



community stories

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ANC in BC Selects Bridgeview

The Action for Neighbourhood Change project (ANC) may be complex but its purpose is clear. The initiative is about real people helping one another to make their neighbourhoods better places to live. Since the project began in February 2005, it has generated optimism and hope among community members. The partners are excited that the program is having the desired results: Citizens are becoming involved in changing their neighbourhoods and government is hearing the feedback it needs to support them effectively. This series of stories presents each of the five ANC neighbourhoods as they existed at the start of the initiative. A second series will be published at the end of the ANC's 14-month run to document the changes and learnings that have resulted from the effort. For more information about ANC, visit: www.anccommunity.ca

Uncharted waters

United Way of the Lower Mainland (UW LM) serves a population of 2.25 million people in a part of British Columbia which blends rural, suburban and downtown areas. Land masses are divided by water and mountains, so geography plays an important role in service location decisions. UW LM stretches north to Pemberton, winds along the Sunshine Coast to encompass Whistler, Squamish and Bowen Island, and ends in Vancouver and its surrounding communities. The latter include Richmond, Delta, Surrey, New Westminister, The Langley's, Coquitlam, Port Coquitlam, Maple Ridge and the North Shore communities of North Vancouver, West Vancouver and North Vancouver District. Of these, Surrey is growing at the fastest rate – 1,500 people move into the city each month. Its population (roughly 350,000) will soon rival Vancouver's (550,000).

A participant in the pan-Canadian learning community known as Vibrant Communities,



UW LM is one of three convenor organizations for Vibrant Surrey.¹ It also piloted a “Communities in Action” program, a four-year community issues identification and action plan initiative aimed at improving the quality of life at the community level. When the federal government selected Surrey as one of the cities to be included in Action for Neighbourhood Change (ANC), UW LM was well-positioned to identify several likely sites for the project and work with the community.

Over the last 20 years, the United Way movement in Canada has expanded its core mission of funding community and charitable services. It now emphasizes its role as a community builder whereby it invests resources into communities in order to help residents build their own capacity to address social issues. UW LM and several other local United Ways across the country are exploring the concept of “community impact.” Within ANC, this will involve considering both the type of work UW LM will do through the project as well as the impact that United Way-funded agency services can have at the neighbourhood level.

Site selection – Surrey-style

The Surrey neighbourhood selection process was driven by two UW LM guiding principles: first, community building is about building capacity for communities, organizations and the nonprofit sector; and second, it must be community-driven. UW LM’s earlier experience with the Communities in Action process underlined the importance of asking for stakeholder input on selection criteria and being aware that agencies will support ideas that are financially and programmatically sustainable. Because Surrey is growing quickly and has a diverse population, ANC was attractive to Surrey City Council members who were looking for help in dealing with

United Way of the Lower Mainland’s perspective on community development

Over the last 20 years, UW LM has gradually moved from being a federated fundraiser to a community builder. In 1995, UW LM staff members attended a conference in the US where they learned of the various ways United Way organizations in that country were building communities. Says Linda Western, UW LM Planning Consultant: “What that means is that we began investing resources – staff, dollars, networks – into communities in a way that strengthened their capacity to address social issues. We have had staff working with United Way-funded and other agencies and partners for the past 15 years. We have been working closely with members of the Surrey community for more than five years.”

Since 2000, UW LM has been responsive to the spontaneous efforts of community members who want to address an issue. It also has worked proactively, bringing together agencies and issue stakeholders to explore issues in high growth and high need areas. (The task of detailing local concerns has been accomplished through a program called “Communities in Action,” in which the first phase is the creation of a community profile developed using indicators chosen by residents.) Profiles provide a snapshot of the current facts and directions as a basis on which to set goals, directions and strategies.

A second preference is for UW LM to be involved in the early phase of an initiative, but to relinquish leadership to the community as soon as possible. Says Linda: “Our organization continues to provide support until the capacity is there to assume leadership. We work to be transparent and collaborative and to build on a community’s assets. Our projects are designed and operated in a way that improves the likelihood that they can be sustained over time.”

the challenges of change. UW LM made a commitment to continue working in the Surrey neighbourhood beyond the ANC's 14-month mandate.

Says Linda Western: "Our experience working in Surrey had taught us that they like to find their own solutions, and because the federal government had pre-selected Surrey for involvement, it was important that we establish an open, transparent and collaborative selection process with United Way acting as a facilitator. We were clear that it would be the community – not United Way – that would select the neighbourhood." Representatives from 45 Surrey-focused organizations were invited to an initial meeting. These included the school board, a crime prevention society, a poverty advocacy group, immigration services, multi-service societies, an Aboriginal society, police, library, City Parks and Recreation and planning departments, and a community group (Surrey Association for Sustainable Communities). Participants were given a list of qualitative and quantitative criteria suggestions and asked if they would help to choose a neighbourhood.

Over a two-month, four-meeting period, a core group of invitees continued to come together, each adding important selection information as the process moved forward. People who were unable to attend meetings were kept informed of the process and progress. The proposed criteria were grouped under four themes: community makeup and well-being, availability of services, levels of resident activism and readiness, and the presence and interest of outside partners. Between the first and second meetings, UW LM staff met with researchers in education, health and local government and agreed that it would be most useful to start with elementary school catchments areas as a means of defining neighbourhood boundaries. By the second meeting, the number

of potential neighbourhoods had fallen from 70 to eight. More information was gathered from principals and parent advisory committees in the eight possible neighbourhoods, along with social housing information and information from local agencies.

At the third meeting, the neighbourhoods were further shortlisted to five. A group exercise was held to summarize everyone's collective knowledge about the five remaining neighbourhoods. Certain criteria were emerging as important, particularly community readiness, neighbourhood assets and whether it was felt ANC could have an impact. Group members were encouraged to visit the communities to get a physical sense of them.

At the fourth meeting on June 14, maps were put up to help participants visualize the sites and neighbourhood information was summarized on flip charts. Group members walked among the displays and discussed the issues informally. When all agreed it was time to vote, Bridgeview easily rose to the top of the list. Says Linda: "We kept the criteria and the values of the project in front of us throughout the process. We wanted a neighbourhood which was representative of the rest of Surrey and where we could make an impact within a short time frame. In the end, we chose Bridgeview based on two deciding factors: it met all the criteria of balance between asset and need, and already had a sense of community. One of the key indicators was the report on school readiness of kindergarten children."

The Early Development Indicator is a screening instrument used by teachers across BC to assess kindergarten-aged children on a neighbourhood-by-neighbourhood basis. In 2004, it showed that Bridgeview children rated

at the extreme lower end of the scale. In all areas – gross and fine motor skills, sociability, language, ability to relate to others – their results were similar to those achieved by children in isolated northern communities. Staff members at the local elementary school have suggested that Bridgeview’s status as a forgotten, isolated neighbourhood ultimately affects the development of young children.

By the time UW LM held a meeting to announce Bridgeview’s selection, word of the project had spread to the managers of departments and organizations that were involved in the selection process and they, too, attended the opening. Says Linda: “Selection committee members had shared their excitement about the opportunity ANC presents, not only to help one neighbourhood, but to share the learning that it generates throughout the wider community.”

Approval and acceptance by the residents was seen as the next step in the neighbourhood selection process. A meeting was held with the Bridgeview Hall Community Association and the elementary school parent advisory committee, many of whom serve on both committees. Initially, they were hesitant about being selected as an ANC neighbourhood because it implied that their community would again be portrayed in a negative light. This perception was soon laid to rest and they became enthusiastic about the potential benefits offered by involvement with ANC.

As the final step in the selection process, United Way held a media launch to announce Bridgeview’s selection. An invitation was extended to all who had been initially involved as well as those who had been added during the process. Says Linda: “Although intended as an opportunity to inform the media of the launch of the project, word of mouth had spread to the residents.”

On July 25, more than 50 people, including newly-elected MLA Bruce Ralston, who lives in a nearby Surrey neighbourhood, responded to the invitation. Bridgeview residents, city staff, members of the selection process committee and some of their managers and members of the media came to the event. Initial fears and reservations expressed by residents about having something done “to them” were quickly overcome. Residents were assured that the only action taken to date had been the selection of Bridgeview, and they soon understood that it would have created false expectations among unsuccessful neighbourhoods to involve them any sooner in the project.

Says local ANC coordinator Gill Redfern: “One elderly woman came to our opening event angrily demanding to know why residents had not been invited into the selection process. By the end of the meeting, she apologized for her outburst and told us that she thought our process had been exactly right and that Bridgeview was exactly the right location for ANC. Though we are only beginning to get to know the people in this community, they have impressed on us their appreciation of Bridgeview’s history, strengths and opportunities. Harnessing that community spirit is an exciting prospect.”

Bridgeview – out of sight, out of mind

Bridgeview lies at the bottom of a valley on a flat, largely open piece of land bounded by the four-lane Pattullo Bridge, the four- and six-lane King George Highway, the Fraser River and an industrial park. A 1976 National Film Board video entitled, “Some People Have to Suffer” documented Bridgeview’s 24-year struggle (1953 to 1977) with the municipality of Surrey to replace open sewage ditches with a sewer system.² The

neighbourhood's distinct geography and sense of community were key factors in its selection for involvement.

Early agricultural settlement in the area dates back to the 1860s. The Pattullo Bridge opened in 1937, linking New Westminster with Surrey, and the area began to develop both as an industrial and suburban area. Modern Bridgeview was established during the 1940s when small homes were constructed on the east side of the bridge to house the wives and families of men incarcerated in the penitentiary across the river (the penitentiary was closed in 1980). There are plans to establish an industrial park to serve the growing lumber industry.

Other structures within the neighbourhood today include the Bridgeview Community Hall (situated on a large park space), a mixture of old and new houses on wide, ditch-lined streets, one temple, one elementary school, a convenience store and a small trailer court. The drainage ditches have the effect of dividing properties into rural-looking lots and they overflow and flood footpaths during rainy weather. Warehouse and industrial facilities run along the river-front boundary, with a used car and parts lot, workshops and one hotel situated along the highway. In order to buy goods, visit a doctor or dentist, attend high school, go to work and access social programs, residents must travel "up the hill." Transit service is available, though limited, skirting around Bridgeview. In order to reach the nearest transit station, people have to walk over the highway on a walkway that becomes impassable in bad weather. Students must take the Sky Train and a bus to reach the high school.

Surrey is divided into six town centres. The Whalley area, of which Bridgeview is only a small part, has received resources to establish youth, employment and seniors programming; a

limited number of these services have made it "down the hill" to Bridgeview.

Isolated by its very boundaries, with virtually no retail stores, no library, limited transit service and only a community centre to provide a variety of community services, Bridgeview has nevertheless managed to forge a community identity. Bridgeview Days, an annual community party, was celebrated for the 61st time in late June, coinciding with the Bridgeview Residents' Association's 61st anniversary.

The people of Bridgeview

Bridgeview has a population of 1,895. The proportion of visible minorities is higher in Bridgeview than in Surrey (43.8 percent versus 36.5 percent). Of the 830 visible minority community members, South Asians and South East Asians represent 38.6 and 28.3 percent respectively. Punjabi (5.2 percent), Hindi (5.2 percent), Tagalog (2.2 percent) and Chinese (1.6 percent) are the most commonly spoken languages after English (60.6 percent).

Among the 720 households, the average income is \$41,607, compared with the Surrey average of \$63,197. More than two-thirds (67.6 percent) of residents own their homes, while 32.4 percent are renters [Statistics Canada 2001]. The majority (70.8 percent) live in single family homes. A small trailer court makes up part of the community. House prices are affordable, which makes the neighbourhood attractive to low-income workers, recently-settled immigrants and first time home buyers. Rental housing stock varies in upkeep and appearance. Residents have expressed interest in labour swap arrangements where people trade house improvement services with one another.

The neighbourhood's isolation has had the positive effect of knitting the 53.6 percent of permanent dwellers tightly together. Bridgeview residents keep a close eye on one another's homes and children. This concern may act as a well-spring for involvement in ANC.

Community assets

Bridgeview Elementary School is a brightly coloured, modern facility. It serves 190 students and has an active parent advisory council. Its former principal, Marcia Hogan, worked in Bridgeview for nine years, leaving in December 2004. During her tenure, she instituted many programs aimed at improving literacy, numeracy and social responsibility skills. New principal Michael Gordon has continued Marcia's efforts to link school programs with community centre activities (e.g., before- and after-school and summer programs) and has plans to further develop this work after the new school year begins.

Bridgeview Community Hall acts as the community hub and is open 12 hours a day from Monday to Friday. Weekend programming generally is reserved for groups that rent the facility (e.g., Scouts, Air Cadets, weddings and private functions). Surrey's parks and recreation department recently expressed interest in establishing new programs at the centre. Until now, the centre's offerings have included exercise and craft classes, a preschool program, a family resource centre, an Industry Canada Community Access Program site, summer day camps and annual community events. The Bridgeview Community Association has had to raise funds from local business and donors to cover reduced municipal operations funding.

At this year's Bridgeview Days, residents could participate in a parade, craft display, games and activities, a softball challenge and a family dance. Gill Redfern used the opportunity to begin meeting members of the community, introducing them to ANC and asking them to list what they liked about their community and what they felt needed improvement.

Says Gill: "People expressed a great deal of affection for, and identification, with their community. There is a tangible spirit that is manifested in a 'can do' attitude. There is a definite perception that Bridgeview is a forgotten and neglected suburb which has helped bring residents together to get things done. Besides Bridgeview Days, there are several community events that run throughout the year which keep people connected with one another, but there are still many people who remain isolated. The neighbourhood has evolved a small-town, rural feel where people notice change immediately. Because of its geographical position, people do not happen upon Bridgeview by accident, nor are its streets used as thoroughfares to get to another part of Surrey. If a strange car is driving around or parked in someone's driveway, people tell one another about it and look out for each other's safety."

When asked which aspects of their community needed attention, residents were quick to identify physical and structural improvements they wished to see made. In particular, they wanted equivalence in service delivery to other parts of Surrey. Municipal council representatives in BC are selected based on their affiliation with a political party. Currently, only one member of City Council, Penny Preddy, currently lives in North Surrey. She is aware of the United Way's activities in the rest of Surrey and will be kept informed of Bridgeview's ANC project.

The way forward

Now that UW LM has concluded its neighbourhood selection process, it will begin engaging community members in the process of envisioning change. This process will include building connections between residents and community support organizations and encouraging community capacity building at the neighbourhood level. The lessons learned during the first stages of the work will be shared with other community members in Surrey and throughout the Lower Mainland.

As a first step after the selection process, the staff of United Way of the Lower Mainland is committed to finding as much accurate information as possible about the area under study. Thorough research will be followed by planning, implementation and monitoring activities. UWLM generally plays a planning consultant role; that is, it invests funds, assembles stakeholders and facilitates process. Ultimately, the goal of ANC is to allow neighbourhoods to lead this process, but initially, the local United Ways will provide a model for future work undertaken by the community. UWLM also is committed to making its role transparent and to ensuring that the work done by ANC is driven by the Bridgeview community and that all parties work collaboratively.

Anne Makhoul

Anne Makhoul coordinates the 'community stories' series for the Caledon Institute of Social Policy.

Endnotes:

1. For more information on Vibrant Communities, visit: www.vibrantcommunities.ca
2. National Film Board video, "Some People Have to Suffer," directed by Chris Pinney. Copyright 1976, available at: www.nfb.ca

Reference

1. Statistics Canada. (2001). *Census*.

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