

Action Swift Current Program Helping Business Community

Action Swift Current is taking a closer look at the needs of its business community. The volunteer non-profit organization is a team of business leaders who are dedicated to facilitating and setting in motion an initiative which supports Business Retention and Expansion program (BR&E) in the community of Swift Current.

BR&E is a model developed by the University of Minnesota and has been used in communities throughout the U.S. and Canada for about 20 years. It is a philosophy and process that focuses on supporting and enhancing existing businesses in a community. Action Swift Current is committed to: enhancing a positive business attitude, building a strong vibrant local economy, along with building community communication and capacity. Pat Parrott, Chairman of Action Swift Current, states "Our primary goal is to build a positive business environment for the success of local business and ultimately the success of the community."

Community meetings were held in the fall and winter of 2001 to organize a leadership group. This group currently has 20 directors that are business and community leaders from the City and Rural Municipality of Swift Current. This leadership group developed the foundation for Action Swift Current and has become a meeting place for the community to discuss the prosperous future of the area. Task teams were developed to address such things as survey development, volunteer recruitment, media and milestone events, and funding. By early spring, 150 volunteers were trained to conduct confidential surveys of randomly selected businesses. Swift Current has about 900 registered businesses ranging from manufacturers to home-based operations. A cross-section of 300 were targeted for the

survey. Participation in the survey was voluntary. Confidentiality is ensured throughout the entire survey process. The survey was tailored specifically for the community of Swift Current and it covered such topics as general business information, future business plans, marketing information, human resources, limited financial information, tourism, retail and service sectors and opinions on the local community. The survey phase was completed in June. The 200 completed surveys are currently being analyzed at the university of Minnesota.

Gord Budd is one of the directors on the Action Swift Current team, and also the President of the Chamber of Commerce. He states, "The program is a very in-depth survey of businesses, and once completed, will provide us with a business profile for the community of Swift Current, detailing our strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. The final report will provide the input for the next phase in the creation of strategies for the community of Swift Current." Budd has been involved since the program's inception.

The University of Minnesota will produce a final report in early fall. At this point Action Swift Current will be holding community meetings to discuss the results and the next stage of Action Swift Current. This phase will involve creating task teams to act on various strategies.

In implementing this survey, the leadership team took the opportunity to find out if businesses have any immediate concerns. The survey has a page that invites a business to identify 'red flag' issues. When the survey is handed in – but before it is sent to the university – the leadership team addresses the red flag issues. "For example, if a business had a complaint about a sidewalk that is in a state

of disrepair located in front of the business, we would take that information, go to city hall, and someone from city hall would contact that business and inform the business of the city's plans for sidewalks in that area."

Budd says the team is already seeing positive results in the upbeat attitude found in the business community. "People felt like things were in a rut, that nothing would change. Now it has created a real spark within the community. We've seen people get excited about this because it is doing something for the betterment of the community. It's not the be-all end-all solution but it's definitely a step in the right direction."

Al Chilton is involved in the program from both sides: he was instrumental in making the program happen and his business was selected at random to be surveyed. His business partner, Ron Heeg, completed the survey.

Chilton says the survey has already shown ways to bridge gaps in the

community. "We discovered that people working in different industries tend to maintain information within their specific business community. We need to change those little pools of interest into a lake where we share information. For example, if we talk of funding an arts centre, that becomes a retirement issue because retired people use the arts centre to a higher degree than people who aren't retired, at least in this community."

Like Budd, Chilton also sees the positive effects of the program in the fact that the business community is stirring itself to action. "People are saying, what can we do for ourselves, not what can be done for us. This interview process is an amazing thing. We have people with tremendous ideas, and we have a huge amount of resources in the community. If anybody ever has a chance to be involved in a program like this, they should be."

For more information, visit the web site www.actionswiftcurrent.com.

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