



BUILDING A NEW ROAD

Reshaping Relationships to Sustain the Collective Impact of Calgary's Nonprofit Sector

On December 9, 2009 **The Calgary Foundation (TCF)** and **Mount Royal University's (MRU) Institute for Nonprofit Studies** convened a forum of 100 respected community influencers from Calgary's nonprofit, public, and private sectors.

The full day event addressed a number of significant changes in Calgary's landscape. Dramatic shifts in the economy have altered people's ability to give. Staff in nonprofit organizations report increased work loads, a higher level of community need, and fewer resources to get the job done.

We asked, is Calgary's nonprofit sector, as it currently operates, sustainable?

The agenda was ambitious. Members of the forum were provided with a website filled with pre-conference resources and relevant information.

The forum challenged a critical mass of creative people to find a better route to travel – to build a new road together, one that can sustain the collective impact of Calgary's nonprofit sector as a whole.

So after this event, where does this road lead?

The purpose of the day was to build relationships to move *promising solutions* forward and to foster conversations that would lead to *concrete outcomes*.

As partners in planning and hosting this event, TCF and MRU's Institute for Nonprofit Studies commit to supporting follow-up actions that honour and build on the contributions made by participants.

The Calgary Foundation commits to:

- Increasing participation of private and public sectors in community dialogue.
- Supporting small group meetings that aim to move ideas forward.

Community Partner:



- Increasing the number of Community Grants for explorations and actions that find new ways for Calgary's organizations and sub-sectors to work together.
- Encouraging and supporting initiatives that result in shared spaces and services. (Refer to [CCVO - Sharing Services, Sharing Space: Laying the foundation for increased collaboration in the voluntary sector.](#))
- Continuing to award small, quick, turnaround grants through our Organization Development and Transformation granting stream for charities to investigate and implement new ways to work within changing contexts.
- Building on 2009-10 research to stimulate Social Enterprise awareness, capacity building, and pilot initiatives.
- Looking for ways to reduce the reporting burden for grant recipients.
- Continuing to work with other funders, grantmakers, and community investors to support broad community initiatives.
- Continuing our multi-year investments in human resources development for Calgary's charities.

The Institute for Nonprofit Studies, Mount Royal University, commits to:

- Providing funding for research into transformational change and the nonprofit sector as part of its annual research funding.
- Convening researchers, policy makers, and nonprofit sector representatives to examine the changes needed for more effective social policy in Canada.
- Contributing to the development of data sets and inquiries that support transformational change.

Over the following pages, read summaries of the forum participants' contributions to the questions and challenges put to them and answer this question for you and your organization:

What follow-up actions will you commit to, and who else needs to help make this happen?

**Add your ideas on our discussion board:
calgaryroadbuildingforum.org**

Community Partner:



BUILDING A NEW ROAD – FORUM RESULTS

Dr. Roger Gibbins led off the day by speaking as a “provocateur,” posing important questions and scenarios to explore relating to the nonprofit sector. After his talk, the group of 100 community leaders was divided among fourteen tables, each with a facilitator. Over the remainder of the day, participants were asked to address four series of questions and challenges. For each of the four activities individuals moved to new tables, creating a different mix to stir discussion.

PART ONE: THINKING ABOUT THE NONPROFIT SECTOR AND CHANGE

Activity One: What Surprised You in Roger Gibbins’ presentation?

In this first activity, participants met with their tablemates to identify one thing from Gibbins’ talk that was new information for them or one idea that surprised them. Common themes emerged, with participants agreeing that the diversity of nonprofits made the idea of a “sector” more of an abstraction than a reality. Being both competitive and collaborative within the sector poses certain challenges to identity, approaches to community and how outcomes are to be archived. Comments distilled from the fourteen discussion groups included:

- The “nonprofit sector” as a combined entity is an abstraction. Is it really just the sum of its parts? There are “lots of stars with no constellations.”
- There is extreme diversity of the sector ranging from huge organizations “hoovering” up the money to tiny groups each pursuing distinctly different ends. What are the boundaries of the sector?
- The sector has never had an appropriate or accurate name and perhaps never will. There should be an emphasis on values and results rather than on inputs, e.g., social profit sector rather than nonprofit sector.

- Nonprofit does not imply non-competitive.
- Two key dichotomies are:
 - For a highly individualistic sector we tend to collaborate a lot.
 - Why are we looking locally when “community” is global?
- “Local” must be defined differently. There are many non-geographic participatory communities – Facebook communities vs. barnraising communities. If we live in abstract communities now, how do we connect with our physical community?
- Just because we share common problems doesn’t mean we need common solutions.
- “Collective transformational energy” can be focussed inward to build the capacity of the sector as well as outward towards community stakeholders. Internal versus external transformation is a false dichotomy.
- Ethnic diversity in the city is not reflected in management levels. (Calgary is the third most ethnically diverse city in Canada.)
- Donors need both business case and heart story. We need to be partners with them, not clients or recipients.
- Staff turnover is an opportunity to drive organizational change and renewal.
- Permit failure! Value and support risk-taking with the knowledge that learning comes from making mistakes and wrong turns. There is an uncomfortable dichotomy between trying to be creative and innovative and being in an environment of little tolerance for mistakes or risk-taking.
- We should not confuse the sustainability of particular organizations with the sustainability of the sector.

Activity Two: Following a New Road – A Metaphor for Change

The title of the day, Building a New Road, is a metaphor for change. As participants began their discussions around this idea, they started with the idea of “end” – to what end is the nonprofit sector working? The fourteen groups each considered three questions from which these points emerged:

Question 1: Destination

What is the destination? Do we have a shared vision of what the road's destination is?

- We are in a landscape, travelling on an intricate network of inter-connected pathways. Our shared destination is vibrant, healthy, connected, strong, sustainable communities.
- Collaboration between widely diverse groups can be more fruitful than between closely related groups. Rather than broad sector collaboration, focus on cause and the ability to organize around an idea.
- Can those with common interests share a lane and learn from each other? When organizing around a common cause groups who are perceived as direct competitors must want to “get to maybe.”
- The destination is more than survival. If you're focussed on this, your organization is dying. Conversations need to move away from money to answer the question of vision.

Question 2: Road

Do we need a new road, or just some repairs to the existing road?

- We need to build on naturally forged trails. Allow people to dictate the location of paths based on how they move through an open space.
- We need a map for guidance and direction or a “travel agent.” Most of us need some facilitation to find travelling partners.
- A traffic circle is a model of an opportunity for the sector to slow down, and express, organize and share ideas.
- Refueling stations may need to make better use of resources. How do we deploy resources internally and externally? The sector needs to stay strong by being engaged and therefore being a good leader; celebrate the diversity that we all bring to the potluck banquet table.
- We need a new language for the nonprofit sector and new ways of thinking and talking about ourselves.

Question 3: Responsibility

Whose responsibility is it to change the road and how can that responsibility be determined?

- If the nonprofit sector wants strong communities, we all have a role and have responsibility. Whose responsibility is it? Ours.
- Individuals need to take responsibility in a civil society.
- Government has a responsibility in facilitating. The government change to purchasing services rather than delivering programs has meant a shift in the sector.
- Government and funders have become too prescriptive. To what extent do funders shape change?
- The sector has a reputation problem. We need to communicate common key messages. The for-value rather than nonprofit sector. Look to the "Milk Board" – They advocate for "milk" rather than for the producer. Paint a picture of what happens if the sector isn't here. (Or, conversely, as the "Milk Board" does, paint a picture of what happens when it is here.)

Community Partner:



• PART TWO: ADDRESSING CHALLENGES

Activity Three: Fourteen Challenges

Previous to the day's proceedings, a number of sector leaders were surveyed about the challenges that nonprofits face – excluding the obvious challenges of “too little time” and “too little money.” The fourteen challenges that the sector leaders constructed were put to the participants; each table of eight people responded to one of the challenges. The challenging questions and a summary of comments are included below:

Challenge 1: RESOURCES

As resources get thinner, innovation is crucial if organizations are going to be able to solve complex emerging issues. Where does the capacity to innovate come from if organizations focus on short-term thinking and are struggling to deliver programs and to balance budgets every year? “Survive” does not necessarily lead to “thrive.”

- “Creative destruction” is needed, but not innovation for the sake of it. Innovation is driven by the need to change. The will to innovate is required, as is the knowledge to implement innovations. Innovations must be linked to values and mission rather than going for the money and orienting your work around available resources.
- Board work should be generative: What are we doing? Who for? Are we meeting the needs? Obstacles: fear of innovation at board level; significant resources from leadership team to support generative work.
- Funders need to improve their tolerance. Failure is learning.
- Say no to project money if it's not enough.

Challenge 2: SUB-SECTOR SEGREGATION

Organizations within the nonprofit sector often segregate themselves within a sub-sector, thereby diminishing their power and hindering opportunities for creative partnerships to address complex community issues.

- The group disagreed with this statement noting that there are many nimble, opportunistic alliances around a common cause; lots of partnerships around projects.
- Sheer diversity of the nonprofit sector requires collaboration.

Community Partner:



Challenge 3: ECONOMIC VALUATION

The conventional economic calculus that values monetary market value over social and ecological values is still predominant. The nonprofit sector does deliver the triple bottom line but there are no accepted ways of making such valuations count.

- Valuation is not necessarily economic. Economic valuation is short-term; alternative types of valuation would take a longer time period to measure.
- Alternative valuations are not restricted to nonprofits. We can look outside the nonprofit sector to find successful practices.

Challenge 4: ENTITLEMENT

There is still a strong sense of “entitlement” among many nonprofits that believe that government or someone else will and should provide for them.

- Two views:
 - Full funding offers the opportunity to staff well and time to think, learn and be innovative.
 - Too much reliance may reduce innovation, self-initiative and entrepreneurial ventures.
- What legal and policy structures can be examined for all nonprofits to more easily generate revenue?

Challenge 5: SECTOR BREADTH

The broadness of the nonprofit sector, in terms of organizational size and scope, impedes the sector’s ability to collectively tell its story, build relationships, change perceptions, and foster awareness / appreciation / value of the role of the nonprofit sector as a legitimate social force that is an integral part of a strong and vibrant society.

- There is no recognition of the nonprofit sector or of its true value, and no communication of the value of a broad sector back to the community.
- As in an ecosystem, diversity is a strength. We need to be able to communicate the value of the sector in a language everyone understands.

Challenge 6: POPULARITY MATTERS

For all nonprofits their revenue generation capacity is not always tied to the quality, need or popularity of the programs, as funders at times continue to support programs or organizations that are not viable, well-run, efficient and/or effective. Within a limited pool of resources, this practice has major implications on the sector’s collective impact.

Community Partner:



- This may occur and the perception exists that it does, but it is not a general systemic issue.
- Establish a “sector cheerleader,” i.e. a regular newspaper columnist to focus on the strengths of organizations and to effectively articulate impact on the community.

Challenge 7: LEADERSHIP

We must re-frame the leadership and governance roles of board members who have not only a fiduciary duty to oversee the long-term existence of their particular organization, but to also advance the social agenda of the sector, as a whole.

- It is very challenging for board members to invest time and energy in advancing a broader agenda. The proficiency, competency, and understanding of board members is mixed.
- Should funding come with a budget line item for board support – to support more training and greater administrative support? Government funding doesn’t currently allow for governance support and training.

Challenge 8: ATTITUDES

Unhelpful attitudes within organizations such as hanging on to history and tradition, fear of change, fear of risk, unwillingness to make the hard decisions, turf protection, lack of trust among sector participants within a competitive environment for resources, being organization-focussed rather than mission or customer focussed.

- There was agreement with this statement. We need to engage with people who have disengaged, to identify leaders in the community, to engage young or new people.
- Corporate entities would not accept restrictions on administration as nonprofits do (i.e. low administrative fees relative to real costs). Allow charities to generate independent income without current restrictions.

Challenge 9: SILO-ING

A lack of understanding or appreciation for the complexity and interconnected nature of needs being responded to by social servicing agencies. The result is a silo kind of servicing, feelings of isolation and disconnect for service providers, and overlap and duplication of services and a lack of coordination that seems to weaken the results in solving or healing or addressing issues.

- Supporters are confused by silos and the reluctance to collaborate; they see the sector as inefficient.

- Build bridges before you need them.

Challenge 10: COORDINATION

A lack of understanding of who is doing what, when, where and how. People often do not know the landscape of others working and serving even in their related realms of concern or interest.

- All sectors have this challenge.
- The Calgary arts community's various collaborative initiatives are examples of successful cooperation.
- We need the support of technology, education, a networking forum, creativity and storytelling.

Challenge 11: COLLABORATION

A natural resistance to partnering and collaboration rooted in normal feelings around competition and fear about losing one's place, power, and position. Even the most generous and well-intentioned people have needs of self-preservation and self-interest, which works against opening doors and sharing resources and the glory.

- The community needs to develop skills, resources, and expertise to build successful collaborations.
- To promote collaboration we can share the stories of successful collaborations, identify niches and overlaps, broaden our scope in finding partners.
- If collaboration is defined as achieving a new and distinct goal together, competition is less relevant.

Challenge 12: INNOVATION

Finding ways to incorporate new ideas into existing programs and organizations so we don't lose the intellectual property developed through existing programs while still maintaining new and fresh ideas.

- A key concept is the "learning organization": learning from and recording best practices and mistakes, renewal, continuous improvement, organizational learning.
- We need connecting "pioneers" from different sectors. We don't always mobilize the resources and support that we have, e.g. accessing larger networks and partnerships. There are many points of interface possible across sectors.

Challenge 13: TOOLS FOR COLLABORATION

How to acquire the tools, processes, and competencies of collaboration so that we don't squander our efforts and our goodwill in unproductive activities and engagements?

- We need to evaluate and share the results of pilot projects, best practices. Create an R & D process for the sector.
- Identify which organizations can be vehicles to promote best practices. How do we sustain those organizations?

Challenge 14: COMMUNITY CHANGE

The community has changed dramatically in the past two decades, and so have the traditional underpinnings of the nonprofit sector, i.e., demographics, politics, business and culture have all shifted. Not too long ago, it was possible to identify all of the needed relationships and develop them – with volunteers, with government, with business corporations. The sector is no longer a "known quantity."

- How do you foster a sense of belonging when you are surrounded by such a large disconnected group? The more diverse we become the more isolated we become culturally. How do we make people feel like part of Calgary as much as they do their own culture?
- Who should play the role of facilitator when it comes to bringing the diverse groups together?

Community Partner:



Activity Four: Seven Challenging Questions

This final activity was intended to assist the participants by using a “get it done” style of questioning, which can develop solutions and propose implementation plans. The seven questions asked were:

Question 1: *What are some new ways the public sector can become more responsible and accountable to the Calgary community?*

- The nonprofit sector does a lot of reporting to the public sector, but that doesn't produce results. We need to reduce the reporting burden.
- Need long-term policies that live past electoral cycles.

Question 2: *What are some new ways Calgary's private sector can contribute meaningfully to a healthy and thriving community?*

- Mentorship between sectors; peer relationships between CEOs, sharing best practices; sharing training that already occurs in-house; sharing information technology.
- Articulate what a healthy community is; define who we are with many dimensions in addition to economic.

Question 3: *What are some current examples of the belief that “productive relationships focus on ideas and actions that produce positive outcomes for the entire community”?*

- Examples: Harvie Passage (Calgary Bow River Weir Project), citizen-led with multiple jurisdictions; Genesis Centre of Community Wellness, multiple partners (with library and YMCA) to create common space for community; Imagine Calgary; Calgary Sustainability for Breakfast.
- Require: perseverance, long time horizon, tenacious leadership, shared purpose, multiple embedded perspectives, urgency and large need, asset building.
- What's missing? Good way to engage elected officials, connections into some communities, i.e. immigrants, seniors, youth.

Question 4: *Some “missing conversations” are a risk to initiate, yet critical to a thriving and healthy Calgary community. What needs to happen for these conversations to get started and be sustained?*

- Missing conversations about competition, fear of government, taxation, leadership, lack of policy; within government, missing

conversations across departments; within organizations, missing conversations with people we're serving.

- Need honesty and open, safe discussion. Equality of conversations between funders and "fundees."

Question 5: *How do power differentials impact conversations, and how can you address power dynamics in order to build better relationships?*

- Fear-based relationships inhibit innovative and creative thinking, and limit transparency.
- Set the tone at the beginning (create culture of mutual respect). We need to get away from being stuck in a scarcity model.

Question 6: *What do you see as the drivers and the barriers to creatively working together with other organizations and sectors and sub-sectors?*

- Drivers: leader-driven facilitation; a safe place or milieu with opportunities to get acquainted, create links and connect organizations; momentum is generated from past successful collaborations.
- Barriers: diversity within the sector – hard to find commonality or starting point, need for assistance with "matchmaking"; demand placed on organization's resources and personnel; need for skills for collaboration.

Question 7: *How would you describe the "status quo" with respect to the nonprofit sector? How can the current status quo be successfully challenged?*

- Status quo: risk-adverse; highly structured; no reward for doing things better; has to re-capitalize itself annually (no risk capital, perception that organizations should not hold cash reserves); no turnover at leadership levels; lack of common language across sectors; driven by project funding.
- Challenging status quo: bring in different voices, new viewpoints; actively scan the industry environment – technology, community, infrastructure.

Community Partner:



CREATIVE CONCLUSIONS

Concluding the table discussions, participants gave their feedback on the day and itemized actions the nonprofit sector, its component organizations and staff, and its supporters can take to realize what was begun at Building a New Road.

What new ideas were created for you from discussing the road metaphor?

- The idea, not of a destination, but a journey.
- A web (network, intersecting paths) seems a better metaphor for the sector. Many paths leading to a common end, a matrix of routes with the destination a stronger, healthier community.
- Transforming the road to river as the metaphor – it is adaptive, stable, directional yet pliable, strong and weak depending on the flow and situation.
- A multi-faceted refueling station where we could change direction, vehicles, and participants; get help with needed vehicle repairs; and meet other travellers.

What was the most thought-provoking idea that you gained from other table discussions?

- We need to devise means of communicating effectively with the public so that NGOs, not-for-profits, and church activities may be understood and come to be supported.
- Change in the sector has traditionally been fostered by funders: off-loading by government; branding by corporate donors; funders' requirement for accountability.
- The idea of a social-profit organization instead of a nonprofit organization.
- We are "nation building" – why do we always take a defensive stance, the efficiency model rather than the values model?

Were you able to produce any action items from the final activity of the seven challenges?

- Sharing IT capacity/office space/community tools/mentoring social enterprises.
- Collaborations are much more effective with personal connections.

Community Partner:



- Assist with “matchmaking” between organizations.
- Create a governance board of sector executive directors and/or board chairs.
- Bring funders together to collaborate to reduce the load of reporting for agencies.
- We need a cheerleader for the sector – take success stories to the public, give examples of positive actions that provide results.
- Create an award to recognize “pioneers” from different sectors.
- We need to change our language as it’s a barrier to our moving forward, i.e. social sector/community sector. We need a “self-esteem” course for the sector – abundance vs. scarcity thinking, assets, not needs.
- Create a campaign to communicate common key messages: The for-value rather than nonprofit sector. Look to the “Milk Board” example which advocates for “milk” rather than for the producer.
- We need to listen to our audience, to take in new ideas by constantly scanning the environment. We need to reach out to youth.
- Invite folks who “GET IT” to a conversation.
- Have this same kind of meeting (Building a New Road) with more people from the corporate sector.
- Examine legal and policy structures so nonprofits can more easily generate revenue, for example, Social Enterprise activity.

What do you think the next steps will be for you and your organization as you go forward from today?

- To carefully evaluate today’s experience and the reporting of it and look at our capacity to assist the sector to move ahead.
- Make sure we’re not just being collaborative for the sake of collaboration.
- Continue the conversations with like-minded organizations on collaborating to create healthy communities.

Community Partner:

