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Planning for change in small towns or trying to avoid the slaughterhouse blues

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Abstract

Rural farming communities throughout the Prairies and Great Plains have sought to reverse decades of slow economic decline by attracting value-added processing of agricultural products as a means of economic development. The meatpacking industry has been attracted to the region by the availability of fed cattle. It has created thousands of low-paying jobs and boosted local agricultural economies by increasing the demand for animals and feedstuffs, while at the same time impairing water quality and bringing a host of social problems to packinghouse communities. This article examines how the town of Brooks, Alberta prepared and dealt with these challenges over a two year period following the expansion of a beefpacking plant. Despite the advance warning of the social changes that would accompany the hiring of additional workers the town failed to meet the housing needs of newcomers recruited to work at the plant and experienced a significant increase in a variety of social disorders. The study concludes that preparing for change begins with the recognition that social and environmental impacts are inevitable with the arrival of a new industry. A pro-active response to protecting the environment and ensuring that basic human needs are met is better for a community and its workforce than having changes thrust upon it by an industry whose only interest is in maximizing profits. © 1999 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Since the 1950s population decline and farm consolidation have characterized rural areas throughout the Great Plains and Prairies. These processes have combined with recent declines in commodity prices to reduce local purchasing power and adversely affect the economic fortunes of small towns throughout the region. In an effort to reverse these trends economic development officials have looked to value-added processing of agricultural products as a means of generating employment and sustaining communities. Tax incentives and public investments in infrastructure have, for example, been used to attract large slaughter capacity meat processing plants throughout the region. These inducements combined with the availability of fed cattle, hogs and water have led to a shift in meatpacking plants from urban areas to rural areas in the Great Plains and Prairies (Broadway, 1997, 1995).

The sudden announcement that 2000 manufacturing jobs will be added to the economic base of a small town

would appear to be welcome news. In 1997 Maple Leaf Foods of Toronto announced plans for a new hog processing facility outside of Brandon, Manitoba that will employ 2000 workers. Three years earlier, the world's largest meat processor, IBP of Dakota City, Nebraska, purchased Lakeside Packers of Brooks, Alberta and immediately announced plans to add 2000 workers to the plant's labour force. Earlier in the decade the company constructed a beef processing plant in Lexington, Nebraska employing over 2400 workers; while Seaboard Corp. established a hog processing facility in the Oklahoma panhandle town of Guymon that now employs over 2000 persons. These and other similar developments represent the industrialization of agriculture and are the product of cost-cutting strategies pioneered by US meatpacking companies and innovations in cattle and hog feeding. The US experience indicates that the shift from an urban to rural-based meatpacking industry has been a mixed blessing for small towns where packing plants have located. The industry provides a welcome boost to a region's agricultural economy by increasing the demand for animals and feed but it is also associated with impairing water quality in rural areas and bringing a host of social problems for packinghouse communities in the form of: housing shortages, increases in crime and the

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demand for social assistance and special services (Broadway, 1990; Stull & Broadway, 1990; Broadway and Stull, 1991; Stull et al., 1992; Broadway et al., 1994; Grey, 1995; Gouveia and Stull, 1995). This article examines how one small prairie town has dealt with these problems and identifies strategies that towns can use in the future. Before considering these issues, the shift in meat processing to rural areas is explained along with its environmental impact and the reasons for the social changes that accompany meatpacking.

2. Structural changes in the North American meatpacking industry

The current shift from urban to rural plant locations occurring in Canada's meatpacking industry reflects a similar change that began over 30 years ago in the US. In 1961 Iowa Beef Packers (now known as IBP) opened a beef processing plant in Denison, Iowa 100 miles northwest of Des Moines, Iowa. This plant, and subsequent cost-cutting innovations pioneered by IBP, revolutionized the meatpacking industry. Unlike its predecessors, the plant was located in a small town close to a supply of fed cattle. It made use of a disassembly line whereby workers are stationed along a line and repeat the same operation as each animal passes by (Stull, 1994). This system proved to be much more efficient than the gravity feed system used in old multistoried plants and worker productivity improved. Accompanying the rise in productivity was an increase in worker-related injuries, the most common being related to repetitive motions. By the 1980s meat packing had become one of the most hazardous industries in North America. Record fines against the packers for safety violations by US safety inspectors, worker training and ergonomic studies have resulted in recent declines in the injury rate (Broadway, 1999). The company used the development of the disassembly line to lower its labour costs by avoiding the terms of the industry-wide master contract, arguing that less skill was required than in older plants (Newsweek, 1965). By locating close to a supply of fed cattle, the company was able to lower its transport costs and reduce the shrinkage and bruising associated with shipping cattle long distances. Costs were further reduced by purchasing cattle directly from farmers and eliminating the middleman.

In 1967 the company introduced boxed beef, whereby fat and bone are removed at the plant and the meat is cut to retail specifications before being vacuum-packaged for shipment. This innovation further lowered the company's costs and enabled them to ship more beef. It appealed to the retail and hospitality industries which could lower their costs by not having to hire their own butchers. As a result, IBP's market share increased. This led to additional construction of large slaughter capacity plants close to a supply of fed cattle in small towns in the Great

Plains (Broadway, 1995; Broadway and Ward, 1990). Most of the towns where IBP has constructed or purchased old plants have populations of less than 25,000 and are isolated from major population centres. The company's Finney County facility in southwestern Kansas exemplifies this pattern. It is located in the hamlet of Holcomb, seven miles west of Garden City and over 200 miles west of Wichita. When the plant opened in 1980, unemployment in the county totaled approximately 400 persons. This pool of surplus labour was insufficient to staff a plant that would eventually employ over 2700 workers and so the company recruited workers from beyond the local region. Other companies emulated IBP cost-cutting innovations by closing old plants in urban areas, demanding wage concessions or constructing new large slaughter capacity plants in rural areas (Broadway, 1995).

In Canada, the effects of US cost-cutting began to be felt in the late 1970s, at the same time per-capita beef consumption began to decline. The industry responded to these challenges by shutting down old inefficient plants in urban areas and lowering labour costs by breaking the terms of the nationwide union master contract. In 1984, Burns Meats demanded that workers at their two oldest plants take a pay cut and accept bargaining on a plant-by-plant basis rather than industry-wide. Workers responded by striking the company. Eventually the company won the right to bargain on a plant-by-plant basis and establish a two-tier wage system for old and new hires. Other companies followed suit, implementing similar wage systems after workers struck their plants. In Brooks, 120 miles southeast of Calgary, Lakeside Packers lowered its costs by breaking the union and hiring replacement workers at lower wages (Noel and Gardner, 1990). Three years after the collapse of the union master contract, Cargill, the third largest red meat producer in the United States, announced plans to construct a state-of-the-art large slaughter capacity beef processing facility in High River, 30 miles south of Calgary.

The High River decision was the product of the same factors behind the shift in US beef slaughter capacity to the High Plains and a shift in fed cattle production. Alberta is Canada's leading producer of fed cattle due to its extensive areas of pasture land and feed grain production. In the past, cattle had been shipped by rail to be finished in southern Ontario prior to their slaughter, but with the adoption of boxed beef it was economical for plants to be located away from their markets and close to the supply of cattle. When the High River plant opened in 1989 its wages were lower than surrounding older urban plants and this led to a new round of plant closures. In 1994 IBP purchased Lakeside Packers. At the time of the sale Lakeside employed about 550 persons and prepared carcasses for markets in Canada and the United States. Soon after the purchase IBP announced

plans to construct a processing facility for the preparation of boxed beef and add a second shift which would necessitate hiring an additional 2000 workers (Broadway, 1998, 1997).

The shift in beefpacking plants to rural areas has been made possible by innovations in cattle feeding. Center-pivot irrigation was introduced to the High Plains in the 1960s which allowed for the exploitation of the Ogallala Aquifer, the cultivation of feed grains and the attraction of feedlots. Over time, increasing specialization and intensification of production techniques has resulted in an increase in feedlot size and a decline in numbers. By the mid-1990s feedlots with a capacity of greater than 32,000 head accounted for over one-third of US fed cattle marketings (Glover, 1996). The Canadian feedlot industry is concentrated in Alberta, with over 60% of the country's fed cattle. Although the average size of feedlots in Alberta is much smaller than in the United States, the industry is dominated by a few large producers with feeding capacities in excess of 6000 head (Alberta Agriculture, 1989). A similar pattern exists among the Canadian and US hog industry with production becoming increasingly concentrated among fewer and larger producers (Glover, 1996).

As feedlots and hog-raising operations have expanded in size, environmental concerns dealing with dust, odor and surface and groundwater contamination have increased. To be competitive and keep up with demand organic feed additives are used to stimulate growth and improve the general health of animals. Non-nutritive additives such as antibiotics, anti-bacterial drugs and hormones are associated with increases in the presence of volatile organic chemicals in animal manure. These volatile compounds are odorous in high concentrations and hazardous to human health (Addison, 1997). Manure is typically stored in a tank or lagoon facility to allow the water content to evaporate before being spread over fields but animal waste spills from lagoons have occurred in several US states and polluted surface waters. Moreover, when manure is applied to fields at rates above the nutrient-absorption rates of soils and crops, the danger of runoff and subsequent groundwater pollution also increases. Indeed, while Canada and the United States have ample cropland for manure disposal a major constraint is the cost of transporting the manure from feeding operations to the cropland. This has the effect of creating manure surpluses in many areas of confined livestock production and adding to the potential for air and water pollution (Glover, 1996). In Texas, concern over the potential for groundwater contamination from cattle feedlots in the High Plains forced the Texas Natural Resource Conservation Committee in 1987 to revise feedlot permit standards to protect groundwater (Sweeten et al., 1995). Complaints and lawsuits by rural residents against hog producers in several states have had the effect of encouraging the enforcement of existing federal air and

water quality standards and forced states to restrict new hog production facilities. A similar situation exists in Canada where residents of Ontario and Manitoba have successfully blocked the expansion and construction of new hog operations in rural areas on environmental grounds (Haley et al., 1998).

3. Rapid growth and community change

Passage of the 1969 US National Environmental Policy Act is widely credited with the formal establishment of social impact assessment as a means of evaluating a project's impact prior to its implementation (Gramling and Freudenberg, 1992; Finsterbusch, 1995). It is predicated on two basic assumptions. First, decision-makers should be informed about a project's consequences before they commit themselves and second, the people affected by a project should be appraised of its impact and have an opportunity to design their future. But there is little agreement as to what constitutes social impact assessment beyond the general goal of identifying a project's social consequences. Evaluating the impact of a project can be completed at a variety of scales ranging from individuals and families to national and international levels. Moreover, a project's effects may be felt prior to its implementation and extend well into the future. Compounding these difficulties is the fact that social impact assessment practitioners such as, anthropologists, geographers and sociologists utilize different methodologies with the result that the technique is less standardized than environmental impact assessment (Barrow, 1997).

In predicting the social impact of a meatpacking plant on a rural community, a useful framework is provided by studies dealing with the effects of rapid and sudden population growth on rural energy communities in the western United States during the 1970s (England and Albrecht, 1984; Finsterbusch, 1982). Most of the small towns on the High Plains and Prairies where the meatpacking industry has moved to over the last 30 years lack a large pool of surplus labour to meet the demands of an industry characterized by high employee turnover. When a plant starts up it is not uncommon for employee turnover among line workers to exceed 200% in the first year of operation. Indeed, after a plant has been in operation for several years, monthly turnover for line workers usually averages between 6 and 8% (Stull and Broadway, 1995). Packing companies have sought to solve their need for labour by recruiting the most mobile segments of the population, new immigrants and young adult single males. In the United States, South East Asians and Latinos comprise a large segment of meatpacking's labour force (Gouveia and Stull, 1995). At Cargill's High River, plant about 80% of line workers are visible minorities with the leading groups consisting of South East

Asians, East Indians, Iraqis, Iranians and Latinos (Heyman and Dempster, 1997).

The sudden influx of immigrants and high population turnover creates a host of social problems for communities including, housing shortages, increases in the demand for special services, such as English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction, and increases in social disorders and demands for social assistance (Broadway, 1990; Stull and Broadway, 1990; Broadway and Stull, 1991). Similar changes were documented in western energy boomtowns during the 1970s when migrants flocked to small towns in Alberta (Gartrell et al., 1981), Colorado (Freudenberg, 1981), Wyoming (Gilmore and Duff, 1975) and Alaska (Dixon, 1978). The theoretical basis for explaining the increase in social disorders is derived from the work of social disorganization theorists (Wirth, 1938). According to this perspective, pre-boom communities are characterized by stability and social cohesiveness. Social control and support is maintained by a high “density of acquaintanceships” i.e. the proportion of a person’s fellow community members that are known to a person (Freudenberg, 1986). A sudden influx of population leads to a reduction in this number which in turn reduces social interaction, watchfulness and contributes to a sense of community breakdown and a rise in social disorganization. Social isolation among newcomer families has been identified as a key factor explaining increases in child abuse and neglect in western energy boomtowns. Neglectful families have been found to have fewer relationships with formal groups and fewer informal contacts with neighbours. This lack of support in a community experiencing rapid growth is exacerbated by high levels of residential mobility which also serves to reduce neighboring watchfulness and surveillance. These factors combine to isolate newcomers and for some families this leads to child abuse (Camasso and Wilkinson, 1990).

High levels of transiency among young, adult, single males has been identified as a factor behind increases in the rate of substance abuse among energy boomtowns. The absence of a stable family environment and the long-standing acceptance of drinking hard liquor as part of the frontier way-of-life helps foster an environment that encourages alcohol abuse. The prevention of substance abuse is further hampered by the transiency of the population which facilitates drug trafficking and makes enforcement difficult (Milkman et al., 1980).

Critics of boomtown studies note that most researchers have focused on the evidence of social disorganization and assumed that social interaction declines with the influx of newcomers rather than focusing upon a causal mechanism linking social interaction with particular disorders (Krannich and Greider, 1990). Although there is little evidence linking a causal mechanism to particular social changes there is plenty of evidence documenting widespread increases in social disorders with the arrival of meatpacking plants in rural areas.

4. Meatpacking and social change

Increases in drug and alcohol abuse and an overall increase in crime in meatpacking towns has been attributed to the recruitment of young, adult, single males, since this demographic group has the highest incidence of committing crimes and alcohol consumption (Broadway, 1990; Gouveia and Stull, 1995; McKenzie, 1997). Communities throughout the High Plains and Midwest with newly opened packing plants report having to hire additional police officers to deal with increasing caseloads. Five years after IBP opened its Columbus Junction, Iowa hog-processing plant, police department employment went from two-full-time officers and one part-time officer in 1986 to three full-time and two-part-time officers (Broadway, 1994). In Finney County, Kansas the construction of two new meatpacking plants in the early 1980s was accompanied by a 130% increase in violent crimes between 1980 and 1985, while population increased by just 33% during the same period. A review of individual case files found that most of the increase in violent crime was attributable to an upsurge in domestic violence (Broadway, 1990).

Schools are in the forefront of dealing with the impact of immigrant newcomers as they experience increases in enrollments and demands for special educational services such as ESL instruction. At the time that IBP opened its hog processing plant in Columbus Junction the number of students enrolled in the local school district’s ESL program was 54, four years later the number was 129. Storm Lake, Iowa which is home to an IBP hog processing plant, experienced an increase in the number of Laotian students with limited English proficiency from 18 in 1986 to over a 100 in 1990 (Broadway, 1994).

Many newcomers arrive penniless and need immediate housing and food. In Garden City, Kansas a homeless shelter was established by area churches in 1979 to deal with a wave of newcomers drawn by the construction of a power plant and IBP’s Finney County plant. A barometer of the town’s economic fortunes and the impoverished nature of many of the newcomers is found in the number of meals provided by the shelter; in 1983 the number was 28,081 by 1988 the number was 69,003. The sudden demand for housing has usually been alleviated by large trailer courts which end up becoming newcomer ghettos (Benson, 1990; Broadway et al., 1994; Broadway, 1994).

Some communities have avoided these circumstances due to their unique situation. High River, Alberta has so far failed to exhibit many of these changes due to the fact that over two-thirds of the company’s employees reside in Calgary and commute to the plant. The only plant employees who live in the town are management and clerical staff. The absence of line workers in the town is explained by the community’s shortage of affordable housing for persons with relatively low incomes. High

River markets itself as “Alberta’s retirement center” and has several retiree developments in town. The town has also benefitted from its situation relative to Calgary and has experienced an influx of professional households willing to commute into the city. These two groups have managed to “bid up” the price of housing beyond the means of most of Cargill’s employees (Broadway, 1998).

5. Preparing for community change

Communities clearly cannot alter the nature of meatpacking, its relatively low pay, hazardous working conditions or recruiting practices; thus the recommended community responses are based upon two basic premises, first, social changes are inevitable and second, communities need to embrace the changes. Once some community members become aware of the extent of social changes which have occurred in other meatpacking communities there is a tendency to see if these problems can be avoided by preventing newcomer settlement. This tactic delays the inevitable and has the unintended consequence of assuring that the development which does eventually occur is usually of the worst kind. In the early 1980s, IBP delayed the start-up of its second shift at its Finney County plant due to a housing shortage in nearby Garden City. The company pressured the city commission into annexing and rezoning land for a 500 unit trailer court which ended up accommodating about a tenth of the town’s population, most of whom were newcomers. This development effectively segregated the newcomers from the host population and served to stigmatize the inhabitants as undesirables (Benson, 1990).

In the Fall of 1996 the Town of Brooks sponsored a public workshop entitled, *The Impact of Meatpacking Plants on Small Towns: Lessons to be Learned from the U.S. Experience*. The workshop summarized the various social and economic changes that occurred in US small towns, along with the experience of High River and provided some strategies for dealing with these changes. This information is summarized in Table 1.

Most small meatpacking towns become multicultural communities and this multiculturalism should become a source of pride and cause for celebration (Response 1a). Instead of confining newcomers to large housing developments such as trailer courts, they should be integrated into the town’s existing physical structure by dispersing new housing units throughout the community (Response 2a). Recruiting young, adult, single males, the demographic group with the highest incidence of criminal activities, assures an increase in crime and alcohol-related incidents. Some criminal activities however, can be prevented if the community is able to establish clear expectations for behavior and communicate this information through a community liaison officer to newcomer groups. Knowledge of the availability of large numbers of

Table 1
Likely social impacts of a meatpacking plant and recommended community responses

| Impact | Response |
|---|--|
| 1. Influx of visible minorities and an increase in language and cultural difference | 1a. Establish cultural awareness workshops, a Diversity Committee and provide ESL services |
| 2. Increase in demand for low-cost housing | 2a. Disperse new rental accommodations throughout the community |
| 3. Increase in crime | 3a. Establish the position of a community liaison office |
| 4. Increase in homeless persons | 4a. Provide a shelter |
| 5. Increase in demand for social services | 5a. Create an interagency service provider group |
| 6. Increase in demand for health care | 6a. Hire additional health care professionals and assure the provision of translators |

Source: The impact of Meatpacking Plants on Small Towns: Lessons to be Learned from the US Experience. Workshop presented at Heritage Inn., Brooks, Alberta. September 1996.

unskilled jobs will spread widely and assure that many people will move to town looking for work. Many of these newcomers will arrive without any money and will need food, shelter and assistance in the event that they are not hired at the plant or quit soon after they start. Meeting these needs requires the careful coordination of services between voluntary and governmental agencies (Responses 4a, 5a). An increase in population will automatically increase the demand for health care but small towns in rural areas are typically under-staffed with physicians and other health care professionals, newcomers only exacerbate this problem by increasing caseloads. Thus the need to hire additional physicians and support staff, while assuring that the needs of non-English speaking patients will be cared for by providing translators (Response 6a). Finally, the responsibility for educating the community about these expected changes and coordinating responses would be given to a Community Impact Study Team, consisting of representatives from governmental and voluntary social service organizations.

Although the environmental impact of the beefpacking plant upon the local region was not discussed at the Workshop, the increased demand for cattle will result in the expansion of local feedlots and add to the potential for air and water pollution. In Alberta expansions or the construction of new feedlots have to be approved by local municipalities and citizens have successfully opposed such plans in different jurisdictions throughout North America. But a more pro-active approach is for citizens, livestock producers, land-use planners and local politicians to work together to establish guidelines

to govern future development. According to Caldwell (1998) such an approach would establish an appropriate livestock density based upon the available land base and its ability to absorb the disposal of manure. Minimum separation distances would be established between livestock uses and non-farm uses and livestock producers would be required to file manure and nutrient management plans. Such guidelines need to be established at the international level to prevent the movement of the industry to areas with weak environmental legislation.

6. Social changes come to Brooks

Two years after the community workshop, Lakeside hired 1000 workers and will hire another 1000 for the plant's second shift in 1998. When the company started hiring at the end of 1996, it initially recruited workers from southeastern Alberta. With high employee turnover, this supply was quickly exhausted and it looked to new immigrants and unemployed workers from the Maritime provinces to solve their labour problems. Since then alcohol-related incidents have increased dramatically in the town. The RCMP report that the number of persons detained in Brooks because they were so intoxicated to the point where they were a danger to themselves rose from 128 in 1996 to 398 in 1997; while the number of persons arrested for violating Alberta's liquor act jumped from 168 to 308 during the same period (RCMP n.d.). Relations between some Maritime newcomers and locals have been tense. A brawl between members of the two groups outside a local bar in the Fall of 1997 led to an attack by over 100 persons on RCMP officers who were sent to break-up the fight (Brooks Bulletin, 1997). These increases in intoxication are also reflected in absenteeism at the plant. In early 1998 the day after pay-days, over 50 workers routinely failed to report for work because they were incapacitated. Further evidence of an increase in substance abuse is provided by a 75% increase in the case load of the Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission in Brooks between the first three months of 1997 and 1998 (field notes 9/8/98). Alcohol consumption is also a factor behind reported increases in domestic violence cases. Social service workers report that 2 to 3 times a month they routinely end-up paying the airfare for a spouse or girlfriend to return to the Maritimes to escape an abusive relationship, although some women do elect to stay in the community. Within six weeks of the establishment of a Women's Shelter in the summer of 1998, eight women had sought shelter and in each case either they or their partner worked at Lakeside (field notes 9/8/98). The doubling of child welfare caseloads from 45 in January 1997 to 90 at the end of the year provides further evidence of the overall rise in social disorders and is attributable, accord-

ing to social service caseworkers, in part, to the stress of families living in overcrowded conditions (field notes 1/5/98).

Some persons drawn to Brooks by word-of-mouth suggestions of opportunity, arrive in town with insufficient funds, needing shelter and food. Between 1996 and 1997 the number of persons receiving one-time transitional assistance payments from Alberta Family and Social Services in Brooks increased by 300%. During a visit to the local Social Services office, while the author waited to interview the manager, four young single males entered the facility over a 20 minute period and made appointments for transitional assistance. All these individuals had similar stories; they had no money, had lost their health insurance cards, needed immediate accommodation and were looking for work at Lakeside. The amount of cash assistance provided to such newcomers is limited. It does not approach the sum required for a damage deposit on a rental unit, even if such housing were available. In the summer of 1997, Brooks announced it had a zero vacancy rate for rental accommodations. This means that households survive by doubling or tripling up in units that should only accommodate one household. The stress of living under these circumstances, coupled with the stress of moving to a new community and starting a new job, may also be considered contributory factors to the increases in alcohol abuse and domestic violence noted earlier. School enrollment in the Brooks School District has increased by just 97 students between Fall 1994 and 1998 (Parker, 1998). The minimal growth reflects the shortage of affordable housing and the fact that Lakeside initially targeted young single males in their recruitment effort. The remainder of this article will outline the town's difficulties in dealing with these problems, despite their advance warning.

7. The Community Impact Study Team

A principal recommendation from the workshop was for Brooks to establish a Community Impact Study Team (CIST). The goal of the team is to learn from the experiences of other packing communities and develop a coordinated response to the expected changes. Ideally, such a team consists of representatives from social service providers, business interests including the packing plant and local government officials. Lexington, Nebraska formed such a team immediately after IBP announced plans to open a beef processing plant in the town. The Committee was established as a study group without any decision-making authority and met monthly. Members traveled to several small towns with meatpacking plants in Kansas to obtain information about how communities had dealt with the impact of newly opened meatpacking facilities. The Committee dissolved itself prior to the opening of the Lexington facility but not before imple-

menting some preparatory steps including: forming a Ministerial Association, organizing an inter-agency social services council, developing cultural awareness workshops, applying for grants to support the establishment of a homeless shelter and educating the community about the expected changes (Broadway et al., 1994; Lexington Community Impact Study Team, 1989). Guymon, Oklahoma adopted a similar approach to deal with the impact of a hog processing plant in the early 1990s. The Mayor's Strategic Planning Task Force consisted of 40 community leaders divided into groups that dealt with the expected impact of newcomers upon: housing, education, law enforcement, health, social services and other areas. The Task Force continued to meet after the plant opened in 1993 and some of the groups were successful in implementing new programs. A homeless shelter was established under the leadership of the social services group, while the education committee established an ESL program, an Alternative School for pupils experiencing difficulties in traditional classroom settings and led a successful effort to pass a local tax increase to fund the construction of a new elementary school. But the Task Force's efforts at providing low-cost housing for newcomers has proved to be a much more intractable problem. The experiences of CISTs in Guymon and Lexington indicate that there is no precise formula for a community to successfully prepare for social change beyond a willingness to accept that change is inevitable and that preparatory steps should be taken.

Brooks established a Community Impact Study Team under the chairmanship of a member of the Town Council in the Fall of 1996. The Team continues to meet on a monthly basis but unlike Lexington's CIST or Guymon's Strategic Planning Task Force, it has so far failed to make any decisive action in terms of preparing the community for change. The Team serves primarily an information-sharing function with Lakeside providing data concerning the number of new hires, turnover, and origin of the workforce. Team meetings are open to the public, but on the occasions the author attended, sharply differing perspectives as to the primary function of the Team were apparent. In the Spring of 1997 a group of citizens and agency representatives expressed their frustration at the town's lack of progress in attracting developers for new housing. This led to a full-scale debate concerning the degree to which the town should provide developers with incentives to increase investor rate of return. But more significantly, the debate revealed a deep division between those persons who viewed Team meetings as a forum for policy formulation and those who viewed them as an information-sharing forum. This division was reflected in the Chairman's decision to contact representatives from Alberta Community Development in Medicine Hat to facilitate these competing perspectives (field notes 3/7/97). Despite this intervention no fundamental change occurred in the operation of the

team. In the meantime outside the confines of Team meetings, social service providers and volunteers work together to coordinate services. Homeless persons, for example, who are unable to be seen immediately by Alberta Family and Social Services caseworkers are automatically referred to The Salvation Army which provides shelter for them.

The failure to incorporate a policy formulation role into the functions of the Team reflects the Town Council's legitimate desire that its role as the arbiter of community issues not be usurped. But more importantly, it indicates that local citizens wanting to contribute to policy formulation need a forum within the town's existing decision-making structure, rather than the ad hoc environment of a CIST. Thus towns confronting similar problems as Brooks would probably be better served if they adopted a two-stage process in planning for change. First a Study Team should be established with its primary function to collect data concerning the experiences of other towns and how they dealt with rapid change. Once this function is completed, the Team should be dissolved and the information incorporated into the town's existing planning structure. Meeting the housing needs of newcomers, and how to attract developers, could be addressed in the same forum as updating the town's Master Plan. Having a plan does not, however, guarantee success in dealing with divisive issues as Brooks's experience in confronting its housing crisis illustrates.

8. Affordable housing

In 1995, before the formation of the CIST, the town of Brooks commissioned an affordable housing study. The report concluded that IBP's hiring 1000 full-time workers would produce a need for between 900 and 1400 housing units to be constructed between 1995 and 1997 and that given the nature of the work force two-thirds of the units needed to be rental accommodations. It recommended that a portion of the affordable housing market be addressed by expanding the general supply of housing so that local people could "move up", leading to an increase in vacant rental properties. The study's authors were optimistic that the town's housing needs could be met, since the town owned sufficient land and this raised the possibility for creative joint ventures with developers such as deferring the payment for the land until its sale to the consumer (Sturgess Architecture, 1995).

Since 1995, 365 houses have been built (Sillars, 1998), or about a third of the projected housing needs. Moreover, most of these units are single-family homes and not rental accommodations. The town's efforts to attract rental unit construction have met with little success for a variety of reasons. Local officials attribute the lack of developer interest to the low rate of return on such

housing, while local residents have successfully opposed new construction projects such as allowing basement rental suites in a new subdivision. Critics argue that the town has not done enough to make it attractive to outside investors (field notes 3/7/97).

Although there is no clear explanation as to why the town has been unable to attract affordable housing; the consequences are readily apparent. By early 1999 over a 1000 of the plant's workers live in Medicine Hat and surrounding communities. While this disperses problems it also results in a significant loss of economic benefits to the town's local businesses. To deal with the housing shortage Lakeside erected dormitory-style housing for 162 single persons at the plant. The housing is surrounded by a chain-link and barbed wire fence. There is no regularly scheduled public transportation into town, and renters are given vouchers so they can eat at the plant's cafeteria. The intent is clearly a short-term fix. Workers are discouraged from long-term stays by a sliding rental fee which increases over time. The cost of the vouchers and rent are automatically deducted from a worker's wages, which coupled with any initial equipment costs incurred makes it extremely difficult to save for the damage deposit for a rental unit. In short, the only way for IBP employees to afford housing in Brooks under current circumstances is to share the cost with others. Unfortunately, as the preceding section on social change indicated, this creates its own set of social costs.

The consultants' recommended strategy of building housing at the top end of the market in the hope of producing a vacancy chain and freeing up rental units at the bottom has so far failed to meet the community's housing needs. At the same time, however, none of the recommended innovative strategies to attract developers appear to have been tried either. This suggests that an important element for a community to successfully adapt to change is for its leaders to first recommend, and then implement sometimes controversial strategies. In Brooks, this might take the form of letting developers have city-owned land at below market value, in order to attract developers and increase their rate of return.

9. Celebrating diversity

The recruiting practices of the packers ensure that most towns will eventually experience an influx of new immigrants. In Lakeside's case the presence of increasing numbers of immigrants led to the provision in Fall 1998 of an on-site immigration service for newly recruited workers. The principal newcomer groups at the plant are Iraqis, Somalis, Ethiopians, Filipinos, Cambodians and Bosnians. Most are males between the ages of 20 and 40. Many immigrants who used the immigration service sought advice on how to proceed with family reunifica-

tion thereby ensuring a continued influx of newcomers. Indeed an emerging social issue for Brooks is the isolation of Iraqi women who stay-at-home and only go out in the company of their husband (field notes 9/22/98).

Many newcomers do not speak English and have a different cultural background from the host population. These differences can often lead to misunderstandings. In April 1997 several Muslim employees at the plant were fired for walking off the line in order to meet their obligation for daily prayer. To reduce the likelihood of such incidents occurring the workshop recommended establishing a Diversity Committee. The Committee provides an opportunity for the host community and newcomers to learn about each other's culture. Membership of the committee is drawn from CIST organizations along with newcomer representatives and service organizations. The goal of the committee is to foster a "welcoming and accepting environment", by such means as providing translation services, sponsoring ethnic celebrations and identifying unmet needs among the newcomer population.

The combination of these common-sense activities can address the high population turnover that plagues meatpacking communities. According to Calgary's Catholic Immigration Service's manager of Employment and Training, Iraqi clients who viewed an IBP recruiting video in Arabic and undertook an orientation program were far less likely to leave or be fired than Iraqis who were hired directly at the plant (field notes 1/5/98). At the end of 1997, community groups in Brooks formed an organization entitled the Community of Friends to serve as a forum for dialogue between newcomers and long-term residents but it is too early to determine its success in facilitating communications between the two groups.

10. Conclusions and recommendations

The industrialization of agriculture confronts residents of rural communities with a variety of environmental, economic and social problems. To deal with these issues requires a pro-active response. Protecting the environment and ensuring a sustainable agricultural system requires that rural areas establish municipal by-laws or agricultural zoning to limit the number of livestock that can be concentrated in one area. Such standards would be based upon the carrying capacity of the local environment and involve a consideration of the amount of crop land for manure disposal, soil type and rainfall. For many small towns, the prospect of a manufacturing facility employing thousands of workers, with its related economic spinoffs, would seem particularly alluring. But as this example from the meatpacking industry illustrates, the nature of the jobs may also have a significant impact upon a town's social fabric. Communities must therefore consider the social costs of economic

development as well as its benefits. A single small town is powerless to alter the nature of an industry, yet it must deal with its human consequences or, at worst, it risks endangering the lives of workers and their family members by failing to provide shelter and food. Small towns must acknowledge that social change is inevitable and that planning for change is a more desirable option than having changes thrust upon them by companies whose primary interests are in staffing the plant and having it run at full capacity.

The social changes that are associated with the opening of meatpacking plants are well documented, but planning for these changes can be problematic. In Brooks, CIST members were well aware of what changes to expect but were powerless to develop any policy responses because the organization lacked any decision making authority. In the future, information gathered by a CIST needs to be channeled to the appropriate decision-making body within a town, thereby ensuring the legitimacy of any decisions and the full consultation of the local community. No system can guarantee innovative and enlightened policy responses, particularly if there is an unwillingness on the part of the community to recognize that change is inevitable.

Outside a town's governmental framework, individuals and voluntary organizations can make a significant difference to the lives of newcomers by being open-minded and offering a variety of assistance including: the public recognition and celebration of newcomer cultures and practical services such as translators and ESL instruction. The subtitle of this article is *Trying to Avoid the Slaughterhouse Blues*; the reality is that the Blues cannot be avoided. They can, however, be ameliorated to some degree by a combination of enlightened institutional and individual responses to social change.

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