In recent years, urban planning, arts and culture, economic development, and city administration have found common ground in a raised awareness of the importance of culture to a community’s livability and prosperity. In fact, cultural vitality is increasingly referred to as one of the four pillars of sustainability, along with social equity, economic health, and environmental responsibility.1

Numerous cities across North America have begun to leverage cultural assets for attracting business, investment, and people. Smaller municipalities often have serious challenges in competing with their larger urban cousins to achieve these kinds of successes. Cultural asset mapping (CAM) is used to understand and interpret the complex interrelationships of cultural elements for use in strategic planning and economic development and is scalable for use in smaller municipalities.

CAM has been defined as: “a process of collecting, recording, analyzing, and synthesizing information in order to describe the cultural resources, networks, links, and patterns of usage of a given community or group.”2

Maps are most often understood as the indispensable tools that help us navigate our physical world. Cultural asset maps, by representing the spatial relationships between such things as artists, markets, fairgrounds, heritage sites, and buildings, help tell us about who we are, based on our unique identity, history, and cherished stories – in other words, our culture.

Cultural asset mapping begins by consolidating existing information in a consistent way. The myth is that municipalities lack information on cultural resources. The reverse is true. The problem is that information is collected by different people, for different reasons, and exists in different locations. Cultural asset mapping begins by consolidating existing information in a consistent way.3

Cultural resource information that is spatially-based allows it to be integrated into municipal projects and land use planning in a number of ways:

- Awareness and marketing – promoting culture with residents and tourists.
- Economic development – targeting or facilitating entrepreneurial investment in creative cultural industries.
- Planning and policy – informing municipal decision-making relating to land use, social planning, heritage planning, urban design, and place making.
- Networks and collaboration – facilitating partnerships with cultural groups and identifying opportunities to maximize assets.

From an Idea to a Strategy

The cultural asset management project that I’ll be describing has brought together four communities in a broad-ranging undertaking linking planning, culture, and economic development.

The towns of Collingwood, Wasaga Beach, Clearview, and Blue Mountains, are located in what’s called the “Georgian Triangle,” a geographic area that includes the UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve of the Niagara Escarpment; Wasaga Beach, the world’s longest freshwater beach (8.6 miles in length); and the waters of Georgian Bay. We are also within a 2-1/2 hours’ drive from the metropolitan Toronto area.

In many ways, our four towns share commonalities with hundreds of others across North America. Our manufacturing jobs have largely relocated with a significant shift to tourism and service based employment; and the recent years of drastic economic upheaval have had their impacts as well.

Although each town has its own unique cultural assets and sense of identity, we recognized the importance of shared relationships, and saw benefits to collaborating in cultural asset mapping.

Our multi-town CAM project also reflects priorities set out in our region’s Economic Development Strategy, which identifies the “Arts and Entertainment” sector as one of the region’s existing economic strengths, and the “Information and Culture” sector as an emerging strength. Many assets in both sectors were mapped in the project.

Data & Findings

Dr. Greg Baeker is one of Canada’s leading experts in the field of cultural resource planning.4 As he explains: “The myth is that municipalities lack information on cultural resources. The reverse is true. The problem is that information is collected by different people, for different reasons, and exists in different locations. Cultural asset mapping begins by consolidating existing information in a consistent way.”

We discovered a wealth of resources and data sets from familiar sources that

2 See the Cultural Mapping Toolkit, available at: www.creativecity.ca
3 Dr. Baeker is a Senior Consultant and Founder of AuthentiCity, the firm contracted to work on our cultural asset mapping project.
4 From Putting Culture on the Map Final Report (AuthentiCity, July 2010).
we had a high level of confidence in, for example: InfoCanada (which aggregates data from Statistics Canada [equivalent to the U.S. Census Bureau] and the Yellow Pages); tourism events; arts and culture data bases; and heritage registers.

We also included municipal and regional GIS mapping for trails and parks; heritage districts and sites; and archaeological sites; as well as cultural heritage landscape assessment maps.

Our project has included the identification of over 700 cultural assets. Each has been translated into data that can be manipulated in the regional and local geographic information systems. What is remarkable is that this only represents resource mapping and does not yet include “identity mapping” stories.

Identity mapping stories generally include three types of narratives: those that honor the past, celebrate the present, or envision the future.\(^5\)

We decided that each community would independently capture these kind of stories later. Why wait? We wanted to avoid spending time collecting things like video recordings of personal community recollections, without first having a strategy in place for how this information would be used. However, when the communities do undertake identity mapping, the results will be linked and highlighted on the project’s “Putting Culture On the Map” web site.\(^6\)

The project’s findings also describe ways that CAM information can support the growth of our creative/cultural economies, an important regional economic development priority. These include: coordination of stakeholders to pursue a shared cultural and economic agenda; building networks of innovation across disciplines; and developing connections between producers and consumers.

\(^5\) A well-designed web site that features these kinds of stories is City of Memory: A Story Map of New York (www.cityofmemory.org).

\(^6\) www.georgianbaymappingculture.com/