

Keeping rural communities alive

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There are lots of ways to unknowingly kill rural communities and MLA Doug Griffiths, chair of the province's Rural Development Strategies Task Force, knows most of them.

He shared the up to 15 different ways with close to 100 southeastern Alberta delegates Friday night in the Growing in Southeast Alberta - a symposium supporting the rural development strategy, held at the Holiday Inn Express.

Griffiths, the symposium's keynote speaker, is the MLA for Battle River-Wainwright, and stressed that the number one way to kill rural communities is to ensure a poor quality of water.

"So if you want to ensure that your community will fail, and if your desire is to see that your community does not grow and does not succeed, then ensure you don't address the issue of water," he said in an interview prior to the symposium.

"It is the most important first step to ensure success and every community that has been successful has done it - so if you want to fail, ensure water issues are not addressed."

Ignoring youth and seniors' issues will also ensure a rural community doesn't survive and grow.

"Don't engage youth because they're the future of your community," stated Griffiths. "Just keep telling them how it's a dead-end town, how farming has no future and that they've got to leave the community. Keep telling them that and wonder why they're leaving the community."

As for seniors, he pointed out that these are the people who built rural communities and they usually have time on their hands, because they're retired, and many of them have money.

"They want to live, they want to volunteer, they want to help, they want to continue to build the town and they're willing to spend money to get the services they want, which can attract other businesses," he explained.

"They'll just fire your community up, but if you want to kill your community, just keep doing what you're doing and put the seniors in retirement homes and expect them to play shuffleboard and crib until they die."

Griffiths stressed there are no "magic fixes" to re-invigorating rural communities, but he did cite one success story he's very excited about, in the City of Winkler, Man. Winkler has a population of about 10,000. and celebrated its centennial this year.

The city's and surrounding county economic development groups and volunteer organizations get together every year and meet with local high school students to see how many of the Grade 12 students are graduating.

They take it upon themselves that if there's say 100 students graduating, they want to create 100 jobs or business opportunities based on community need. The high school work experience class is tied into the chamber of commerce to ensure a meaningful work experience from a local business.

"Their idea is that when people reach 60 to 65 years of age and they're thinking of retiring, they'll already have two or three people working in the business from the community, who may be interested in taking it over," said Griffiths.

He added that in other rural communities, if younger people want to set up a local business, people set up a community-type cooperative organization where they'll find 10 local people to pool some money and loan it to a young person to start the business. After that, they act as mentors to make sure the business is successful.

"There's no magic bullet and it's going to take a 100 different initiatives and desire for a community to survive," stressed Griffiths.

The symposium continues today with sessions ranging from rural leadership development, rural youth engagement, partnerships and collaboration, and attracting professionals and new Canadians.

The symposium is sponsored by a tri-ministry partnership involving Alberta Community Development, Alberta Economic Development and Alberta Human Resources & Development.

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