

Common Ground – Aboriginal Relationship Agreement Framework

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Background:

In 2006, following the successful implementation of Edmonton's Urban Aboriginal Accord (www.edmonton.ca/aboriginalaccord), the ANFCA actively engaged discussions with City of Edmonton political leaders and administration in an effort to better understand the processes involved in this outstanding accomplishment. Mr. Lewis Cardinal, a well-known Aboriginal community leader who played an instrumental role in the creation of the Edmonton Urban Aboriginal Accord, was retained by the ANFCA to assist in the development of a provincial process that would encourage the same benefits of understanding, acceptance and increased inclusion afforded to rural and remote Alberta-based communities.

Initial discussions with the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association (AUMA) (www.auma.ca) led to the identification of a common goal and desire to see Alberta communities strengthened through increased capacity, understanding and inclusion. In September 2007, the ANFCA and AUMA signed a historic agreement that would unite the organizations to this end. The AUMA/ANFCA Agreement of Understanding and Cooperation (see link) set out the foundation of what is anticipated to be the first of many such agreements that will see diverse groups and people join together for the betterment of all. From these humble beginnings, the Common Ground - Aboriginal Relationship Agreement Framework was launched.

With a clear understanding that each Aboriginal and municipal community is distinct both in character and in community need, the concept to develop a series of processes which could be implemented with support by local Aboriginal Community Development specialists was soon realized and built on. After 12 months of foundational work on the Common Ground process in 2008, the strategy has been refined and expanded to include recognized certification of Aboriginal Community Development Officers to lead the way in establishing and promoting community dialogues and relationship agreements.

Vision:

To engage local communities through culturally appropriate processes to create strong, inclusive communities where mutual understanding and collaboration between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal residents is improved and the capacity of communities to respond to local needs is enhanced.

Goals and Strategies:

Create support mechanisms to employ regionally based Aboriginal Community Development Officers with a solid understanding of cultural practices and protocols to actively engage community-based Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal stakeholders to develop viable working

relationships or agreements designed to respond to local community needs and based on guiding principles including respect, acceptance, understanding, and appreciation.

Develop and provide tools and resources to the community and recommend improved ways to renew current working partnerships and relationships through the creation and sharing of a Common Ground Toolkit with clearly defined approaches, processes and strategies to affect culturally appropriate community engagement and development;

Empower local communities through processes focusing on respecting and understanding each other, and offer options for working together to achieve greater community unity and strength;

Raise awareness about common community challenges and opportunities through community engagement, dialogues and forums;

Determine how the municipality and other community stakeholders can work collaboratively with Aboriginal people and groups in tackling critical needs and areas of concern.

Project Description:

Common Ground is relatively speaking a simple concept built on relationship building from traditional Aboriginal perspectives, customs and processes. The concept itself is old in nature yet innovative in approach. No such relationship building framework exists in Alberta, or North America for that matter. From a simple concept to the development of the complex and sensitive processes that form the action steps and engagement, Common Ground holds much promise to improve the lives of countless segments of the population who unfortunately continue to be marginalized by mainstream society.

Common Ground is a place of meeting where all community members are valued as being equal and part of a community-based solution that promotes inclusiveness and sustainable development.

Common Ground is based on a community engagement approach and is part of an ongoing effort to create and foster local relationships that will result in positive and meaningful impacts for those within the region. Common Ground will encourage and support the development of community-based partnerships that will enhance the capacity of communities to improve the quality of life of their members, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal.

A foundational element of this community driven process is the tradition of the Circle of Life and Learning. Rooted in holistic tradition, the Circle model will outline the process for the development and implementation of Common Ground. Based on four sectors of the Medicine Wheel and drawing on the four phases of a basic collaboration model, the Common Ground community process includes the following phases:

1. Listening/Exploring Issues
2. Learning/Discovering Common Ground
3. Planning/Creating Options
4. Doing/Committing to Agreements

From Mar. 2009 to Mar. 2010 the ANFCA will complete the Common Ground process in the four pilot communities of High Prairie, Red Deer, Rocky Mountain House, and Slave Lake, including:

- Hiring Aboriginal Community Development Officers (ACDO's);
- Providing certified training for ACDO's;
- Establishing community-based steering committees;
- Producing a quarterly Common Ground Newsletter;
- Planning and coordinating community dialogues and forums;
- Recording and publishing results of community dialogues and forums;
- Developing community action plans;
- Creating relationship agreements;
- Designing and distributing a Common Ground Community Facilitator's Toolkit;
- Performing evaluations of the Common Ground process

Funding Partners:

Major funding for the 2009-2010 phase of Common Ground has been provided by Rural Alberta's Development Fund in the amount of \$272,330 (www.ruralalbertasfund.com); an additional \$40,000 has been generously provided by Alberta Aboriginal Relations (www.aboriginal.alberta.ca).

Initial funding support for Common Ground was provided by the Federal Office of the Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians and Alberta Aboriginal Relations, allowing preliminary work to take place since mid-2007.

Project Partners:

The Alberta Native Friendship Centres Association (ANFCA) and the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association (AUMA) (www.auma.ca) signed an *Agreement of Understanding and Cooperation* (<http://www.anfca.com/docs/news/mou%20auma.pdf>) in September, 2007. The main objective of the agreement is to facilitate understanding and cooperation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Albertans specifically at the municipal level. Under this agreement:

The ANFCA will:

- Act as the main contact for the local Aboriginal community facilitators who lead the initiative in the community;

- Provide training to Aboriginal community facilitators and municipal representatives, offer culturally relevant resources, and provide overall guidance and direction for concept implementation; and,
- Act as a fiscal agent and manager of the delivery of the project.

AUMA will:

- Act as a main contact for municipal partners and representatives;
- Provide advice, guidance and relevant information regarding municipal governments; and,
- Offer additional resources and relevant research materials.

Strategic Direction:

The direction of the project is monitored and guided by three distinct groups:

The **ANFCA Board of Directors** for overall endorsement of the process and community engagement;

The **Provincial Elders' Wisdom Circle** ensures cultural guidance and direction of the project;

The **Common Ground Steering Committee** provides strategic direction to the project, and ensures transparency and collaboration according to a standard Terms of Reference. The Common Ground Steering Committee is comprised of dedicated professionals from across Alberta including:

- Charlene Ball, Common Ground Project Coordinator
- Lewis Cardinal, President, Indigenous Media Institute, and Aboriginal Community Consultant, Edmonton
- Lucille Cook, Executive Director, Slave Lake Native Friendship Centre
- Valerie Findlay, Executive Director, Edson Native Friendship Centre
- Sheralle Graystone, Executive Director, Red Deer Native Friendship Society
- Nelson Mayer, ANFCA Executive Director
- Donna Webster, Executive Director, Lac La Biche Canadian Native Friendship Centre
- Sue Welke, Alberta Urban Municipalities Association (AUMA)