



MIDTERM REPORT

ThriveSask Pilot Program

The ThriveSask Pilot Program was convened and facilitated by the Saskatchewan Economic Development Alliance (SEDA) in 2018. Our aim is to build on momentum established by the Saskatchewan Main Street Program, providing support for communities and downtown improvement organizations to build resilient and vibrant economies. The pilot was implemented without benefit of third party funding. It is reliant on the services and expertise of founding program partners: SEDA, Heritage Saskatchewan, Tourism Saskatchewan and Province of Saskatchewan Parks Culture & Sport.

The pilot program was delivered in Eston, Gull Lake, St. Walburg, Unity and the Downtown Moose Jaw Business Association. This Mid-Term Report contains program evaluation input from the communities along with their one year progress reports. Further assessment will be provided within a final report on the pilot to be generated in June 2020.

Three program components were established to support achievement of overall program goals:

1. Community Activation Session (visioning and action planning)
2. Technical Assistance (provision of training & support of specialist service providers)
3. Grant program (to support capital and technical assistance)

The Thrive action planning and implementation framework has proved to be very successful as illustrated by the community progress reports found within. However, we were not successful in accessing financial support from the corporate or public sector and the aforementioned components 2 and 3 were not implemented.

A commitment to provide in kind services was made by two private sector firms; Stantec and REFRESH Marketing. Stantec services have not yet been utilized by communities. REFRESH provided a branding consultation session to four of the five communities followed by recommendations. However, impact of this marketing consultation was limited by the unique challenges inherent to branding a community. Integrating the consultation into the initial activation session would have improved outcomes.

Founding ThriveSask partners are all adding value to the program, however, further leveraging of these and additional partners is dependent on the progress in each community and their demonstrated need for intervention and support. Generally speaking, community progress is a factor of: availability of financial and human resources (volunteer and municipal staff); and adhering to the 30 day strategic doing process.

Underpinning the ThriveSask Program are four pillars we view as essential to building a healthy living heritage economy: Leadership; Economic Vitality; Placemaking and Promotion. Field Guides for each of these foundational areas were provided to pilot communities as a coaching resource. Each guide contains recommended benchmarks.

Relevance

All five pilot communities affirmed that ThriveSask is a unique offering, not duplicating other programs or services offered by the public and non-governmental sectors. Some concepts presented can be resourced from specific organizations but ThriveSask brings relevant themes and supports together cohesively. Communities feel there is a demonstrated need for this type of programming, particularly to activate and kick start a community.

'This has changed the way our Town Councillors approach their discussions, thought process and total outcomes from any program objective.'

'So many of our communities lack the knowledge in this area. Bringing a group of community leaders together to kick start community initiatives is a necessity.'

'There is a demonstrated need for this type of programming and support. Many smaller rural communities struggle with capacity and direction in community development. ThriveSask facilitates this direction and assists communities to build a foundation for implementation of desired action plans.'

Resources

We asked pilot communities if program resources were appropriate and adequate for their needs.

'Additional resources might diffuse community input and overwhelm desired outcomes. In addition, the completion of action items would not have been as focused.'

'Support was above our expectation. However, direct support and resources to the community for additional capacity would have increased the likelihood of success. There was not sufficient capacity existing in the community to properly fulfill the objectives.'

'Overall support was provided but we required more technical assistance and resources to help implement what we prioritized. An example is resources to hire a graphic artist for signage.'

Leveraging Additional Funding

Thus far in the program, pilot communities have had limited success in leveraging additional funding to support their local action plans. However, our observation is that the majority of community action plans are not yet ready for fund development efforts.

Four of the five communities accessed funding from Sask Culture to host the Thrive activation session. One community has also secured some local support from the business sector and the municipality .

"We have not leveraged the Thrive Action Plans directly, but thought processes created by our plan led us to broaden our overall fund development strategy. For example: we are developing the Trans Canada Trail Network to bring in tourism and increase opportunities for physical activity - for which we have received Government grants."

COMMUNITY CAPACITY

Financial and human resource capacity is the primary denominator of success in any community. Although pilot communities were required to assign a project lead, transition in employment and challenges in allocating volunteer resources impacted the degree of progress in several Thrive communities.

Two of the pilot communities are being led by volunteers; one has a limited part-time staff person; and two have full time community development staff (however the Eston position was vacant for six months and has only recently been filled).

Here are some comments from Thrive community leaders:

"We overcame the perception of a "sleepy little Town" such that we have sold 6 of 11 residential lots that were previously for sale (for over 25 years!). In addition, we brought 3 municipal commercial properties on the market and sold 1 within 48hrs. We also met with a large industrial area employer (several times) to impress upon them that we are OPEN for business."

"Some small steps taken, however no clear organizational capacity and leadership. This will be changing in June 2019 as a whole new board of directors will assume the leadership role."

"We have struggled to increase our capacity....we should have spent more effort in developing our core leadership group prior to engaging with the Thrive program."

"I think the majority of success thus far has been understanding local potential across all community organizations and their members."

The Sustainability Quotient

The majority of pilot communities remain optimistic that the Thrive process and associated momentum will be maintained.

"We have embedded the concept of economic growth and considerations into town policies, procedures, bylaws and ethos. Thus, when Council changes in October 2020, the concepts created by ThriveSask will perpetuate."

"We will continue to use our goals and action planning to guide our efforts."

"To a great extent yes – a new board is forming in June and the vision will be actioned. Long term impact will accrue."

Program Design and Delivery

Generally speaking, pilot communities viewed the ThriveSask program design as effective. However, progress within each community is impacted by local capacity and a commitment to convene the group every 30 days.

"The 30-day action planning cycle was key to maintain Council and ratepayer focus. It is our belief the 30-day planning cycle was a major contributor to the program success. The four program pillars and heritage based approaches provided focus to leaders in the community."

"The program pillar design was appropriate for our community, however we did not spend enough time prior on the leadership component, and as a result were not as successful in the other pillars or in meeting the 30-day action items."

"Very appropriate, we need visioning. The four pillar program confirmed the strength of our great assets in the downtown core. The action planning cycle was a great opportunity but there was no organized group to follow-through at a leadership level."

Communities Ranked Effectiveness of Program Delivery

	Ranking scale of 1 to 10				
	10	9	8	7	6
Activation Session	2	1	1	1	0
Action Planning	0	1	1	2	1
Coaching	2	2	0	1	0

Were the program objectives and desired outcomes clear to key stakeholders in the community?

"Placemaking was an innovative program objective that we embraced and built upon; however other objectives were conceptually difficult for town ratepayers to grasp. For example: "promotion of the town" was, and remains, a difficult sell. Ratepayers do not understand, nor embrace the need to market our community. eg. a modern website is not priority for the current ratepayer."

"Clarity was present, there were meetings with ThriveSask Partners and major community stakeholders. Twenty five local residents attended the activation and follow up meetings; others engaged via email communication."

"There was some confusion from stakeholders as to the expectation for ongoing work and volunteerism to meet outcomes."

"I think they were very clear. Three main objectives were identified in our community, people were assigned responsibilities and regular scheduled meetings set to follow-up on deliverables."

"I think one more workshop day to tie all the ideas and communication together would have been beneficial, but having a local leader was good to continue the communication and move goals and ideas along."

WE ASKED THRIVE COMMUNITIES...

Have there been unexpected positive or negative outcomes of the pilot?

- No, we controlled the outcomes.
- Everything we have experienced so far has been positive.
- Positive – leadership!
- The only negative is the time it took us to get to where we are now.
- Lack of capacity and community leadership has been an unexpected negative conclusion. This highlights the need to seek additional community volunteers and provides the opportunity to develop leadership capacity
- We are pleasantly surprised with the engagement by downtown businesses!

Are there lessons or alternatives that could contribute to an improved heritage-based action planning model?

- History keeps repeating itself.....
- Awareness.
- It created awareness with respect to returning to original mandates.
- The local area plan assisted in revisiting past models.
- Determining community readiness and need/willingness to participate is a lesson that could contribute to the action planning model.

WHAT DO COMMUNITIES NEED TO MOVE THEIR PRIORITIES AHEAD?

- TIME!
- Funding.
- Effective local leadership.
- Perhaps a demonstration of best practices, benefits vs costs, a 'ThriveSask' champion community that could be emulated.
- More community capacity: people and volunteers willing to become involved.

COMMUNITY PROGRESS REPORTS

Downtown Moose Jaw Association

leadership

The group was successful in formally incorporating as the Downtown Moose Jaw Association. A new board was recruited and now in place (June 25, 2019) supported by a broader group of stakeholders.

With the support of municipal staff, the group compiled a set of asset inventories for the downtown. They also disseminated a needs assessment survey to downtown residents and visitors; data was collected and evaluated to support priority identification. Two community engagement sessions held to date with the Thrive Resource team, one being a branding consultation with REFRESH Marketing.

VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT: 50 STAKEHOLDERS

"Canada's most notorious city".



promotion

The great 'moose war' was fought in the background of the Downtown Thrive initiative in early 2019 followed by the birth of a new municipal slogan "Canada's most notorious city".

The Downtown Association will work to adapt the 'notorious' market position to its own promotion, placemaking and events as it moves forward.

The group did focus on expanding the reach of social media over the past year with new content and strategies (storytelling).

An enthusiastic group of 21 downtown stakeholders came together at the ThriveSask activation session in April 2018. Primarily business owners, this core group worked to formally incorporate the Downtown Business Association and taking foundational steps to support their four priority areas: building organizational capacity; utilizing vacant buildings; business retention & expansion; making the downtown a place to live & play; creating a vibrant dynamic downtown atmosphere.

As a fully volunteer based organization, the group was somewhat challenged to build momentum during the first year of the pilot, however a Board of Directors was formally struck to govern the new non-profit association in June.



placemaking

The association was successful in developing a downtown vacant property inventory and hosting a follow up meeting with vacant property owners. A local area plan was completed by municipal partners, laying the groundwork for next stage initiatives.

economic vitality

economic vitality

St. Walburg leaders are firmly focused on residential and business attraction and are in an ideal position to leverage oil and gas expansion in the region. To support the “quality of life value proposition, they made significant enhancements to local amenities including:

- A water feasibility study, followed by recommended adjustments to water quality.
- Campgrounds were expanded from 8 lots to 26 lots and new electrical services installed. This will assist in housing oil and gas and workers as well as tourists.
- A number of enhancements were made to the communiplex and plans are underway to add a new handicap elevator in the curling rink and to upgrade the bowling alley. An entrepreneur opened a new gym downtown, supporting health and recreation.
- An outdoor ice rink for residents was established this past winter, located next to seniors housing, with intent of engaging all ages.
- An “Interactive urban garden space” was developed in 2019 to facilitate residents/groups growing local produce and sharing agricultural practices between elders and the rest of the community.
- The town plans to hire a recreation/community development staff person in August 2019. In the meantime, the leadership group is working with the local recreation board to encourage a robust offering of outdoor and indoor activities.

Seniors attraction & retention. A new transport van was purchased, and handicap parking established throughout the town. Discussions with the local senior's committee have begun with respect to potential day trips within the region.



Entrepreneur-Friendly Policies. Town Council is evaluating incentives for new businesses to reduce taxes over a 3-year period. A new industrial subdivision is now shovel ready and will be marketed by the town's real estate company. Additional municipal owned lots have been made market ready.

Oil and Gas Industry Development

Local leaders have established a strong relationship with Husky and Serafina and supplier development discussions are ongoing. Oil and gas sector training/education requirements/options were identified at a secondary and post secondary level. A workforce training program was established at Northwest Regional College in North Battleford. Councillors attended the heavy oil show; obtained leads and followed up with direct mail packages to attract supply chain businesses to the area.



Slaughterhouse Feasibility. Several meetings were held with industry and potential investors with tentative financing commitments secured. Further analysis is being conducted.

Business Retention and Expansion. The Mayor and Chamber of Commerce are working on this ongoing strategy. The Mayor began outreach with local businesses in August of 2018.



Residential attraction strategy. The town changed real estate companies and reduced the price of fully serviced lots from \$35,000 to \$7,500. Six of thirteen have now sold. Leaders have made progress in identifying several affordable housing developers and discussions are underway with respect to creating new builds.



ST WALBURG

*Hundreds of residents engaged.
We gained a renewed volunteer base.*

“There is tremendous untapped commercial potential within the Chuck Wagon Heritage Center and the St Walburg and District Historical Museum. There is lots there that has yet to be developed.”

“We changed local transportation service branding from ‘Handi van’ to ‘St. Walburg Transport’. This makes the service perception more socially modernized. This change of use was agreed to by the Minister of Municipal Affairs, as we consider this a replacement for STC.”

promotion



With the assistance of program partner REFRESH, the community rebranded itself in 2019 as “the pulse of oil, gas and agriculture in Saskatchewan”. A new website is in development and will be live by September. A Town newsletter has been initiated to inform and engage residents in community activities. Using concepts from ThriveSask the community assertively promoted the second annual “Party in the Pasture” in 2019 and doubled attendance over 2018.

The leadership group is in discussion with the local museum and tourism committees to determine how local stories will be shared. The community hosted Kristin Catherwood of Heritage Saskatchewan in spring of 2019 to discuss incorporation of storytelling into various projects. With consideration of heritage, the community successfully rejuvenated the Town Parade which had been absent for several years.

The TransCanada Trail was connected with the recently purchased CN rail line creating a new 8 km walking loop around town. Outdoor fitness stations are being added to the loop. A living heritage project in early development is the mapping of Indigenous walking and hunting trails to integrate with modern communication routes. Municipal staff attended a workshop hosted by the Ministry of Parks, Culture & Sport to explore built heritage concepts and programs for future heritage conservation initiatives.

placemaking

leadership

Thrive St. Walburg is being led by Town Council with the support of municipal administrative staff. They have made considerable progress with respect to recommended benchmarks established under the ThriveSask leadership pillar. These include:

Community Engagement: Two community engagement sessions held to date with ThriveSask partners. Multiple TOWN HALL meetings have been held with ratepayers. Town Council has now created a Town Advisory Committee focused on Economic Growth.

Partnership Building: The Mayor has met with the Chief of Thunderchild First Nation on several occasions and relation building continues. Mayor and Council have built a working relationship with Husky Energy, Serafina and Northwest College and they are working together on several initiatives beneficial to the future of St. Walburg.

Infrastructure Capacity: In addition to the initiatives mentioned above under Economic Vitality, St. Walburg has partnered with several rural municipalities in a regional lagoon development to be completed in 2019. A Water Treatment Plant and Recycle Station Renewal program have been initiated. Council is moving towards a Town sourced Wi-Fi service.

Action Planning: The community is preparing a business plan for economic growth.

GULL LAKE

Located within the Swift Current commuter shed, Gull Lake is a safe haven to grow personally and professionally. We offer a rare opportunity to experience the spirit of the old 76 where everyone does their part to get it done.



placemaking

Establishing a Streetscape Beautification & Design Committee to develop a vision and action plan is a strategic priority for the Thrive Gull Lake group. This will include heritage conservation and integration of living heritage elements. A streetscape workshop facilitated by the Ministry of Parks Culture & Sport was held in May 2019 to ready the group for further efforts in this area.



promotion

"Living Local" is an internal communication message developed in 2018 to build local pride and spearhead the summer 'shop local' campaign. A Buy Local Campaign was developed and implemented from June to August 2018. It included a unique marketing identity and passport concept to encourage shopping at all participating local businesses. A grand prize draw was established for those with eligible passport stamps.



The leadership team met with all local businesses to encourage participation in a cross promotion strategy - marketing their fellow entrepreneurs' products and services. A workshop was also held to support business expansion via effective social media marketing. A community branding session was held with the local Thrive group in October 2018 with recommendations made in a report generated by REFRESH Marketing.

In order to increase community engagement, the Thrive group organized a one day Solstice Street Festival in the downtown area on June 20, 2018 engaging 200 attendees. Rain impacted the outdoor component of the 2019 festival, however 150 attendees were on hand with an additional 50 children participated in specific activities.

The Thrive group has implemented a series of very successful public markets in June and July of 2019 with local vendors, music, and library displays. They will continue in August and possibly into the fall.

leadership

Prior to the Thrive Activation Session, the community compiled a comprehensive regional (trading area) asset inventory. This was a mandatory requirement for all pilot communities. In addition to the initial activation session, SEDA conducted a follow-up action planning session at the 60 day mark

The Thrive group also implemented needs a assessment survey to local residents with responses collected and evaluated to guide further priority setting.

VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT: 50 TO 75 RESIDENTS

economic vitality

Gull Lake has a young demographic desiring local places to socialize and gather. Business attraction priorities established by the ThriveSask group included: a coffee shop; a bar/saloon (the community lost its pub and hotel to a fire several years ago) and a new motel. Business development success to date includes:

- Local entrepreneurs purchased the 'Old 76 estate' located within town limits, with the goal of opening a coffee shop, and gallery/retail operation.
- In fall of 2018, a key restaurant in the community transitioned into new ownership. Reopening as the 'Last Chance Bar & Grill', the physical premise aligns with local living heritage (rustic) of the community and the owners are being encouraged to integrate oral traditions into the menu.
- Local father/son entrepreneurs opened Hunt's Hunting Supply in the former liquor board store in December 2018.
- In fall of 2018, a local business owner donated a vacant building to the town. The Thrive group is currently renovating the building with new flooring and roof before exploring business development opportunities.

The Mayor engaged in a business outreach program in summer of 2018, talking to all local businesses with respect to challenges; ideas for growth and feedback on the community. Following this process, a new weekly calendar designed to support local businesses (who is hiring; summer positions etc.) was established on the municipal website.

A key success factor for the group was addressing vacant residential and commercial properties. A vacant building inventory was established, followed by the leadership team working with property owners to ensure they are willing to sell and that the premises are marketable. Extensive work was undertaken by community volunteers with respect to vacant buildings including a cleanup bee to empty properties of excess items and garbage. A tour of all vacant properties was conducted by the group, which resulted in the sale of the Old 76 estate to a local volunteer and her partner.

Thrive Gull Lake has reached out to Tourism Saskatchewan for assistance in development of a local community tourism plan and this process is scheduled to begin in September.

ESTON

We have a plan that we are working towards. ThriveSask has helped bring the various committees and groups in our community together for a common goal.



leadership

Following compilation of a market area asset inventory, fifteen leaders and representatives of local organizations convened to establish priorities during the Thrive Activation session in November 2018. Shortly after the action planning session, the designated project lead transitioned from an economic development role into full time CAO, however the group has maintained momentum and a new economic development officer is in place as of July 2019.

A number of priorities were discussed during the planning session and four projects chosen to move ahead in the first year of Thrive: 1) Bring back the Gopher; 2) Expand the Farmers Market; 3) Enhance the Urban Orchard and 4) Bring back the River Trek. Thrive Eston is still in early stages (seven months) and we anticipate additional priority setting to occur over the next year.

Additional priorities were discussed but not immediately actioned:

- Revitalize Main Street
- Establish a business incubator or marketplace
- Expand the existing Harvest Moon festival
- Revitalize the library
- Celebrate and expand agricultural industry
- Partnership building with industry and neighboring municipalities
- Expand the Kidsport tournament
- Establish an outdoor checkers competition
- Enhance marketing of the community

**VOLUNTEERS
ENGAGED: 15**

placemaking

Enhancing the Urban Orchard and protecting the trees from damage – animals and all-terrain machines is linked to the local Communities in Bloom. ThriveSask Eston has conducted an assessment of the trees currently in the orchard to determine which are viable, and which need to be removed.

A local volunteer horticulturist is working on a site plan, to be completed by end of September 2019 with the goal to remove dead/damaged trees, possible planting of hedges, and install a snow fence. The group plans to utilize drought resistant, low and zero maintenance vegetation as well as repurposed/green materials where possible.



economic vitality

BRING BACK RIVER TREK

This initiative builds on a former marathon which ran between Eston and the South Saskatchewan River. It will promote local and regional engagement in the community and support tourism growth. Thrive Eston is setting a date in June 2020 with a formal working committee to be established by end of September 2019. A course route has been determined. An Iron Man event has been ruled out as an option and volunteers are currently exploring the potential for a 'Tough Mudder' event. Supplies to make obstacles for the trek have been donated and the event will be branded once a committee is in place.

BRING BACK THE GOPHER

The gopher has been a traditional icon in the community for a number of years as evidenced by the statue on Main Street; community signage and the gopher stamp that is added to all outgoing mail at the post office. The demise of the Eston "gopher races", a number of years ago, opens up opportunities to celebrate and honour the gopher in a different fashion,

Directly following the Thrive activation session, polling stations were set up at various locations in the town and local residents voted on whether to 'rejuvenate the gopher' as an icon to utilize in community development initiatives. Residents said yes and the local leadership group is now working on a new Gopher design with a marketing agency and evaluating potential locations for signage

Thrive Eston is currently incorporating Gopher-themed slogans (eg: gopher a swim) around the community such as the library, Town Office, public events and private businesses. A gopher letterhead graphic is in development and the group is sourcing gopher products such as stuffed toys. There are currently three gopher costumes available to the public for use, one with a face mask and two without. Committee members are looking into "Trekker the Gopher" costumes suitable for various holidays/seasons. Further development of public art and cultural events around the gopher will continue.

In addition to the River Trek and Gopher related initiatives mentioned above, the community also prioritized expansion of the Farmers Market as one of several projects to celebrate agriculture. The group is working with vendors this year to make this a reality.

promotion

economic vitality

Thrive Unity has successfully undertaken the following initiatives in support of identified priorities:

- An inventory of home based businesses was developed to identify potential tenants for the downtown.
- A retail marketplace opened, spearheaded by a property owner on Main Street. This endeavor provides “marketplace/shared space” for independent entrepreneurs and their products and services.
- Initial outreach has been made with local and regional artists to engage them in an ‘artists collective’, with potential to open a gallery downtown.
- An investment attraction strategy was developed and is being implemented in 2019.
- Preliminary discussion on an outdoor “Unifying Unity” family music festival has been undertaken to feature live bands and Indigenous entertainment.

Several new businesses opened in 2019 including ‘What the Float’ Floatation Therapy, Green Box Cannabis and Simba Transloading. Business expansions include the Unity Credit Union, Richardson Pioneer, and Torq Transloading.



UNITY

There is ongoing discussions and research into determining the path of the Sounding Lake Trail, a transportation pathway utilized during settlement and pre-settlement in the area. There has been good engagement with First Nations leaders in the renaming of Killsqaw Lakes to Kikiskitotawanawak Iskewak Lakes, with hope of continued discussions and partnerships.

leadership

Five short term priorities were establishing by the eight person leadership group convened in June of 2018.

- Utilize vacant buildings downtown
- Increase visitors to the community;
- Retain and expand existing businesses;
- Community marketing/branding
- Partnership building.

At a municipal leadership level, the Mayor has reached out to nearby Red Pheasant and Poundmaker First Nations. Local leaders are committed to working with First Nations neighbors in the spirit of reconciliation as well as exploring the potential for business and tourism projects.

VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT: 8 RESIDENTS

promotion

A branding session with REFRESH was held in fall of 2018, however the community has kept its existing brand positioning . The municipal website was revamped and enhanced to support business attraction. An investment attraction promotion video is under development.

With the goal of attracting more seniors to visit and live in this growing regional service center, Thrive Unity developed a fact sheet of all local senior services and distributed these flyers to medical offices, pharmacies, hospital and local businesses.

Unity is host to a robust number of sporting and special events through the year. To increase special event visitation, the group developed posters to promote major events and distribute these within the region. An online calendar of all events hosted in Unity was developed and is now being maintained. A commitment was made to enhance the community’s profile with contracting of a social media specialist and special event postings were boosted to reach a broader audience.

placemaking

Unity has built a unique sense of place over the years with an incredible attention to detail that starts with the attractive (and effective) white post directional signs evident once visitors turn off the highway and is reflected in a number of beautification elements on Main Street. The community has an abundance of well kept public parks and recreational amenities with the new Richardson Outdoor Recreation Park will be opening in 2019.

