

The Community Circle Approach to Piloting

What distinguishes it — and why it works

The core distinction

Piloting is not a technical test. It is a trust test — conducted in real conditions, with community oversight, designed as much to surface failure as to prove success.

Most pilots are designed to win funding for the next phase. Community Circle pilots are designed to earn the right to operate indefinitely — with or without outside support.

Conventional approach vs. Community Circle

Standard approach

Proves the technology works

Designed to succeed and report upward

Community receives the results

Handover of infrastructure after commissioning

Trust is assumed or deferred

Community Circle approach

Proves the whole system works — technology, training, governance, and maintenance

Designed to fail informatively — a failure that teaches is more valuable than a surprise failure post-deployment

Community holds oversight authority throughout the pilot, not only at the end

Handover of capacity, governance, and maintenance culture — not just equipment

Historic distrust is actively navigated through accountability, transparency, and open debate at every stage

Five principles that make this distinct

1 Scope includes the O&M handoff, not just the equipment

The OWL (Operations, Wellness, Learning) model means the pilot tests whether operators can run the system independently — before full deployment, not after. Three world-first drinking water treatment solutions were commissioned on this basis, including during peak pandemic conditions.

2 Reward and risk are held together, not separated

The pilot must generate visible, brag-worthy wins to sustain political and funding momentum — while simultaneously requiring honest reporting of what broke. Neither alone is sufficient. Communities need to own both the credit and the learning.

3 Real conditions, not controlled ones

Three commissionings during peak pandemic — remote management, supply chain pressure, staffing constraints. The pilot was a genuine stress test, not a showcase environment. The result: the fastest emergency water supply solution in the history of Indigenous Services Canada.

4 The community defines what success looks like

Success criteria are not set by the engineering firm or the funder. The Build / Own / Brag framework means success must be something the community can point to with pride, defend in council, and use to attract the next investment. A lifted advisory on paper is not enough.

5 The pilot produces peer mentors, not just outcomes

A successful pilot creates capacity that travels. The community that lifts one water advisory becomes the knowledge source and peer mentor for the next community facing the same challenge. The circle propagates outward, not only upward to the funder.

Proof points

- | | |
|------------|--|
| 12+ | Canadian water industry awards, including two prestigious Schreyer Awards presented by the Association of Consulting Engineering Companies of Canada. |
| 3 | World-first drinking water treatment and O&M training solutions commissioned simultaneously during the COVID-19 pandemic — managed entirely remotely. |
| #1 | Fastest emergency water supply solution in the history of Indigenous Services Canada — speed made possible by trust infrastructure and operational readiness built before the emergency. |
| 6+ | First Nations communities with lifted long-term water advisories, including Lytton First Nation, Hupacasath, Lhoosk'uz Dene Nation, and Zhiibaahaasing First Nation. |

On trust and distrust

The most important conceptual move in the Community Circle approach is the refusal to treat distrust as a problem to be solved before work begins. In First Nations infrastructure contexts, historic distrust is not a barrier to the pilot — it is part of the operating environment, and the pilot must be designed to function within it.

This means replacing the assumption of goodwill with the architecture of accountability: open debate, risk sharing, critical challenge, transparency, and feedback loops that give the community genuine authority — not just consultation — throughout the process.

"Community Circle is not about trust; it is about navigating the historic distrust. It is about accountability, risk sharing, open debate, critical challenge, transparency, investigation, and input and feedback from the circle."

Why the buying journey matters

The complexity of the community buying journey — chief and council turnover, multiple funding bodies, procurement rules, legal flags, budget cycles, and shifting political priorities — is not a friction to minimize. It is the environment in which the pilot must prove itself.

Pilots that are designed only for technical performance routinely survive commissioning and collapse within years when the operator leaves, the funding cycle ends, or the political context shifts. The Community Circle model builds for the entire buying and governance lifecycle, not just the commissioning event.

This is why the three criteria — Build/Buy, Own it, Brag about it — function as a pilot success test as well as a procurement philosophy. If the community cannot own the result and brag about it to its peers and funders, the pilot has not succeeded, regardless of what the water quality data says.

What this looks like in practice

A Community Circle pilot looks different at every stage from a conventional infrastructure commissioning:

- **Before commissioning:** Planning includes the O&M training model, not just the technical specification
- The community defines success criteria in terms they can defend politically and practically
- Stress-test scenarios are designed in — not treated as risks to avoid

- **During the pilot:** Community oversight is structural, not advisory
- Failures are documented and shared as learning, not buried to protect the reporting
- Operator confidence is monitored alongside water quality

- **At completion:** Capacity to train the next operator is verified before the pilot is declared complete
- The community can articulate and demonstrate what was built, independently
- Lessons are structured for transfer to peer communities — the circle expands

Community Circle Piloting Approach

What makes it distinct — and why it works

Piloting is not a technical test — it is a trust test.

Designed to earn the right to operate indefinitely, with or without outside support.

Conventional approach

Proves the technology works

vs

Community Circle

Proves technology, training, governance and maintenance work together

Designed to succeed and report upward

vs

Designed to fail informatively — surprises cost more than lessons

Community receives results

vs

Community holds oversight authority throughout, not just at the end

Hands over infrastructure

vs

Hands over capacity, governance and maintenance culture

Five Principles

What a Community Circle pilot looks like in practice

- 1. Scope includes the O&M handoff, not just equipment**
OWL (Operations, Wellness, Learning) — operators tested before full deployment.
- 2. Reward and risk are held together**
Visible wins sustain momentum; honest failure reporting builds long-term credibility.
- 3. Real conditions, not controlled ones**
Three pandemic-era commissionings — managed remotely under full supply-chain pressure.
- 4. The community defines success**
Build / Own / Brag — success must be defensible politically and practically by the community.
- 5. Pilots produce peer mentors, not just outcomes**
Earned capacity travels — each lifted advisory seeds the next community's readiness.

12+

Industry awards

3

world-first solutions

#1

fastest ISC emergency supply

6+

First Nations Long-term water advisories lifted