sites between visits.

The project team's three visits allowed us an outsider's and a visitor's perspective of Elk Rapids, but our extensive public engagement gave us connections and information often only available to a resident of the community. Our impressions, observations, and learnings (along with the extensive research and stakeholder engagement carried out concurrently) have been combined with our decades of experience with other communities and are reflected in the recommendations contained in this summary report.

The 13 Ways team leveraged various means to engage stakeholders over the course of the community assessment. A quantified summary of unique visits is offered below. It is important to note our team met multiple times with many stakeholders and citizens, but such visits are not reflected in these numbers. As well, numerous other spontaneous and ad-hoc engagements also took place, but these are not accounted for in the official total listed below.

Group Meetings	**21**
Scheduled Individual (In-Person) Interviews	**39**
Zoom Interviews	**12**
Phone Interviews	**9**
Public Meetings	**2**
Events	**Evening on River Street, Farmers Market**
Media	**Radio, Newspaper Interviews**

Project updates were communicated publicly following each official visit through the Elk Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce to the public. With each project update an open call was issued to community members inviting them to reach out to the 13 Ways team directly if they were interested in participating in, and/or being interviewed as part of, the project. We received many requests and integrated each into our in-person, online, or phone call interviews.

In total, the 13 Ways team engaged with more than **240 individual citizens** from the Village of Elk Rapids and the surrounding area at least once, and some multiple times.

The community of Elk Rapids is beautiful. When we first arrived we wondered if we were in the right location. Breathtaking scenery in a dream location with a bustling mainstreet and warm and friendly people all came together to create the impression of paradise. Yet, like so many communities like Elk Rapids, it is easy to mistake good fortune for good planning.

Years ago, Elk Rapids was a less than robust community. Mainstreet was in decline with vacant buildings and dilapidated storefronts. We heard from many, and saw even more pictures, of the state of the community not so long ago. Some risk-taking entrepreneurs have invested in buildings, reconditioned them, and sold them or opened businesses in them. That is how Elk Rapids became what it is today. Those days are easily forgotten. It can seem like Elk Rapids has always been successful, and that it will always be successful. But it has faced dark times. Even today there are challenges that lie beneath the surface, and others right at eye level, that put the community at risk. Yet people choose to ignore them. Complacency kills.

Many of the businesses in the community are seasonal in nature. They open when tourists start to arrive, and close when they leave. Yet, with the challenges in finding labour, many talked about how they considered closing up for the season and not reopening in the spring. It is hard to persuade people to work a seasonal business for tourists when fast food chain wages are approaching $20/hour. It is even harder to persuade them when those employees have to commute because they can't afford to live in Elk Rapids. Permanent year round businesses face equally daunting challenges as they struggle with the issue of housing and the lack of business in the off season hours. Their viability is challenged year long.

The lack of housing affordability is an issue in Elk Rapids, which is a challenge for young employees and the businesses that want to hire them, but it is also a challenge for young families and threatens the future of the community. Without young families living in the community the viability of the schools is threatened. Quality programming and school-of-choice opportunities means there are a significant number of students not from the Elk Rapids region currently attending local schools. That changes when competitive quality choices are provided in their own community. The current decline in student enrollment will eventually threaten the quality of the programming, or the viability of the school, and that will deter young families from choosing Elk Rapids as a place to live.

This is not only an issue for the Village, nor is it only the Village's issue to address. The viability of the Village should be of concern to residents in neighbouring municipalities as well. The success of the Village will only add to the success of the region, but the failure of the Village will invariably become an issue for residents in neighbouring municipalities. We should not ignore each other because of an artificial municipal boundary. Doing so is equivalent to saying, "Am I my brother's keeper?" The solution to housing issues requires coordination and cooperation between the Village and the Township. Yet, that relationship is frosty, to say the least. There is a general sense that runs through the region that each can function and succeed without the other. That may, in fact, be the case. At least for now.

Tourists come to the community, driven by the lake, the beach, the docks, and the pier. It is often presumed they will always come, but we have seen communities fail because they thought their good fortunes could never end. With no young families and no new employees, year-round businesses are often the first to close without year-round employees and a year-round economy to keep them viable. With those businesses gone all that remains are seasonal stores and gas stations, and a lot of empty buildings. There will be more empty homes too, as more residents become seasonal. Vacant buildings

decline from neglect, taxes go up as the tax base goes down, and the seasonal owners return to find their town has changed.

It is not the quaint beautiful village they once knew, where they walked adjacent beautiful properties to head for a nice meal and a glass of wine, or an ice-cream, or a coffee, or a beautiful piece of local art. All that is gone. All that remains are tourists who fetch gas and snacks, and grab pre-made meals to go, leaving their garbage trailing behind them on the street. Why? Because the village is empty and unkempt from the lack of activities, events, and community beautification work that used to be done by volunteers. With nothing left but seasonal retirees and tourists (who don't pay taxes), how can the village afford to keep itself in pristine condition?

Oh, I know this sounds like a far-fetched story, but that is because things look very fine right now. The community is robust and vibrant and beautiful. We are talking about the future. No housing diversity or affordability means no young families or young employees moving to town. That means fewer permanent residents to keep businesses viable and operating. That leads to business closures. That leads to vacant neglected buildings and a smaller tax base, which means reduced services, or higher taxes. Without services, amenities, and year round businesses, that means more seasonal residents, and fewer volunteers, which just exacerbates the problem.

This won't happen overnight, but neither will it take a decade. We have seen this happen in communities, and always the remaining residents say that it seemed to happen so suddenly, and then it was too late. Already, the community volunteer base is exhausted and shrinking in size, but also made up of the same aging demographic. That is not meant to be a slight, or insulting, but an important observation. Who will fill their shoes when they retire from volunteering? Will new seasonal residents care to volunteer at all? Meetings held to talk about the issues of young families had no young families attend, and no one in attendance could identify one they could invite. It took a lot of work to locate the ones we found. There is little diversity in the demographics of those who attended meetings, those who sit on committees, boards, and agencies, and those whom we saw in the street and in businesses.

Frankly, there is a strong opposition to any change within the community. For some, the resistance to change is based on environmental concerns, such as protecting nature. We can certainly appreciate that. However, climate refugees are going to be a real force and will be growing in number, and simply preventing them from entering your community is not an answer. In other cases, people used nature as a weapon to protect their own privilege and to prevent development. There is a strong sense of entitlement throughout the community. Elk Rapids is generally a wealthy community, and no doubt those folks have worked hard to achieve their level of success. We don't dispute or disparage them. However, that drives the notion that nothing needs to change, though there are problems. That is complacency at best, and entitlement at worst.

None of the challenges facing the Village of Elk Rapids and the region are easily addressed. If they were, they would have been addressed already. Neither are they inconsequential. Things look fine now to so many, and what issues you do see, may look small and inconsequential. They are not. They will not appear urgent or significant, and they will not mean the failure of the community tomorrow, or even next year. But Elk Rapids is heading for a tipping point that will have an effect like dominos. When one issue reaches a crisis point, it will all come down quickly.

Except where noted specifically, these recommendations apply to all the community's boards and commissions who can influence the future of the community:

- Elk Rapids Village Council
- Elk Rapids District Library Board of Trustees
- Elk Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce
- Elk Rapids Downtown Development Authority
- Elk Rapids Planning Commission
- Elk Rapids School District

Issues Addressed in this Report:

- Conduct and Respect
- Communication
- Housing Availability and Affordability
- Community Planning
- Branding, Marketing, and Identity
- Diversity and Inclusion
- Governance Standards
- Others

The Problem:

There are some significant issues with dysfunctional attitudes in the community. The community has become deeply fractured over issues that would normally cause debates and discussions connected to the future of the community and its overall well-being, but these fractures have gone far beyond disagreements and debates. The disagreements have devolved into behaviours that would not be tolerated in a school yard environment, yet they persist at kitchen tables, on the street, and at public meetings. Insults, personal attacks, and accusations have replaced discussions about what might actually work for the community and what course it should take for its future. Some of these dysfunctional attitudes are:

- **Self-Righteous Attitudes:** There is a strong sense by many people in the community that their way, their perspective, and their belief is the right way. That presumption stops people from listening to others, or considering there are other legitimate ways, perspectives, and beliefs that have merit. Acknowledging and respecting opposing points of view, and making *genuine* efforts to understand others' positions is a critical component of a healthy community. In the end, humility goes a long way. This is not all about you, and you are not always right.

- **Contempt:** There is far too much instant contempt for each other. We heard it in voices, we saw it in faces, we watched it in real time at meetings. People who disagreed with each other showed their obvious contempt for each other when they refused to make eye contact, refused to speak directly to each other, spoke over others as though they weren't talking, or outright insulted each other. The disagreements have grown into such personal issues that people have an obvious disdain for each other.

- **The Presumption of Evil:** Far too many people who are active in the community have begun taking sides based on who is on each side. Instead of discussing issues with us, many people talked about the motives of others and made presumptions that those motives were evil. In fact, too many people explained their position on issues, not on the issue itself, but based on who they stood against. We witnessed many people reading in false motives, evil motives, into phone calls, emails, and comments that were not supported with evidence. There is a presumption of evil that permeates community thinking.

These are the three most significant mindsets that are damaging the community, exacerbating the problems, and diminishing the opportunities for the community to move forward.

The Challenge to the Community:

The community is beyond discussing issues. Any issue that comes up for discussion immediately devolves into accusations of ulterior motives, evil intentions, and underhanded dealings, especially when some people don't get their way. It means people that need to talk won't talk to each other. It means issues and ideas aren't discussed for merit. The majority of people in the community are ready to move on and open to discussing solutions, but the agenda is hamstrung by angry rhetoric, malicious attacks, and personal agendas.

We need to reiterate something of significance. Public consultation and engagement is designed to provide public feedback on an issue. Sometimes the majority public opinion is clear and concise, and sometimes it is not. Sometimes the majority public opinion is right, and sometimes it is not. At times, majority public opinion has given the world dictatorships and strips people of basic human rights. There are times we need democracy, and times we need leadership. Public consultation and engagement is the chance to provide input to an issue, but that does not ensure the issue goes your way. 'Listen' does not mean 'obey'. Having input does not mean things will go your way.

There is a sense of entitlement brought about by self-righteous attitudes that leads some in the community to presume their input means things will go their way. That is not what a community is. You aren't contributing to your community if you think your opinion is the only one that matters. When people don't get their way, there is a tendency to show contempt to those who disagree, and make false accusations of malicious and evil intent against anyone who disagrees. This creates a level of general distrust that can provide short-term success to the proponents, but that distrust causes animosity and factions that leave the community deeply divided and dysfunctional. That is where you are now.

The Opportunities if the Problem is Solved:

The community could focus on addressing issues in a respectful manner with solutions that might not garner universal support, but could propel the community ahead and prepare it for the future.

The majority of citizens in the community and region want to discuss the future. With divisions and personal agendas out of the way, and confidence that disagreements would not lead to personal attacks, more of the public would be willing to step forward to express their opinions and their concerns, but they might also be willing to serve on boards and commissions. Presently, they are reluctant for fear of having their name and their reputation tarnished by participating.

More active public engagement, more diversity on boards, a focus on discussing issues and opportunities, and movement to adopt pragmatic solutions to real challenges is what comes from solving this issue.

Recommendation(s):

How do you make recommendations regarding this issue? We struggled with this. We can get so caught up in our anger that we can't see beyond it. Except our anger is a liar. When we are angry we look for more reasons to be angry to feed our anger. When we are distrustful, we look for more reasons to be distrustful, to justify our distrust. If this were a playground we would send kids away in different directions so they could cool down and regain their composure. Perhaps that is a recommendation.

Frankly, everyone participating in this needs to take a break and come back with a different attitude that recognizes people are not evil, you are not entitled to special treatment, there is no conspiracy against you, you won't always get your own way, the world is changing and the status quo is not an option.

The Problem:

Poor communication is *creating* and *contributing* to the challenges being experienced by the community, and represents one of its biggest challenges. Whatever the case, we found plenty of room for improvement by increasing the amount of information shared, and improving the processes for how it is being shared. There are two main issues, all strongly interconnected with one other, contributing to poor communication:

- **There is a lack of capacity:** There does not appear to be a dedicated communications function within any of the community's various boards and commissions. Communications are being executed by administrative staff responsible for various other tasks and responsibilities. Those employees running communications strategies in a secondary role don't possess the time or resources to effectively manage a thorough and robust communications strategy. Staff are to be commended for their tremendous efforts and for doing a commendable job given the limited time and resources they possess, but communications is a vital function of successful public engagement, policy implementation, and governance processes.

- **There is a clear lack of a communications policy, or a failure to follow existing policy**: We found many circumstances where communications policies did not exist for each organization and, when they did exist, they were not followed. In an attempt to bolster communication there are now too many channels of communication but no consistent policy to ensure all the avenues of communication present the same information consistently. A simplified, concise, and consistent communications strategy needs to be articulated.

The Challenge to the Community:

Poor communications means that residents, businesses, and stakeholders are occasionally unaware or uninformed of meetings, processes, input opportunities, and the reasons for decisions being made. That contributes to an environment in which leadership is seen as hiding something from the public. Whether this is true is irrelevant to the perception. Even when exemplary processes have been followed, poor communication has created a level of distrust, which some have leveraged to create doubt about the validity of processes and decisions with which they disagree.

There is a feedback loop of distrust and animosity. Organizational leadership holds back information out of a fear of being criticized and personally attacked. Citizens presume leadership is hiding things from citizens as they fail to be open with information and attack citizens requesting information. Now there are multiple factions within the community, all distrusting each other, all accusing each other, all focused away from the issue of most importance: the success of the community.

The dysfunctional nature of public discourse in Elk Rapids is creating negative attention that is being observed by residents, businesses, and media from Elk Rapids and beyond the village. The brand and reputation of the Village is rapidly turning negative which will harm the community's ability to attract and retain residents, businesses, and visitors.

The Opportunities if the Problem is Solved:

Improved communications will help ensure that community members remain well informed of decisions, projects, events, and initiatives that affect them. Improving both the processes and systems through which information is currently shared will also help ensure leaders are fully transparent in their decision-making. Ultimately, relations between decision-makers and their constituents/stakeholders will be strengthened through a relationship of mutual trust and understanding, which can be achieved through a strong, clear, and robust process of communicating and sharing information.

Recommendation(s):

- All boards and commissions undertake communications-related training that includes:
    - How to respectfully engage and communicate with one another while retaining the ability to productively debate and disagree; how to initiate and engage in 'crucial conversations. EX: Acknowledgement when someone is speaking. Three Second Rule.
    - Techniques, insights and best practices around media and public relations; and how to present themselves professionally, respectfully, and responsibly in all public-facing interactions;
- Village of Elk Rapids should provide an updated quarterly update to residents to include, but not limited to, budget targets and revenue expenditure, status of ongoing initiatives (dashboard), meeting schedules, and upcoming public engagements.
- Each board and commission should designate responsibility for communication and provide training and education resources for that person.
- Centralized, simplified, concise, and consistent routes of public notifications and information the public is aware of and can rely on: Examples - dashboard, email subscription updates, Village Managers Report
- Response policies in place for email and social media that articulates authority to respond, nature of the response, and anticipated timelines.
- Annual Citizen Satisfaction Survey
    - Ensure the survey is accessible via an online link and a paper copy to be available for pick up at the town office.
    - The survey should be a mix of quantitative and qualitative with few open ended questions.
    - Communicate the process extensively, both before and after the survey is completed. Ensure the results are made public and easily accessible, and articulate specifically how they will be used and/or followed up on.

The Problem:

There is a shortage of available and affordable housing in the community, particularly certain types of housing required and desired by younger families and those who work directly in businesses in the community. There is limited land available within the Village to address housing issues, and the current stock that is available is converting to profitable seasonal rentals. There is a missing middle in the housing market, a diversity of housing options, that prevents a diversity of residents from being able to live and work in Elk Rapids. Specifically, this is not an affordable housing issue, but an issue of housing affordability, which is partially driven by a lack of housing diversity and availability. It is important to understand that none of these issues are anyone's fault, and there is no easy answer to this problem.

The Challenge to the Community:

Without addressing the housing issues in the community it is difficult/next to impossible to attract younger families who can help populate the schools and use local amenities, and younger employees who can, and will, work in the local businesses. Not to mention, a neighbourhood vibe is important.

In the absence of new residents, businesses face considerable challenges in being able to grow their staffing complement and stay economically viable during winter months. As well, the population of the community grows more transient with a growing reliance on tourism, which is changing the sense of community as seasonal residents and permanent residents clash over what the community of Elk Rapids is, and is becoming.

The Opportunities if the Problem is Solved:

Having diverse, affordable, attainable, and accessible selection of housing will allow the community to grow its year-round population base. The permanent residents and year-round population means more patrons for local businesses resulting in a more robust and stable local economy. It also means more employees for seasonal and year round local businesses which means more services and amenities for permanent residents and tourists alike. It also means more security and stability for local schools. Addressing housing issues will encourage a diversity of lifestyle and demographics in the community that can ensure the long-term stability of the community.

Recommendation(s):

- **Conducting a housing needs assessment**

    - To evaluate industry trends, movements, and opportunities
    - To quantify and categorize existing housing supply, stock, and inventory
    - To identify gaps in certain types of housing with respect to product and pricing
    - To identify opportunities for growth and future development (focusing closely on infill in particular)

- **Conduct Public Engagement**

    Consider the following questions:
    - What type of housing is needed to ensure residents are able to 'age in place' without ever needing to leave the community?
    - What type of housing is needed in order to attract new residents to the community? What about young families? Seniors? Short-term workers?
    - What is discouraging new residential development from taking place?
    - What can be done to make the community more attractive to residential developers and home builders?
    - What building/development incentives could be considered?
    - What limitations exist with respect to the availability of developable land?
    - What, if any, land remains shovel-ready for home builders to build upon?
    - Is residential infill a feasible/viable opportunity to pursue?
    - How flexible are the Village's land use/zoning restrictions with respect to being able to permit and enable a variety of residential housing options (i.e., with respect to density, height restrictions, parking requirements, etc.)?

- **Develop a housing strategy**

    - Establish a land bank enabling the Village to attract developers or pursue the strategic acquisition of lands to be used for future residential development
    - Examine opportunities for infill residential development; explore potential incentive programs for targeted housing development
    - Develop a marketing and engagement strategy specifically targeting stakeholders in regional residential development — developers, builders, real estate agents, etc.
    - Engage neighbouring municipalities in a long-term housing strategy to address regional housing issues that support encouraging young families and help grow the regional economy
    - Engage Housing North

- **Community (Housing) Investment Fund**

    Imposing rules on what people can do with their property has limitations. However, many communities like yours are raising funds through special levies that are then used to address housing and residency issues that create challenges for residents and businesses alike. Revenues from such levies are allocated to a Community (Housing) Investment Fund, which are then leveraged to purchase land, incentive infill development, or facilitate partnerships with developers on particular identified housing needs in the community.

https://hbr.org/2019/04/research-when-airbnb-listings-in-a-city-increase-so-do-rent-prices
https://files.epi.org/pdf/157766.pdf

The Problem:

There is no overarching community vision, and thus no shared goals for residents and stakeholders to collectively buy into, collaborate on, and work toward. When an organization did present a strategic plan it was more commonly a list of priorities and issues without an inspiring vision, with a declared purpose, and without a 'why'. As a result, most community agencies and organizations are focused on their own individual strategic priorities, that are not aligned at best, and come into conflict at worst. A common vision for the future of the community is lacking.

The Challenge to the Community:

In the absence of a shared vision, the community becomes ripe for conflict and strife as personal agendas and competing ideas come into conflict. Even what the notion of success looks like varies considerably within the community as everyone works to implement their own vision. Without a target, everyone is throwing darts around trying to hit their own board, and everyone thinks they are helping, when they are only fulfilling their own vision. The lack of vision creates conflict, which creates confrontation that escalates into intolerance of new ideas and alternative solutions. That simple lack of a community strategy is tearing at the community.

The Opportunities if the Problem is Solved:

A shared vision can create unity among the various boards and commissions within the community. It can create an environment of collaboration and cooperation, and ultimately contribute to a more respectful working relationship between the community's various stakeholders and organizations. Even those who disagree with the vision and the strategy, can appreciate they had their input and the community chose a clearly articulated path forward. They will know what the path is, why it was chosen, and how every decision fits into supporting the vision of the future of the community. Though that does not mean everyone will agree, it can drastically improve the overall sense of community harmony. As well, a shared community strategy can make efficient and effective use of the talents, resources, and capacity of individuals and organizations in the community.

Recommendation(s):

- **Create a Community Strategic Plan**
    - Utilize an Outside Third Party
    - Ensure Robust Public Engagement
    - Shared Story, Shared Vision, Shared Values
    - From this each organization can create their own Mission, Actions, and Milestones

- **Create a Shared Economic Strategy**
    - Between the Chamber of Commerce, the Downtown Development Association, and the Downtown Merchants Association
    - Shared Story, Shared Vision, Shared Values
    - Unique Mission, Actions, and Milestones

- **Create a Community Development MasterPlan**
  - Identify East Side Development and Community Enhancement Opportunities
  - Identify Business Growth Nodes
  - Identify Housing Diversification Locations and Opportunities
  - Identify Socialization and Public Space Growth and Utilization

- **Regional Cooperation and Collaboration**
  - Develop trusted relationships that extend beyond political boundaries and short-term political agendas.
  - Address Delivery of Library Services to Library Patrons, not political and municipal agendas
  - Address delivery of water and wastewater services
  - Address family and workforce housing issues
  - Address opportunities for coordinated economic development and marketing opportunities to grow the regional economy

- **Labour Force Needs Assessment**
  - The Village of Elk Rapids and Elk Rapids Township business labour needs, and the challenges they create, should be assessed.

The Problem:

The community at present has no clear identity, nor is there any consistent agreement on what the community should be, or how it should market and promote itself. Plenty of ideas have been discussed and proposed that include a retirement community, a tourist destination, a hub for recreation, a social hub, and many others. The community needs to define what it wants to be and make strategic choices to take it in that direction. Until the community establishes a clear identity and a path forward, it will be difficult to market, despite its many attractive and alluring qualities.

The Challenge to the Community:

In the absence of a clear community identity and a story to support it the community has no sense of itself. It is difficult to identify specific goals, actions, and objectives with respect to marketing and promoting the community. Identifying target audiences is particularly challenging. As a result, any efforts to attract new residents, businesses, and tourists will be wasted. So, little is done by way of marketing, and the community gets what comes to it, rather than going to get what it wants.

The Opportunities if the Problem is Solved:

With a clear focus on what the community is going to become in the future, it is easy to identify the target audience for a marketing strategy. In business, marketing efforts fail unless you know what you are selling and who you are selling it to. That becomes your brand, your story, and your message. With a clearly articulated community brand and identity, and a robust marketing strategy, there is tremendous opportunity to put Elk Rapids on the radar of future residents, new investors, new businesses, and new visitors.

Recommendation(s):

- Identify what the community is, and what it wants to become.
  - Public engagement strategy to gather public feedback
  - Organization and stakeholder engagement strategy to gather feedback and to ensure alignment of goals and coordination of objectives
  - Leverage the strategic plan story and vision
- Create a brand that reflects the identity of the community from now into the future.
- Ensure a brand guide is created to reflect standards and uses of colours, logos, typography, and other brand assets for the entire community.
- Create a community profile to reflect market segmentations for public and business marketing efforts.
- Develop a comprehensive marketing and communications strategy for implementation.

The Problem:

There is a noticeable lack of diversity in the community, and significant under-representation of marginalized and minority groups on the community's various boards and commissions. In fact, most boards and commissions are populated from the same group of people who sit on multiple boards and commissions.

Decision-making is likely to be much more homogeneous in nature but that lack of diversity leads to a lack of diversity of opinions and ideas as well. Governance research has shown that a lack of diversity means comfortable discussions and conformity, but it also demonstrates a tendency for unchallenged presumptions that lead to poor decisions. Diversity adds discomfort during the discussion process, but it has repeatedly been proven to lead to better decisions for the organizations and communities.

We know the argument will be made that others do not step up to let it be known they are interested. That is correct, but the reasons why are important to note. First, they do not because of the vicious nature disagreements are handled in the community. And secondly, there is a presumption in the community that a small cabal of insiders run everything, which is reinforced by the fact the same small group of people seem to populate every committee and board. The only way to change the impression is to deliberately create a succession plan for each board, and then create vacancies and recruit new people with fresh ideas.

The Challenge to the Community:

The fewer groups and demographics that are represented in decision-making entities, the less equipped those entities are in being able to understand and reflect the views of a diverse mix of people within the community. As a result, people from underrepresented, marginalized, or minority demographics are less likely to see their needs being acknowledged and addressed, and as a result are more likely to see the community as being unwelcoming, unaccommodating, or unresponsive to their needs. As well, there is a sense within the community that their challenges are not important since there is no one who reflects their situation or their demographic on the boards and committees. That exacerbates the sense of apathy within the community.

The Opportunities if the Problem is Solved:

By improving diversity and inclusion in the community a broader range of solutions can be found to address old issues, new opportunities can be identified for the future, and a growing sense of ownership and an appreciation for full public participation will emerge. As well, younger generations are growing in a world where you must be a truly welcoming community to attract them, which means welcoming people of any age, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status. That cannot only be done with words, though, it takes action. Diversity and inclusion must be on display and lived.

Recommendation(s):

- Implement mandatory Diversity, Equality, and Inclusivity training for all governing bodies
- Implement a Welcoming Community Initiative
- Process for enticing and attracting young professionals, remote workers.
- Strategy for Indigenous and Native engagement in the community and region.
- Consider a Deliberate Unique Cultural Event that draws particular populations out of their homes and into the community.
- Explore services and amenities desired by different populations: example - childcare needs
- Initiate Policies and Procedures Review to identify areas in which amendments can be made to better encourage the participation of underrepresented, minority, and marginalized groups.

The Problem:

Some of the greatest and most pronounced challenges we observed and heard of in Elk Rapids stemmed from the lack of harmony, organization, and decorum among all boards and agencies, and at the municipal level. Among the various boards and commissions we engaged with, we witnessed and observed a tremendous need for clarity of standards, and adherence to guidelines that included:

- Conduct and behaviour
- Ethics and Conflict of interest
- Term limits
- Diversity and Inclusivity
- Board Appointments

In our review, we found that provisions outlining standards and requirements for some or all of the above areas were either:

- Entirely absent.
- In place, but vague and not easily understood.
- In place, but simply not followed due to a lack of awareness around their existence, or out of intentional disregard.

Of course, our above comments refer to the community's various boards and commissions in general; not every observation was noted with respect to each one.

The Challenge to the Community:

The lack of consistent and quality governance training among the community's various boards and commissions creates an environment of dysfunction, ultimately contributing to feelings of resentment and heightened confrontation, which significantly decrease the function and effectiveness of the boards and antagonizes public distrust and resentment.

The Opportunities if the Problem is Solved:

A well-functioning board generally means a well-functioning organization that clearly meets expectations, which grows public trust and confidence.

Recommendation(s):

- **Terms of Reference Review:**
  Audit of existing terms of reference and/or any other governing documents outlining each board, commission, and committee's purpose, composition, appointment processes, and to identify and understand any existing gaps, as well as opportunities to modernize existing standards and guidelines.

- **Professional Conduct:**
  Establish and articulate consequences for instances in which professional conduct does not reflect clearly articulated standards.

- **Ethics Standards:**
  Mandated ethics training for all board, commission, and committee members. Professional training is strongly recommended.

- **Term Limits:**
  Review term limits (where any overarching legislation permits) to facilitate and allow for turnover to occur on a regular basis, while still striving for and retaining a reasonable degree of continuity.

- **Board Composition:**
  Explore and implement provisions that encourage the elected/appointed representation of a diverse array of personal and professional backgrounds, qualities, and characteristics. Adopt a policy establishing and communicating the criteria under which board members are appointed. Candidates should be evaluated (and ultimately appointed) based on the specific skill sets they possess, and their overall ability to contribute to the board and its mandate.

- **Human Resources Standards:**
  Review and update human resource guidelines postings, hiring policies, and public transparency.

- **Employment Reviews and Key Performance Indicators:**
  All employees should receive regular independent performance reviews measured against KPIs to ensure impartiality, but to also create a clear path for performance improvement.

These issues and initiatives have been identified by community members and through our community assessment. They have no particular place in this report, though they would work well in a community-wide strategy. Regardless, we wanted to ensure they were identified as important and desired.

- A Quality Coffee Shop
- Later Business Hours
- Child Care Options
- Public Art
- High Speed Internet
- Co-Working Space

IF YOU DO NOTHING ELSE

1. Be Nice and Listen.
2. Bring New and Diverse People to all Levels of Governance.
3. Address the Missing Middle with Housing Diversity

As you read through this report, we know you saw those you disagree with, those you blame for bad behaviour and bad decisions, those you just don't like. You were looking for them in this report. You were looking for those you feel are doing wrong to be highlighted and identified, not by name, but by their behaviour. They are no doubt in here. Everyone who reads this report will find that person or people they disagree with, or blame for decisions they didn't like, or the person they didn't like. Every single one of you. As much as you see them in this report, they see you too. Remember that.

Now, we encourage you to read through this report a second time without them in mind. Read it again with no one in particular in mind. Read it again looking only at the attitudes and behaviours. This time you will see a friend, an ally, or a neighbour. You won't be angry at them because they are good people, people in your circle, and one bad behaviour does not make them a bad person. You are correct. We can all do bad things on occasion when our emotions get the better of us, and our perspective of others gets tainted.

Finally, read it again, and look for yourself. You are in here, too. We have a tendency to only see the bad in each other, but not the bad in us. We judge those opposed to us by their actions and presume evil motives, but we judge the actions of ourselves and our allies and presume good motives. Why? Because it is hard to ever think we are part of the problem. I smile at those who complain about the traffic they are stuck in each day on the way to work. They see the traffic all around them, and they see it as someone else's fault and someone else's problem . . . as they sit in a car in the middle of the road. They are the traffic. They are the problem they dislike.

It is that way too with communities. Our community is something we are part of. We aren't surrounded by it. We are it. If it is great, it is a reflection of us. If it is bad, it is also a reflection of us. We are either out to make our community better with positive words and comments that help the situation, or we make our community worse with hurtful words and selfish motives. We contribute or we detract. None are innocent. None ever are. So, read this report one more time and look for yourself in it.

We are not saying these things to make anyone feel bad or angry. If you feel one of those things you missed the point . . . we tell you this so you can all do better. Smile at each other. Listen before you speak. I mean really listen. Don't listen to speak, or to catch someone out. Really listen. Take a moment and think about what they said, and then, and only then ask questions about what it means and why they think that way, and do it with eye contact and a soft voice. It may feel like you don't have time, but if you don't, you won't make any progress. When you do speak or act, ask yourself first, if this is for your sake or for the sake of the community? Be careful you don't fall into the old trap of arrogance and entitlement by thinking what is good for you *is* good for the community. Think about how what you want will negatively impact someone else. Put yourself in their shoes. That is how you develop compassion, patience, and understanding, and also how you focus on the community rather than always on yourself.

Now, don't talk to the media after reading this. Don't call your circle of friends to have your anger confirmed. Don't call the Village office, or the Chamber, or the Governor, or the President. Don't call anyone. Put the report away and let it sink it. Read it again, and let it sink in. Read it again until you don't feel angry anymore. Read it until you feel a little humility. When that happens, pick up the phone and call someone you don't know well, someone who isn't in your circle and ready to confirm your anger. Take them for coffee and listen, really listen to the issues they have. Share yours. See if you can't agree that you both have issues that need to be addressed. I mean really honestly recognize someone else's opinion that doesn't align with yours, and now see if you two can't find a solution together. Future generations will honor you for it.

And if you are still angry, still blaming others, and still didn't see yourself in this report, then at least everyone else will see you as spreading anger and blame, ignorant of your own contributions to the problem, and your influence will be gone. And, If you do see yourself, but can't or won't change, because of your ego or the anger you can't let go, maybe it is time to move out of the way and let others who will focus on the community and its pathway to success.