



Freedom To Create.  
Spirit To Achieve.

## FIRST IMPRESSIONS COMMUNITY EXCHANGE

# FICE

### ONE YEAR FOLLOW-UP EVALUATION 2009 PILOT



**Government of Alberta** ■  
Agriculture and Rural Development

May 2011

## Introduction

The First Impressions Community Exchange (FICE) is a program in which a participating community is matched with another that shares similar demographics and has similar challenges and aspirations. These municipalities send exchange teams to each others' communities to look for strengths and shortcomings as seen through the eyes of a first time visitor. The benefit of FICE is that it provides communities with a fresh perspective that is delivered by a fellow community which likely has a good understanding of the barriers to community development, and may have some firsthand, practical ideas of how to overcome them. Another aspect of the FICE exchange is the opportunity for municipalities to partner with local businesses and other organizations to develop and champion action plans that address areas of need and opportunity. Many Alberta towns and villages are interested in community development. The FICE program can serve as a practical tool in helping to identify and develop action in many areas of community development including municipal sustainability planning, beautification, community spirit and revitalization initiatives.

The First Impressions Community Exchange program has been utilized with great success by smaller communities in both Ontario and Saskatchewan as well as throughout the United States. FICE was piloted in 2008 and 2009 by the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association (AUMA) with support from Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development.

This evaluation is of the 2009 pilot communities and serves the purpose of giving a longitudinal outlook on the program. The consultant who facilitated the program evaluated the communities at the end of 2008 upon

### 2009 Pilot Community Pairs

- Cardston and Didsbury
- Black Diamond and Carstairs

completion of their action plans. This evaluation assessed each step of the exchange, reporting and planning processes, associated documents and checklists, general

learnings and value to the community. In checking back with the FICE community coordinators in the first quarter of 2011, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development wanted to see if communities were still engaging with their action plan and whether their perspective of FICE had changed over time.

## The Evaluation

### Action Areas

In three of four cases, the coordinators indicated that there had been an awareness of at least some of the areas identified as strengths or weaknesses by the visiting community. All three said that in spite of there being awareness of those areas, identification in FICE gave the impetus needed to achieve action or take action sooner: "We could have talked about welcoming signs until the end of time, but when outsiders pointed out the need, it happened."

A need for improved signage was a recurring theme in the areas in need of action. Other areas identified included sidewalk improvements, updating the town’s website and developing non-denominational after-school youth programming.

Any action since last follow-up?

Three of four coordinators identified that action has occurred or will be occurring since the last follow-up. Actions have ranged from downtown beautification with erecting new streetlights with flag standards and seasonal flag displays to beginning sidewalk replacements which are now on a two year schedule. Two communities noted that some things have taken more time to achieve due to the need to wait for new fiscal year and to allocate dollars in the budget and get it passed by council.

One community had not yet achieved action due to budget constraints but the coordinator indicated that the Chamber and Economic Development office were working actions into future spending plans. Other than an lack of available funding, some things weren’t able to be completed as they involved private property or were the responsibility of someone over whom the Town has no influence.

One coordinator made particular effort to look into the suggestions and found an inability to complete action due to external forces, including lack of participation by business owners, provincial highway regulations and an affordable housing grant application that was not successful.

Achieving action

In three of four interviews, the importance of relationships, collaboration and community buy in was highlighted. Manpower or available time was the other issue raised.

“It is not even the dollars so much. Council has made the actions a priority and even though we can’t pay for it all at once, it is in the budget to be done over three years. But manpower is a real challenge.”

How much of the plan is likely to be implemented

Three coordinators estimated that 75% of the action plan is likely to be implemented . One other indicated that 60% of the plan was either complete or in some stage past conceptual.

New ideas coming out of FICE

Three of four coordinators indicated that FICE had presented them with new ideas which included making vacant lots into attractive public space, and the cleanliness of the host community inspiring a “Community Pride Campaign” in the visiting community. Two coordinators indicated that seeing the signs and directions on their visit inspired improvements, in addition to the comments received on the visiting community report.

Surprises in the visiting team FICE report

Two coordinators identified surprises. For one, the most surprising thing was that visiting team members weren’t able to get information on town-owned real estate when they asked at town office. That revealed a

need to make sure that when there is new staff or things change that front end people know about it. Another was surprised by the positive comments. Though the assessment was sufficient in its constructive criticism, the expectation was that there would be a far harsher judgment of the community and its flaws.

*Incorporating FICE into another plan*

Half the communities had not incorporated FICE into another plan but in one case they had recently completed a Municipal Sustainability Plan which the FICE report confirmed and complemented. One community had incorporated FICE into their three year Strategic Plan and another had rolled most, though not everything, into their three year Economic Development and Tourism Plan.

*“Other” outcomes as a result of FICE*

The focus of the FICE program is on receiving an assessment of the community from the visiting team and using it to develop an action plan, based on the worksheet (Table 1). The nature of the program is such that outcomes other than the formal action plan are possible.

**Table 1. FICE Action Plan Worksheet**

Action	By Whom	Deadline	Resources & Support		Potential Barrier(s)	Communications Plan	Evaluation
What needs to be done?	Who will take the lead?	By what date will the action be done?	Available	Needed	What individuals or organizations might resist? How?	What individuals and organizations should be informed re: this action?	What will successful implementation look like?

Only one of the coordinators identified an “other” outcome in the form of goodwill between communities but also within the community. Those on the visiting team got to see a similar communities and its strengths and weaknesses, thereby gaining an appreciation for their own strengths.

*Other comments*

The coordinators were invited to comment generally on the program, its structure and follow up. One coordinator noted that she had been to the partner community prior to doing FICE, had stayed, toured around but found doing it again through FICE to be a very different experience. She found that going with the program’s specification of what to look for made her experience the town in a new way and see things that she hadn’t in her previous visit. She emphasized that the visiting booklet was well laid out and valuable to the process.

Another coordinator indicated that they had been spending some years working on aligning priorities of the Council, the Chamber of Commerce and local business. She found FICE to be a tool that helped in that process as the team was very deliberately chosen to represent those groups.

### Value of FICE

All four communities felt FICE was valuable. Though not specifically asked, one stated that they would like to do it again in future. Three mentioned, unprompted, that other communities should do it.

*“It was a great program and we would do it again with another town. I definitely recommend it to others. Even on the stuff that didn’t happen, it was worth looking into and we’ve learned something doing that process”*

Unprompted, one coordinator mentioned that the visiting team members were carefully chosen to have councilors, Chamber members, business owners and other community people on it.



*Mainstreet Black Diamond*

### **Conclusion**

The FICE program is an inexpensive way to gain insights and a document that supports recommendations made to council. The recommendations of the visiting team were important to communities: the program put a focus on projects, even the ones that were known, and helped coordinators move those projects forward. Communities valued the ‘fresh eyes’ gained not just from the perspective of the exchange partner but also for team participants who were able to view their own communities more critically. The pilot communities appreciated the FICE program and as a result of their participation have taken action to redress identified challenges. While these actions were, for the most part, ones which the community would likely have taken in time, the coordinators attribute FICE for making projects a priority. Implementation of the action plan is as contingent on community involvement as it is upon finding dollars to do things. Coordinators are interested in seeing the program continue for the benefit of other communities. They also see merit in repeating the process in the future to establish how actions have made a difference in the eyes of outsiders.