

Twinning in Thailand: Part 2: Fredericton and Ubon Ratchathani

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Introduction

Last month, Part I of this article provided an overview of the general structure of Thailand local government, its challenges and how Canadian municipalities can assist their Thai partners in overcoming some of their problems. Part II provides a detailed discussion of the Fredericton - Ubon Ratchathani partnership.

Fredericton and Ubon Ratchathani

The Federation of Canadian Municipalities's (FCM) selection of Fredericton and Ubon Ratchathani as potential partners was fortuitous. Both cities are located in relatively economically depressed regions (Maritimes and North-East Thailand), are roughly equal in size (Fredericton's population of 50,000+ and Ubon's 100,000), are located on major rivers (St. John River in New Brunswick and the Mun River in Thailand), house provincial capitals, universities (University of New Brunswick [UNB] and Ubon Ratchathani University [UBU]), teacher education institutions (UNB's Faculty of Education and Ubon's teacher's college), and community and vocational colleges.

While the University of New Brunswick is Canada's oldest English language university, UBU is a relatively young institution, having just completed its first decade. Both universities tend to focus on professional programs aimed at serving the economic development needs of their respective regions. Relationships between the two institutions have blossomed as a result of the municipal partnering program, with inter-university agreements being signed in Fredericton in November 2000 and in Ubon Ratchathani in February 2001.

The partnering of Fredericton and Ubon Ratchathani began in mid-1999. The partnering program was initiated by a visit of four members of the Ubon Ratchathani Council to Fredericton in November 2000. The four delegates included the Chair of the Council (as project coordinator),

and three deputy mayors (representing finance, public works, and public health and environment). During their visit, the Thai delegates met with City Council and toured municipal facilities (water treatment, pollution control, sanitary landfill, hydro power dam, hospital, fire service and so forth) as well as the city's two universities (UNB and St. Thomas). This initial and subsequent visits were supported by the translation efforts of several of UNB's Thai students. In particular, one Thai student who is a Fredericton resident and formerly from Ubon Ratchathani assisted in all the visits including the ones in Thailand as she happened to be visiting her home when the Fredericton delegation were there. The Thai students also provided language lessons to the second Fredericton delegation to Ubon Ratchathani.

In February 2001, the first Fredericton delegation travelled to Ubon Ratchathani. This delegation was comprised of the deputy-mayor, a councillor, the city engineer, and a professor from UNB (as a citizen representative).¹ FCM normally funds three people per trip, however, both Ubon Ratchathani and Fredericton supported the additional member in each delegation - reflecting the importance to them of this municipal partnering program. The Canadian delegation met with the Council, Chamber of Commerce, UBU and had tours of various facilities including water and wastewater treatment plants, elementary schools, vocational schools, hospitals, regional economic development initiatives such as a silk weaving craft factory and a rubber plantation, and participated in cultural activities (temples, immersion in a Buddhist festival, and a regional high school cheerleading competition). The Fredericton visit to Ubon Ratchathani culminated in the signing of a formal protocol agreement between the two municipalities and a cooperation agreement between UNB and UBU.

The municipal protocol outlined the activities expected from the FCM partnering program between Fredericton and Ubon Ratchathani. In the past, many of the municipal partnering programs focussed on physical infrastructure and service enhancements. In this case, it was apparent that Ubon's municipal facilities and infrastructure were modern, well equipped and provided a good level of service. The city had invested wisely in modern water treatment

facilities (rapid sand filtration), pollution control (aerated lagoon) and solid waste disposal (compacting technology) as well as taking steps to deal with their social welfare needs by creating worker cooperatives in the poorer areas, and ensuring good access to education for the children from these areas. The real need in Ubon Ratchathani is at a higher level - longer term planning and service coordination. Following discussion among the Canadian and Thai partners, the formal protocol focussed on three goals: assisting Council in developing a corporate strategic plan to define its longer term community goals and objectives, enhancing Ubon's information technology (IT) infrastructure (hardware, software and networking capabilities), and improving relations between the city and its university.

The need for longer term planning became apparent from the Council's predominant focus on the immediate future. The rapid changes being introduced by the new *Constitution Act of 1997* with its devolution of responsibilities to local communities requires a broader view on how Ubon should prepare to cope with its changing roles. The Fredericton team are able to facilitate their Thai partners in developing this corporate strategic plan, as the City of Fredericton developed and subsequently implemented a similar plan.²

During the visit to Ubon Ratchathani, it became apparent that city's IT infrastructure needed improvements. The city representatives sought Fredericton's assistance in determining appropriate hardware and software solutions along with appropriate networking systems to meet the growing needs of the municipality.

In their visit to UBU, the Fredericton delegation found little interaction between the university and the municipality. It was clear from discussions with UBU faculty that they wished to be more involved in meeting community needs. UBU offers considerable expertise that can be tapped to solve local problems. Using ongoing relationships that have developed between UNB and Fredericton, relevant examples were used to reinforce the need for and benefits from enhanced relationships between the university and the municipality. The UNB - Fredericton model of a joint Council-Universities Committee provided a process for the Thai partners to

emulate.

The protocol between UNB and UBU creates a cooperative understanding between the two institutions opening the door for future collaboration, research opportunities, and faculty and student exchanges. In particular, UBU's young faculty seek opportunities to study for higher degrees at Canadian and other institutions. UNB is well placed to assist them as it has had a long term relationship with Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, educating several of its senior faculty and other alumni in Thailand.

The partnering protocol set the stage for future interaction both between the two municipalities and the two universities. In June 2001, the initial working visit under the partnership protocol was undertaken with four Thai delegates coming to Fredericton. The delegates included a deputy mayor (responsible for education and social welfare), a councillor (Ubon's IT specialist), director of public works, and UBU's Dean of Liberal Arts.

During this longer two week visit, the initial protocol was refined, job shadowing undertaken, and specific steps initiated to assist Ubon Ratchathani in developing its strategic goals and objectives, reviewing appropriate IT strategies, and improving linkages with Ubon's institutes of higher learning. Other steps included developing relationships with New Brunswick's Department of Education to support future teacher exchanges and with UNB's Faculty of Education to assist in developing appropriate educational administration models (to help them cope with the anticipated devolution of middle and high schools to the municipality). The Thai delegation was particularly interested in how Fredericton incorporates public participation in municipal decision-making. The delegation attended council-committee meetings in which the public participated. They were briefed on steps taken to ensure community views were incorporated into Fredericton's plans, policies and programs. The Thai delegation also observed varying management styles, differing housing and welfare issues in Fredericton and other communities (Halifax and Charlottetown).

The municipal partners focussed on the key protocol elements to develop a detailed work

plan for both groups to tackle prior to the next visit to Thailand by the Fredericton working group in January 2002. The second Fredericton delegation is comprised of the city engineer (returning as coordinator to maintain continuity), the city's IT director, and a senior planner to facilitate the Ubon Ratchathani corporate strategic plan. UNB's Dean of Renaissance College (an innovative leadership degree program) is joining the delegation to identify international internship opportunities for students as well as continue to develop mutual relations between the two universities.³ This latest visit solidified Ubon's corporate strategic plan and led to several UBU faculty members applying to enroll in PhD programs at UNB as well as providing several internship opportunities for UNB students in Thailand.

Conclusion

The Fredericton - Ubon Ratchathani partnership has produced benefits for both communities by establishing mutual relationships and improving cultural comprehension. These understandings serve as a sound base to assist Ubon Ratchathani in facing the many challenges the current transformation generated by the new *Constitution Act of 1997*. On the other hand, there are many Thai activities that will help Fredericton and other Canadian municipalities cope with their changing realities. For example, there are several successful private hospitals serving alongside a major public hospital in Ubon Ratchathani - their experiences in dealing with different mechanisms for health care delivery may provide an alternative model for Canadian communities. Similarly, despite having fewer resources than equivalent sized Canadian cities, Ubon Ratchathani is a clean, well serviced community. There are many lessons awaiting the Fredericton delegation on effective but low cost service delivery, as they immerse themselves in the daily activities of this vibrant community.

Urban communities throughout the world face their many challenges with few resources. Growing population, rising service demand, pollution, evolving democracy and the subsequent

demand for participation in decision-making all challenge municipalities in developing countries. Canadian municipalities can help their colleagues by contributing their time, abilities and experiences to finding solutions to these many problems. The FCM's Municipal Partnering Program is a major support tool. The partnering of Fredericton with Ubon Ratchathani in Thailand is a good example of the benefits to both communities of a successful partnership. Ongoing community relationships have emerged from the partnership. In the Fredericton - Ubon Ratchathani case, their two universities have developed bonds to aid each other. UBU is now actively involved in various municipal endeavours in Ubon Ratchathani offering their assistance and expertise. Similar steps may evolve with respect to the Chambers of Commerce and future trade relations.

In Thailand, municipalities face considerable challenges as the government changes its social and political culture with the devolution requirements of the *Constitution Act of 1997*. Coping with the institutional challenges arising from devolution means the Thai communities partnered with Canadian municipalities will seek continued and higher level assistance. The continued support of the FCM and CIDA is crucial to helping Thailand municipalities successfully face their many challenges.

Endnotes

1. The initial Fredericton delegation included Deputy-Mayor Tommy Jellinek, Councillor Zona Bovington, City Engineer Murray Jamer, Dr. Mike Ircha, and Fredericton translator Juthathip Kruanopphakhun.
2. M.C. Ircha and R. Storey, *City of Fredericton - Corporate Strategic Plan*, Fredericton, New Brunswick, September 1995.
3. The second Fredericton delegation is comprised of City Engineer Murray Jamer, Director of IT Maurice Gallant, Senior Planner Ken Forrest, Dr. Terry Haggerty, and Juthathip

Kruanoppakhun.