

Memorandum

To: Dr. Erika Patterson
From: Rodrigo Samayoa

October 14, 2020

Re: Proposal to research how new engagement strategies can be applied to the creation of a climbing cooperative in Prince Rupert

Introduction

Over the past decade, rock climbing has had an explosive growth in popularity, not just for outdoor enthusiasts, but also for those looking for an active and social activity.

The proliferation of the sport has also led to a boom climbing gym industry across Canada and North America. According to the Climbing Business Journal, the number of commercial climbing gyms has nearly tripled in the past decade, not including all the climbing walls built inside community centres (Farooqui).

While most climbing gyms in British Columbia are located in large metropolitan areas like Metro Vancouver, Greater Victoria or Prince George, small towns across the province have also started building their own.

As the rainiest city in Canada, Prince Rupert has never had a big or thriving climbing community. But that reality didn't stop a dedicated few to build a small climbing wall in the city's community centre in the 1980s.

Since then, however, this wall went into disuse and disrepair until it was taken over by a new generation of climbers in the mid 2010s. Seeing it as a good way to stay fit during the long and rainy winter months, these climbers spent countless hours working with city authorities to revive the wall and build a small community around it.

As the community has grown, however, this small and outdated wall has stopped meeting the needs of the local climbing community. In response to this, the same group of climbers that revived the existing wall just a few years ago have come together to build a new climbing gym under a climber's co-operative model.

The Problem

The Rockfish Climbing Co-op was founded in 2017 with a specific purpose in mind: build a modern indoor climbing gym that can provide a space for climbers in Prince Rupert to both build a community and pursue their passion for the sport.

But the reality of climbing gyms is that they are expensive ventures that require large up-front investments and a large member base to sustain. This is the reason most climbing

gyms across the province are in densely populated urban centres and not in small communities like Prince Rupert.

While this dedicated group of climbers has been able to build a small community of climbers in Canada's rainiest cities, there may not be enough members and member engagement to make this venture feasible. The co-operative is expecting to need upwards of \$200,000 in initial investment to build the climbing wall, plus ongoing operational expenses to go into equipment, maintenance, rent and other costs.

The question the co-operative is trying to answer is, how can it build up and maintain the membership to the point where a new modern climbing gym can be built in Prince Rupert?

Proposed Solution

The outdoors community has a long history of bringing people together to achieve big unattainable goals. After all, it is this same community that built influential organizations like the Sierra Club, and major cooperatives like MEC and REI.

A solution for the problem of community engagement for the Rockfish Climbing Co-op is to make the co-op less about a physical space and more about community. In short, the co-op needs to start applying community organizing principles as a way to build and grow the climbing community in Prince Rupert.

As stated above, Prince Rupert is not the most obvious place for a climbing community to thrive. It's too small, too rainy and too transient. This is why this project needs to take a community building approach as opposed to simply having the goal of building a new recreational facility.

Rock climbing can be intimidating for many new climbers. Not only is it a sport with risks, but it is one that most people did not grow up with, like hockey or skiing. If the co-op is to attract new members, it must use new strategies to encourage the wider Prince Rupert community to see the co-op less as a new recreational facility and more as a community hub.

Scope

In this report, I will investigate engagement strategies that can be applied to grow and sustain the Rockfish Climbing Co-op. This will require research on two different fronts.

First, I will perform a brief literature review of community organizing principles proposed by social movement theorists like Saul Alinsky, Jane McAlevy or Marshall Ganz in an attempt to see if and how these principles can be applied to the building of a climbing co-operative.

Second, through interviews with members of existing climbing co-ops as well as community groups in Prince Rupert that have succeeded in bringing in new members, I will see how other groups have engaged their membership and community. This can shed light on the community building practices that worked in their case, which can also be applied to the case of the Rockfish co-op.

Given the reality of the pandemic, this report will also briefly look at how the learnings of this study can be applied in a time when expanding community networks is discouraged and can

be potentially deadly. While the effects of COVID-19 will not be a major focus of the report, it is a factor that cannot be ignored in this day and age.

Methods

As I briefly state above, the two main sources of information gathered for this report will come from a literary review of community organizing theory and interviews with members of existing cooperatives and community groups.

For the literary review, I will be looking at some of the major works of community organizing theory, including books and academic articles. These will include works coming from different social movements, including social, environmental, labour and religious movements.

The study of engagement methods by existing cooperatives and community groups will be done primarily through interviews. I will approach existing climbing cooperatives, outdoors clubs and advocates of the wider cooperative movement who can shed light on membership and community engagement strategies.

My qualifications

I have dedicated most of my career to movement building. I have worked in multiple social, political and labour organizations both as an organizer and as a campaigner to help build social change movements. Through this work I have already explored and applied many community organizing principles and have extensive networks in social change circles that can provide guidance on community organizing theory.

I am also an avid outdoors enthusiast and climber as well as an active member of the Rockfish Climbing Co-op. This gives me an inside perspective into the problems the co-op is facing as well as the resources it can tap into in the outdoors and wider community in Prince Rupert.

This project is a good opportunity to blend my professional background in community and political organizing with my passion for the outdoors and climbing.

Conclusion

I am looking forward to investigating how the Rockfish Climbing Co-op can address the problem of growing its membership base and community support to make a new and modern climbing gym financially viable. I will be looking at how community organizing principles developed throughout decades of modern social movement building can be applied to this small and localized community project.

In a city where a climbing community is unlikely to thrive organically, local climbers have to expand their toolbox to bring in new members into their community and sustain their membership over the years.

Works Cited

Farooqui, S. (2019, December 12). Rock climbing's Olympic debut, and its growing popularity come with challenges. Retrieved October 15, 2020, from <https://www.ctvnews.ca/sports/rock-climbing-s-olympic-debut-and-its-growing-popularity-come-with-challenges-1.4726631>