

Improving 'place' through local leadership

By Stephen Finlay & Simon Farbrother

If you work for local government do you consider yourself as a leader within your community? You really ought to. You are what the International City Management Association calls a 'conductor of possibility'. Leadership is at the core of improving communities. By working in the local government sector you have the opportunity to conduct local participants in 'the art of the possible' as they work together to achieve a shared vision for their community.

Local authorities in Canada have an inherent ability to capture the dreams and aspirations of their citizens and turn these into reality in a short space of time. The ability to achieve this has more to do with the internal cultural behaviour of local authorities than with the legislative parameters within which the authorities exist and operate.

Many of these leading local authorities are inspiring to visit; The City of Nanaimo on Vancouver Island, the City of Richmond, in British Columbia, the City of Waterloo in Ontario; each a relatively small community but realizing a large vision. The leaders in these communities are involved in what we now call the 'place-shaping' agenda.

As local authorities in Northern Ireland are set to expand in size and scope, resulting from the review of public administration, it is likely that they will follow national and international trends to become key shapers of their local place. But what is the place-shaping agenda all about and what relevance has it for the future of local government here?

Place-shaping refers to the empowerment of local authorities to shape their localities to achieve the very best they can for their citizens. Local authorities in the UK have come of age by evolving from their traditional role as provider

and commissioner of services to one of *locality leader*, or *place-shaper*. This aphorism refers to a local government's role in leading and coordinating a wide range of strategic services, programmes and organisations across the entire locality to promote the general well-being of its citizens. Local authorities have acquired the moral authority to take on this leadership role following a decade or more of sustained efficiencies and innovations in service delivery and performance. Developing a sense of place not only requires collaboration with multiple organisations across a range of sectors; it requires the articulation of a strategic vision that is developed, supported and implemented by the community itself. It is for local leaders to cherish and nurture this vision as they work to turn the dreams and aspirations of their residents into reality.

Local Visioning

As countries become economically interdependent, as environmental issues cross national boundaries and as technologies open up new frontiers, cities, towns and neighbourhoods are finding strength in their unique diversity, creativity and security. Local authorities are responding to the forces of 21st century globalisation through *place-shaping* by involving local people in the shaping of services and providing leadership to communities. Evidence shows that central governments are beginning to appreciate the need to balance national and local priorities.

The most effective local authorities in the world understand that their focus extends beyond the delivery of excellent services. They recognise that their role is to develop a shared vision for their place, in partnership with their citizens, and to align their strategic resources and collaborative abilities to meet that vision. Many of these authorities have undergone rapid change and development during the past decade as a result of local leaders who have had clarity of vision to see a different future for their place and the strategies to make it happen. The City of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada is one such place. Recognised as the world's top Intelligent Community in 2007, the city's chief executive, Simon Farbrother is proud of its achievement.

Waterloo – Defining Place through Collaboration

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With a visible Mennonite presence, Waterloo is a unique Canadian city that revels both in tradition and in the ongoing development of leading edge technologies that keep this community on the global forefront of innovation. We take great pride in the fact that countless high tech companies – Research in Motion (RIM), Sybase, DALSA, and Open Text, to name just a few – call Waterloo home.

While a strong sense of place comes naturally from the blend of history and innovation, Waterloo is a city where municipal leadership has helped pave the way for a heightened sense of community and unconventional collaboration. In this process, the City itself has played a significant role in facilitating the coming together of multiple, diverse interests for one common goal – to build a stronger sense of place in Waterloo.

One of the most notable examples of our municipality's success in this is the recognition garnered as the 2007 Intelligent Community of the Year, awarded each year by an independent think tank based out of New York. To participate in this process the City pulled together representatives from all sectors of the community – from business and academics to social planning and not-for profits – and facilitated a process that ultimately defined Waterloo as a leading edge city, fostering innovation and technology to build and strengthen community.

Beyond the award, however, there are countless examples of how a clear focus on shaping and creating a sense of place has resulted in world renowned community attributes.

Consider the Perimeter Institute for Theoretical Physics – an independent, resident-based research institute devoted to foundational issues in theoretical physics at the highest levels of international excellence. Perimeter was born through a financial contribution by Mike Laziridis, (one of the founders of RIM), with strong links to the University of Waterloo, and with a donation of land made by the municipality. While theoretical physics may sound beyond the reach of the masses, a focused community outreach program geared to students, teachers and the general public has made Perimeter a well-known, well-loved feature in Waterloo.

Another example of place shaping in Waterloo is the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI) – an international think tank founded in 2002 to address international governance challenges through world-class research. The founders - key leaders in various sectors - envisioned a multidisciplinary organization that would bring together the best minds to provide a unique resource for those charged with making policy decisions in a complex international environment.

Most recently, the City has worked in partnership with CIGI, with Waterloo's two universities, and with Jim Balsillie, also a founder of RIM, to pave the way for The Balsillie School of International Affairs. And it's no accident that CIGI, the Balsillie School and the Perimeter Institute are all on lands that are owned by the City.

Waterloo takes great pride in the many unique features that contribute to a sense of place in our community. Combined, they have helped define Waterloo and have garnered our city's global recognition as a place where innovation and collaboration are at the heart of all we do.

Located in Canada's Technology Triangle, in the heart of the Great Lakes of Southern Ontario, Canada, Waterloo is a community of just over 115,000 people.

Sir Michael Lyons, author of the 2007 *Lyons Inquiry into Local Government*, notes that place-shaping requires a local authority to focus on developing a vision for its area which is owned by its communities and businesses. His outline for that future vision requires:

- having a sense of where a place should be in five, ten, twenty or even thirty years time

- an awareness of long-term trends locally as well as in the world beyond
- an ability to be responsive and to adapt to change
- strategies to achieve all of the above.

Local Leadership

But vision alone is not sufficient. It requires strategic leadership to mobilise human, financial and community resources in ample strength to turn a vision into reality. Effective *leadership of place* requires strong political *and* managerial leaders who readily engage with local residents and who work in partnership with the wider community to create healthy, sustainable and prosperous communities.

Local government leaders face new realities which require new responses. The days of top-down leadership approaches are being replaced by relationship building and collaborative working. The old adage: ‘politicians lead and officers manage’ has been replaced by overlapping leadership roles between local politicians and senior managers. This is why the most up-to-date local government leadership training focuses on building the capacity of ‘top teams’ (political and managerial). The argument is that training together generates a common purpose and vision which creates loyalty to the organisation and place as a whole rather than to a specific department, function or profession. Some believe that this concept should be expanded further by adding other local leaders – from the private and non-profit sectors – into this training equation.

The most effective leaders in local government are those with an inherent sense of integrity which flows from strong ethical standards. Such characteristics can be found in what Robert Greenleaf calls the *servant leadership model*: a visible and selfless dedication to the place their council serves. It is this type of local leader who places the *citizen* at the core of all local government activity. To address the challenges that face local authorities in Northern Ireland, local leaders must assume their position as *conductors of possibility* and have the courage to explore new ideas through

robust dialogue, with citizens, with the wide range of sectors that manage the assets of the local place and with themselves. Effective leadership is not so much a function of circumstance but rather is a matter of choice and discipline.

Philip Faithfull, Chief Executive of Strabane District Council and Chairman of The Society of Local Authority Chief Executives in Northern Ireland, expresses the feeling of many leaders within the local government sector; “We have tried our best with limited resources and powers to improve and develop our local communities. I sincerely hope that the Review of Public Administration will give us genuine powers to influence, to bring together key public and private stakeholders, to work with and listen to local communities and to improve the physical and economic infrastructure of our localities.”

As local authorities in Northern Ireland embark on significant change in the months and years ahead, we should be confident that with change comes the opportunity to create great places; places where effective leadership can capture the talents, dreams and aspirations of entire communities and make them real.

Are we ready to play our part in the place-shaping challenge?

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