The Western Valley Development Agency

A Backgrounder

based on

Annual Report to the Board of Directors

by

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The Agency

Ten years ago, the seven municipalities in Annapolis and Digby counties came together, in partnership with the provincial and federal governments, and created a new organization called the Western Valley Development Authority. Annapolis and Digby counties were the first to create a Regional Development Authority in Nova Scotia.

WVDA is jointly funded by the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, Nova Scotia Office of Economic Development, and seven local municipalities (the Town of Annapolis Royal, Municipality of Annapolis County, Town of Bridgetown, Town of Digby, Municipality of the District of Digby, Municipality of the District of Clare and Town of Middleton). The agency’s mission is:

Building on our diverse cultural heritage, the Western Valley Development Authority (WVDA) will work with the community to create a vital, prosperous, and self-reliant region where the people have ample opportunity for a full and satisfying life.¹

This document is intended to provide background information for those unfamiliar with WVDA’s community economic development activities. For those who require more information, a number of detailed documents are available that survey the region, the organization, and its information and communication technology projects.²

The Context

There were a number of significant challenges facing the Western Valley region in 1994:

- The closure of CFB Cornwallis was devastating to the regional economy. Seven hundred jobs were lost, Annapolis County’s tax base was devastated, and retailers, contractors and suppliers of goods and services were all severely impacted.
- Ground fish stocks had collapsed, leaving a significant portion of the fisheries sector in crisis.
- Computer literacy was low, the Internet was accessible to very few, and much of the region was still served by analogue phone service, with many areas still using party lines.
- And, the two counties had not generally been thought of as one region.

However, there was a tremendous will amongst the community to make the economy work. That will has been reflected in the results.

Results

Businesses in Cornwallis Park now employ more than 900 people full time, with 1,200 more added when the Acadian Sea Cadets arrive each summer. The majority of the businesses continue to grow, with companies such as Shaw Wood doubling their workforce in the past year, Acadian Seaplants building a new Research and Development Centre, and Fundy Composites and Darmos Enterprises continually diversifying their products. All of the former PMQs are now owned privately, creating a community of more than 500 people.

The former tire recycling plant has been converted into a state of the art contact centre. Convergys, the building’s first tenant, created 350 new jobs in its first three months of operation.

The fisheries sector has also rebounded, with the value of fish landings at $69.4 million this year. This is a 32% increase from 1994, an increase which has happened without increasing catches. The single largest employer in the region is Comeau Seafoods of Saulnierville, which employs over 500 people, processing and shipping seafood around the world. Companies that have traditionally supplied the fisheries sector with boats, such as AF Theriault and Son shipyard of Meteghan River, have continued to grow and diversify, constructing luxury yachts for U.S. markets, and using their extensive knowledge of composites to create specialized housing units for developing countries.

While the number of farms has declined, the agriculture sector has actually grown in value, with overall farm gate sales increasing by more than 76% in the last decade, and regional farm gate values at $45.5 million last year. Efforts have been underway to help diversify the sector, including a project to collect and analyze detailed data about the region’s microclimates to identify what niche crops may be grown, the creation of a community-owned grain centre, and the development of new crops such as cranberries and raspberries.
The forestry sector also continues to play an important role, employing some 700 people. For the past two years, the WVDA has partnered with the Nova Forest Alliance to host an annual Woodlot Owner’s Conference and to deliver a Opportunities Planning program for woodlot owners. Creative initiatives to ensure the sustainability of the region’s forests and support the diversification of agriculture contributed to the Economic Developers Association of Canada twice naming the Western Valley region the best economic development program in the country.

Small businesses have also continued to grow, and indeed represent the backbone of the region’s economy, with 80% of businesses employing less than five people. Each year, the WVDA has focused much of its work on supporting small businesses, hosting dozens of workshops, seminars, conferences, trade shows, and events in support of local entrepreneurs, in addition to serving some 150 first-stop business clients every year.

Several hundred youth have participated in entrepreneurship camps, and a small business outreach program reached more than 500 clients. New this year was the creation of a Canada-Nova Scotia Business Service Centre within the WVDA building. And also new this year was the introduction of the Innovator of the Year Award, which went to a young Meteghan software development entrepreneur named Marc Robichaud.

Community-based groups have also demonstrated leadership in innovation. The Salmon River Salmon Association, for example, has partnered with the École Secondaire de Clare to establish a fish hatchery and science lab right in the classroom, involving students in habitat restoration. The WVDA helped the group secure $385,000 from the Atlantic Innovation Fund to conduct research into the use of cement dust, a by-product of the cement manufacturing process, to lower acidity in rivers, improve habitats, and divert waste from landfills.

Community groups are showing leadership in other areas as well, such as waterfront development projects, farmers markets, and events to celebrate the region’s rich heritage and diverse culture. The community has been planning for much of the past decade to celebrate the 400th Anniversary of the
founding of Port Royal in 2005, and to host some 250,000 visitors for the Congrès mondial acadien this summer.

Events such as Paint the Town in Annapolis Royal and Musique St Bernard in Clare are part of the broad mix of community-driven cultural events that form the foundation of the tourism sector, as well as being the stuff on which the community’s rich quality of life is based. Local artists have become international ambassadors, with groups such as Grand Dérangement and Blou taking the international music scene by storm.

Community groups have also driven the creation of new facilities, including the Bear River First Nations Heritage and Cultural Centre, the Clare Curling Club, the Bridgetown Community Health Centre, and the Bay of Fundy Marine Resource Centre. New community-driven facilities in the works include the Bay of Fundy Discovery Centre, which is expected to become an anchor attraction on Digby Neck and Islands.

Plans are also underway to construct Lifeplex, which will transform the former Canex building at Cornwallis Park into a regional wellness centre.

Thirty c@p sites were established in community centres and libraries, and computer outreach programs have reached hundreds of citizens. An estimated 85% of the population now has computer and Internet in the home, 20% higher than the national average. Programs have been designed to ensure inclusion of all members of the community, focusing on youth, children, families, and the Francophone community. Special programs targeting seniors, in which the graduates become the teachers, have a perpetual waiting list.

In 2000, the region was designated one of Canada’s official "Smart Community Demonstration Projects", and local communities are making technology relevant to their lives:

- The New France web site engaged children and elders in using technology to document and share the history of Weymouth.

- The Towns of Annapolis Royal, Bridgetown, and Middleton have created a sophisticated on-line digital mapping system that details each town’s infrastructure.
- The regional libraries have put local library services on-line, increasing library usage by 50%.
- The Centre Acadien has digitized the genealogical records of 52 complete Acadian family histories going back 400 years, accessible online, and Radio CIFA in Clare is broadcasting Acadian community radio on-line to the world.
- A free email program was created for local residents, and is being used by some 3,100 people.
- Special portals were created for the tourism sector and the arts community, and a new community information portal was launched this year in four different languages. The various web portals hosted by the WVDA receive a combined average of 12,000 hits every single day.
- Britech Information Systems of Lawrencetown, through a partnership with the WVDA, has provided business mentoring and support to 52 students just entering the workforce.

All of this technology development is driving the need for broadband, resulting in a unique project to construct a community-owned fibre-optic network. The section from Meteghan to Weymouth, completed this year, now has 200 residential and business subscribers for high-speed Internet in Clare.

The seven municipalities in the region and the Nova Scotia Community College together form the FundyWeb Broadband Board, which will oversee the completion of a 144 km network, linking the region to Halifax, and the world. Plans are underway to expand the network to include wireless services that will reach communities off the grid. A two-year wireless test, in which the WVDA provided several groups in Clare with access to high speed internet, has been moved to Sandy Cove to serve communities on Digby Neck and Islands.

A major user of the broadband system will be the Nova Scotia Community College, which now has three campuses in the region. The Digby Satellite campus was created through a partnership with the Digby Area Learning Association and the WVDA. Programs delivered there have yielded tangible results: more than 400 people completed the Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition program, 30 graduated from the Info Tech program and 77 from the Virtual Firm. More than 80% of those participants are now employed.
The NSCC sites at Lawrencetown and Middleton, known as the Centre of Geographic Sciences, have established the Applied Geomatics Research Group. AGRG has secured more than $10 million in research grants and employs 20 full time research scientists. Plans are underway to create an innovation cluster which would focus on turning this research into commercial opportunities, and enticing some of the thousands of graduates of COGS back home to work in the region.

The Université Ste-Anne, Nova Scotia’s only French language university, has merged with Collège de l’Acadie, thus expanding its reach throughout Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island. The Collège has been recognized as a pioneer in the use of technologies such as videoconferencing to deliver its programs.

Learning from the experience of the collège, the WVDA has established five publicly-accessible videoconferencing sites. These are being actively used by businesses, community groups, educators, and students. One of these sites is located at the Intellicentre@Clare, a technology business incubation centre created by the Conseil de développement économique de la Nouvelle Écosse.

All this contributed to Annapolis and Digby counties being selected from 3,800 communities as one of the top seven "Intelligent Communities" in the world for 2003.

Other unique projects that have yielded results include a focus on renewable energy and community participation, which helped convince Nova Scotia Power to install the province’s first commercial wind turbine in Little Brook. Opportunities to expand the number of wind turbines in the region are being pursued, along with experiments in new renewable energy technologies.

A plan to create a District Heating System was drafted for Cornwallis Park which would use biomass, an industry by-product, to offset some $500,000 worth of heating oil annually; business in the park are enthusiastic about moving forward with this vision.

One hundred and fifty participants have joined the Learn$ave Program, one of only 10 pilot projects in Canada, which assists low income individuals in building assets to start a business or upgrade training to increase their employment opportunities. Thirty-five percent of those participants have started a small business, and 65% have gone back to school.
Despite many successes, there have been some deep disappointments; most notably the failure to find a solution that would keep the Britex textiles plant open. This was not for lack of effort by the community. It is certain that the kind of attitude of resiliency that resulted in the turnaround of Cornwallis Park will be applied to addressing the loss of Bridgetown’s largest employer.

Local entrepreneurs are moving forward with an ambitious vision to create a bio-refinery in Bridgetown, which could play a significant role in the region’s economic growth. Other ideas for creating new manufacturing industries are also being pursued.

The Future

The region’s successes are based firmly on a positive, can-do attitude. Major new initiatives will focus on youth and what they can contribute to shaping the region’s future.

To help plan for the future, the WVDA is undertaking a new strategic planning process this year, which builds on the positive vision that came out of the community consultation process conducted five years ago.

Strategic sectors include: Youth Leadership and Entrepreneurship; Broadband and Innovation; Renewable Energy; Business Retention & Expansion; Commercialization of Research; Natural Resource Industries; Tourism, Heritage and the Arts; International Networks: Export, Immigration and Business Attraction; Coastal Communities; Social Economy and Inclusion; and Municipalities. All of these elements are considered important ingredients to enable this rural community to take full advantage of its strengths.

The WVDA Board of Directors has recently adopted a number of bylaw amendments that are intended to take the organization into its next decade. Driven by the municipalities, the board has eliminated its community-member-at-large nomination process and opted to have both of each municipality’s two seats appointed by that municipal council. The board now has fewer committees, and the organization’s name has been officially changed to the “Western Valley Development Agency.”

Meanwhile, to strengthen the organization’s processes, WVDA has begun the process to become ISO 9001 certified.
Janet Larkman, WVDA’s Executive Director for the past 4 years, describes the organization’s vision for the future:

In the coming decade, work will continue with partners both locally and abroad to build sustainable economic development opportunities that are strategic, community-driven, and focused on the future. We will strive to invest energy, enthusiasm, creativity, and a spirit of cooperation into all that we do. We will continue to take risks, and learn from the past. We will work with our communities towards a positive and prosperous future. And in the coming decade, the people of this region will continue to surprise the world by demonstrating what is possible in a rural community.  

Notes:

1 WVDA, Building Tomorrow - Vision 2000: A multi-year action plan for Annapolis and Digby counties (Bridgetown, Digby and Church Point, NS: Western Valley Development Authority, 1999) 4.

2 The other backgrounder in this series is:


For introductory academic work on these topics, see:


4 Ibid 12.

5 This is a WVDA estimate that can be neither supported nor rebutted using the organization’s existing data sources.


7 WVDA Board of Directors, Annual General Meeting Minutes (Cornwallis Park, NS: WVDA, 24 June 2004).

8 This quote (and all un-cited facts found throughout this document) is attributable to:

Larkman, Janet, Executive Director’s Annual Report to the Board of Directors (Cornwallis Park, NS: WVDA, 2004).