



SASKATCHEWAN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ALLIANCE

COMMUNITY ACTIVATION PLAN

Town of Eston



Introduction

ThriveSask is a program convened and facilitated by the Saskatchewan Economic Development Alliance (SEDA). ThriveSask uses a heritage based action planning framework to guide community development efforts. It aims to harness the social, economic, physical, and cultural assets that set a place apart, ultimately leading to tangible outcomes that benefit the entire community.

ThriveSask encourages communities to take steps to enact long term change, while also implementing short term, inexpensive and place-based activities to support the local business sector and create a sense of enthusiasm and momentum about the community. There is something special about every community. This unique sense of place – where people came from and who they are today – is the living heritage we draw from in the ThriveSask action planning process. Our values, beliefs and way of living we have inherited from past generations inform the present and our choices for the future.

Four pillars anchor the ThriveSask Program and will guide the development and implementation of local action plans:



Community Activation Session

Eston's ThriveSask Community Activation Session was held on November 6, 2018 at the AGT Community Centre. Twelve local stakeholders participated along with resource team representatives from SEDA, Heritage Saskatchewan, SPRA and Ministry of Parks Sport & Culture. Local residents shared what makes Eston unique and community priorities were established with initial action plans set for 30, 60 and 90 days. This session was sponsored by Sask Culture via the Cultural Planning Grant.



Resource Team Assessment

Observations from the ThriveSask Resource Team are provided for consideration of the local leadership group.

PRIOR TO OUR VISIT

A market profile was reviewed prior to the activation session including a comprehensive inventory of community resources and assets. The following observations are highlighted as they relate to several of our go forward recommendations.

The market snapshot indicated the presence of a stable and relatively young population base over the past 18 years with annual residential building permits illustrating a demand for new housing. Average housing prices are competitive within the region: 13 to 38% lower than Kindersley/Rosetown and 10-20% higher than neighboring Elrose and Estonia.

Eston has an above average number of multi-family dwellings for a community of this size, likely aligned to the presence of Eston College – an accredited post-secondary education institution.

Although the town appears to be relatively self-contained – with a trading area encompassing the immediate community as well as the RM of Snipe Lake (396 pop) – it has retained a fairly diverse business base including two financial institutions. The community still has a newspaper – The Press Review – which is certainly a sign of a cohesive and supportive market. Ensuring local businesses remain viable within this small catchment area will need to be a priority, given proximity to the larger centers of Rosetown and Kindersley and likelihood of business succession demands due to retirement.

Recreation and youth amenities appear to exceed those of neighboring towns of the same size and there is a robust number of local organizations and special events active in the community.

Eston participated in the Prairie West Planning District, however we understand a District Plan has not come to fruition. Likewise, the community has not yet adopted a local official community plan. However, we were pleased to see a progressive number of tax incentives in place along with potential business opportunities on the town website. The Town of Eston website is very attractive, comprehensive and easy to navigate.

ON SITE ASSESSMENT & RECOMMENDATIONS

Visiting during the throes of winter is not ideal timing, however, we saw a community that expresses prosperity and independence. We were very impressed by the capacity of local residents (arguably your biggest asset) - intelligent and hardworking individuals that care about their town and their history.

Leveraging the Highway

Contrary to many rural communities, no billboard corridors are in place on highways leading to Eston, promoting amenities and businesses in the community. Although we loved the brown/white wayfinding signposts on the highway (nice attention to detail and sense of place), there was no prominent indication of local retail or services and no incentive to turn off and stop. The traditional Highway Marker (to the right) does not 'pull' us in.



We did not see a tourism kiosk, but this could have been due to the season. The lack of a tourism kiosk (it could be self-serve as in a number of other rural communities) and signage gave the impression that the community does not want or need visitors. There was an abundance of oil industry traffic on the highway during the days of our visits – they could be potential customers to support viability of your local service and retail businesses (average annual daily vehicle count on HWY 44 at Eston is 720 vehicles). Offering public wifi and a coffee shop/bakery with expresso – promoted to highway travelers – are on our wish list for Eston!

Billboard corridors are not always appealing, but perhaps an attractive themed sign featuring key amenities could be considered as well as specialty signage directing visitors to attractions such as the museum and art gallery – and the park with an outdoor checkerboard (Note: the checkerboard should be marked as an attraction). A simple “100 businesses to serve you in Eston” sign would invite consideration from highway travelers.



Adding some history to honor and explain the Eston Gopher (start the story at the statue) is suggested along with a pull out if possible for vehicles (and self-serve tourism kiosk) and provision of waste receptacles. Storytelling could be continued via locally produced 'gopher tales' and perhaps regular storytelling circles at the library.

Another value added amenity to encourage highway traffic to stop is “public dog park/run”. Note: Visitors often generate inquiries to Tourism Saskatchewan on this amenity.

Downtown

The vacancy rate on Main Street – in conjunction with buildings in need of repair - is our primary area of concern. The planned move of the co-op to the highway will exacerbate this issue. Buildings that are clearly in need of demolishing should be addressed. Please contact SUMA to obtain their input on legislation providing leverage for municipalities to act on property not maintained (Note: we sought their advice earlier this year and there appear to be options for communities). Offering a charitable tax receipt in lieu of transferring ownership to the town may also be an attractive option. Many communities are now maximizing their opportunities to reduce absentee landowners and unsightly properties.

Kudos to the community for window dressing the vacant buildings downtown. For buildings that have a 'story waiting to be told', installing inexpensive heritage markers to the building or property is an easy means of communicating to visitors (and reinforcing to local residents) the history of the property and somewhat mitigating the inactive nature of vacant buildings. To the right are two examples from another community in Saskatchewan – simple signs that can be easily created by local stakeholders. Further visioning on placemaking and leveraging local heritage could result in metal signs or metal holders for the stories that these buildings tell.



We strongly encourage animation of Main Street in the context of ongoing and special events – including expansion of a Farmers/Public Market. Demolishing of particular buildings could assist in freeing up suitable space. Looking to host special events at the rink/community centre is natural given parking and amenities – but we encourage you to focus on pushing locals and visitors to Main Street. Visitors are potential residents, and there are business opportunities waiting on Main Street.



Perhaps locally crafted tabletop checkerboards and benches could be incorporated into some of the pocket parks already on Main Street and other locations downtown, to encourage interaction of residents and visitors.

Addition of a downtown coffee bar (why not the library in the absence of an entrepreneur?) with local baking (perhaps a fundraiser for the library). Add in storytelling and the Imagination Garden – this is a great tourist attraction.



The Eston area has at least one well known artist(painter) and we did not see her works for sale in town. Is there a critical mass of artists in the region – that could be engaged to support a downtown gallery – perhaps in partnership with a marketplace concept? After reaching out to regional artists and artisans, the Town of Spiritwood implemented an artist walk several years ago with art placed in the windows of vacant buildings as well as at local businesses. It was an immediate success and resulted in a group of artists creating their own gallery downtown.

Ideally – if any of the vacant buildings are owned by the municipality or by individuals with a vested interest in the community – a marketplace concept could be considered. Space could be rented out to various entrepreneurs – retail/home based/crafters/metalworking products – and have each one work one day a week to manage the marketplace (avoids employee/employer dynamic and costs). Overhead expenses should be covered by rental fees.

The presence of Centennial Park along with some interesting heritage buildings provide a foundation for future revitalization of the downtown area. We noticed the pole banners were generic and without an Eston identity – they could be enhanced cost effectively once some further consideration is given to communication and marketing of the 'Essence of Eston'.

Local Business

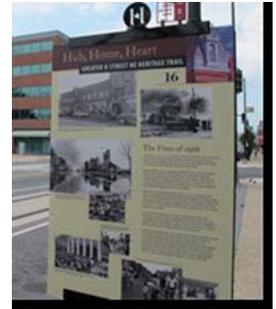
We found a number of places to go for a good meal but it was challenging due to lack of wayfinding signage for local area businesses. Accommodation is definitely a gap with respect to special event attraction. The B and B was a great experience and signage on the highway promoting the B and B would be an asset as there is some confusion as to whether the other hotels are operating or not. Is there opportunity for the oil and gas employers to cut their commute time to Kindersley by staying locally and supporting local businesses?

Has the old hospital had a formal environmental assessment and building inspection? Can it be salvaged perhaps for accommodations or conference/special event facilities? What are the future plans for Eston College – is there opportunity to expand their services/facilities? These are key questions we have with respect to potential diversification of the local economy and utilization of vacant buildings. Business retention and particularly efforts to support succession should be a priority of local leaders.

Tourism

Adopting the concept of a Heritage Walk with heritage markers or an eco- museum approach may be an option to enhance the downtown and link it to encourage a 'bike friendly' community/tourist region (linkages to River Trek). Work with an existing business to add bike rentals to its product line. Establish biking paths throughout the town and to the River. Make these available in brochure format and via a downloadable document on the local website.

The museum is situated on a lovely piece of land – undoubtedly used to host special celebrations (weddings/photo opportunities). Note: potential business/community opportunities here for an entrepreneur or community based business.



The art gallery, outdoor checkerboard and library(imagination garden; storytelling etc) are other attractions to promote in addition to special events and Public Market. And what is Bizarre Bazaar all about – we are intrigued. Likewise – Andrea's Corner?

The community has tremendous potential to share the story of a beloved(to most of us) 'prairie icon". It does not need to include a race.

In summary, we feel Eston and the Eston region (to the river) has untapped tourism potential. Discussions at the activation session point to Riverside Park being frequented by locals only. A comprehensive tourism attraction strategy would definitely bring in new visitors and support the economy.

Housing

Eston boasts a thriving mix of older and newer housing along with a number of multi-family housing units – conveying a sense of vibrancy. Few homes are for sale which is a sign of community vibrancy.

Marketing

We recommend establishing a focal point on the municipal website for Tourism, using a drop down menu tab or perhaps an attractive icon on the home page that links directly to Tourism and highlights attractions and special events

Eston has great potential to attract residents willing to commute to the larger regional centers. Developing a resident and business attraction strategy is recommended and associated marketing implemented.

2019 Grants

The Saskatchewan Heritage Foundation has an upcoming grant deadline of March 1 for designated and non-designated municipal heritage buildings. A number of other cultural grants have first quarter 2019 application windows. Careful evaluation of grant programs may yield opportunities to support capital items.

A Unique Living Heritage

Attendees at the community activation session shared their robust and authentic heritage. Incorporating heritage elements into contemporary promotion and placemaking strategies – as well as business development - provides an opportunity to engage local residents and strengthen what is already a strong 'sense of place' in Eston.

General comments and takeaways include:

- Eston is a resilient, content, enthusiastic community – like its icon the gopher!
- The community oozes stability and independence.
- Self-sufficient with generations of prosperous residents.

ORAL TRADITIONS

- Washboard (corrugations)
- The complex (rink)
- Nuisance ground(the dump)
- The Park
- We don't have a lake – we have a river
- Ice crossing
- The river separates – southerners and northerners
- Palliser Triangle – some of best farming in province
- Bad Lake
- McMorrin Road
- Riverside Park
- L.A. - Lacadena Flats
- Cutbank
- Rizer Hills
- Madison
- School Division names Alowanda; Yellow Cactus; Lourdale; Red Rock

SOCIAL PRACTICES, RITUALS, FESTIVE EVENTS

- Gopher race
- Skating carnival
- Outdoors checkers
- Imagination Garden at the library
- Hockey tournies – senior hockey team
- Santa Claus Day
- Minor hockey
- Baseball and slow pitch
- Indoor rodeo
- Soapbox derby
- Gopher races
- Curling bonspiels
- Harvest moon festival – grew out of culture days
- The town siren at noon/6pm/9 pm
- Motocross park
- Gopher race put Eston on the map

LOCAL CRAFT TRADITIONS

- Hamburger soup
- Food – lots of good cooks in community
- Hutterites and produce – Glidden Colony
- Canning and pickling
- Prayer shawl group
- 4h clubs offers textile products
- Quilters and knitters groups
- Bizarre Bazarre
- Welders Club

PERFORMING ARTS

- Marching bands in 50s/60s/70s
- Epic Theater Group – there has been theatre from day one
- Dance groups
- Murals
- Haunted house
- Artists club
- Handbell group
- Music festival – very musical community
- Local choir
- Book club
- Literary excellence – author Cassie Stocks
- Two art galleries – one is for youth and one has a Picasso litho
- Post office stamps all outgoing mail with a gopher stamp

KNOWLEDGE & PRACTICES: NATURE AND THE UNIVERSE

- Agriculture – large canary seed producer
- Agriculture research and innovation– current generation of farmers are well educated – doing it better
- Dryland farming
- Lentils and specialty crops
- Agribusiness
- Ag manufacturing
- Antique and modern machinery - patents
- UFO stories
- Oil and gas
- Hospital and schools
- You need to know miles to find way around in country – few signs or landmarks
- Surveyor road allowances
- Chinooks. gardening

Established Priorities

The enthusiastic leadership group brought forth a number of priorities during the session. Four priority areas were chosen for immediate action to achieve short term success and build momentum.

1. Bring back the Gopher

- Resurrect the Gopher Races or develop new events and festivities to honour this agricultural icon
- Can we play with the word Gopher to integrate into communication and activities eg “Go-pher a dip”(pool) “Eston residents Go-pher it”
- Align with Saskatchewan Roughriders mascot Gaynor
- Use to host major fundraisers for economic development and revitalizing Main Street
- Turn Groundhog day into Gopher Day
- Gopher Tales books and/or tour guides/momentos

2. Bring back the Eston River Trek

- Could be a mini as well as full marathon for all ages, cycling, running, walking – 42 mile trek
- Explore hosting a Spartan Race or an Introduction to Spartan
- Employ expanded marketing for the event and reach out to established races and sport associations for support

3. Further develop the Urban Orchard

- Protect the trees from damage – animals and all-terrain machines

4. Farmers Market

- Expand to bring in Hutterites, fish and fruit trucks
- Look at 50+ club parking lot and potential contingency inside the hall
- Collaborate with Bizarre Bazaar
- Canning and picking, crafts textiles
- Food for Thought Farms
- Logistics – permanent spot, timeline
- Community garden – orchard revitalize and connect to the market

The remaining ideas have been clustered into common priority areas. We encourage the local team to look at actioning these at a later date.

Main Street/Downtown

- Expand our Murals
- Cultural and historical tours with printed map and/or audio tour
- Address condemned buildings on Main Street
- Obtain formal assessment on the vacant hospital
- Engage local artists in a gallery or art walk
- Explore programs and grants to support heritage buildings
- Develop an overall vision for the downtown area streetscapes.

Entrepreneurial Incubator and/or Marketplace

- Explore locations and partners
- Engage local educational providers to provide student business opportunities
- Mobilize home based businesses and artisans

Grow the existing Harvest Moon Festival

- Can it be enhanced – and better reflect Eston - with some of the living heritage attributes identified at the activation session?

KidsSport Golf Tournament

- Grow and/or change
- Could it be hosted in concert with another event?

Revitalize the Library

- Potential to add a coffee bar with homemade baking
- Expand into a community centre with adult programming
- Integrate the Imagination Garden and storytelling into programming (and tourism)

Celebrate and Expand the Agriculture Industry in Eston

- Explore a 'women in ag' initiative such as conference
- Expand Farmers Market
- Explore new value added ag opportunities – what are our natural assets and how can we add on local value added to increase employment opportunities and attract new residents
- Look at provincial and global opportunities eg canary seed packaging, processing,

Establish an outdoors checkers competition

- This could be part of a broader event
- There is a large scale board existing in the community park

Building Bridges

- Oil and Gas industry: Build closer relationship with industry
- Town and RM Relationship: Seek out collaboration opportunities
- Build relationships to expand support for community from large local businesses
- Community sharing of skills and talent – examples are library and museum – get to know each other

More promotion and marketing of the Essence of Eston

- Increase curb appeal and word appeal.
- Explore opportunities for heritage conservation/preservation.
- Explore marketing and branding strategy which captures the unique assets and strengths of the community.
- Look at specific marketing campaigns for tourism and resident/business attraction.

Action Plans 30 to 90 Days

November - December 2018

ACTIVITY	RESPONSIBLE	DUE BY	THRIVESASK PILLAR
Survey local residents to determine interest level for gopher races <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set up display and voting week of Santa • Take this question to special interest groups • Set up voting station in the library 	James, Cassie, Terry	December 2	Promotion/ Economic Vitality
Article on gopher survey Include article in Wednesday Words	Jody	November 14	Promotion
Set up voting jar at library	Cassie	November 22	Promotion
Set up voting at rink	James, Barb, Terry	November 22	Promotion
Convene 30 day meeting of ThriveSask leadership group at Town Office		December 6	Leadership
River Trek <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contact the Spartan Race Association • Reach out to Queen City marathon in Saskatoon, Toronto, Ottawa • sub-committee follow up 	Lacey, Bret	December 6	Promotion/ Economic Vitality
Determine price of tree protectors for Urban Orchard (3\$ per tube)	Michelle	December 22	Placemaking
Explore signage and watering options for orchard	Jody	December 22	Placemaking
Find posts and suitable cable to build a fence enclosure	Mike	December 22	Placemaking

January 2019

ACTIVITY	RESPONSIBLE	DUE BY	PILLAR
Farmers Market – explore potential locations such as Plus 50 or Rink/Hall <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore potential for Hutterites and fruit trucks – ensure business/transient licensing is equitable for local/out of town businesses 	Jody, Lorne, Verna, Susanne	January 31	Economic Vitality/Promotion
Meet with Communities in Bloom to discuss the orchard and explore partnership with the school	Michelle, Lacey, Barb	January 20	Placemaking
Discuss infrastructure for the orchard and potential budget	James, Barb	January 6	Placemaking

February 2019

			PILLAR
Meet with Tamara Carter to discuss horticultural design for orchard	Michelle, Lacey, Barb	February 6	Placemaking