

Throwing Out the Rule Book: Policy Development for the “New Normal”

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At the Economic Developers Council of Ontario 2021 annual conference “EvolveOn”, Fuad Gure and Dimitrios Kagialaris, students in the post-graduate Public Administration Program at Seneca College, summarized the workshop entitled “Throwing Out the Rule Book: Policy Development for the ‘New Normal’”. Moderated by Laura Thompson, Senior Manager, Business Development at the City of Orillia. The guest speakers were Ashleigh Weeden, Rob Adams, and Tom Kaszas.

Abstract

COVID-19 changed the dynamics of what is considered proper form in terms of the relationship between government, business owners and the average citizen. New and improved ways of delivering policy frameworks are developing at a surprisingly rapid pace. Governments now understand adaptability is of the utmost importance to ensure the survival of entire communities, businesses, and institutions. Throwing Out the Rule Book: Policy Development for the ‘New Normal’, was a joint presentation by three industry experts providing their insights on creating innovative policies during the pandemic.

Ashleigh Weeden, a self-described rural futurist and expert in rural development policy, discussed some of the challenges and solutions that rural communities face. Rob Adams, the CAO of Whitchurch-Stouffville, highlights how his municipality adapted to the pandemic and how it succeeded. Tom Kaszas is the director of The Red Tape Policy and Business Relief Branch in the Ministry of Economic Development; he provides insight into provincial government bureaucracy during the pandemic.

Keywords: *Policy Development, Economic Development, COVID-19, Rural Communities, Red Tape, Frameworks, Regulations, Rulebooks, Adaptability, Tackling the Barrier, Job Site Challenge, Accelerating Industrial Approvals Working Group, BIA.*

Introduction

Examining pre-COVID policy development was straightforward because it existed within a set framework that was to be followed closely with occasional policies considered creative or visionary. This strict outlined formula had a profound effect on business leaders because they tried to operate within this framework to the detriment of their plans and goals.

The effect of such a framework was an increase in red tape, stagnation, and delays in both policy development and economic development in the process.

With the advent of COVID-19, this dynamic surprisingly changed for the better despite the overall health concerns. Policy development is no longer static and now has the impetus to meet present conditions and prepare for a post-COVID world. The three

presenters at EDCO each provide a different perspective on one unique aspect of policy and economic development and how they adapted or changed entirely in response.

1) Throwing Out the Rule Book: Policy Development for the ‘New Normal’ by Ashleigh Weeden, Rural Futurist

Ashleigh Weeden is a Ph.D. candidate from the University of Guelph, specializing in environmental design and rural development. Her presentation focused on the economic hardship and adaptability of rural communities; she also provides solutions to solve a few more pressing issues. Despite this narrowed focus, Weeden gives an overall analysis on why economic development frameworks of the past failed and changed. She argued that economic development was not ideal because there was a tendency to favour growth over the consideration of other socio-economic factors.

Due to this focus on growth, Weeden argues that there is a disconnect between the public record and reality. This disconnect reverberates more strongly in smaller communities because it creates a sense of apathy and lack of engagement with the “social contract” and government initiatives. Rural communities believe the government is always trying to urbanize them in place of their unique concerns.

According to Weeden, diversity and change in these communities must be meaningful instead of appropriating social movements in a half-hearted, hollow manner. The solution to these broad issues for Weeden is to create community-based responses that plan for the future rather than being reactionary. There should also be a focus away from the narrative that residents in smaller communities are perpetually resistant to whatever befalls them.

Rural communities must create more avenues for development beyond tourism and, for this to happen, there must be the involvement of many actors. Weeden ended the presentation by providing successful examples of transformative projects and communities, such as the Island Revival Declaration and the Indigenomics Institute. Referring to the shifting ideas about economic development, Weeden concluded with the statement, “We must choose the future we want”.

2) “The Redeployment of Municipal Staff to Support Economic Development During COVID-19” by Rob Adams, Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville.

Rob Adams’ presentation highlighted how the Town dealt with the closures, disruptions, along with the effects on economic development caused by COVID-19; and how staff redeployment was implemented to continue providing support to the public.

On March 13, 2020, the Town closed all facilities and, a few days later, on March 17, the Premier declared a state of emergency. As a result, many economic activities were interrupted or stopped altogether, and the Town could not fulfill its duties. They had to start thinking outside the box.

One of the first moves was to convert the *On the Road* magazine, a business and tourism-oriented community newspaper, from paper to an online format. In that way, they were able to keep communication alive. Additionally, they decided to launch a project to identify the service gaps they faced due to the closures. Based on these results, they proceeded to redeploy four staff members. The next step was a new website, L4A.ca EVERYTHING Stouffville, where all the downtown businesses posted their information. This new portal connected the residents with local businesses and simultaneously served as a hub for activities in Stouffville, such as birdwatching, a virtual museum, or story reading during Christmastime. One of the greatest successes of the initiative was the virtual farmer's market. Since the physical one had to close, customers could use the website to make their purchases. Gradually, the website turned into a virtual marketplace where customers could support *all* local businesses.

Closing his presentation, Rob Adams concluded that what led to innovation was a risk-taking, creative response to a disruptive crisis.

3) “Small Business and Red Tape Reduction” by Tom Kuzas, Director at Red Tape Policy and Business Relief Branch

The third presenter was Tom Kuzas from the Ministry of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade. His presentation focused on the Ontario government's efforts to support small businesses by reducing red tape (i.e. regulatory restrictions that hinder development). According to Mercatus Center, Ontario has the second highest number of regulatory barriers in Canada. Also, businesses say that one of the main factors hindering investment is costly and burdensome regulations.

The government so far saved \$331 million per year for businesses in regulatory costs and reduced regulatory compliance requirements by 4.2%. Next, Tom Kuzas presented the structure of his branch, which has three units. The first unit is externally based, working with stakeholders to identify and resolve issues based on reports. The other two are internally based; they work with other ministries and the legislature to create and implement the required policies. The results of this work include seven burden reduction packages with over 200 items in changes in legislation, regulations, and policy.

One of his office's responses to COVID-19 is the Tackling the Barrier web portal, where businesses can request a temporary rule or regulation change. So far, 1300 submissions were received, and some temporary exemptions suggested through the portal were made permanent. Another online tool is the Job Site Challenge, a partnership opportunity where the Ontario government provides valuable services to help make sites attractive to prospective investors.

The final tool presented was the Accelerating Industrial Approvals Working Group. In his closing comments, Tom Kuzas called on the audience to get involved by reporting red tape affecting businesses or suggesting actions to address barriers to reopening from COVID-19 restrictions.

4) Question and Answer Session

During the question-and-answer period:

- Tom Kuzas confirmed that his office only works with the federal and municipal government when common interests align.
- Ashleigh Weeden suggested that diversification be at the centre of rural development.
- Rob Adams affirmed that the Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville collaborates with the local BIA.

Conclusion

The three presentations differed in tone and style but shared a common theme: how to think outside the box and throw out the rule book. This mindset shows our communities what resilience is and how they can overcome significant difficulties and disruptions in times of crisis. All three presenters proved that this is an attainable goal by providing real success stories and how they became achievable by not following the rule book. The lesson to be learned is that the rule book can sometimes be a hindrance that disrupts progress and development, instead of a guiding tool, and should be taken with a grain of salt.