

# Our region should strive to be an innovation capital

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When great minds think alike there is a "tipping point" of collaboration, to borrow a phrase from Elmira native Malcolm Gladwell, and a people can leap forward in their social progress.

Two hundred years ago it was William Wilberforce, whose 20-year efforts in the British Parliament led to the abolition of his country's slave trade -- but it still took a collective awakening to end this injustice.

In western industrial societies our social evolution has not kept pace with our technological revolutions.

In Waterloo Region we continue to make great technological leaps, and are also blessed with many visionary social institutions and networks, all of which are moving our region from better to best.

I say yes to the goal of becoming the knowledge capital of Canada, yet I submit that we should strive even more so to become an innovation capital as this encompasses more fully the equally important opportunities for social development in our area. We are already known as social pioneers with the use of mediation in the community through agencies such as Community Justice Initiatives, and the Social Purchasing Portal to buy goods and services that has the bonus of helping social agencies.

Here are my suggested 10 goals for our region towards becoming an innovation capital.

First, let's emphasize continuous improvement. Leverage the power of the Internet to capture and share ideas from all sectors and ages for community projects through a permanent suggestion box. Local and provincial governments would support selective projects with grants. Local governments would also have mayors' and chairs' mailboxes so citizens would have a direct line to suggest ways to improve these institutions and services.

The Oktoberfest celebration is a great example of a past "grand idea."

This suggestion box could enhance and connect the community like never before. Just imagine an exchange of students or families to each other's homes in different cities and municipalities as a low cost way to get to know our regional neighbours.

Second, we should develop further strategic advantages in our educational institutions. Let's become specialists in the disciplines of knowledge management, project management, multimedia, and innovation in general.

Third, create a knowledge portal for local and regional government available to all for sharing of best practices, and create communities of practice to enhance communication across disciplines within the region, such as planning, emergency services and hydro.

Fourth, pilot options for collaboration in municipal government services across the region with built-in review periods.

Fifth, help foster "art clusters" in the downtowns of our cities with incentives and advertising.

Sixth, create public idea/testing labs. Leverage existing libraries and community centres to engage the creativity of the public as proud members of an innovation capital that would be privileged to be part of the innovation and knowledge loop.

Seventh, make regional "smart cards" available to all as a downloadable paper card that would entitle all users to discounts at regional tourist attractions, shops and local plays, events and concerts.

Eighth, the alternative dispute resolution model developed by Community Justice Initiatives should be rolled out to all regional schools and government offices to demonstrate this area's commitment to using the power of words and deeds to heal and improve relationships.

Ninth, seek support for the Social Purchasing Portal from all sectors to demonstrate the value and power of enabling the self-help model.

And tenth, pilot a new model of health care within the universal health-care system with qualified immigrant doctors, nurses and others being given opportunities to prove themselves as apprentices in the health-care field -- as well as expanding the model of e-health to share expertise and services to medically under-served areas.

I believe Waterloo Region is on the cusp of this kind of convergence of intellectual and community development for all its citizens, and is able to provide a template for other communities.

We need forward thinking individuals who are able to envision and build this region into the innovation and knowledge capital it deserves to be.

To ensure that our success as an innovation capital is long-lasting, it is essential that leaders from business, arts, technology, non-profit groups and education

work even more closely together.

If we are successful our community could become a model of intellectual and community development and a template for success in other communities. Then we will have earned our title as innovation capital.

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