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Wichitowin Circle of Shared Responsibility and Stewardship – An Example of Urban Aboriginal Governance

“Wichitowin: Circle of Shared Responsibility and Stewardship is a community-driven model of an urban governance process that is inclusive of the many Aboriginal peoples and the agencies that serve them in Edmonton.” (Wichitowin website)

The Wichitowin Circle advocates the needs of Edmonton’s Aboriginal population and unites Aboriginal people, agencies, and governments to form the steering committee for Edmonton’s Urban Aboriginal Strategy (UAS). Their vision is one of “Aboriginal communities and partners working together to improve the quality of life for Aboriginal peoples in Edmonton” with the mission to “make the best use of resources, information, and commitments to find solutions to our challenges and to create opportunities through a circle of shared responsibility” (Wichitowin 2007, 2). The foundational values for the relationships facilitated within the Circle are:

- Honesty
- Respect
- Wisdom
- Truth
- Sharing
- Honour
- Faith

The Approach

The four corner stones of the Wichitowin Circle are *relationship, agreement, celebration, and renewal*. The Circle features and encourages relationships and partnerships between governments, service organizations, and all members and entities of Edmonton’s urban Aboriginal community. Such partnerships aim to solve issues regarding service gaps, to build healthy relationships, and to achieve sustained change and improvements. These relationships and collaborations are formed in response to needs and are based on formal and informal

agreements. In order to communicate and promote change and success, contributions and achievements are celebrated at an annual gathering. “By honoring all of the values and traditions of the urban Aboriginal community and our partners we will renew our relationships, reflect and learn from past activities of the Circle, and revitalize our direction and vision” (Wicihitowin website).

The concept of Wicihitowin was born from three years of Aboriginal community dialogues and consultations which was facilitated by the Edmonton Urban Aboriginal Community Dialogue Process[from 2004 to 2007], which [in turn] was facilitated by Edmonton Aboriginal Urban Affairs Committee and the City of Edmonton with support and participation from the Edmonton Housing Trust Fund (now called Edmonton Homeward Trust), Urban Aboriginal Strategy through the Office of the Federal Interlocutor for Métis of DIAND, and the Government of Alberta through the Ministry of International, Intergovernmental, and Aboriginal Relations (now called Aboriginal Relations). (Wicihitowin website)

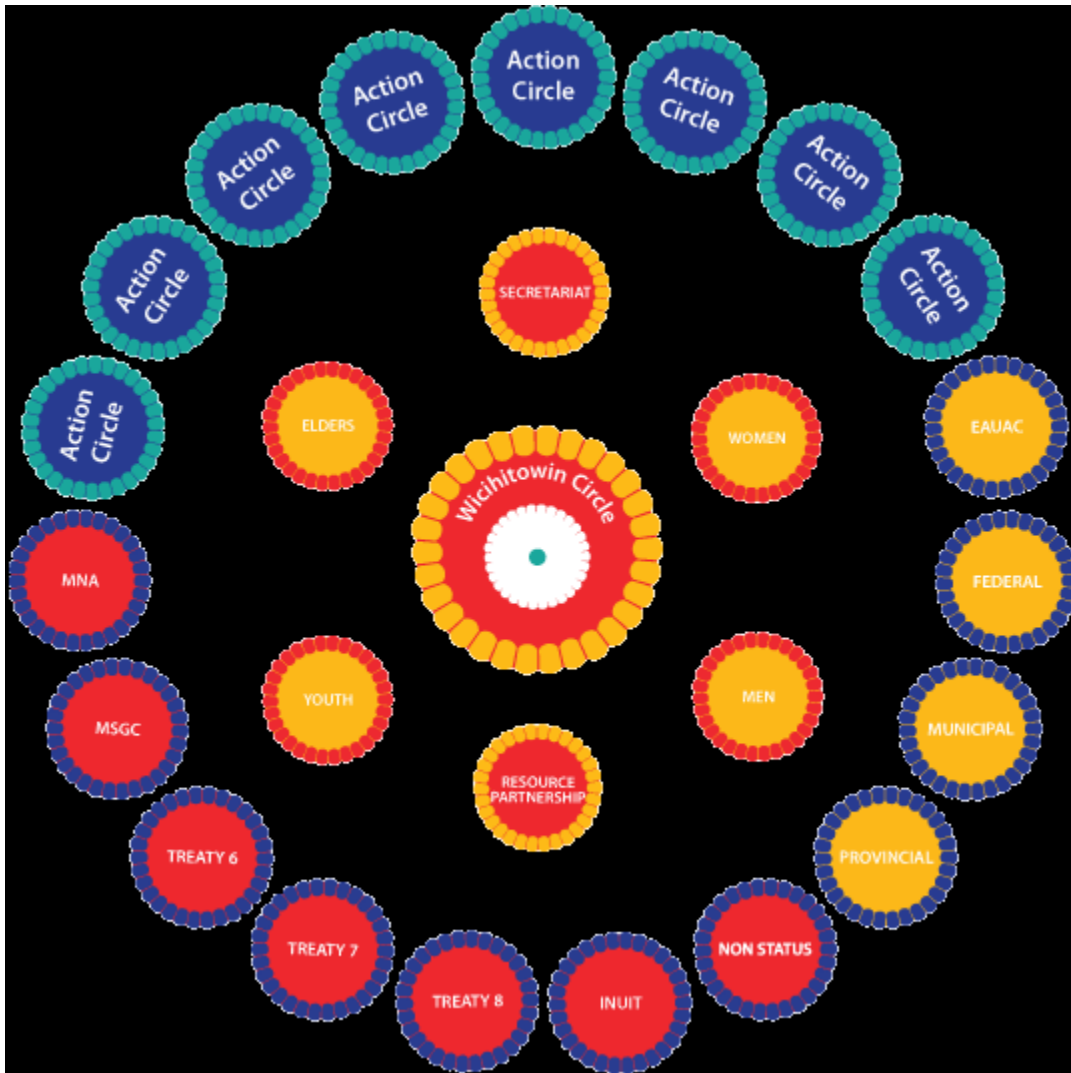
The process was guided by a Circle of Aboriginal Elders, based on community input, and featured a consensus decision-making model that is also incorporated into the Wicihitowin Circle. The urban Aboriginal community developed a preferred mode of cooperation, under which stakeholders would be able to identify and address issues and concerns. The result was an *Accord Relationship Agreement* to provide a set of principles and values for cooperation and relationship-building.

While Wicihitowin is a governance mechanism, it is not a government. In fact, when creating Wicihitowin, the Aboriginal community felt that all orders and levels of governments must work together with local community members, through Action Circles and the Circle of Shared Responsibility, to better make use of resources to deliver much needed support for priority needs in the city. Aboriginal governments along with Federal, Provincial, and Municipal governments have identified places and roles within the Wicihitowin: Circle of Shared Responsibility from which their inclusion and participation in this consensus-driven governance model is made clear. (Wicihitowin website)

Governance

The Wicihitowin Circle reflects the diversity of the Aboriginal community and provides an avenue for bringing together the various stakeholders involved in pressing issues to find common solutions. As a form of urban Aboriginal governance, the Circle does not infringe upon existing Aboriginal treaties and agreements. It encompasses numerous existing organizations, whose mandates are supported and respected.

Figure 1 Wicshitowin Circle Structure



Source: Wicshitowin website.

The *Wicshitowin Secretariat* is in charge of providing technical and administrative support in coordinating the logistics of Circle activities, including the eight Action Circles, four Community Circles, and the Collaborative Granting Process of the Ranking Committee and the Resource Partnership Circle.

The role of the *Resource Partnership Circle*, consisting of government, corporate, community, and philanthropic funding bodies, is to identify funding opportunities for projects developed by the Wicshitowin Circle. The resulting granting process is to be “open, transparent, fair, and inclusive” (Wicshitowin website). Objectives include gathering and understanding information

about the needs of Edmonton's Aboriginal people, promotion of projects in response to Aboriginal needs and priorities, and the allocation of UAS funds. This body also assists candidates with funder specific application processes. A minimum of three meetings takes place annually with an annual evaluation of the effectiveness of the collaborative granting process.

The four *Community Circles* include *Elders, Women, Men, and Youth*. All four groups are represented on each of the eight Action Circles. They provide input, guidance, and terms of reference for the matters discussed in the Action Circles. Each of the Community Circles determines one speaker.

"The *Action Circles* are year-round networking groups that improve coordination of services" by participating in all Wicihitowin Circle processes and networking, prioritizing, and communicating in order to respond to community needs in their respective areas of concern (Wicihitowin website). Members of the Action Circles include service providers, service leaders, and members of the urban Aboriginal community. Each Action Circle is to reflect the diversity of the community. Some examples of how this is achieved in the various Circles are separate or integrated Aboriginal citizen and Elder advisory groups or other community engagement processes. The eight areas represented by the Action Circles are:

- Aboriginal Education
- Aboriginal Employment & Training
- Aboriginal Health & Wellbeing
- History, Culture and Languages
- Aboriginal Housing
- Wicihitowin Justice
- Tawow Connection
- Economic Development

Four levels of *Governments* form another group of Circles. *Aboriginal, Federal, Provincial, and Municipal* governments are included as significant entities in the process of addressing indigenous concerns in Edmonton.

The Wicihitowin Circle appoints two co-chairs to preside over gatherings. Public meetings in which all Action Circles report to the community take place at least four times per year. One annual gathering functions as Annual General Meeting and celebration of partnerships and achievements.

UAED Lessons

Wicihitowin Circle provides meaningful lessons in the context of urban Aboriginal economic development. Jurisdiction is a problem for Aboriginal people in urban settings. Physical, and

sometimes personal, distance to the home community can hinder service provision of First Nations governments to their urban members. Provincial, regional, and municipal governments are not explicitly in charge of Aboriginal services. The federal government limits its responsibilities to reserve boundaries. This can leave the urban Aboriginal population in a service void. Aboriginal service providers often step in, but the lack of an umbrella organization to coordinate efforts for maximum effectiveness and efficiency can lead to fragmentation, redundancies, and gaps in services. Because the urban Aboriginal community is often a fragmented group of many origins, the establishment of an umbrella organization that provides unifying urban governance in hosting various service providers, being the point of contact for the Aboriginal community, and advocating on behalf of the people can be difficult.

A lack of coordination and point of contact not only impacts service provision, it also impedes communication, partnerships, and support networks that are necessary for economic development in particular. Whether it is an Aboriginal entrepreneur's in need of investors or business partners, the lack of information about possible supports, or an unemployed member of the Aboriginal community looking for training or employment opportunities, a coordinated go-to body facilitates all elements of economic development and economic growth.

Wicahitowin Circle is an example where the creation of an umbrella body of governance has successfully been achieved. The diversity of the Aboriginal community is respected and integrated in the structure; existing service providers and jurisdictions are valued and incorporated while maintaining their roles; and the model is based on and respects traditional governance practices, including for example respect for Elders as advisors and a consensus decision-making model.

Beyond its value as a model for other urban areas in need of a solution to Aboriginal governance and service coordination challenges, Wicahitowin Circle is an important tool for the entire Aboriginal population of the City of Edmonton. It offers avenues to individuals or groups to become active in their community or receive assistance with economic development endeavours and, in addition to technical and financial supports, it provides a vehicle for networking in the community.

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