



Tri Regional Action Collaboration

Stony Plain, Spruce Grove & Wabamun Chambers of Commerce

tracc

To the membership of the Spruce Grove, Stony Plain and Wabamun Chambers of Commerce,

As you have likely heard by now unification of the Spruce Grove, Stony Plain and Wabamun Chambers of Commerce has been a topic of conversation of our collective boards for close to 2 years. It has been the mandate of our respective boards to form a committee, the Tri Regional Action Collaboration Committee (TRACC), to explore what potential unification may look like and how it may happen. To be clear any move to unify the chambers will require a formal membership vote from all three membership bodies, by no means has this decision been made at this point in time.

OUR MOTIVATION

Before we provide an update on where this process is currently, the motivations behind potential unification bear repeating. The goals of unification are two-fold with the first being to provide better service to our collective membership by way of more efficient use of resources. Between all three chambers there are several duplicated services and tasks that are being performed by our respective staff. Maintaining 3 separate memberships lists, 3 separate event calendars, 3 separate sets of finances to name just a few means that our staff spend a significant amount of their time maintaining each organization as opposed to providing membership facing services such as business education or advocacy. Under a unified organization these “day to day” responsibilities can be streamlined leaving time for a combined staff body to provide more attention to our membership base. The other key motivating factor is that a larger membership base carries more weight at the advocacy table. In Canada the primary historical role of Chambers of Commerce is to act as advocates to all three levels of government on behalf of the business community. The more businesses that our chambers represent the louder our voice is when advocating to any level of government. Combining the membership of the Spruce Grove and Stony Plain Chambers alone will make the Chamber the 3rd largest in the province and one of the largest in the entire country. This type of size will open advocacy opportunities not previously available to our region and strengthen our voice at existing tables.

At a recent Town Hall regarding Chamber unification, held at the Stony Plain Heritage Pavilion on November 28th, 2018, it was suggested that TRACC provide a comprehensive update on what discussions and research have taken place so far.

HISTORY

After establishing a formal relationship in 2018 the first action of TRACC was to gather member feedback regarding the idea of chamber unification. This took place using three distinct mediums. The first was during a survey at the joint Chamber Golf tournament on June 21st. At the tournament members of the TRACC committee gathered feedback from tournament attendees regarding this idea. A total of 44 individuals participated and of the 44 respondents, 39 expressed support for the idea of unified chamber. The 44 respondents were made up of 17 members of the Spruce Grove Chamber, 12 members of the Stony Plain Chamber, 6 members of both chambers and 9 non-members.

NEXT STEP

The next step of TRACC was to conduct a formal email survey of members during the month of September where by all members of the Spruce Grove and Stony Plain Chambers had the opportunity to voice feedback on the idea of a unified chamber. These surveys were performed independently (one done by Spruce Grove and another by Stony Plain. Out of the 40 participants of the Spruce Grove survey 36 (90%) expressed support for the idea of a unified chamber. Out of 69 respondents to the Stony Plain survey 56 (81%) expressed support for the idea of a unified chamber. When looking at the combined membership of both chambers (Spruce Grove with close to 600 and Stony Plain with close to 550) this survey represents a response from approximately 10% of the combined membership.

In September of 2018 both the Stony Plain and Spruce Grove Chambers help round table discussions at their respective general meeting to facilitate feedback and discussion regarding the idea of a unified chamber. Both meetings were very well attended, and some excellent feedback was collected as a result of the round table discussion. This feedback was then collated by TRACC into what we are classifying as the top 3 benefits and top 3 concerns regarding a unified chamber. In terms of benefits members most commonly highlighted; a reduction in duplicate services/better use of Chamber resources (and ease of dealing with Chamber administration), a stronger regional voice (specifically in reference to advocacy) and enhanced networking opportunities. The most prevalent concern which was raised during the round tables discussions and during the survey process was the idea that combining the chambers would result in a loss of identity for one or both organizations and their memberships. Related to the idea of a loss of identity is the concern that under a unified body decision making, events and advocacy work will favor one region over another. The final primary concern that was brought forward by members is in regard to membership fees increasing under a unified body.

TRACC would like to thank all members who have provided their feedback so far in this process. The feedback provided has reinforced what the committee originally highlighted to be the benefits of unification and it has provided excellent areas of focus to ensure that a unified chamber does not result in a lack of identity, uneven distribution or attention and that a unified chamber remains affordable for members regardless of size.

OUR RESEARCH

With positive feedback around the idea of unification in mind TRACC opted to hire a research consultant to gather additional information for other Chambers throughout the County that have under gone unification projects. Specifically, the focus of the research assistant was around finding out what worked well for other chambers or what didn't work well during this process. The secondary objective of the research was to further explore the mechanics behind joining Chambers.

The Chambers interviewed include the following:

1. St. John Board of Trade (New Brunswick)
2. The Ottawa Board of Trade
3. Prairie Sky Chamber of Commerce (Battlefords, Sask.)

Overall the result of unification for all three was positive. Some organizations even successfully combined more than 2 or 3 entity's at once with the St. John board of trade consisting of a combination of 2 Chambers of Commerce, a Board of Trade and a Business Association all at once. All said that the ultimate objective of reducing duplicate services and providing more effective advocacy was realized by way of unification. The biggest stumbling block that was highlighted across the board was that of membership communication. Organizations that rushed to unify and that did not concisely communicate with their membership had a much more difficult time during this process.

When exploring the options of how a chamber would unify there were found to be two predominant styles with one being recommended over the other. The prevailing option is one by where a single chamber dissolves and its boundaries, membership and staff is assumed by the other. This requires not only a name change of the remaining chamber but also requires some reworking of the Chamber's bylaws to better suit the new organization.

Upon review by TRACC the prevailing opinion is to follow this model. Due to organizational complexity and the current state of assets TRACC has highlighted that the logical choice would be for the Spruce Grove and District Chamber to dissolve with the Stony Plain Chamber rebranding, renaming and adjusting its bylaws accordingly. Once these two Chambers have successfully unified it would be much easier for smaller Chambers such as the Wabamun chamber to follow the same pattern to join the larger entity.

Following review of the provided research TRACC has undertaken to formulate the framework of the business model for a unified chamber. The focus of the business model has been to ensure that primary objectives, duplication reduction, advocacy and networking, may be met under a unified model but also to ensure that concerns regarding identity, representation and cost are adequately addresses.

BUSINESS MODEL

Highlights of the current business model include:

Strategic Priorities

TRACC has summarized the Strategic priorities for a unified chamber into a succinct statement: Promote, Support and Strengthen Tri Regional business growth, business interests and thriving community.

Name

The current proposed name for a new entity is: Tri Region Area Chamber of Commerce. Though it is important to note that the idea of an open naming contest has been discussed as it may yield some more creative options.

Board Structure and Governance

The current proposed board structure is to be made up of 16 total members. 3 members being selected from Stony Plain, 3 members from Spruce Grove, 3 members from Parkland County, 1 member from Wabamun and the remaining 6 members being from any location. In following with the board of trade act, which the Chambers are incorporated under, the board must be elected by its membership. It is likely that the process of a nominating committee presenting the names of suggested individuals will be retained but ultimately nominations and voting will remain open for all members of a unified body.

Membership Dues

The exact impact of a unified chamber on membership dues is still being explored and will need to be investigated further based on the results of a draft budget which is currently being worked on. It is likely that dues will be raised in some capacity as currently both chambers fall below other regional chambers (St. Albert, Leduc etc.) and are facing a reduction in non-dues revenue from projects such as the Chambers Community directory. It is likely that a unified body would embrace a tiered membership approach where by businesses with less employees or smaller operations would pay less to be members than larger businesses.

Physical Office Locations

The current plan is to maintain both staffed locations (Stony Plain and Spruce Grove) with Stony Plain being the “head office” due to space availability. Members would be able to visit either chamber office to perform any chamber related tasks or activities.

Staff/Management Structure

Under a unified chamber the layout of staff and their respective roles would ultimately be the responsibility of the Executive Director, however the framework that is being discussed currently is:

- Executive Director
- Office Support/Manager
- Advocacy Manager
- Advocacy Support (Pending a unified Chambers financial position)
- Events Coordinator
- Membership Coordinator
- Marketing/Social Media Coordinator

Visitor and Information Services

A unified body would seek to keep visitor information centre service contracts with both the Town of Stony Plain, City of Spruce Grove and Parkland County. A unified entity would have the ability to explore regional tourism branding which does not currently exist but could help strengthen visitor information services in the region.

Advocacy and Regional Representation

As proposed a unified chamber would facilitate the creation of a Municipal affairs committee. This committee will be made up of board members from all three major regions and would be coordinated by the Chambers advocacy manager. This committee will allow members from any business or location to present concerns that will be then be acted on with the full weight of the regional entity as opposed to just that a single community as it is today. This will allow for a stronger voice and greater impact for not only regional issues but also defined issues that may impact a specific community (down town business cores for example) as advocacy efforts will be better coordinated and carry additional weight.

CONCLUSION

So, what is next for TRACC and the idea of unifying our Chambers of Commerce? TRACC has commissioned the treasurers of the Spruce Grove and Stony Plain Chambers to meet with staff to draft a detailed sample budget for a unified entity. The results of this draft budget will be reviewed by TRACC and will play a big role in answering some of the outstanding questions that remain regarding impact to fee structure. As these updates become available, they will be shared with membership via email newsletter, Chamber general meetings and potentially in other round table discussions focused on the unification project. As always, we want to hear your feedback! Do you think we are on the right track (pun intended) or do you have other concerns that you think may have been missed? Please feel free to reach out to any member of the TRACC team or to a Chamber Office directly to voice your opinion.

Kevin White - President – Stony Plain and District Chamber of Commerce & TRACC Committee Member