



## SMALL BUT MIGHTY: BUILDING NETWORKS, SHARING WISDOM, AND IGNITING PASSION IN ASSET MANAGEMENT

### Case Study: Learning Communities

#### OVERVIEW

In collaboration with the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) MAMP Partners' Program, the partnership of Alberta Municipalities (ABMunis), Rural Municipalities of Alberta (RMA), and Infrastructure Asset Management Alberta (IAMA) initiated a series of Small Group Learning Communities (SGLCs) which were delivered between February 2023 and February 2024. Participants were asked to self-select into small groups gathered under three themes, "Asset Management Has No Dumb Questions," "Teamwork Makes the Dream Work," and "The Great Software Debate," which would remain consistent throughout the workshop sessions.

These sessions provided a platform for municipalities to learn from each other, collaborate, and share experiences in asset management. Delivery methods included large group discussions, individual learning community discussions, and virtual check-ins between workshops to maintain relationships. A learning community worksheet was developed to support participants in recording their learnings, identifying useful resources, and remembering who they spoke with for follow up in the future.

#### THE BENEFITS

As a part of this program, Beth Thola from Red Deer County, Candace Clark from Woodlands County, and Curtis Hoffman from the Town of Innisfail engaged in the learning communities, which were facilitated by Urban Systems. Here are the key benefits from their experience:



##### EXPANDING HORIZONS AND LEARNING TOGETHER:

Many municipalities are working on improving their asset management capacity and processes; the small group learning communities provided a platform for participants to expand their horizons and learn from one another.

Collaboration between municipalities accelerates individual programs by sharing approaches, learnings, and best practices, all of which were emphasized by Beth Thola during the interview, *"Through collaboration with your peers, good things come. You'll find solutions to problems, expand your network, and realize you're not alone in facing challenges."*



##### FACILITATION AS A KEY INGREDIENT:

The success of the learning communities was attributed to effective facilitation. Facilitators played a crucial role in guiding discussions and ensuring a positive learning environment.

Beth also expanded here, *"Facilitators made sense of the cohort's ideas/brainstorming as it was happening. The facilitators organized the group's collective thoughts, clarified objectives, and helped formulate strategies for advancement."*



### INVESTING IN PEOPLE FOR EFFECTIVE ASSET MANAGEMENT:

While many communities invest in tools and systems for asset management, the key message emphasized that ongoing, sustained investment in people, skills, and networks is essential for continued improvement in asset management implementation.



### SAFE AND WELCOMING PLACE FOR BUILDING NETWORKS:

The learning communities provided a safe and welcoming space for people to build their asset management network, regardless of their level of experience.

Said Curtis Hoffman of the experience, *“I really enjoyed spending time with the people that I met. Everyone was very respectful, open, honest, and forthcoming within the group.”* Participants also greatly appreciated hearing about works-in-progress alongside final products.



### ENDURING RELATIONSHIPS:

The relationships built during the learning communities endured, with many participants keeping in touch and regional sub-groups emerging based on common interests.

Candace Clark shared that as participants, *“You become very comfortable with the group you’re in. As you become more comfortable, those relationships continue to grow. As a whole, the AM group is pretty close-knit, those relationships will continue to grow.”*



For municipalities contemplating future participation in cohorts, the advice from experienced participants is encouraging.

Candace Clark emphasizes the importance of learning from others and overcoming the initial challenges, stating, *“Lots of municipalities don’t know where to start – coming to a conference doesn’t necessarily help you piece together how things work. Cohorts spell out the way of ‘Start here! Ask these questions!’ – come and talk to folks and see what worked for them or didn’t work for them, and then take on your own journey. In my opinion, this facilitated cohort is equally as beneficial as attending the conference.”*

Beth Thola echoes the sentiment, urging municipalities to embrace the opportunity, *“Just do it! Embrace the opportunity, and you’ll reap the rewards of shared knowledge and collective support.”*

While also enthusiastic about the cohort process, the advice from Curtis Hoffman was a bit more practical, *“Come prepared. Have a good working knowledge of where you are at with your asset management maturity. The conversation moves around quickly and sometimes shifts topics very organically. It’s good to refresh your knowledge of your asset management plans, TCA, GIS, 10-year capital, etc. before coming into the meeting. You’ll get more out of and have much more to provide to the conversation.”*

The consensus among participants is clear – the cohorts offer a unique platform for shared knowledge, collective support, and a supportive community that transcends challenges, making the investment in participation worthwhile for any municipality seeking to enhance their asset management practices.