

LASTING RESULTS, LASTING FRIENDSHIPS

Fredericton NB, Canada and Ubon Ratchathani, Thailand

From 2000 to 2005, the City of Fredericton, Canada and the City of Ubon Ratchathani, Thailand, worked together through a cooperation program of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) to develop planning and tourism development capacities of Ubon Ratchathani. Almost two decades later, the friendships among peers still thrive. In early 2017, Maurice Gallant — technical team leader for the City of Fredericton — had the opportunity to visit his former partners again. This case study highlights some of the key outcomes and the persisting value of the municipal and personal friendship.



From 1993 to 2002, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) collaborated with the National Municipal League of Thailand (MLT) to support a series of eight partnerships between Thai and Canadian local governments. These partnerships took place under the Municipal Partnership Program (MPP), funded by the Government of Canada. Several of these partnerships have yielded exemplary results.

The partnership between the City of Ubon Ratchathani (or Ubon) and the City of Fredericton is a case in point. Within just over 2 years of collaboration, partners reported the following results in 2002.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT — Ubon improved the quality of life of its citizens by: redesigning parks to accommodate specific needs of different groups and ensuring the safety of park equipment; revitalizing its downtown commercial area and making it safer for, and more accessible to disabled citizens; and providing a safer environment for victims of floods through emergency procedures.

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY — Ubon now benefits from a cleaner environment because a neighbourhood and school recycling program has contributed to significantly reducing the quantity of solid waste going to the landfill site.

ECONOMIC WELLBEING — Ubon now sees local downtown businesses as a community to serve, so that it maintains its vitality. Tourism bureaus have been set up to attract tourists, with the aim to make Ubon Ratchathani the hub for people traveling to Laos and Cambodia. In addition, citizens involved in the recycling banking program have increased their revenues by collecting and selling recyclable materials.

But the friendship and collaboration didn't end with the end of their project. City officials and staffs from Fredericton and Ubon then joined forces and forged a three-party initiative to support the City of Lang Son, in Vietnam, in its aspiration to develop its tourism sector in a sustainable way. Moreover, several staffs from Fredericton have maintained relationships with their friends and colleagues in Thailand (and Vietnam as well, but that's another story), and a few have returned to Thailand on personal trips.

This article captures some of the stories and insights gathered during Maurice Gallant's visit to Ubon Ratchathani in March 2017. We share these with you hoping it will inspire you to forge long-lasting ties with municipal leaders overseas.

HOW THE PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN UBON AND FREDERICTON CAME ABOUT

The City of Fredericton has participated in FCM international capacity building projects for over 17 years. Local leaders and staff from Fredericton have implemented projects to introduce strategic planning and information technology operational planning in local governments to help make them more efficient. We have helped our partners to develop a culture of planning. We have worked with a city in Vietnam in the area of park design and development, as well as sharing basic pruning and soil management techniques. This helped Ninh Binh become more beautiful and green. In Bolivia, we are collaborating with the City of Tiquipaya to help them manage solid waste, and to define and test new approaches to spur local economic development. The partnership with the city of Ubon was the first local government capacity building partnership in which Fredericton got involved. In 1999, Fredericton expressed interest and was selected to engage within the Federation of Canadian Municipalities' Municipal Partnership Program. Little did anyone know at the time that this would lead to lasting friendships and many years of collaboration, program development and service delivery improvements in both municipalities.

The first two missions consisted of getting to know each other and each other's communities and determine areas of mutual interest for capacity building and economic development. We agreed that our goal would be to help Ubon develop a Strategic Plan to help focus their efforts in municipal service delivery and community development. A SWOT analysis highlighted that, while Thailand as a whole benefited greatly from strong international tourism, this did not extend to Ubon Ratchathani which is situated in the north east and off the beaten path. While Ubon



Ratchathani was not in a position to compete with the postcard-like settings of Phi Phi or Samui islands, it could perhaps build on its proximity to Laos and Cambodia to improve tourism in their area.

A possible weakness and detriment to tourism that was identified in the early stage of our partnership was Ubon's litter problem and lacking sanitation standards for open markets and street food vendors. During one of the early assessment missions to Ubon, we observed that Thailand cities seemed to have considerably more litter on the streets and in public areas than would be the case in Canada. We also noticed that the standard for cleanliness in open markets and food carts seemed to be less stringent than we would expect in North America. Discussions on the topic led us to develop a number of initiatives to address this issue. The municipality doubled its efforts to dispose of litter in parks and public spaces. Also, a municipal permitting system was established to control standards for streets food vendors, their preparation of food, access to coolers and ice and water for washing preparation surfaces. Our Ubon partners attest to how much the community has benefitted from the initiative. In fact, we witnessed firsthand that Ubon has become one of the cleanest cities in Thailand.

From municipal partners to lasting friendships

Through FCM, the City of Fredericton began working with Ubon Ratchathani, Thailand in 1999. The first assessment mission consisted of two elected officials, a Professor from the University of New Brunswick and a senior staff member of the City of Fredericton. Following this, a Thai delegation visited Fredericton. Strategic Planning and information technology (IT) planning were identified as topics of mutual interest. I first traveled to Ubon Ratchathani in the winter of 2000. As the City of Fredericton's then IT Manager, my role was to help forge and guide implementation of an

IT Tactical Plan for the City of Ubon. Strategic Planning included discussions about Infrastructure and Asset Management, Recreation and Community Development, Organizational Effectiveness and Gender Equity. Over the years, I would return to Thailand many times, first as IT Manager and later to assist with mission management overall.

In March 2017, I had the opportunity to visit Ubon one more time while on vacation in Asia. As I compared today's Ubon to the place I first visited seventeen years ago, I am struck by how this city in north eastern Thailand has developed and prospered. I was overjoyed to reunite with many of my old friends. Some still work with the municipal government, others have moved to the private sector and some have since retired. Taking advantage of the opportunity to see my old Thai friends, I asked them to share their views about the partnership we have entertained together. I chatted with each person one-on-one, and then we discussed together as a group.

As we gathered around a table of food and refreshments, I wasn't alone in reflecting on the fact that we have worked together to make a difference. People spoke of tangible work outcomes and personal outcomes.

What it means to build capacities

When reflecting on what the partnership has brought to the Ubon City organization, a reoccurring theme was capacity building of program participants, their staff and colleagues, followed by how this improved the effectiveness of their organization to deliver services to local residents.

One of my Thai colleagues spoke of his experience as going "Back to the Future". He explained that this was true of his visits to Canada and his observations of the City of Fredericton's delivery of internal and customer facing services, but it was also true of his observation of how the Canadian participants did their work, facilitated group discussions, planned and managed their work in a more methodical and structured style than he had been used to. Over the course of a few visits, he explained that he and his colleagues developed a clear picture of what their organization would quickly become as they prepared to adopt a work culture of planning and continuous improvement.

Another spoke of how he came to understand and value long-term planning and project management. He remembered vividly discussions we had 15 years ago about how "a plan is like a map, helping us find the shortest path to our destination".

Many credited the program and our working together with the development of their organization's vision and mission, strategic plan, SWOT analysis and eventual reorganization of their common internal "Shared Services". We recalled how IT started in Ubon, with only a part-time person with

a computer under his desk and 10 other computers peppered throughout the Engineering department. E-mail was non-existent. Internet access was slow as molasses.

Today, the vision/mission plaque still displays proudly and prominently in Ubon's City Hall. Customer facing services are managed and delivered efficiently. The IT Department consists of 10 proud professionals and one diligent Manager. Operational plans are clear and transparent. Systems are robust and reliable.

Everyone benefits

The conversation with Thai colleagues also turned to what our collaboration meant to each of us personally. We spoke about how we came to see our similarities more than our differences.

I shared that during my first visit I was overwhelmed by the heat, the smells and the food. When I looked around, it seemed that everything was different from back home. Our Thai friends recalled how they were nervous about their first visit to Canada. Would they be safe, would they be well received? What would the food be like? What would Fredericton be like? I shared how I and my Canadian colleagues wondered about the same sorts of things prior to our first trip to Thailand. How Thailand seemed so very different, foreign and strange at first. We marveled at how quickly our differences seemed to fade away as we got to know each other and to trust each other. Getting together nearly twenty years later, we speak of family, of careers, of hobbies and in some cases of health issues and even of loss of mutual friends. Many spoke of the skills they acquired or improved, such as meeting facilitation and public speaking. We laughed about our clumsy early struggles with communication, despite our efforts to learn basic Thai with the help of Thai students attending the University of New Brunswick back home. We recalled how our early conversations about strategic planning brought scepticism and worry for our Thai colleagues. We remembered someone saying "How can we develop a five year plan if we don't even know what will happen tomorrow?"

Clumsiness and scepticism soon turned to trust, communications became fun and less guarded. Soon we were learning from each other and developing our capabilities and skills in ways neither team would have imagined. Leadership, facilitation, discussion and consensus building became easier and more natural. Some spoke of personal confidence building, motivation and self-awareness. A young Thai lady who started working with us as a junior clerk is now Manager of Tourism and Recreation. A young gentleman who first joined our team as a junior IT technician is now Ubon's IT Manager. Both spoke of how the skills and experience they acquired helped them advance their careers.

All spoke of relationships, friendships, cultural awareness and mutual respect.

MUNICIPAL PARTNERSHIPS: INSIGHTS ON DOING IT RIGHT

Right from the start our team at the City of Fredericton knew it wanted to make the most of this opportunity. In order to make sure this happened, careful attention was placed on assembling a strong and highly motivated team. To be offered the opportunity to participate in this was a privilege. Prospective team members needed to have the right combination of technical expertise, motivation and attitude. Expectations were set to a high standard. Fredericton participants would be expected to invest their personal time to learn about the history, culture and political structure of Thailand. Thai students at our local University were invited to provide Thai language training so that we might be able to communicate with our partners on at least a basic level.

Participants from Fredericton and Ubon Ratchathani seemed to instinctively understand that a sustainable and productive partnership would need a solid footing of trust and mutual respect. Early meetings were focused on getting to know each other and building friendships. Only then would we be able to openly discuss our strengths and weaknesses. By openly stating our interests, discussing our respective expectations and acknowledging the limitations of the types of commitments we were able to make to each other, we were able to define a clear scope and realistic project plan for our newly established partnership. The partnership would be about knowledge sharing and capacity building, rather than providing tractors and financial aid.

Building mutual understanding and relationship, before seeking to change things

In 2000, delegates from Ubon traveled to Fredericton for 10 days and met with City officials and senior staff to tour Fredericton facilities and learn more about how we delivered municipal programs and managed service delivery. Then, in early 2001, I was part of a Fredericton delegation that travelled to Ubon Ratchathani for a two-week mission. There, we met with the Council and University officials. We toured various facilities and City operations and met senior staff responsible for operations and service delivery.

It was soon evident to everyone that the match was an excellent one. A number of similarities were obvious. Both are the capital cities of their respective provinces and each is a University town. Both are relatively small cities, far from the economic engines of Bangkok and Toronto. Ubon Ratchathani is a provincial capital in Northern Thailand, with a population of about 100,000 people. Fredericton is situated on the Saint John River and Ubon, on the Mun River. Neither of our cities is on the main tourist routes. It was also apparent to all involved that, in their respective



context, both cities enjoyed modern infrastructure and both provided a good level of service to their residents. The key difference between Fredericton and Ubon Ratchathani was found to be in the areas of Strategic Planning and Information Technology planning and operations. The first study visit and technical assistance missions also provided us the opportunity to get to know each other. That first year of establishing relationships and building mutual trust and respect was the foundation that enabled us to have a productive discussion on how we could collaborate. We worked hard all day exploring ideas and building the roadmap for a successful capacity building partnership. After hours we hosted our guests, socialized and showed each other the best our respective communities had to offer. In Canada, we played ball hockey and went camping at family cottages. In Ubon, we went on road trips, visited parks, played badminton, went to markets and fairs. We ate together, traveled together, played together and got to know each other.

From the very beginning, all those involved agreed all together that it is people who make things happen. In order for a group to become a winning team, individuals must understand and respect each other. Only then can the team be successful at tackling the challenges before them.

Over the next 10 years and a number of back and forth visits, Fredericton would help Ubon adopt a culture of planning as witnessed by the development and implementation of a Municipal Strategic Plan and an IT Tactical Plan. Early on in the partnership, Team Fredericton also suggested that Ubon may want to leverage expertise found at the University of Ubon (UBU). In Fredericton, collaboration with the University was commonplace. It was a model that had served us well. In Ubon Ratchathani, until then, there hadn't been much interaction between the university and the municipality. UBU was happy to offer resources and expertise. The partnering protocol set the stage for a new level of interaction between Ubon and UBU that continues to this day.

CONCLUSION: MUNICIPAL COOPERATION IS A TWO-WAY STREET

The Fredericton – Ubon Ratchathani partnership has produced a great number of benefits for both organizations. The Fredericton delegation observed how Ubon delivered effective, but low cost service delivery by leveraging community stakeholders and volunteers. We witnessed how some of our Thai colleagues managed community engagement. I remember being impressed at how well they managed teamwork and collaboration across departmental lines. Ubon learned to become more comfortable using group facilitation techniques. Fredericton sometimes took for granted. In time, Ubon witnessed the value of long-term strategic planning, operation planning as well realizing the benefits of reaching out to local expertise such as that found at their local university.

The FCM's Municipal Partnering Program is a major support tool. The partnering of Fredericton with Ubon Ratchathani is a good example of the benefits to both communities of a successful partnership. Ongoing community relationships have emerged from the partnership. UBU is now actively involved in various municipal endeavours in Ubon Ratchathani, offering their assistance and expertise. Similar relationships have also developed with the Chambers of Commerce, Economic Development and Tourism associations.

Despite the obvious differences in geography, climate and culture, municipalities around the world offer many of the same services to their residents. Building and maintaining roads, providing potable water and waste water services, offering fitness and recreation opportunities, and encouraging economic development through land use planning and tourism are common across geography and culture. We also share the responsibility of engaging and consulting citizens, residents and visitors and collaborating with stakeholders and community leaders to ensure municipal services meet their requirements and needs.

Municipalities with huge cultural differences from across the globe can help each other by contributing their time, abilities and experiences to collaborate and find solutions to their... surprisingly similar problems!

A CHEAT-SHEET TO BUILD A STRONG AND PRODUCTIVE MUNICIPAL PARTNERSHIP

1. Recruit and build a strong and highly motivated team, with the right combination of technical expertise, motivation and attitude.
2. Be deliberate and clear about what each municipality wants to get out of their involvement in the partnership project.
3. Identify the similarities — partner municipalities that have similar characteristics (size, geographic features, urban/rural, economic base, universities, etc.) have more in common!
4. Take time to build a strong foundation based on trust and mutual respect.
5. Set expectations to a high standard.
6. Be open to share both your strengths and your weaknesses.
7. Define a clear scope for the project and a realistic plan to achieve them.
8. Remain flexible.



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