

The Remarkable History of The Nord-Bridge Senior Citizens Association: The Friendly Centre

Developed by Robert Tarleck, January, 2016



Roy Berlando, Founding President of Nord-Bridge Senior Citizens Association

One of the remarkable facts about the Nord-Bridge Senior Citizens Association is that it ever saw the light of day, let alone that it has survived for thirty-six years. The obstacles against it were numerous and formidable.

I. An Introduction to the Nord-Bridge Story

In the spring of 1978 a handful of north Lethbridge seniors began meeting around a kitchen table to discuss how they might lay the foundation for a seniors' organization in north Lethbridge. According to some accounts, that first meeting took place in Minnie Komm's house. However, about the same time, I was invited to attend a similar meeting in Roy Berlando's kitchen for the same purpose. Regardless of where the first meeting took place, by the spring of 1978 a determined band of North Lethbridge seniors was pushing forward with an ambitious plan.

Those advocating for a north Lethbridge seniors' centre faced some formidable challenges. To begin with, Lethbridge already had a senior citizens' centre. The Lethbridge Senior Citizens Organization, or LSCO as it is known in the community, was already embedded in the city-owned Civic Centre building. LSCO had registered as a charity in 1976. Further, the Westminster Community Hall, which Nord-Bridge identified as its initial home, was barely fifteen blocks from the LSCO. When Nord-Bridge registered under the Societies Act in 1980, many citizens in the community wondered whether Lethbridge seniors really needed two senior centres in such close proximity to one another.

But the obstacles were not just geographic. They had to do with the culture and history of Lethbridge and the need to develop a unique organizational culture that would allow Nord-Bridge to complement the already-established LSCO.

Like many prairie cities, Lethbridge grew up along both sides of the Canadian Pacific Railway tracks that bisected it. Each side of town had its distinctive character, with south Lethbridge assuming the dominant role. North Lethbridge has been less-well served over the years with regard to professional, financial, retail and medical services. It is still without a single full-service medical clinic. With a population almost identical to that of south Lethbridge, North Lethbridge has typically been under-represented on boards such as City Council, the Lethbridge Public School Board and, while it existed, the Lethbridge Regional Hospital Board. North Lethbridge waited almost a hundred years before the first north-sider was elected mayor and it did not receive its first high school until 1961. Only now is it receiving its first regional park.

The principal exception to this pattern has been the Catholic School Board. The concentration of new Canadians on the north-side ensured strong representation on the Catholic School Board.

North Lethbridge was historically settled by citizens from different ethnic backgrounds who moved to the City between 1900 and the post-World War II era. While many of these new Canadians arrived with modest financial resources and limited formal education, they proved to be hard-working, skilled blue collar workers who cared about their families and their neighbourhood.

It was in this environment that a determined group of North Lethbridge residents, fewer than a hundred at the outset, dedicated themselves to building a seniors citizens centre that would reflect the values and needs of their community. In doing this, they realized from the outset that they would also have to confront serious funding challenges. While membership dues, donations and fund-raising promotions might help to pay for some of the centre's expenses, the Board clearly understood from the outset that Nord-Bridge would require financial support from all three levels of government if it were to survive. This challenge, they realized, would require them to demonstrate fiscal prudence in at least three important ways.

First, the Nord-Bridge Board realized that it must be innovative and prudent in how it delivered services and programs to its members. No part of the Nord-Bridge operation could be above scrutiny. The commitment was to achieve value for every dollar spent.

Second, it understood that if it wished to access government funding for Nord-Bridge programs and services, it would be compelled to align its objectives and goals with those of municipal, provincial, and federal governments.

And third, the Board made a firm commitment to actively pursue promising entrepreneurial opportunities. Its operation at 13th Avenue North, which incorporates a number of commercial tenants within a senior citizen centre, demonstrates this spirit.

Over the last thirty-six years, Nord-Bridge has focussed on these foundation goals, with remarkable success.

II. Important Dates in the History of a Community Organization

- Roy Berlando and other north-side seniors met in the home of Minnie Komm to organize a new seniors association for north Lethbridge. The group took up residence in the Westminster Neighbourhood Hall. **Spring, 1978**

Roy Berlando is elected as founding President. **June, 1978**
- Foundation/Incorporation date of Nord-Bridge Senior Citizens Association. **April 22, 1980**

Minnie Komm elected President. **March 4, 1981**
Shirley Saillian employed as Executive Director. **January, 1984**
Gladys Rose elected President. **March 7, 1984**
- Representatives of Nord-Bridge and the Lethbridge Senior Citizens Organization (LSCO) met to discuss a merger of the two organizations. The discussions faltered when Nord-Bridge was offered only one seat on the joint board. **April 14, 1983**
- Nord-Bridge relocated from its first home in the Westminster Neighbourhood Hall to the Bill Kergan Centre on 13th Street North. **April 4, 1984**
- Official Opening Ceremony, Bill Kergan Centre. **June 15, 1984**

Muriel Wolliscroft elected President. **March 2, 1988**
Dan Hopkinson elected President. **June, 1988**
- New wheelchair ramp for Kergan Centre officially opened. **June 7, 1988**

Hans Rothlin elected President. **March 1, 1989**
- At the urging of Board Director Gus Herresvelle, Nord-Bridge joined the Lethbridge Community Bingo Association. The first year's income totalled \$11,459. **1990**
- A bequest from the Miners' Library enabled Nord-Bridge to acquire its first van for its seniors' transportation program. **Feb. 6, 1990**

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| Leo Grismer elected President. | March 6, 1991 |
| Gus Herresvelle elected President. | March 3, 1993 |
| Jean Cook employed as Executive Director. | January, 1994 |
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| Leo Grismer elected President. | March 6, 1996 |
| Caroline Philipp employed as Executive Director. | January, 1997 |
| Viola Arkinstall elected President. | March 5, 1997 |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From reserves previously held in the Bingo Fund, the Nord-Bridge Board established a Building Fund of \$160,043. It intended this fund to be used to acquire property for Nord-Bridge and to undertake needed maintenance and improvement projects. | Dec. 31, 1998 |
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| Randy Smith employed as Executive Director | Jan. 2, 1998 |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nord-Bridge Seniors joined with the City of Lethbridge and the LSCO to co-host “Seniors 2000: Shaping our Community.” The conference was open to senior citizens and service-providers throughout the Lethbridge region. It also commemorated 1999 as “The International Year of the Older Person.” | June 11, 1999 |
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| Frank Deane elected President. | March 1, 2000 |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • President Frank Deane and Vice-President Mike Bennett presented the Nord-Bridge Business and Building Acquisition Plans to a meeting of Lethbridge City Council. Council subsequently approved a funding grant of \$505,120 and an interest-free loan of \$248,921. It also increased Nord-Bridge’s operational funding. | Sept. 20, 2000 |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nord-Bridge acquired the former Chinook Mall Building at a cost of \$875,000. Over the next twelve months the Association invested an additional \$1,031,532 for capital improvements. Some of these improvement funds were derived from grants from the City of Lethbridge and the Government of Alberta. | Jan. 1, 2001 |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nord-Bridge relocated to its present site at 1904-13 Avenue North. | July 23, 2001 |

- Nord-Bridge and the City of Lethbridge co-hosted the 2001 Alberta Senior Games. **July 24-27, 2001**

- **Mike Bennett elected President.** **March 5, 2003**

- The Lethbridge Miner’s Library Club donated the “Miner Sculpture” to Nord-Bridge. The restored sculpture was unveiled in the Nord-Bridge foyer on March 2, 2005. **Oct., 2003**

- The Community Room at the west end of Nord-Bridge Centre opened. **Sept. 7, 2004**

- Nord-Bridge and the City of Lethbridge jointly established a Senior Transportation Steering Committee, which led eventually to the Go Seniors Transportation/Shuttle Program. **2005**

- **Clay Olsen elected President.** **March 1, 2006**

- An Aboriginal Seniors Program was established within Nord-Bridge. After operating successfully for approximately one and one half years, it was terminated in late 2007 because of a lack of funding. **2006**

- Repairs to the floor of the Multi-Purpose Hall were completed. **2006**

- Nord-Bridge took delivery of its first Go Friendly Van, which it subsequently leased to the City of Lethbridge in accordance with a joint agreement. **Dec., 2007**

- A second van was ordered to meet growing demand. **July, 2008**

- With the City’s adoption of a three-year budget cycle, Nord-Bridge secured a three-year funding commitment from the City. **2008**

- **Harry Fischer elected President.** **March 4, 2009**

- Nord-Bridge was a host venue for the Alberta 55 Plus Games. **February, 2009**

- Nord-Bridge opened the Fitness 55 Plus Club, with a total capital investment, including equipment, of \$244,604. **2009**

- The First Annual Miners’ Memorial Dinner was promoted as a Nord-Bridge fund-raising event. **May 1, 2010**

- The First Annual President’s Supper was promoted by then Vice-President Jim Hahn as a major Nord-Bridge fund-raising initiative. **Sept. 22, 2009**

- Nord-Bridge faced a major funding challenge, as bingo revenues fell sharply as a consequence of: **2009**
 - (1) Shifting senior demographics;
 - (2) A new City of Lethbridge smoking by-law; and
 - (3) The opening of a competing Casino.

- The Volunteer Income Tax Program, which had transitioned from the Federal Superannuates National Association (FSNA) to Nord-Bridge beginning in 2008, became part of Nord-Bridge’s new Seniors Helping Seniors Program. By 2010 the program was fully operational. That year volunteers responded to 1,012 requests for assistance for Alberta Health benefits and prepared 937 income tax forms. **2010**

- The Alberta Association of Senior Centres was officially Registered as a society, with Nord-Bridge one of five founding member agencies. **2011**

- Jim Hahn elected President.** **March 7, 2012**

- Jim Hahn represented Nord-Bridge on the Board of Directors for the 2009 Alberta 55 Plus Games.

- Debt repayment: Nord-Bridge made a final payment of \$20,743 to the City of Lethbridge on a twelve-year, interest-free “Building Loan” for \$248,921. The loan allowed Nord-Bridge to purchase and renovate the former Chinook Mall Building on 13th Avenue North. **2012**

- Nord-Bridge co-hosted the 2013 Grey Matters Conference with Alberta Health. This was the first senior service providers conference hosted outside the cities of Calgary or Edmonton. **Sept. 2013**
- Nord-Bridge joined with a number of community organizations in a successful campaign to preserve local control over ambulance and paramedic services dispatch. **2013**
- Nord-Bridge was faced with drastic cutbacks to Family and Community Support Services funding. FCSS funding was reduced by 5% in 2014 and frozen until 2018. **2014**
- Nord-Bridge embarked on an ambitious capital improvement Program with a total budget of \$106,000. The project included energy-efficient lighting, an electronic messaging system, new exterior signage, and paving and curb repairs. **2014**
- Pat Santa elected President**

March 4, 2015
- The Nord-Bridge Operational and Strategic Review was completed by Management Resource Services, Principal, R. Bruce Thurston. **Nov., 2015**
- **One significant measure of the Nord-Bridge success story is the dramatic growth in membership, from 98 in 1978 to 1310 in 2015.** **Jan., 2016**

Nord-Bridge Mission Statement, Follows

III. Nord-Bridge Senior Citizens Association Mission Statement:

"The provision of educational, social, and support service programs for Senior Citizens and the fostering of independence, self-worth, and a sense of community pride amongst the senior citizen population of Lethbridge, and surrounding communities in Southern Alberta."



Photo of Roy Berlando, Founding President of Nord-Bridge Senior Citizens Association

IV. Strategic Objectives

1. Provide a safe, welcoming environment where members may meet with friends informally or participate in a number of recreational opportunities.
2. Acquire and maintain lands and buildings in a fiscally-responsible manner so that Nord-bridge is able to provide social and community programs for its members.
3. Engage in fundraising activities that support Nord-Bridge's financial and social needs.
4. Promote health and fitness through a variety of classes and sports, and through the provision of an affordable, well-equipped fitness centre.
5. Provide a venue for drop-in programs which include various sports and recreation activities enjoyed by seniors, including billiards, shuffleboard, floor curling, carpet bowling, various card and board games, and other leisure activities.
6. Provide Nord-Bridge members with a variety of social activities, including jam sessions, dance and choral programs and special event dinners with the goal of reducing seniors' isolation.
7. Provide affordable, nutritious meal options in a clean and friendly environment.
8. Support the provision of affordable and appropriate transportation services, including public transportation services for seniors.
9. Provide a meeting place for the discussion of a wide variety of political, financial, health, and public interest topics relevant to Nord-Bridge members and seniors in general.
10. Assist Nord-Bridge members, as well as other seniors in the community, in obtaining accurate information about a wide spectrum of government support programs and services.
11. Provide tax information and form completion assistance to Nord-Bridge members, as well as to members of the general community, as resources allow. This includes hands-on assistance regarding tax filing when appropriate.

12. Promote the physical, social and fiscal safety of members and work with appropriate local officials, including members of the Lethbridge Police Service and appropriate support services, with regard to possible instances of elder abuse.
13. Provide Nord-Bridge members with a variety of affordable recreational travel opportunities.
14. Through a pro-active political advocacy program, engage with municipal, provincial, and federal officials to advocate for programs and policies that benefit members of Nord-Bridge, as well as other seniors in the community at-large.
15. In partnership with other seniors groups in the community, support City of Lethbridge planning and programming for seniors
16. Build inter-generational understanding through a number of collaborative partnerships with schools and appropriate agencies.
17. Build collaborative partnerships with other senior centres and with appropriate community agencies within the greater Lethbridge community, and within the Province when these partnerships are in line with the objects of the Society.