

THE MISSION SPORTS PARK: A CASE STUDY

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The Mission Sports Park story began in the early 1980's when Municipal Council decided to lease approximately 25 acres from the Federal Corrections Service for playing fields. The site, although undeveloped, was centrally located adjacent to the existing Municipal Hall on Stave Lake Street at Dewdney Trunk Road. It was also adjacent to the Mission Medium Institution and the price was right - a nominal lease fee. In January 1985 the deal was cut and the Sports Park Project was on its way or so municipal officials thought.

The game plan was to enhance facilities for minor sports and improve the public image of the Correctional Service of Canada in the Pacific Region. An ideal, partnership between the Federal Government and Mission. Prior to the agreement being signed, the Municipality benefited from 'volunteer' prison laborers who removed debris and selectively cleared the site. The plan also included use of the playing fields by Corrections' Service inmates and staff for sports activities and training. The idea for funding the Project had always been to blend Municipal, Federal and Provincial monies with 'anything else' that could be obtained.

In March 1985, just after the Agreement with the Federal Government was signed, the writer began employment with Mission as Municipal Administrator. Support for the project seemed substantial although enthusiasm had to be tempered with the reality of finding \$1,800,000 to complete the Project. Applications were made to the Federal and Provincial Governments and an Expo Legacy Grant in the amount of \$600,000 was secured from the Provincial Government.

In 1986 the result of poor financial planning by the District of Mission over a number of years took hold and the fairly well known 'tax revolt' gathered momentum in June and July of that year. It attracted local and national attention and seemed to be spearheaded for political gain. The 1986 budget had included provision for short term borrowing of \$300,000 for the Sports Park but under tremendous pressure from a 17 percent tax increase, Council decided to take the Sports Park to referendum (even though not required to do so by the Municipal Act) and the electorate was asked to initially spend \$300,000 on the Project. Financial difficulties had been caused by a lack of forward planning and years of reliance on reserve accounts to keep taxes artificially low- not an uncommon scenario in B.C. Municipalities. Needless to say the referendum was 'defeated' and most thought the Project was finished.

The November 1986 municipal election resulted in changes on Council and in fact as it turned out the referendum did not kill the project, but seemed to have the opposite affect. Rather impetus was provided for municipal officials to band together and find a way 'to do it'. Because, after all, the Project was becoming increasingly necessary. The St. Mary's. Indian Residential School, leased by the Coqualeetza Education Training Society from the Federal Government, and used for years by the District's Parks & Recreation Department for programs, was being withdrawn from Municipal Use by the Native people. There were political differences between the Council and the Society in that Council did not want the land or a long term lease to be given to the native people rather the property should be put to some other use like Fraser Valley College or a variety of other options that were possible. Also, school property developed jointly with the Municipality as playing fields was now needed for schools due to growth in Mission and this compounded the shortage of sports facilities in the District.

Efforts continued throughout 1986 to put a deal together but in November 1987, largely due to ongoing concerns over taxes, there were five changes on Council including the Mayor. The experienced Aldermen included one who had served two years and one for one year. Between 1987 and 1989 inclusive, there were eleven changes on Mission Council - a difficult environment within which to provide continuity but the Council from 1988 to 1990 accomplished, more than perhaps any other in the history of the Community. They were conscious of the need for

financial responsibility but also wanted to see the Sports Park proceed. It had to, however, be packaged differently and of course even this progressive 'group' said no municipal money. Therein was the challenge. To build a Sports Park (now estimated to cost \$2.5 million dollars) without any money expended by Municipal taxpayers other than staff time.

It is, with the passage of time, difficult to recall exactly who said what or indeed who came up with individual ideas nor is it particularly important (analytically or in practical terms). What is significant is the truly team approach that developed within the Mission staff structure to make sure the project was completed. This team approach and working well with Mayor and Council and a partnership with the community in a very broad sense, upon reflection, were what 'bought' a new sports park for Mission, that is the focus of much pride in the Community today.

The decision to proceed was made by Council two weeks after its inauguration': in December 1987 - just before Christmas. This decision in itself was quite 'gutsy' for a new Council. Because, as we were to find out, 'the watchful eye of the Community was always on us waiting for a mistake and it would have been. easy to do nothing. There are many in Mission today who believe we used Municipal money to make it work and indeed we didn't use a dime. The key staff group that put the Project together was the Director of Parks & Recreation, Municipal Engineer, Operations Manager, Director of Finance and Director of Planning. The

first three were the real leaders. Each Department within the organization, however, sacrificed time and effort to make the Park a priority. A Project Manager was borrowed from Engineering Operations for nine months to manage the Project under the auspices .of the Director of Parks & Recreation. Municipal staff gave countless hours of their own time - departments sacrificed their own priorities to make the Project work.

Extending into the Community was a very important strategy. The Mission City Rotary Club agreed to sponsor the Project and donated \$5,000, a local businessman gave \$100,000 and there was the Expo Legacy grant of \$600,000. Mission Sports groups committed to build a Clubhouse (although this has not yet happened) and this was enough to move ahead with the rezoning application that was necessary.

The new site was zoned (an abandoned gravel pit west of Town) and the next step was to undertake three sets of negotiations with the Operating Engineers (Local³115) Joint Apprenticeship and Training Program; Teamsters Local 213 Training School and the Construction Labourers' Union. In the first instance, equipment operators would train to drive earthmovers, excavators, backhoes and bulldozers to get the property to final landscape stage. The cost would be 5 on the dollar - the cost of fuel. As well, Teamsters would provide trainee drivers and teachers to Mission to haul and stockpile 150,000 meters of fill. The

Construction Labourers' Union agreed to send nine students and a supervisor to install a major drainage system, on the site. In this way the District of Mission could help extend \$750,000 in cash to a value of 2.5 million dollars, the cost of the completed park.

Work was well underway (in January 1988) toward transforming an unusable 16 hectare municipal property into a major teaching experience. The next two years everyone, business leaders, the Rotary Club, unions, municipal officials and the Council worked closely so there was cooperation internally and externally. It was, however, the creativeness of the staff group and a supportive Council that pulled it off. Other contributions from the Community included \$8,000 in turf from a local turf farm, donation of time and equipment by a local landscaper, \$27,000 in sand by the B. C. Custom Car Association and good cooperation from the Fraser Valley Record Newspaper (one reporter was a good friend and Chairman of the School Board). Inmates from Mission Institution cut firewood, the O.A.P. prepared free lunches, municipal CUPB staff donated equipment operators. Assistance also came in the form of soil testing, security personnel, independent truckers, and electrical work.

The process selected was much slower than if the Project had been tendered in the normal way and it is still not finally completed. However, the Park was officially opened on April 7th, 1990 and it is a true credit to everyone involved. It is a credit to the politicians' trust in their management team, but perhaps more

importantly, it is a credit to the determination of volunteer citizens and municipal officials.

With four full size soccer pitches and five full size baseball/softball areas now being played upon, there is a renewed sense of community pride and spirit in the District of Mission. Although there are still those who want to look over the District's financial records to find out how much was really spent!

Seeing kids play on the fields was indeed the most gratifying part of the experience but being a runner up in 1990 for a CAMA Best Innovative Program Award for the Sports Park Project was also a moment for the organization's pride to show through. Professionally the best of all was playing a role in fostering an organizational climate that lead to the creation and completion of this Project for Mission.

ANALYSIS

The Problem

The District of Mission was badly in need of new playing fields in 1985 because the School District was placing new schools on sites, historically used by Mission for playing fields and because fields were no longer being made available to the District by the Coqualeetza Education Training Society on a reciprocal basis as they had for many years. A proposal for new fields was defeated at referendum in November 1986 but none of these events altered the fact that a severe shortage of fields existed and a way to provide them at little or no cost had to be found. This was the mandate given by a new Council (five of seven members, including the Mayor were elected for the first time in the Fall of 1986).

The Approach to Solving the Problem

Meetings were held between the Municipal Engineer, Operations Manager, Director of Planning, Director of Parks & Recreation, Finance Director and Municipal Clerk to develop a solution. The main criterion was that no municipal money could be used. Out of a series of meetings (brainstorming sessions) came a proposal for a new site and the idea to use the Operating Engineers Training Program (the first suggestion came from the Operations Manager) but a Service Club had to be found to sponsor the project. The Administrator was the incoming Rotary President and the connection with the Community was made. A good example of how community involvement by municipal staff can pay dividends. Using the connections to the Community of various staff

members seemed to pay off. The Operations Manager had ties to the Operating Engineers, the Parks & Recreation Director was linked to landscape assistance and sports groups and to one particular mill owner who had been actively involved in Sports in Mission for many years. He also happened to be an opinion leader and a multi millionaire. The natural ties between the Parks & Recreation Director and Minor Sports groups got them behind the project (which had not been sufficient to pass the referendum). The stated Management Philosophy for the organization (as developed by the Management Team) involved a commitment to service which was surely demonstrated but it involved Fostering Partnerships and this was accomplished in spades. Gradually, commitment was developed in the Community despite a few who wanted to criticize and couldn't (I think) believe the skillful way the Project was put together. External ties to the Community, therefore, were the first component of the staff teams' management philosophy put in place.

The second key ingredient was the team itself. The organization, somewhat akin to a sports team with the right chemistry to win, seemed to gel in an unselfish way. In fact, the Director of Parks & Recreation seemed to get most of the credit (from a staff standpoint) but none of the rest seemed to mind - the Engineer, Operations Manager and everyone all contributed and got satisfaction from that. The Project, therefore, worked because of.., the team approach that had been developed.

A third important reason for the success of the- Project was the

confidence the management group and Council had in each other. Both took risks, a key ingredient of leadership and it paid off - Council and staff working together.

The result of all this was enhanced pride in the organization through successful' calculated risk taking and leadership. The Community also benefited in ways other than the obvious. Mission had become an inward, self critical almost negative community and the Sports Park development helped mitigate that outlook. This perhaps is an even greater benefit of the Project than completion itself.

There was also a feeling in the Community that what had been accomplished was not necessarily that significant and winning the CAMA Award tended to verify that what had been achieved was indeed noteworthy. This also seemed to boost pride in the organization particularly when throughout the period of the tax revolt there had been criticism for various excesses (unjustified criticism of course).

The Result

Today, the Mission Sports Park is enjoyed by many. The Clubhouses is not yet complete and more development will take place. But Mission is now self supporting in terms of playing fields. No Municipal Money Was Used - the non believers are gradually being eliminated.

Management Lessons to be Drawn From the Experience

1. Lack of financial planning placed the District of Mission in a position where a large tax increase was unavoidable. This had a direct impact on a sports project that otherwise probably would have gotten support from the Community. Sound financial planning is critical.
2. Small 'radical' groups can indeed influence decision making and have a very negative impact on a Community. The damage done to Mission in terms of negative publicity by a small group of 'tax protesters' was significant and it is taking a long time to overcome. While it is impossible to diffuse all groups it is very important to try to do so for the overall well being of the Community. Developing ways to do this is an important challenge for local government managers and Council members. There are no quick or rubber stamp answers or approaches.
3. Fostering partnerships in a Community will become increasingly important in the future as resources become

even more limited. The importance of municipal staff participating in the Community in which they work may become clearer as will networking by both Council and staff. There are many untapped resources that will have to be accessed.

4. No one municipal department could have made the Sports Park Project work. It took several Departments and Department Heads working together 'to pull it off'. The Municipal Engineering Department in particular got behind Parks & Recreation by providing design services, loaning staff and moral support.
5. Much of the staff work was done behind the scenes and every effort was made to ensure Mayor and Council got the credit. This went a long way to ensuring the success of the Project and a peaceful co-existence for the two groups.
6. A project like the Mission Sports Park can be used as a catalyst to build pride and trust in an organization.
7. Persistence and hard work often pays off - in this case it brought needed recognition for the organization and the Council.
8. There was an element of risk involved in the Project. Risk taking is characteristic of good leadership that is essential in today's municipal environment.