

Successful Municipal Practices: Responding to New Challenges



Tools for Change

BETTER MUNICIPAL BUSINESS PRACTICES: Langford Community Pasture Conservation Easement Agreement Rural Municipalities of Langford & Lansdowne

The Langford Community Pasture covers just over 21,000 acres in the Rural Municipalities (RMs) of Langford and Lansdowne in western Manitoba. The Community Pasture land is important to these two municipalities, as it provides summer grazing for approximately 2,000 head of cattle belonging to 26 producers, and is a habitat for Manitoba's only lizard, the endangered prairie skink. It also provides a unique example of how the prairie landscape looked prior to settlement, and is enjoyed by many local residents for recreational purposes.

While much of the pasture land has never been broken, the Councils became concerned in 2009 that the pasture's fragile and high erosion risk soils could be damaged by the rapid growth of potato farming in area. Through strategic planning, the RM of Langford Council began looking for ways to preserve this large block of native grasslands and rolling sand hills forever and to ensure that the native species of plants and animals living there were protected.

After some research, Council decided to approach the Manitoba Habitat Heritage Corporation (MHHC) about protecting the Community Pasture land through a conservation easement agreement. A conservation easement agreement is a voluntary, legal arrangement between a landowner and a conservation organization that permanently limits the use of the land in order to protect its natural values. Council also enlisted the support of the RM of Lansdowne and the Whitemud Watershed Conservation District.

In order to determine local public support for the conservation easement agreement, the Councils of Langford and Lansdowne held public meetings with Community Pasture patrons and recreational users. Citizens expressed support for the agreement, and a decision was made to proceed.

The municipal councils coordinated the project with Manitoba Crown Lands and the federal Agri-Environmental Services Branch, as 65% of the pasture is a mixture of Federal and Provincial Crown-owned land. The success of protecting in perpetuity this unique large block of undisturbed natural prairie relied on developing acceptable partnership agreements with the provincial and federal governments. The first critical step was to lead by example. As such, all the municipal owned land within the Community Pasture were protected in perpetuity by a conservation easement agreement with MHHC.

Councils were looking for a way to permanently preserve and protect their Community Pasture in order to ensure that it will be used by producers and enjoyed by citizens into the future.

The Councils decided to create a conservation easement agreement in order to protect native grasslands and wildlife and promote sustainable pasture management practices – the first of its kind in Canada.



Successful Municipal Practices: Responding to New Challenges

The Councils then worked with Crown agencies and the MHHC to develop a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the municipalities, the MHHC, Manitoba and Canada. The MOU was designed to connect native grassland protection with sustainable pasture management practices, and is the first of its kind in Canada. Discussions are continuing to determine the best method to permanently protect the 65% provincial lands in the community pasture to ensure the entire 21,000 acre block of native grasslands is preserved forever.

The conservation easement agreements were signed by the RM of Langford on August 25, 2010 and by the RM of Lansdowne on September 8, 2010. Key elements of the agreements include:

- Legal protection in perpetuity for the 11,000 acres of the Community Pasture that is owned by the two municipalities and the creation of the largest protected parcel of land in Manitoba;
- Providing that grazing can continue on the land while protecting the land from future development;
- Prohibiting anyone from breaking, annually burning, draining, degrading, converting, applying herbicide or fertilizer, filling, excavating, or constructing ditches or in any way disrupting the ecosystem or animal habitats; and
- Preventing the establishment of any commercial or residential buildings or facilities on the conservation lands.

In addition to the environmental benefits of the conservation easement agreement, the agreement will also help to ensure the economic stability of local livestock producers, and has the potential to create recreation, tourism and heritage opportunities for the municipalities including possible summer hiking trails, winter snowmobile trails, and deer hunting.

The agreement, which is the largest in Manitoba, was created with the support of staff time costs to the RM of Langford. The MHHC covered significant staff time costs and financial costs to register the easements with Land Titles. A spinoff benefit to a neighbouring Town is the protection of its drinking water. The Town shifted from a surface drinking water source to a protected groundwater aquifer located in the Community Pasture, resulting in significantly reduced water treatment costs for the users.

Councils are proud of their unique Community Pasture Conservation Easement Agreement, and believe that this model could be used for protection of community pastures across western Canada. Partnerships between the municipalities and with Federal and Provincial agencies were crucial to the success of the project, and demonstrate that municipalities can work together to improve the environmental and economic sustainability of their communities.

For more information contact: Kathy Jasienczyk
Reeve
Rural Municipality of Langford
(204)476-2576
E-mail: kjas@inetlink.ca

Tools for Change

The Agreement will allow producers to continue to utilize the lands for grazing, but will limit future development. This will allow the Community Pasture to be preserved in perpetuity, and also provides economic development opportunities for local entrepreneurs.

For more information on better municipal business practices, Successful Municipal Practices, and the Tools for Change program, see the Association of Manitoba Municipalities' website, at www.amm.mb.ca.