

Downtown Revitalization on the Boomtown Trail



Change is afoot in rural Alberta, and residents of the Boomtown Trail are leading the way.





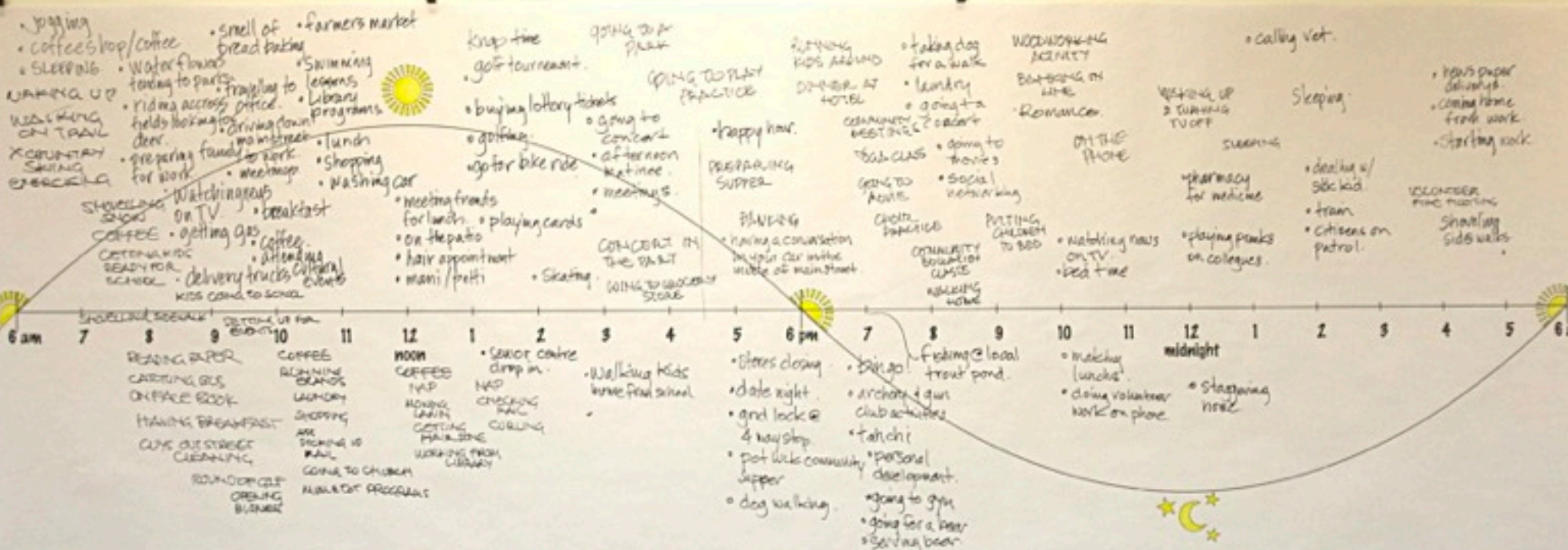
January 20, representatives from Boomtown Trail communities met in Delburne for a day of planning, and left with a clear sense of how their downtowns will become the heart and soul of their communities, thereby creating a strong, economically viable region. The process and its results were nothing short of visionary.

Ken Duncan, CEO of the Boomtown Trail, enlisted the support of Community Design Strategies Inc. in association with TheCo-Design Group to develop the region's Downtown Revitalization Master Plan. The Boomtown Trail knows their downtowns are more than marketing hubs, they are the very essence of their communities. Goods for sale in their downtowns are grown, created and prepared in the surrounding region; events are developed, marketed and delivered by members of the entire community. These activities not only attract visitors to the Boomtown Trail, they keep residents living, and thriving, along the Boomtown Trail.

Why is this different?

The Boomtown Trail started with the right people. Participants represented a variety of demographics, ages and community roles, with volunteers, elected representatives and staff arriving from every corner of the Boomtown Trail. They even consulted 12-year-olds. That's right – children. Because the Boomtown





A DAY IN THE LIFE OF THE BOOMTOWN TRAIL

Trail is creating its own future, they need to talk with, and involve, their own future.

While they took part in a planning session, this was not like any strategic planning session participants had seen, or heard of, before arriving in Delburne. The Boomtown Trail is creating a new model for rural economic development – this demands a new way of thinking.

Enter Merinda Conley, Principal of Community Design Strategies, and Associate Director of the Co-Design Team. led participants through the exercise of Collaborative Drawing, a concept originally developed by Stanley King, Principal of Co-Design, to assist participants in identifying and capturing their vision.

Visionary Process

“Collaborative Drawing is all about taking the client’s instructions,” explained Stanley. Participants were asked to describe the downtown experience they wanted for their communities – what they wanted to see, hear, feel, smell, and do. As participants shared their thoughts, artist architects from the Co-Design Team sketched these ideas in full color, right in front of them. Each page quickly filled with cameos depicting how participants wanted to experience life in their communities, and how they wanted to share this experience with visitors. The illustrations gave the group a concrete sense of their vision.

And the process itself is visionary. This is the same process used to create Robson Square in Vancouver, the vibrant gathering spot in the city’s downtown. It is the process that

is changing the way rural Alberta sees itself, and way the rest of the province will soon see rural Alberta.

Building excitement

The excitement was palpable. Participants saw their future taking shape right in front of them, and the resulting pride was evident throughout the day. It was almost as if the artist architects had reached in and pulled ideas out of the participants' heads. The process was focused but fun, with lots of laughing, smiling and positive sharing. "Drawing focuses the discussion," according to Stanley, "It reduces the need to restate things."

The discussion and generation of ideas was further prompted by the use of additional visuals. Virtual Walking Tours of Boomtown Trail Communities covered the walls with photographs of downtowns from across the region. Maps identified transportation networks, county boundaries, provincial parks and natural areas, touring areas, museums and historic sites, and regional highlights. It was the first time representatives of the Boomtown Trail had been given a complete visual of their region.

As the artist architects filled pages with sketches, the individual cameos were given titles and became features of the newly envisioned downtowns. At day's end, the drawings were displayed and participants asked to rate their ability to implement each feature. The Co-Design Team will use these ratings to develop strategies for the Boomtown Trail – strategies for their Downtown Revitalization Master Plan.

This planning session dovetailed on the work of Grade Six students in Delburne the day before. The Boomtown Trail

wanted to learn about the walkability of its communities, and the Co-Design Team suggested that they look to the children. After all, who better to ask about walkability than a bunch of 12-year-olds?

Changing the face of rural Alberta

This process is going to change the face of rural Alberta along the Boomtown Trail, a change that residents and future generations will benefit from. "This is a long-term plan, not a quick-fix or a band-aid," says Ken Duncan. "Boomtown Trail is in it for the long haul. We are planning for the grandkids of the kids who are in Grade 5 right now."

The Boomtown Trail is doing its homework and carefully planning its growth, making them leaders in rural Alberta. "In the past, Rural Communities have not done a lot of planning about where we want to go," says Ken, "but times are changing."

.....Perhaps they already have.

