



ILM Success Story: Fort Assiniboine Coal Bed Methane Early Engagement Process

In the Fort Assiniboine area, the local residents, Nexen Incorporated and Trident Exploration Corporation began working together when planning for proposed coal bed methane (CBM) development began in 2003. Open dialogue was key to building trust and inspiring a greater appreciation for all stakeholders' interests.

The small, historic community of Fort Assiniboine is situated near the beautiful Sandhills Wildland Park and the Athabasca River, approximately 150 kilometres northwest of Edmonton. Residents of Fort Assiniboine enjoy the area's stillness and natural splendour.

There is a strong sense of local land stewardship and desire to preserve the area's natural beauty and wildlife. While forestry operations have long been a part of the local economy, the community has previously seen modest oil and gas development.

Simply put, CBM is methane gas found in coal seams that are too deep to mine. The methane is loosely bound to the surfaces of coal and held in place by pressure in the coal deposits. Fort Assiniboine is located within the area known as the Mannville coal bed deposit. Here, water occurs naturally and contributes to the pressure that keeps methane gas attached to the coal.

In CBM development, water is removed from the coal bed (by pumping), which decreases the pressure on the gas and allows it to detach from the coal and flow up the well.

What was the issue?

In 2000, industry first identified the potential for CBM gas reserves in the Fort Assiniboine area. A pilot area comprising private and provincial Crown land was selected north of the Athabasca River to test the commercial viability of the resource. Early in the development planning process, Nexen and Trident scheduled a meeting with local Alberta Sustainable Resource Development staff about obtaining surface access to public land.

The companies were encouraged to adopt the same philosophy for their proposed operations on private land. To help facilitate the use of an integrated land management approach, Sustainable Resource Development began reviewing pipeline applications before applications for well licenses were considered by the Energy Resources Conservation Board. Government flexibility was important to helping promote a shift in oil and gas development planning.

Nexen and Trident tried a number of new approaches to how they planned for their development projects. They began collaborating on common access corridors and proposed substituting single vertical wells – which were initially used in Fort Assiniboine – for central pads with multiple wells to reduce their overall footprint. In using a central pad, the companies planned on applying directional drilling techniques, which were located in the corner of a section to minimize impacts to existing agricultural uses. These innovative new approaches to limiting landscape fragmentation were supported by government, and have since become best practices recommended to other industrial users.



In 2003, CBM development was still relatively new in Alberta. In Fort Assiniboine, Nexen and Trident's exploratory operations were known to many within the community. Still, when residents discovered that Nexen and Trident's existing test wells had been successful and expansions were planned, they became wary of what was in store for their future. They started questioning the potential size and scope of development, its environmental footprint, water concerns, noise and visual impacts and the long-term social effects on the community.

Some of these concerns were also motivated by information in the media about the adverse consequences of CBM developments in the United States, particularly in Wyoming. Soon residents were considering the merits and disadvantages of CBM and whether this type of development was appropriate for their community.

How was the issue managed?

Nexen and Trident realized that even if they obtained government permits for their proposed CBM development, growing scepticism among residents and local land owners would not allow them to gain the community's trust as responsible operators. It was important to give their proposed development project a public face. They began exploring how they might engage residents by offering information, education opportunities and a forum in which the community could voice their concerns.

In the following months, Nexen and Trident began providing information to town residents, farmers, recreational users and local land owners so that they would have a clearer understanding of the proposed project. Some of these initiatives included:

- Drafting a community involvement plan that was distributed to select community members to provide input that accurately reflected their community.
- Presentations to local Woodlands County council members.
- Project Open Houses to allow residents to view project information, ask questions and provide feedback directly to company officials.
- Mail out of a Project Newsletter to area residents, summarizing information shared at open house events.

These early information sessions helped to inform the residents of Fort Assiniboine about the proposed development and about where, when and how Nexen and Trident were looking to develop for CBM. However, the companies realized that they also needed to listen and act upon the community's concerns about traffic, dust and water if they were ever to be accepted as good corporate neighbours.



Who were the partners/collaborators for this project?

The Fort Assiniboine Project Liaison Committee was started in 2003, with the intention of giving the community an independent and influential voice that made recommendations to the companies. This committee comprised twelve members who were selected from various communities of interest including:

- local businesses
- emergency services
- law enforcement
- landowners (with and without wells on their property)
- local government and the education community.

It was decided that two seats would also be reserved for local high school students to help build capacity of industry knowledge and encourage participation in matters affecting their community.

Monthly meetings were held where members could discuss the development and the community's input could be shared in an open and respectful environment. Community members were encouraged to discuss items of mutual interest with their neighbours and advise Nexen and Trident of any questions or concerns as part of their monthly community update report. Often residents could be heard talking to their neighbours about CBM development at the post office or local coffee shop.

Because of their interest in seeing the community's values respected, the Project Liaison Committee was committed to bringing their local knowledge, expertise and desire to find solutions to the table. For instance, the committee acted as a liaison when local farmers expressed their interest in returning well sites to productive farmland. In response, the companies looked at removing the topsoil to allow the well pad to be built below the root mat of the surrounding vegetation. This innovative technique helped with dust control, prevented soil damage caused by heavy service trucks, and helped improved conditions for future crop re-establishment.

Similarly, when the community raised concerns about water, the companies brought experts into the community to discuss how Alberta regulations required the companies to dispose of waste water by pumping it deep underground, below the ground water supply.

The committee was also instrumental in helping to address social impacts of CBM development on Fort Assiniboine. After residents brought their concerns forward that rig moves were being scheduled at the same time that school buses were transporting children to and from school, the committee discussed potential actions with Nexen and Trident. Listening to these concerns, the companies made changes to help ensure the safety of school buses on the road.

Often if Nexen and Trident could not accommodate the community's requests, they tried to find alternatives. These efforts went a long way to building trust and neighbourly relations. Even today, most residents continue to have a high opinion of Nexen and Trident and wonder why some non-CBM producers in the area do not live up to the same standards of communication with the local community.



What happens next?

Looking back, residents of Fort Assiniboine are proud of their contributions to building an open and transparent relationship with Nexen and Trident. They have gained a deeper awareness of how industrial activity can affect the land and environment, but they also know the value of collaboration in developing solutions to reduce the footprint and mitigate damage before it happens.

While some community members suggest that public consultation should always involve the entire community, they acknowledge that Nexen and Trident have been committed to responding to resident concerns. For this reason, the Public Liaison Committee approached the companies in 2006 about transitioning into a multi-stakeholder synergy group that would be open to all local and surrounding area stakeholders.

The Fort Assiniboine and Area Multi-Stakeholder Alliance's first met in February 2007 with over 75 people attending. Today FAAMA works with a variety of local energy, forestry, power, oil and gas, pipeline, and government agencies to ensure effective and continued communication between industry and the public.