

CASE 18: THE GOOD OLD BOY SYNDROME

The Story

The town of Kilmarnock is undergoing a dramatic change:

- Three of its key industries are scheduled to close in the next six months;
- The town's infrastructure is in serious disrepair;
- Old businesses are closing their doors and new ones are reluctant to open;
- The town is fast becoming a bedroom community for a larger city close by, with a new, young and relatively well-off group of people taking up residence in the town;
- Town staff are retiring en mass, since they all belong to the same age group.

Meanwhile, the town's municipal leaders, i.e. the mayor and councilors continue to be elected, year after year, by a small majority of the some 50% of voters who show up to the polls on Election Day. The political level of the town has failed in many respects:

- It proved incapable of taking action when presented with clear and viable options for salvaging or replacing the businesses that were closing down;
- It has sustained a high level of business taxes in a municipal economy that can't afford it;
- It has moved down town shopping to the box stores situation on the town's outskirts by installing meters and allowing parking officials to exceed their authority in the levying of tickets and fines;
- It has steadfastly refused to prepare a change plan for the town to respond to the challenges its population is facing;
- It has proven to be less than active in making representations to the province on the plight of the town and taking advantage of available funding.

The Intervention

Intervention in the democratic process is not for the faint of heart. However, the local Chamber of Commerce or Business Owners Association has a role to play in bringing change to the town of Kilmarnock. It can, without undue criticism of the current administration, gradually assume a needed leadership role:

- Prepare its own change strategy for the town, and involve its citizenry;
- Make those councillors who are interested in change part of the process;
- Make its position known with facts and arguments in support;

- Consult with provincial officials on programs that can assist the town;
- Groom their own candidates for positions on Council.