Horizontal partnerships in image-building: local level collaboration for place promotion in the Swan Valley

Karla Zubrycki, University of Waterloo *(kzubrycki@hotmail.com)*

Abstract: Many rural regions that have traditionally relied upon agriculture as the main source of income are realizing the importance of diversification in order to improve the resilience of their local economies. However, exploration and development of such new avenues can be costly and difficult for a small town or rural municipality to carry out alone. To overcome these obstacles, the seven towns and rural municipalities that comprise the Swan Valley in Manitoba have pooled their resources and are working cooperatively, along with other stakeholders, to create a "brand" for the whole region in order to attract economic development, tourists and new residents. Spear-headed by a local economic development corporation, the image-building effort capitalizes on the relatively pristine nature of the area and the economic and lifestyle opportunities it affords. This paper provides a descriptive case study of the Swan Valley strategy and analyzes the experiences of the Swan Valley against existing image-building and collaboration literature in order to determine the degree to which the Valley's approach could be used as a model for other rural regions that need to strengthen themselves in the face of a changing and uncertain economy.

Introduction

For much of the 20th century, the Swan Valley region of Manitoba, Canada, had an economy based mainly on agriculture and forestry. In the late 1800s, farmers were attracted to the valley by its fertile soil, an immigration no doubt in part influenced by image-building efforts of the time, including promotional brochures and hand-outs about opportunities in the western Canada (Rees 1988). While these brochures often exaggerated the chances of prosperity, many who moved to the Swan

Valley did find success. The land continues to be bountiful in the 21ˢᵗ century; in 2006, the Swan Valley had the "second highest agricultural production for a region in the Province of Manitoba" (Swan Valley Enterprise Centre 2006, 7).

However, with the well-documented increases in farm size across the country, the decline of "family farms" and decreasing populations in many rural areas (Statistics Canada 2006a; Newman 2007) it became apparent to some politicians and residents in the last decades of the 20ᵗʰ century that it would be beneficial economically and demographically for the region to be seen as more than agricultural. Therefore, in 2005, the Swan Valley Enterprise Centre proposed to the municipal governments, to businesses, and to residents in general, that the region "re-brand" itself in order to build a new image that could help strengthen its economy. The resulting collaboration led to the articulation of a strategy to attract new residents, new and expanded businesses and tourists. However, the process was not without problems. In particular, friction already existed between stakeholders.

Nevertheless, the Swan Valley managed to create something that did not exist in the other two rural case studies that were part of the larger study of which the Swan Valley research is a part. In the case studies of Town of Winkler and the Rural Municipality of Stuartburn, leadership was either non-existent or distanced from the rest of the community.

This paper will first present an overview of existing image-building and collaboration literature. In particular, the literature review will focus on what other scholars have found to be factors for success for image-building and collaboration, as well as what the common problems are for these types of initiatives. Next, the case study of the Swan Valley will be described. Lastly, the experiences of the Swan Valley will be analyzed to determine what other places considering image-building strategies could learn from the Valley's example, and to what degree the Swan Valley could be used as a model for rural image-building.

Methodology

Choice of study site:

The Swan Valley was chosen as one of four study sites[1] for a larger study on image-building in Manitoba, Canada[2]. The Swan Valley was selected to represent a more northerly agricultural location relative to the

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[1] Other locations in the study were the Rural Municipality of Stuartburn, the City of Winkler and the City of Winnipeg.

other study sites, which were closer to the Canada-US border. At the time of the location's selection, it was unbeknownst to the researchers that the region was in the midst of developing an image-building strategy.

Data collection:

The first step of this research project was to explore relevant concepts through a literature review. A semi-structured interview schedule was then developed by the team of researchers involved in the image-building aspect of the multi-university project; the same interview questions were used for studies in Saskatchewan and Prince Edward Island. These questions guided the interviews, but follow-up and probing questions were used when necessary.

The researcher generated a list of potential interviewees by researching Swan Valley image-building stakeholders on the internet. These potential interviewees were then contacted by phone, introduced to the research concept, and asked if they would agree to schedule an interview in the time period during which the researcher would be in the Swan Valley. Interviews were then carried out in-person[3] when the researcher visited the Swan Valley.

Literature Review

Image-building for economic development, tourism and resident attraction:

Image-building is a somewhat nebulous term, frequently interchanged with similar terms such as place branding, place promotion and destination marketing (Harvey 2009). There appears to be no agreed upon distinction between the terms, and many academics use them interchangeably; therefore, for the purposes of this paper, they will be considered synonymous terms.

Ward and Gold (1994, 2) define image-building as "the conscious use of publicity and marketing to communicate selective images of specific geographic localities or areas to a target audience". This definition focuses on the act of promoting a place. Lindsay (2000) offers a slightly different

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[2] This paper is part of a multi-university collaborative research initiative, sponsored by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, that adopts this broader definition of image-building. Therefore, the results of the entire project will provide significant advances in knowledge of broad-based image-building and multi-stakeholder collaboration across Canada.

[3] One interview, McCrae (2006), was carried out by phone.

definition, with image-building being "the totality of thoughts, feelings, associations and expectations that come to mind when a prospect or consumer is exposed to an entity's name, logo, products, services, events, or any design or symbol representing them" (as cited in Van Ham: 129). This definition focuses on the reception of the promotion offering. Both definitions are relevant to the current case study because the act of brand creation and the intended effect of the promotion of the Swan Valley will both be discussed (although this research only recorded intended effect, not *actual* effect).

Many studies of image-building focus mainly on its tourism aspects (e.g., Frenkel, Walton and Anderson 2000; Ylanne-McEwen 2000; Walmsley 2003; Nelson 2005). However, image-building can also be conceived of more broadly. For instance, there is a growing literature linking image-building to local economic development (e.g., Gordon 2007). Such an all-encompassing view was taken by researchers in the Multi-Collaborative Research Initiative, "Multilevel Governance and Public Policy in Canadian Municipalities: Image Building," of which this study is one part. All of the scholars in this initiative adopted the same definition of image-building: that it is how a community, town, city, region or country attempts to sell itself "to investors, to tourists, [and] to the current and prospective residents, in a competitive market" (Harvey 2009, 7).

Image-building in rural areas:

While image-building is not a new concept, scholars have noted its increasing importance in recent decades as various economic and demographic circumstances have changed for rural communities around the world (Hankinson 2001; Murtagh 2001; Hannigan 2003; Walmsley 2003; Kavaratzis and Ashworth 2005). Since the 1970s, residents of rural areas have found that their traditional activities, most notably agriculture, are no longer always adequately supporting their economies. Across the developed world, the out-migration of residents, often to urban areas, has led to declining populations. The age of remaining residents in many rural areas are often above the national average (Walmsley 2003; Jenkins 2005; Markey, Halseth and Manson 2008). Changes in rural economies (e.g. the movement away from 'family farms') has also had negative effects (Hopkins 1998; Wilson et al. 2001; Walmsley 2003).

While image-building is often considered a "big city" endeavour, Hopkins (1998, 68) suggests that there has been a "reinterpretation of rural identity" through recent place promotion initiatives. There is a good variety of place promotion literature, but the balance of this literature focuses on the promotional efforts of urban areas (e.g., Holcomb 1994; Coles 2003; Green 2005; Vanalo 2008 "Helsinki"; Vanalo 2008 "Turin") and

entire countries (e.g., Dinnie 2008; Jansen 2008) rather than by small towns or rural regions (Kneafsey 2000; Walmsley 2003; Runyan 2006; Lehr 2007).

In some cases, rural places have marketed themselves as escapes from cities and the dangers, crime and busy lifestyles associated with them. Gardyn (2002) observes that rural areas have been particularly able to market themselves as "safe" post 9/11. Hopkins (1998, 78) also found that place promotion literature for rural southwestern Ontario emphasized safe and tranquil elements of rural areas to the point of "mythologizing" the countryside. Roberts and Hall (2004, 254), too, note the marketing of safety, as well as that of peacefulness, health "and even restorative experience". If a rural community can successfully "sell" these characteristics to consumers, it may be able to successfully reach out to both tourists who want holiday escapes and new residents who yearn for security from urban threats, perceived or real, and a quieter lifestyle.

Rural place promotion can also focus on other elements such as agritourism and food production (e.g., Glenn and Rounds 1997; Boyne, Hall and Williams 2003), ecotourism (e.g., Weaver *et al*. 1995), cultural heritage and history (e.g., of migration and settlements) or attractive geographic characteristics (Wilson *et al*. 2001). Nature-based tourism may be particularly popular in regions where land is not entirely converted to agricultural uses. Forests, native prairie, mountains and lakes all offer the potential for the marketing of outdoor activities such as bird-watching, hiking, picnicking, fishing, biking, fishing and hunting (Weaver, *et al*. 1995; Roberts and Hall 2004; Lehr and Zubrycki 2009).

However, some authors warn that place promotion may not be the appropriate solution for all struggling rural areas (Palermo 2000; Walmsley 2003). Roberts and Hall (2004) warn that marketing nature and rurality will not work for all areas that simply possess natural attributes and rural landscapes. Many more factors are necessary for a place promotion campaign to succeed in such a "niche" market, including the ability to attract of high numbers of people, the ability to charge a high premium and the existence of unusual or quality attractions to draw these high numbers and charge this high premium. If a rural area is remote, travel distance also becomes an issue. Walmsley (2003, 61) offers a similar analysis of rural tourism. He notes that "tourism is often seen as a panacea for the ills of declining rural communities", but that a location that is far from large populations could have difficulty in creating a successful image-building campaign, particularly if tourism is the campaign's main goal. He suggests that places that are distant from major centres may have to rely on unique attractions (e.g., geographic beauty or unusual festivals) to attract visitors, investment and new residents. Schultz (2004, 101) makes the same observation, writing: "If you're located in the middle of nowhere, without

a strong population base for hundreds of miles, you had better develop something that sets you apart from everyone else".

Wilson *et al*. (2001, 134) offer one of the most comprehensive guides to whether or not a rural region should consider turning to tourism to aid its economy. In their study of rural communities in Illinois, they were able to create a list of factors that could contribute to the chances that a tourism attempt would succeed. In the discussion section of this paper, the situation of the Swan Valley will be measured against these factors, which include:

1) A complete tourism package;
2) Good community leadership;
3) Support and participation of local government;
4) Sufficient funds for tourism development;
5) Strategic planning;
6) Coordination and cooperation between businesspersons and local leadership;
7) Coordination and cooperation between rural tourism entrepreneurs; and
8) Widespread community support for tourism.

Many of these factors for successful tourism development also extend logically to broader economic development.

Collaboration in image-building:

Traditionally, cities, towns and municipalities have most often taken a competitive view in terms of image-building, if they have undertaken image-building at all. However, numerous academics (Hankinson 2001; Finucan 2002; Nel and Binns 2002; Fyall and Garrod, 2005) observe that multi-stakeholder, regional collaboration has become increasingly common, both in metropolitan and rural areas. This observation holds true for both collaboration in terms of tourism and in terms of economic development; Olberding (2002) suggests that regional collaboration on economic matters in the United States increased fourfold from the 1970s to the 1990s.

However, academic study has not thoroughly tracked this development and scholars repeatedly note that many questions are still left unanswered or under-explored (Medeiros De Araugo and Bramwell 2002; Olberding 2002; Hankinson 2004; Fyall and Garrod 2005; Lehr 2007). In many cases, studies have dealt with either tourism (Medeiros de Araujo and Bramwell 2002; Boyne, Hall and Williams 2003; Fyall and Garrod 2005; Wang 2008), economic development (McGuire 2000; Olberding 2002; Hauswirth *et al*. 2003; Gordon 2007) or the attraction of new residents (Niedomysl 2004).

Fewer studies have undertaken the comprehensive approach to image-building tying all of these considerations together within the context of collaboration.

Various scholars have offered definitions of collaboration. Wood and Gray (1991, 146) suggest that "collaboration occurs when a group of autonomous stakeholders of a problem domain engage in an interactive process, using shared rules, norms, and structures, to act or decide on issues related to that domain". Huxham (1993, 603) proposes the concept of "collaborative advantage" to counter the more traditional notion of "competitive advantage"; he suggests that collaboration allows stakeholders to carry out initiatives they could not have undertaken on their own, and that objectives might be better-achieved than if undertaken unilaterally. The bulk of collaboration literature (e.g. Wood and Gray 1991; Selin and Chavez 1995; Huxham and Vangen 1996; Fyall, Leask and Garrod 1999; Young and Kaczmarek 1999; Gardyn 2002; Nel and Binns 2002; Hankinson 2004; Greasley *et al.* 2008; d'Angella and Go 2009; Naipaul, Wang and Okumus 2009) suggests that key characteristics of collaboration are:

- The need to address a problem shared by multiple stakeholders;
- Input and decision-making from all stakeholders;
- Interaction between stakeholders; and
- The maintenance of autonomy during collaboration.

These characteristics are discussed further in the following sections.

Why collaborate?

Academic tourism literature identifies various reasons why stakeholders in the image-building process might choose to collaborate. One of the most common reasons for partnership is to tackle a problem shared by all stakeholders (KPMG Management Consulting 1995; Fyall and Garrod 2005). Fyall and Garrod (2005, 146-147) relate collaboration for this purpose to "relational exchange theory," where "organizations operating within an increasingly complex problem domain are expected to develop inter-organizations relationships that will help them solve their problems by working together… collaboration is the result of organizations recognizing the interdependence of problems in their domain and the benefits of developing reciprocal relationships aimed at solving them". For instance, in the current case study (see below), the common problem shared by all stakeholders is the decline of agriculture, the loss of population and the need to diversify the economy.

Another common reason why collaboration occurs is to increase efficiency and reduce duplication through the sharing of resources and information, resulting in less duplication of efforts. An Industry Canada-sponsored report (KPMG Management Consulting 1995, 13) promoted this idea before much of the academic literature on collaboration was produced: "The sharing of common resources, a buildup of 'critical mass', and less duplication of effort can result in economies of scale. Partnering can allow you to share overhead costs, increase your buying power, expand your marketing reach, improve your performance, [and] improve your potential for financing…". Academic literature also emphasizes these benefits (Welford and Ytterhus 2002; Caffyn and Dahlstrom 2005; Fyall and Garrod 2005; Greasley *et al.* 2008; Naipaul, Wang and Okumus 2009).

Partnering can also open up access to funding. Numerous academics note that governmental money is often tied to collaboration as a precondition (Hall 1999; Roberts and Hall 2004; Fyall and Garrod 2005). For instance, the Federal government's Rural Secretariat (Government of Canada 2009) emphasizes partnership in a large number of its programs, including the Rural Partnership Development Program.

In addition, Lehr (2007) suggests that partnerships can strengthen the image of towns or cities in the eyes of potential investors, and industry seeking new locations. Just one example of how partnerships can appeal to investors is that a partnership allows the marketing of a *region's* population to potential investors, rather than just each community's population, thereby appearing to have a larger workforce than just the one community would on its own.

Problems with regional collaboration:

While there are many benefits to collaboration, rarely does a collaborative effort occur that does not encounter problems. For instance, the pursuit of public funds, discussed above, may lead to acrimonious partnerships. In their study of public-public partnerships (i.e., partnerships between governments), Greasley *et al.* (2008, 309) discovered animosity between some of the participants. One participant described the relationships as "a mutual loathing in pursuit of government funds". Existing animosity may also preclude the option of collaboration. One documented example of enmity between cities preventing collaboration is that of the neighbouring Manitoban towns of Winkler and Morden (Lehr 2007; Lehr and Zubrycki 2009). Competition between the two towns is so long-standing and fierce that it took twenty-seven years of bickering over the best location of a new hospital for the area before a provincial minister decided to place it mid-way between the two communities. Issues between the two communities revolve around differing values (Winkler has a

stronger Mennonite contingent) and work ethic (Morden focuses on "recreation and leisure" while Winkler emphasizes business) (Lehr 2007, 108). Due to these long-standing contentions, cooperation on an image-building strategy is improbable in the near future, even though the close proximity of the towns and the potential benefits make collaboration logical.

However, even when partnerships are formed without underlying resentment, disagreements commonly arise. Wang (2008) observed that conflict is a common issue, often centred around stakeholders emphasizing their own individual benefits before common benefits. Gardyn (2002, 41) writes that when nine counties in Indianapolis merged into one, consensus on image-building was nearly impossible to reach. Not only did all of the counties have differing ideas of what images should be portrayed, but also different private and nonprofit groups separate from government were promoting their own images for the area. The end result was a "too many cooks in the kitchen" scenario.

In addition, Greasley *et al.* (2008) note that one partner may be stronger in some ways (e.g., finances, size, influence) than others, possibly resulting in the stronger party dominating the process, and the smaller ones developing resentment. In Wang's (2008) case studies, resolution of conflict was usually reached through striking a balance between individual and common benefits. Greasley *et al.* (2008) recommend that conflicts be mitigated through frequent discussion and communication between all parties involved.

Lack of communication is a commonly cited problem within partnerships. Wood and Gray (1991), Greasley *et al.* (2008) and Huxham and Vangen (1996) all stress that communication is key to successful collaboration. Problems with communication can stem for many reasons, from a situation where one stakeholder prefers to dominate the process and does not communicate information to other stakeholders, to where some stakeholders are not enthusiastic or committed to the initiative (Greasley *et al.* 2008; Wang 2008). In some cases, some partners might receive communication from other stakeholders, but do not offer much in return, making the process essentially a one-way communication. Sometimes, a situation such as this arises when a stakeholder prefers to limit involvement to funding, and not man hours, expertise, ideas or information. A study for Industry Canada by KPMG Management Consulting (1995) suggests that to simply provide funds is merely "sponsorship," and that collaboration requires more engagement.

Also, when creating a regional image, the validity of the image is important (Greasley *et al.* 2008). Hankinson (2001) notes the importance of having the residents in the region identify with any "brand" that is developed to market the area. If the citizens do not feel that the brand

represents them, it may be difficult for the brand to get any traction. For example, Manitoba's 2006 image-building campaign, which branded the province with the words "Spirited Energy," was widely criticized for not ringing true with residents (Sinclair 2006; Gerbasi 2007; Hirst 2007; Smith 2007; Welch 2007; Lehr and Zubrycki 2009). Issues raised by the many detractors of the slogan included that it was confusing and vague (Peikoff 2008; Sawatzky 2008; Lambert 2007; Welch 2007; Armstrong 2006; Lazarenko 2006; Oleson 2006; Rollason 2006), that it was redundant – one citizen wrote that "[b]y definition, energy is always spirited. Have you ever heard of dull energy?" (Cecchini 2007), that it was "top-down" and did not consult enough with everyday Manitobans (and, therefore, rang less true) (Kives 2009) and that Manitoba's old slogan ("Friendly Manitoba") was preferable and rang more truthfully (Peikoff 2008; Sawatzky 2008; Rollason 2006). Even focus groups held prior to the brand's release were not impressed with the "Spirited Energy" idea (Welch 2007).

As will become evident below, many of the problems noted above were encountered during the development of a collaborative image-building strategy for the RM of Swan Valley. This descriptive case study that illustrates how these problems arose and were overcome can be of use to other rural areas also wishing to undertake collaborative image-building.

The Swan Valley

The town of Swan River is located 370 kilometres north-west of Winnipeg and approximately 410 kilometres from the nearest 24-hour border crossing (see Figure 1). The town does is not in close proximity to major populations; the closest city of notable size is Dauphin, approximately three hours from the town of Swan River by car. With a population of 3,859, Swan River serves as a hub for the surrounding villages and towns of Minitonas, Benito, Bowsman, Kenville and Durban (Statistics Canada 2006 "Swan River"). These towns, and the Rural Municipalities (RMs) of Swan River, Mountain and Minitonas, make up the entire Swan Valley, which has a population of roughly 11,350 people (2006). Geographical attractions in the region include the Porcupine Mountains in the north, the Duck Mountains in the south, as well as the rolling landscape in general. Therefore, the area has some potential to capitalize on geography quite different from that in the flatter southern Manitoba. In addition, a relatively high percentage of the Swan Valley's black bear population are prized "colour-phase bears," a genetic variation of black bears, which attracts a niche market of hunters (Collinge 2006; McCrae 2006; Benson 2009).
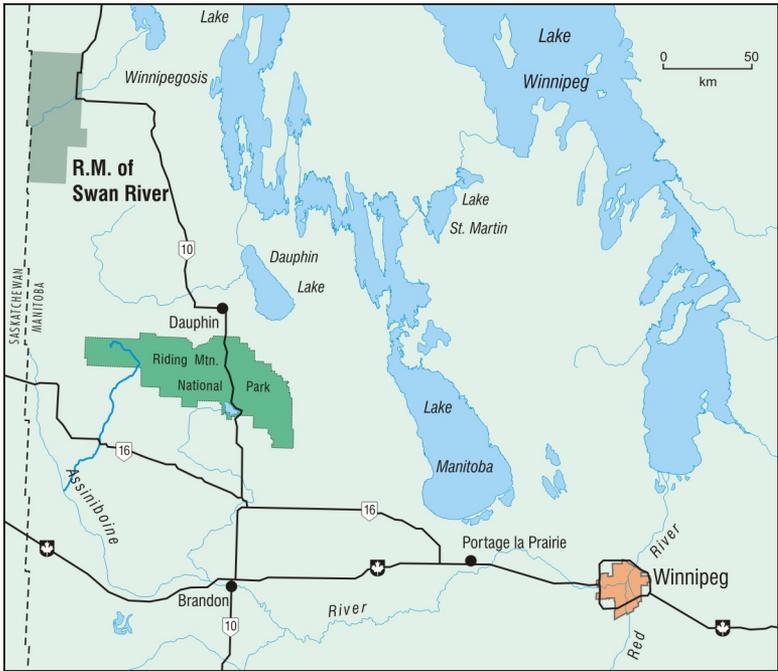
Figure 1: *Location of the Rural Municipality of Swan River.*

The region initially developed around the agricultural industry in the late 1800s. Current agricultural activities include cereal farming, oilseed farming, elk farming, and mixed farming of dairy, cattle and pigs. While agriculture has served the Swan Valley Region well in the past, changes in the agricultural industry, such as the development of large-scale farms, high farming input costs, and a decline in the viability of "family farms"[4] has required some farmers to look for new employment (Baldwin 2006; Swan Valley Enterprise Centre 2006). This change, in turn, is requiring Swan Valley to diversify its economy and turn to areas such as tourism and value-added processing such as biofuels (Swan Valley Enterprise Centre 2006).

The Valley also has several interrelated demographic problems. First, the existing population is aging. In the 2006 Statistics Canada census, the

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[4] For example, Statistics Canada (2006 "Agriculture") reports that "the median total income for farm families on unincorporated farms in 2005 [in Canada] was $56,412, compared to $63,846 received by census families in the general population."

median age of a Manitoban resident was 38.1, but the median age in most
of the Swan Valley area measured higher than that, the highest being in the
Village of Benito at 50.7 years[5]. In part, this difference is caused by the loss
of youth to "greener pastures." This trend is reflected nationally; Statistics
Canada (2006 "Agriculture") reports that the median age of farmers in
Canada, 51 years, is the highest of any occupation. The median age for the
overall labour force is 41.2 years. As in other rural and somewhat remote
areas, younger people are not carrying on the farm tradition as they once
did and are being attracted to larger centres such as the Manitoban cities
of Winnipeg, Dauphin or Brandon (Doleman 2006; Reich 2006; Statistics
Canada 2006a). In addition, not only is the population ageing, but it is also
decreasing. Depopulation is a common trend in rural areas, and every
village, town and RM in the Swan Valley saw this change in the 2006
census, each losing between 1.6 and 11.4 per cent of the population
measured in 2001[6] (Statistics Canada 2006b, 2006c, 2006d, 2006e, 2006f,
2006g, 2006h).

In 2005, the Swan Valley Enterprise Centre (SVEC), the regional
economic development office, proposed that it facilitate a plan to confront
these economic and demographic problems. With its offices in the town of
Swan River, the SVEC receives about thirty-five per cent of its funds[7] from
the villages of Bozeman and Benito, the towns of Swan River and
Minitonas, and the RMs of Swan River, Mountain and Minitonas[8]. It
carries out economic development activities throughout the region. As
such, it was a logical organization to spearhead the development of what
was first termed an "investment attraction project" and which later
broadened into a "branding strategy" (Collinge 2006).

The logic behind the project was that it made sense for the towns and
RMs to pool their resources and create a regional image-building strategy

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[5] Other median ages were: for the Town of Swan River, 45.1 years; for the RM of Swan
River, 41.8 years, for the town of Minitonas, 43.2 years; for the Village of Bowsman,
38.7 years; and for the RM of Mountain, 45.3 years.

[6] Specifically, the Village of Bowsman saw a 1.6 per cent decrease (2006c), the RM of
Minitonas 4.1 per cent, the town of Swan River 4.3 per cent, the RM of Swan River
4.8 per cent, the Village of Benito 10.8 per cent and the RM of Mountain 11.4 per
cent (Statistics Canada 2006b, 2006c, 2006d, 2006e, 2006f, 2006g, 2006h)

[7] Other funding comes from the provincial and federal governments, as well a private
funders.

[8] Over the years, several of these members have periodically joined and left SVEC,
depending on whether or not they felt the Centre was meeting their current priorities,
but all have been members at some point (Collinge 2006; Reich 2006).

rather than have each entity create its own. Rich Reich, Reeve of the RM of Swan River, strongly advocates the region working together as much as possible: "What we have to do is sell ourselves as one place. It's about image. To me, the perfect image is a strong, financially viable place…if we can save money and become more cost-effective, we become more viable, which gives us a good image" (2006).

Challenges to Building Partnerships

The beginning of the project entailed holding a public brainstorming session in the Fall of 2005 to solicit the views of residents and invite them to become participants throughout the process. Of the eighty people that attended the session, eight became members of the "Investment Attraction Committee," a SVEC-coordinated group in charge of the strategy. The SVEC also hired a marketing consultant to develop the official plan and conduct a "SWOT" analysis, a common marketing strategy that identifies strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for the community in question (Kotler and Lee 2007).

It was at this point that a problem became evident: there was very little active interest from the local government in the plan. No councillors joined the investment attraction committee; instead, the people who joined were eight interested citizens, a representative from the chamber of commerce, a local tourism representative, a member from the provincial Member of the Legislative Assembly's office, and three of the SVEC's own employees (see Figure 2). Darlis Collinge, Economic Development Manager for the SVEC, felt disappointed by this lack of interest (2006). "You would think that the municipalities would be more involved in how they're represented, but they're not," she said. "I think image-building is a very valuable exercise for a community. I think all communities should do it so that they know where they fit and what their niche is."

However, the SVEC still tried to solicit input from the seven local town and rural municipality councils by sending them the marketing materials that were developed and asking them to fill out questionnaires about their impressions and ideas. Unfortunately, the responses were unenthusiastic. Only two of the seven councils returned the questionnaires and the feedback provided was very basic. For instance, the open-ended questions were rarely answered (Collinge 2006).

Reich (2006), who sits on one of the councils, did not see a problem with the feedback his council provided. "We got to pick the colours," he says of their contribution to the materials. In part, the problem may be that councillors like Rich Reich see local government's role as more distanced

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│General board│                          │Investment Attraction Committee│
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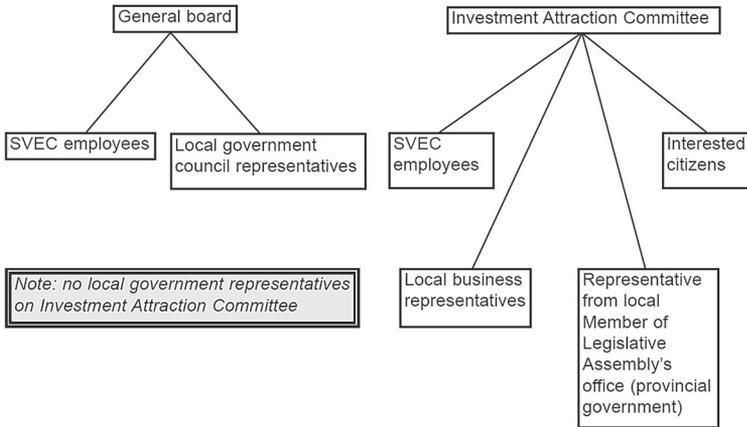
Figure 2: Swan Valley Enterprise Centre (SVEC): Comparison of General Board and Investment Attraction Committee.

from image-building than does the SVEC. In an interview, Reich emphasized that the municipal councils generally deal with more day-to-day concerns, such as roads, infrastructure and taxes. He pointed out the benefit to having non-elected people in the Investment Attraction Committee to "get the layperson's view."

However, Swan River town councillor, Ken Doleman, suggests that municipal government can contribute to both day-to-day concerns and "higher-level" issues such as image-building (2006). Unlike the majority of local government officials, he feels each of the town councils should be contributing ideas and energy to the image-building process, not just money. He suggests that it could be useful to have councillors involved in the branding process because it is crucial to have those who live in, work in and run the government of a "branded" community believe in their own brand. As head of the local credit union, and owner of a bed and breakfast, he believes an effective image, supported by the community, can help "sell" the region to visitors and investors.

While council support of image-building efforts has been passive, with most support being monetary, there does appear to be recognition that working together strengthens the region. Reich (2006) is even known for advocating the amalgamation of the seven separate villages, towns and RMs into one political entity. "I'm a firm believer that our valley is *one*. We do have seven municipalities and we try to have seven different identities, but we are one. We have to work together or we won't survive…We have 11,000 people and 42 elected officials that look after

them…Winnipeg has only 15 councillors [for approximately 633,000 people]." Reich feels there is too much duplication of efforts. The thinking behind this view is similar to that behind the image-building strategy: that by pooling resources, the region can more easily and efficiently overcome economic problems and pursue investments, tourism and new residents. In this case, less money could be spent on administration and, therefore, more on improving the region. "It's like having too big a mortgage and the interest eats up all your money instead of making payments," he explained. While there are many who still disagree with Reich's view, he says an increasing number of residents are becoming supportive. For instance, local Member of the Legislative Assembly, Rosann Wowchuk, has told him she finds it helpful to be able to go to government and say the region is able to cooperate on development. It may increase the Swan Valley's ability to access provincial-level funding and support.

Developing the Marketing Materials

Despite the drawback of having only partial and passive municipal government support, the SVEC worked with the community volunteers who wished to participate actively in the development of materials. It was not overly difficult to identify the appropriate image for the region. Collinge (2006) explains that the natural beauty of the region made the outdoors the obvious best choice for visual imagery in the campaign. "What we decided to focus on is blue skies, clear air and pristine lakes….We're presenting ourselves as a healthy, environmentally-conscious, clean way to be," she says. The natural beauty of the area is something that residents themselves value in the area and feel is an appropriate image to convey to outsiders (Doleman 2006; McCrae 2006; McKay 2006; Potten 2006; Walker 2006).

Therefore, the visual imagery created by the campaign and displayed on the brochures, web site <*www.swanvalleycanada.com*> and the trade show booth at the Rural Forum in Brandon in April 2006 reflect these environmental virtues. Images include non-threatening, puffy clouds, blue skies, lakes, golden fields and rolling landscapes. The *Investment Attraction Marketing Plan* (Swan Valley Enterprise Centre 2006) suggests that natural assets should be emphasized in order to attract immigrants from Europe, where ecology and clean air are "prized" (10). In addition, a family-oriented image is conveyed through the inclusion of a mother, father and child walking hand-in-hand in a field with a blue sky behind them, and a young girl on a swing. This family-oriented imagery is the embodiment of the *Marketing Plan's* stated objective to present "high quality rural lifestyles" (1). By presenting family themes in its imagery, mixed with outdoor settings,

the campaign is reaching out to potential new residents. The family theme is further built by the campaign's slogan: "A Community of Communities,"[9] which implies that the region is friendly and welcoming. In addition, the family-focused approach could have a positive effect on two of the strategy's other target markets, entrepreneurs and industry, as it suggests that the Swan Valley would be a pleasant place for employees to live.

While the "brands" of being nature-oriented and family-focused came easily to the developers of the campaign, other aspects were more difficult to agree upon. In particular, there were disagreements over what the campaign's logo should be. While some members felt a swan would be a logical symbol, others argued that it would focus the campaign too much on the town of Swan River, which already uses a swan as its logo and has the word "swan" in its very name. Collinge explains that the other political entities already felt some antipathy towards the town of Swan River, as there was the perception that it receives an imbalanced amount of resources and facilities (e.g., hospital, new businesses). Therefore, some members felt that to use a swan as a logo would make people living in the areas without the word "swan" in their name resentful (Benito, Bowsman, RM of Mountain, town of Minitonas, RM of Minitonas). In other words, there is some concern that the town of Swan River and the Rural Municipality of Swan River would benefit more. Therefore, in the end, it was decided that a swan would not be the logo. "We made a very conscious decision that nowhere at any time were we going to include a swan…because it would further alienate those other municipalities…We knew that from the outside looking in, a swan would make sense, but we also knew that if we didn't have people from the inside who supported it, it wouldn't matter what it looked like from the outside" (Collinge 2006).

Instead, the logo is a stylized "V" incorporated into the word "Valley" (see Figure 3). Further controversy arose when participants discussed whether the words "Swan River Valley" or "Swan Valley" should be used. This seemingly small difference caused "the most discussion" during meetings (Collinge 2006). Again, the conflict was based on resentment of the town of Swan River – some members argued that to use the words "Swan River" would focus attention too much on the town. Eventually, it was decided that "Swan Valley" would be used "because then it clearly encompasses the entire region" (Collinge 2006).

These decisions came at the price of losing one of the committee's members who felt that the group was squandering its time discussing

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[9] The slogan has since been changed to "The Natural Choice" to complement the nature-based images of the campaign. A triple-meaning is also created, suggesting that the Swan Valley is a good place to visit, move to or to establish a business.

Figure 3: *The Swan Valley logo.*

minor details. Don McCrae (2006), a trapper from nearby Cowan and owner of Trapper Don's Lodge and Outfitting Services, resigned in frustration over the never-ending discussion. "I drove 80 miles and they spent 90% of the meeting discussing the logo," he says. "The logo doesn't sell trips." While McCrae finds it promising that the region is developing an image-building strategy (he realizes other regions are not so fortunate) he strongly disagrees with their methods. In particular, he felt that they lacked goals such as how many busloads of tourists they wanted to draw per year or how many new residents they wanted to attract. "If they wanted to attract immigrants, they needed to speak with people who have immigrated to Canada, find out why they came to Canada, and find out why they came to a certain spot instead of another spot," he explains. In his opinion, this type of market research is more important than the materials disseminated to the markets: "When you're selling soap, you've got to know the soap. If you're selling fish, you've got to know the fish. You have to know the market in order to sell to it." McCrae does have some expertise in the field of attracting people to the region; at the height of his company's success, it did up to $1.6 million in business per year, attracting the likes of former United States President Jimmy Carter and actor Rob Lowe to hunt in the area.

Despite the difficulties encountered during the creation of the strategy, by February of 2006 the SVEC representatives attended an immigration trade fair in the United Kingdom armed with a completed display, brochures and a newly minted plan. The fair attracted 15,000 people considering emigrating or building vacation homes abroad. The *Marketing Plan* (SVEC 2006) identifies Europeans as potential candidates to be new residents because some are "anti-urbanites," seeking non-crowded, rural areas. For example, even before the image-building strategy was launched, a German-

language magazine, *Kanadischer Stern,* published an article on the region that attracted one family with five children from Germany. The family now takes advantage of the region's open spaces and operates an apiary, or bee-keeping business. Collinge says several families at the trade fair also expressed interest in the combination of rurality and amenities in the region, with two couples planning visits to determine if the Swan Valley meets their needs.

Discussion

In light of existing image-building and collaboration literature, the Swan Valley initiative appears to be a fairly good candidate for using image-building to counter rural decline through a cooperative approach. The Valley is fortunate in that it possesses a more hilly landscape than most of southern Manitoba, therefore giving it the potential to attract nature-seeking tourists from nearby regions. One downside, however, is the Valley's distance from major population centres; the six-hour drive from Winnipeg may be a deterrent to Winnipeg residents. As numerous authors note, remote places may struggle with image-building tourism initiatives unless they can provide something truly unique (Schultz 2004; Walmsley 2003). For instance, the town of Churchill, Manitoba, attracts visitors from around the world, despite its remoteness, because it can offer an experience unequalled elsewhere – polar bears. The Swan Valley does not have an attraction quite so unusual. Were the Swan Valley's plan to focus on just tourism, the academic literature suggests it might not fair well. However, its broader approach, encompassing economic development and resident attraction, suggests more promise and resiliency. Given this three-pronged strategy, perhaps some unavoidable weaknesses in the tourism component of the strategy are acceptable.

In addition, despite its relative remoteness, the Swan Valley meets many of Wilson *et al*.'s (2001) factors that contribute to successful tourism initiatives. Most notably, strong leadership is provided by the SVEC. This organization can certainly be credited with determination. First, it received rather indifferent support from municipal government for its proposals. Then, members of its investment attraction committee argued incessantly over details of the plan. The Swan Valley initiative coped with these obstacles and managed to achieve more planning and coordination than in the other two rural case studies in the larger study of which the Swan Valley research was a part (see Lehr and Zubrycki 2009).

Also, a "complete tourism package" (i.e. various activities and appropriate tourism infrastructure) exists in the region, based most strongly

around nature-based tourism. In particular, before the development of the official image-building program outlined in this paper, the SVEC supported an initiative by the Mixedwood Forest Research and Advisory Committee (2002) to develop an eco-tourism guidebook. This guidebook, which also had numerous local partners, presented three driving routes through which readers could explore the natural and cultural heritage of the region. Guides such as this can help keep tourists in the area for longer durations of time and therefore contribute to some additional economic development.

Wilson *et al*.'s (2001) factor of strategic planning is also met by the Swan Valley through its *Investment Attraction Marketing Plan* (SVEC 2006). By identifying regional strength, weaknesses, opportunities, threats, and target markets, the Swan Valley is able to visualize its desired future and take steps to achieve that future.

Wilson *et al.* (2001) also mention cooperation as critical to a successful strategy. This study shows that cooperation was perhaps only moderately successful. Local government cooperation was limited mostly to economic contributions, a situation that collaboration literature suggests is "sponsorship," not partnership. Still, the funding was absolutely necessary for the Valley to even embark on such a project and, therefore, the local governments still contributed in an important way. Other community stakeholders such as the Chamber of Commerce and some businesses were willing to have more hands-on involvement in the creation of the region's image. The fusion of their involvement and financial support from local government resulted in the Swan Valley having a workable, albeit a bit imbalanced, situation.

Another positive observation can be made about the ability of the participants to solve problems that did arise, such as disagreements over details or feelings of resentment towards the Town of Swan River. The successful mitigation of these problems through discussion indicate dedication to the creation of the strategy and may bode well for the ability of the communities to collaborate.

However, the Swan Valley does not fully meet Wilson *et al.*'s requirement of community support. Collinge (2006) notes that more "internal marketing" has to be done within the Valley to encourage residents to present a more positive view of the region. The SVEC's *Marketing Plan* (2006, 4) notes local attitudes as a weakness, saying that the "local view of being 'remote' [could be] communicated to visitors" if when they travel around the area, they hear the locals disparaging the region. While community feedback on the marketing materials has been positive, and residents agree that an outdoorsy and family-oriented image is accurate, there is still a degree of negativity about the region. For example, some residents wish they could live closer to a major centre so that they could

have access to a wider range of amenities and entertainment facilities. The SVEC, however, hopes to counter these sentiments; while the SVEC cannot single-handedly add new amenities, it does hope to foster more pride within residents about their region. The hope is that this attempt will create a positive atmosphere for visitors. Therefore, part of the initiative will involve reminding residents of the attractions the Swan Valley *does* offer (even if it lacks some amenities that large centres have), attempting to engage residents in the initiative (e.g. through public meetings) and attempting to build a stronger sense of community and connectedness (for instance, the slogan is a reminder of community).

Another weakness for the Swan Valley may be indifference from some stakeholders, for example the businesses and tourism operators who do not wish to participate in collaboration. These businesses may be taking a "competitive" approach to development, rather than a "collaborative" one, as discussed in this paper's literature review. One way in which the SVEC is trying to increase community support of the strategy is by having manufacturers and businesses find ways to include the strategy's logo on their products or business materials to increase a feeling of cohesiveness. However, reception was lukewarm to this proposal with many businesses refusing to participate.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Swan Valley may have avoided treating image-building as a panacea for rural decline due in part to its inclusion of economic development and immigrant attraction in its image-building strategy rather than just tourism. In particular, the initiative appears to have a strong focus on resident attraction, and while the degree of success or failure of this approach cannot yet be assessed early feedback at immigration fairs were positive (Collinge 2006). The attraction of new residents to slow or reverse the decline of the region's population is important in order to strengthen the local economies. Other regions seeking to build their own strategies should consider the image-building aspects considered in this paper – for economic development, resident attraction and tourism. Each region could tailor its own plan that includes these elements and takes into account the region's own particular strengths and weaknesses.

The Swan Valley example also demonstrated the importance of having an entity to champion the cause of image-building. Once the SVEC proposed the idea of a branding strategy, it became apparent that there was latent interest amongst other stakeholders. However, without an organization like the SVEC to initiate a project, a rural region may not awaken to the

possibilities image-building offers. Therefore, it is important to identify possible leaders in the community to organize and run such an operation. If no such champions are apparent, Lehr and Zubrycki (2009) suggest that higher levels of government could take the lead to encourage image-building and foster champions.

The value of collaboration was also demonstrated in this case study. Without the cooperation of the numerous stakeholders involved it would have been difficult for the SVEC to attempt to alter the Valley's image. Both the knowledge contributions of the committee members and the financial support of the seven local governments were critical to the development of the strategy.

However, this study also demonstrates that local government officials may not consider image-building to be a high priority. It does not appear that the lack of participation by government officials greatly handicapped the Swan Valley's branding attempt, but other rural regions hoping to undertake a similar initiative should be aware of such passivity. Academic literature suggests that, ideally, all stakeholders should be involved as participants, not just sponsors. Therefore, attempts should be made to convince government members that they should take some responsibility for their community's image and include image-building in their mandate.

Finally, other regions considering a collaborative project should know that conflicts will likely arise between participants. Differences in opinion are a natural part of the process. The Swan Valley study demonstrates that persistent, if sometimes tedious, discussion and debate between stakeholders can lead to a plan that most of the stakeholders support. Collaboration literature shows that without deliberation and compromise, collaborative initiatives are more likely to break down (Selman and Wragg 1999; Fyall, Leask and Garrod 2001; Hardy *et al.* 2003; Lester and Weeden 2004; Greasley *et al.* 2008; Naipaul, Wang and Okumus 2009).

While there were certainly kinks in the development of the Swan Valley strategy, the simple fact that many stakeholders throughout the large region were willing to support an image-building strategy may bode well for the future. As has been noted, in many places, community rivalries can make cooperation in image-building difficult; while this study found some degree of antagonism between the communities, particularly antipathy towards the town of Swan River, the stakeholders managed to work through these difficulties.

It is perhaps too soon to say if the Swan Valley image-building strategy has been successful. It is notoriously difficult to measure the success of place promotion, and it may be years before conclusions can be made. Indicators could be the development of new industries and businesses, attraction of new residents, increased tourism and the reversal or slowing

down of the depopulation and ageing trends. Regardless of the outcome, the Swan Valley branding experience provides insights into the process of collaborative planning. The Swan Valley strategy can perhaps be viewed as a rough model for other struggling rural areas wishing to improve their fortunes. Other regions considering regional collaboration can consider the methods used by the Swan Valley – some of which were productive, the problems encountered in the creation of the strategy and the ways in which disputes were resolved in order to develop image-building strategies that position them more visibly and competitively for the 21st century.

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