

CALEDON



INSTITUTE OF
SOCIAL POLICY

community stories

January 2004

ISBN #1-55382-075-4

Lillooet is Learning

Located on the bench lands of the Fraser River, the town of Lillooet is part of British Columbia's southern interior. Only two hours from Whistler, though at a considerably lower elevation (250 metres versus Whistler's 2,182 metres), Lillooet's hot, sunny climate and hilly topography make it a very attractive place to live, but a tricky place to sell to potential investors and tourists. "We're not coastal, we're not north, we're not adjacent to any large urban

centres – we lack brand name identification," says Catherine Schulmann, Chairman of the Lillooet Learning Communities Society.

The Lillooet area has a population of 4,500; half are First Nations people. The modern town was the site of one of the earliest Aboriginal settlements established in the BC interior. More recently designated 'Mile Zero' of the Gold Rush Trail, Lillooet was one of the biggest miners' settlements in BC during the late 1800s.

Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) created the Office of Learning Technologies (OLT) in 1996, in order to encourage innovative, technology-based learning. HRDC staff and representatives from the (then) British Columbia Ministry of Community Development, Cooperatives and Volunteers, in cooperation with community leaders, tailored an OECD model to incorporate lifelong learning concepts and lessons from the learning cities work carried out in the UK. This Caledon series of community stories profiles several communities in BC that secured OLT funds in order to strengthen and extend their community capacities to deal with socioeconomic challenges.

Despite the benefits of a pleasant climate and a colourful history, Lillooet is struggling to establish a solid economic base for future prosperity. Until 2001, more than 500 townspeople were employed directly in the forestry industry. At that time, the provincial forestry ministry began reducing the size of its satellite offices. Before downsizing, the forestry office in Lillooet had a staff of 60 employees; only four remain. Fewer than 250 Lillooet residents now work in the forestry industry, and the sense of security that used to accompany employment in this sector has been eroded. These

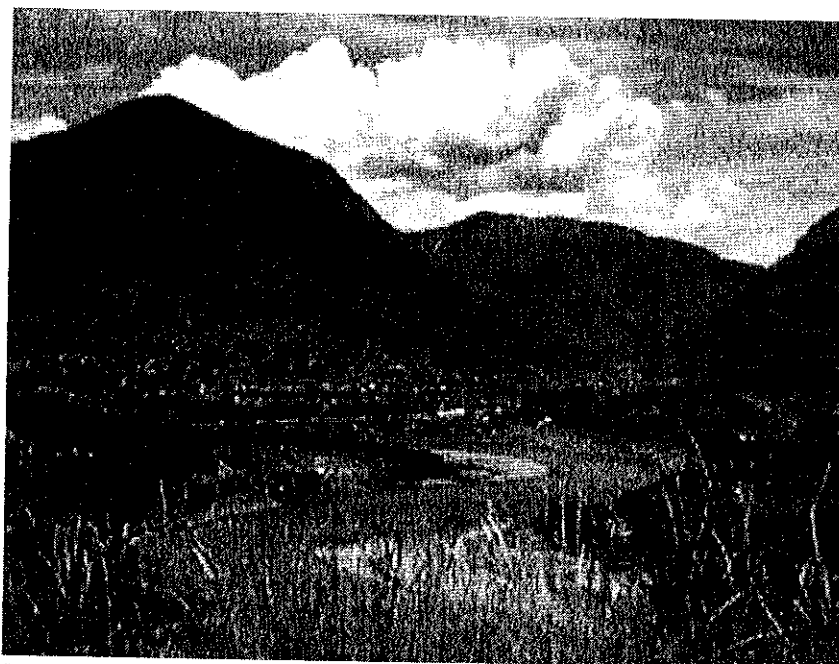
days there are a lot of houses for sale in Lillooet; residents with portable skills have left for healthier economic centres. Many of those who have chosen to remain need to upgrade their education and develop new skills to help them secure jobs or start their own businesses.

Proposals for change

In 1999, a diverse group of social service professionals, citizens, educators and representatives from the Aboriginal community began to look for ways to improve Lillooet's prospects. They submitted an application for proposal development funding to Human Resources Development Canada's Office of Learning Technologies (OLT) office. In what turned out to be a defining coincidence, one of the five local Native bands submitted a parallel application at exactly the same time. OLT staff contacted both organi-

zations to let them know the situation and, at that point, the two groups came together and submitted a second, successful bid. "It's amazing that in such a small town, people can become so insulated," says Norm Leech, Community Chief of the T'it'q'et band whose reserve lands encircle Lillooet.

Betty Weaver and Alice Kidd were hired to develop the community proposal, a process document which presented several ideas for improving the social and economic conditions of their town. One focus of the proposed project was to address the educational needs of Lillooet's adult population. Many townspeople have found themselves at high risk for continued unemployment. Low graduation rates from high school, historical issues around the effects of residential schools and the realities of living in an isolated rural community have led many people to feel that they are unable to adapt to new social and economic conditions.



View of Lillooet.

In 2001, the OLT awarded the Lillooet Learning Community Partnership Project a three-year contribution agreement to advance its educational and community-building goals. Known now as simply 'Lillooet Learns,' the project's first phase ended in December 2003. Betty Weaver was hired as the Special Projects Coordinator.

During the project's first year, Betty helped complete a needs analysis which identified two major themes: families required continuing encouragement and support in their roles as parents, and residents requested better access to upgrading opportunities. Fortunately, provincial and federal departments already had done much work in the area of supporting families. The Lillooet Learns project supplemented existing programs by providing training opportunities and funding resources, and by encouraging cooperation and partnerships. However, as family support projects take effect and families gain strength, their members come to see that an isolated, economically insecure lifestyle will not keep the community vibrant. Lillooet Learns is now focusing more of its energies on the second theme identified in the needs study – support for adult learners.

In this era of changing markets, Canadians are reminded regularly that they must develop a wide variety of skills. Betty reports: "Distance education courses are the only options for adult learners in our community. Over the last decade, the University College of the Caribou [located in Kamloops] has offered courses at our satellite campus in Lillooet, but to make it financially viable, they require 12 or more students in each class and that's not always feasible. We will continue to try new ideas for course presentation."

Learning by correspondence takes a lot of dedication, motivation and confidence. At a minimum, people need someone to talk to when they get stuck – someone with enough skills

to get them past their difficulties. At this time, Lillooet's Educational Coordinator, Lorain Hupman, is providing that kind of expertise.

Community initiatives

Besides promoting education, Lillooet Learns is working to build community networks. Very similar programs are being offered and funded by federal and provincial organizations with very little communication or connection established among these side-by-side undertakings. The OLT's Learning Communities initiative brought a number of provincial players to the table, but these members changed after the 2001 provincial election and some departments were reorganized. A ministry whose mission included community development work was reformulated and the community tasks were orphaned – no provincial ministry currently is assuming responsibility for this type of undertaking. Lillooet community members have continued to meet with provincial representatives to promote a comprehensive community approach. "We've seen a few cracks in the silos, but we still have a long way to go," reflects Norm Leech.

The community has learned that it cannot rely on governments to continue funding projects forever. With their budgets shrinking, professionals and people working in human service fields recognized the need to work more cooperatively. In small communities like Lillooet, it is impossible to run big projects, but important to encourage pockets of expertise. In 2003, Lillooet Learns staff spent a great deal of time setting up meetings for professionals and citizens to work on cooperative ventures.

One success has been a loosely-knit collection of people concerned with changing community attitudes towards drinking and drug use. "This was an issue which cut across silos,

with them and find the message that makes it possible for people to share their ideas. Coffee klatches with people working in the field often yielded the best input in the project's early days.

Once activities got under way, it became more difficult to engineer casual get-togethers where people felt they really could be heard. Meetings which present dry facts are unpopular, but community members are eager to be speak if they feel the listeners are truly interested. This type of fluid communication requires leadership that possesses the tools for sifting through a host of ideas and finding consensus.

Many rich relationships have been forged and strengthened since the initial OLT submission was made in 2000. Many more silos and hurdles will have to be overcome before a successful, healthy future for Lillooet's children is assured, but a collective will now exists to improve the town's social and economic prospects. Harnessing that will and creating a shared vision for prosperity is Lillooet's next challenge.

Anne Makhoul

Anne Makhoul coordinates the 'community stories' series for the Caledon Institute of Social Policy.

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The project website is at www.lillooetlearns.ca

Reference

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