



Bernice Booth has nearly a decade of municipal work in a variety of roles, but is most content in her current position as Marketing and Communications Coordinator for the City of Welland. She can be reached at [bernice.booth@welland.ca](mailto:bernice.booth@welland.ca) or 905-735-1700.



Sarah Ane has a passion for community building and placemaking through recreation program development. Her primary goal is to enhance affordable and accessible recreation opportunities for communities and individuals to enhance overall quality of life. She can be reached at [sarah.ane@welland.ca](mailto:sarah.ane@welland.ca).

# Growing relationships on a better public engagement model

Municipalities are growing and adopting a broader range of responsibilities to create healthy, happy communities. This holistic sense of advancement is not a task or a conversation that can be had from the confines of city hall. A more organic, proactive strategy is needed to create healthy partnerships and to create a new framework for partnerships.

Canadian cities are changing because of a consistent stream of new technology and the smarter city movement. Municipalities are striving to deliver efficient, leading-edge services to residents and stakeholders. However, if focused on simply delivering more data and bigger broadband, cities could run the risk of losing sight of public engagement and valuable partnerships.

The federal government's Smart Cities Challenge, launched in 2017, will see municipalities compete for prize dollars that accumulate to \$300 million.<sup>1</sup> Before they begin to strategize on how to make their communities smarter and more intelligent, municipal leaders might want to evaluate their priorities. Simply writing a convincing proposal to the federal government might not be enough to win the challenge, and there will continue to be value in investing in better placemaking, community engagement, and job creation.

## City of Welland Example

The City of Welland provides a good case in point. The city has discovered that growing a public-private partnership into an ongoing relationship is a smart way to achieve a healthy socio-economic landscape in its downtown core; and, prize dollars or not, the community is winning.

Formed in the 1970s, the Welland Downtown Business Improvement Area (WDBIA) had an initial mandate to support a business presence in the downtown area and beautify the streetscapes. The city also implemented community improvement plans and incentives to assist businesses with financial support.

The city and the WDBIA have always had a neighbourly, yet at-arms-length relationship, with the city supporting the WDBIA on a financial level and WDBIA reciprocating the courtesies. There is a long history of photographs that validate cheque presentations and handshaking. This was the traditional relationship between the city and the WDBIA, until an opportunity appeared in early 2014. The local community group that had hosted the Canada Day celebrations for many years made a difficult decision in 2014 to no longer manage the event. Numbers were dwindling among the dedicated group of volunteers, forcing them to walk away from the event.

Historically, the city had provided the group with the funds and space to

<sup>1</sup> [www.infrastructure.gc.ca/plan/cities-villes-eng.html](http://www.infrastructure.gc.ca/plan/cities-villes-eng.html).



deliver a full Canada Day event at one of the city's public parks, typically luring 1,000 to 1,500 people to socialize with free entertainment, cake, and fireworks. The event carried a budget of \$8,000, usually presented in the same format each year.

When the group disengaged from the event, city staff unsuccessfully approached other organizations to take on the project; but, the municipality was ultimately left with responsibility for managing community groups, leaving the city to manage the logistics for the celebrations.

However, the WDBIA would soon express an interest in partnering with the city to host the celebrations at Merritt Park. Although the downtown core had historically been a venue for community celebrations, many of the festivals had scattered around the city or fallen off the community radar.

In 2015, the WDBIA was in a transitional phase due to investing in a full-time position. And, having a staffer on board helped grow an invested connection to the city because the municipality and the WDBIA both had similar goals: the city fosters the wellbeing of communities, while the WDBIA fosters the wellbeing of business. These convictions brought together a unified philosophy of creating a vibrant, active, and connected downtown community.

## A New Partnership is Born

The WDBIA and city staff sought permission from council to redirect the Canada Day event to Merritt Park, located along the city's recreational waterway in the downtown. The park had undergone some infrastructure improvements that included a Welland Canal Memorial Monument, and a 750-seat amphitheatre overlooking a floating stage on the recreational waterway.

In order to bring more people to the downtown core and draw attention to the city's assets, council passed approval to temporarily host Canada Day at Merritt Park for 2016. Although the decision to relocate required adjustment, the event greeted roughly 5,000 attendees. City staff were elated that the WDBIA wanted to partner again for the 2017 Canada Day events. Given the overall positive feedback from the community and an increase in attendance, council permitted the event to be again hosted at Merritt Park for the sesquicentennial celebration.

Along with an increased budget and sponsorship that the WDBIA secured from local businesses, the 2017 Canada Day event was a grand success. There was approximately \$30,000 invested into the event, which had an attendance record of 10,000 very happy participants. Across the street from where the event was hosted,

### ABOVE

The Tragically Hip - A National Celebration - Welland Civic Square  
Photo © Anthony Gallaccio

Welland museum welcomed 850 visitors that day.

The WDBIA and the city's recreation staff have also begun to connect and collaborate on other events and projects. The WDBIA became the administrator for Bridge 13 – a decommissioned canal bridge in the heart of downtown Welland. The WDBIA manages all applications submitted for Bridge 13's commemorative lighting, and also organizes the lighting schedule with Niagara Region. Bridge 13 was the recipient of two notable awards in 2016, and the community, although sceptical at first about the investment in giving the bridge a new facelift, began to celebrate the bridge as a source of pride and identity.

A free live broadcast of the Tragically Hip's last concert was another product of the partnership. Timing was good, as a new LED screen had been installed at Welland Civic Square just days before the concert, and staff thought this would be an excellent way to introduce the big screen to the public and lure residents to the downtown core. The city organized the sound system, scheduled staff to work the event, and organized road closures. The WDBIA secured food vendors and donations for prizes. A local radio station also chimed in to emcee the event and provide in-kind advertisement on the air. Ultimately, this event brought roughly 3,000 people to the downtown core – and all this was accomplished with roughly a

week of preparation and determined staff from the city and WDBIA.

### Growing Together

Most municipalities welcome public-private partnerships and secure them for specific projects on the horizon. Although city staff had no reason to believe that collaborating on the 2016 Canada Day event with the WDBIA would be anything more than executing a fun family event for the community to enjoy. Other staff and committees have begun to welcome the budding relationship because it has opened up new opportunities and better connections to the business community. The WDBIA has since contributed valuable information and efforts to a variety of projects. City staff and the WDBIA have also partnered for the Trail 150 project at Merritt Island, and continue to collaborate on the active transportation initiatives to make businesses and downtown Welland a friendlier urban centre.

The city began a "My Civic Square" public engagement campaign in the autumn of 2017 to gather public input on a repurposing project at the frontal exterior of Welland Civic Square, with an goal of making this public space a natural community hub where residents and visitors can engage and socialize.

In addition to residents, input from downtown businesses was important for understanding what would make Civic Square a more inviting place that complements the downtown, invites creativity, and enhances community

experience. Having already established a working relationship with the WDBIA was a window to engaging the economic community. The WDBIA was briefed on the project early in the planning stage, which assisted tremendously in connecting with downtown businesses. Information and an invitation to take a public engagement survey regarding the project were posted on the WDBIA website. The city is now planning and place-making a smarter, business-inclusive community hub that will open up opportunities and conversations in the city's urban centre.

Last year, the WDBIA executive director and the city's community development coordinator presented at the 2017 Parks and Recreation Ontario Educational Forum. The presentation outlined the benefits of public-private partnerships from a socio-economic perspective. The presentation validated the claim by providing all the usual statistics – from increased sponsorship, to substantial growth in attendance. It further reinforced the claim by examining the significant development of community spirit and resident engagement. The presentation also presented another outcome of the relationship that had the audience smiling: the perk of a connected community. It is because the public-private partnership grew into a well-groomed relationship between the municipality and the WDBIA that a more holistic, intelligent model to community development has been welcomed. **MW**

as published in

**MUNICIPAL WORLD**

CANADA'S MUNICIPAL MAGAZINE – SINCE 1891

1-888-368-6125

[www.municipalworld.com](http://www.municipalworld.com)