

Program Excellence Award for Innovations in Local Government Management

POPULATIONS OF 50,000 AND UNDER



SIMON FARBROTHER

A second Program Excellence Award for Innovations in Local Government Management in the 50,000-and-under population category is awarded to the city of Spruce Grove, Alberta, Canada, and City Manager Simon Farbrother for the city's success in changing the town council's role in governance and policy making.

Imagine a city where a secretary presents the city's new waste management initiatives to schools. Where staff create a model and plan to test flex-time scheduling. Where the public says "Yes!" to a raise in taxes to help build a new \$28 million tri-municipal recreation facility. This is the city of Spruce Grove, Canada (pop. 15,069) today.

Just a few years ago, Spruce Grove was limited in its ability to innovate or change. The corporate culture was unfocused and lacked leadership. The council relied on a large management team for advice. There was a strong focus on day-to-day activities but little thought was given to the organization's strategic direction.

With a new chief administrative officer at the helm in 1997 and a new management team appointed shortly thereafter, the city began to change its course. To meet the challenge of providing strategic leadership with a strong focus on governance, in October 1998, the council adopted as its vision "The Community of Choice." The vision was supported by public input through a community development plan and a three-year strategic business plan that focused on 11 key initiatives.

In parallel with "The Community of Choice" initiative, city employees focused on re-engineering the Spruce Grove organization into "The Organization of Choice." Employees focused on continuous improvement, long-term sustainability of initiatives, and processes rather than programs. The initiative involved all city employees and emphasized the translation of ideas and good intentions into observable, measurable actions, behaviors, and outcomes through performance management, skill development, and sustaining leadership.

Spruce Grove management recognized that achieving these goals would require teamwork and a

willingness to change. The city's management team first developed a series of leadership principles that could be translated into observable actions. Next, with council's endorsement, employees developed a vision of what the organization should look like and then created a set of organizational guiding principles to ensure that employees could work together to achieve that vision. Each work group ascertained which principles they were already demonstrating versus those that needed to be enhanced, and employees and work groups met regularly to share strategies and successes. The city provided specific skill-building sessions to work group leaders and employees. Finally, a cross-departmental advisory group was created to plan the ongoing process and serve as a link to employees.

The performance improvement system has had clear, measurable results. Rather than getting caught up in the day-to-day details of running the city, the council now provides strategic direction for the city. As a result, the budget development process has been shortened by two months, with a 50-percent reduction in the time spent by the council in deliberations. The city's administrators now receive clear direction from council, and business plans and strategies reflect organizational priorities.

Employees are empowered. Their input is solicited and valued, and they feel engaged enough in the process to celebrate successes along the way. In a 2000 employee survey, 93 percent of respondents indicated that they felt communication within the city had improved.

While Spruce Grove today is *still* not a perfect organization, the journey continues. By providing the city organization with the tools it needs to work through challenges and changes, the council, employees, and citizens of Spruce Grove move ever closer to realizing their vision. ♣



Employees and council members of the city of Spruce Grove.