

**Vibrant Communities Saint John:
Strength & Empowerment Neighbourhood by Neighbourhood
March 21, 2007**

Conversations with
Don Connolly, Corporate Representative, Canada Mortgage & Housing
Donna Beaton, Regional Director, New Brunswick Department of Family &
Community Services

Commentary by
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Interview with Don Connolly

Tell us a little bit about how you (and your organization) became active in the work of Vibrant Communities Saint John. What drew you to the work, and what does it mean to you to be involved in this initiative?

I've been in my current position with CMHC since June 2005. I came to my position as a result of community efforts to have a federal presence in Saint John due to serious poverty issues. I was familiar, because I grew up in this area, with some of Saint John's problems, and also with some efforts made by the community to come to terms with poverty. The community recognized that there was an issue and wanted to do something about it.

As I arrived on the scene, my first job was to listen, and to make sure I understood the issues as the community saw them.

Your involvement has been particularly focused in the Old North End – how did your work come to be primarily in this one neighbourhood?

It followed along from the consultations. I consulted with groups as diverse as the City, the Department of Family and Community Services, the Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative, Vibrant Communities, and housing resource groups. The consistent and common message I heard was that two communities needed to be prioritized – the Old North End, where poverty was a serious issue, and Crescent Valley, a public housing community. I began to concentrate on the Old North End, where a group called ONE Change had already started to get things organized. There was an undercurrent in the community for change. People had seen enough problems with violence and drugs – they wanted to take their community back. We put together a strategy – in partnership – and I was able to secure some funding to put on a community planning event called a charette. I tapped into CMHC resource funding to help the community out to organize this 5-day event. Our contacts in the University connected me with a

group at Dalhousie University, and we used their model to bring the community together to develop strategies.

The charette ended up with 176 separate potential projects identified. It was an intensive exercise to organize, but was very rewarding for all partners. The partners included business, faith groups, and non-profit groups. Money was put in by businesses. There were in-kind contributions of food. The event was designed to be fun – there was entertainment the first day, and lunches and suppers throughout. The project was submitted to the Canadian Institute of Planners for an award in excellence in planning and it won. It was beneficial to the community to receive that sort of recognition.

Congratulations on that terrific recognition of your work! So in order to fulfill your mandate, then, you had to work within a collaborative approach?

That is the only way it can work. It fits in well with the approach CMHC takes, bringing partners together to work to solutions. When the community is organized, it makes the job even easier to get partners at the table.

Were there any tensions, barriers or challenges to working in this way?

The biggest challenge was the number of actors involved – trying to coordinate partners, getting people together at the table to do organizational work. We started working in June of 2005 and did the charette in November.

Coming out of it, the biggest challenge is balancing expectations. People in other neighbourhoods that also have needs are hearing about the successes in the Old North End and they are saying, “Why the Old North End? Why not focus on us too?” When things have been tested and proven to work, they can then be transferred to other communities.

Interview with Donna Beaton

Donna, your work was focused in the Crescent Valley neighbourhood. How did you come to be involved in this work, and to focus on that area specifically?

I think people will hear a number of common themes to those that Don has expressed.

I joined the Department of Family & Community Services as Regional Director about five years ago. Once I assumed that role, I, through discussions with residents and also our staff, became aware of issues, concerns and frustrations that Crescent Valley residents were experiencing. I started to think about exploring the role of our department in trying to effect changes and improve the conditions.

Crescent Valley is a separate neighbourhood in Saint John, almost set off by itself. It is a neighbourhood of low-income public housing, with 388 units, owned and managed by our department. That is how I initially got involved in the work, and then I was asked to be a part of the Vibrant Communities Saint John Leadership Roundtable. It then became obvious to me that there was a real opportunity to work collaboratively with other Roundtable partners to effect changes. Our department clearly could not do everything necessary ourselves.

Don said that it was easier for him to become involved because the community had self-organized and articulated its needs. Could you describe how Crescent Valley residents had identified their needs?

Crescent Valley was not organized to the point where the Old North End residents were. However, there was a tenants association that had existed for several years, which had run a number of projects and done a lot of good work. After I became involved in Vibrant Communities Saint John, we moved towards establishing a Crescent Valley Planning Committee. There were representatives from the three levels of government and a number of community organizations. It became obvious that one of the first things we should do was to conduct a resident survey to enable people to identify their priority needs and issues and their vision for the future of the community.

We were able to secure funding, with Don's help. We were able to conduct a survey, and the residents themselves became involved, received training, conducted the survey, and presented the results at an open session. This session was so high-profile that it attracted the attention of municipal and provincial government representatives

After the survey was presented to the community, the result was an announcement by the provincial government of a \$500,000 investment. Money was provided to cover a number of identified initiatives – to renovate a property to provide a resource centre for the residents, which would include an office for a community policing officer, to offset the expenses the City would incur to pay the officer's salary, and to hire additional maintenance staff to do improvements to the aging housing stock in the neighbourhood. The Survey Action Team also presented the results to City Council, with the result that the City has committed \$900,000 to improvements in the area.

It is much easier for partners to see a role they can play, and more difficult at the political level for people not to respond, when the community has self-organized and know what changes they want.

What, if any, challenges or barriers did you encounter?

There isn't anything that stands out. What Don is saying is true for our project – it certainly took some time to identify the appropriate partners. The issue of keeping up the momentum also arose – with any project, you deal with delays, so it is a challenge to keep people motivated and committed.

In Saint John, I notice that there is really a history of partners working collaboratively together on issues on many fronts. That is the culture I see here – which doesn't always exist in other communities.

Commentary, Caroline Andrew

Four themes in particular stand out from the experiences that Don and Donna describe:

1. What makes people go beyond their specific particular mandates? Both Don and Donna went beyond their narrowly defined mandates. Is it personal qualities, organizational culture, community traditions? What factors play themselves out in what makes it possible for people to see their work in the broadest possible way?
2. The theme of listening to the community is very important. I would distinguish between listening to the community and more formal consultations. When you consult, you are thinking about how you can make your case, but listening is going to the community in its own phase of organization.
3. Building community capacity is also a theme. In both of these cases, the people reacted to community needs and community demands, but also saw those in an even broader way and were able to do even more community capacity-building. Giving voices to the residents was important in both cases. Making citizens feel that they are a fully recognized part of society.
4. Finally, the question of how you balance institutionalization and flexibility. There are some interesting questions around what kind of structures there should be, how permanent they should structures be, and how to best organize – around geographic area, by sector, or in another way.

Questions & Comments

I work with a regional hospital corporation in Saint John. Vibrant Communities Saint John is flexible, not institutionalized. In Crescent Valley, as much as we wanted to do something on our own, we wouldn't have been able to if it weren't for the infrastructure of Vibrant Communities.

In health care, we sometimes do “for” rather than “with” – that is an important piece.

I work in the Gilbert Park Community in Manitoba. We have a tenant advisory group and a lot of partners, and it has been encouraging to learn what has gone on in Crescent Valley. Is there any information on-line about the process or the community?

Donna - The survey information is available on line. If anyone would like to make a connection with me at any time to talk about what we have done in Crescent Valley, I would be more than happy to share additional information. Don't hesitate to send me an e-mail and I will follow up.

Further to the questions that Caroline left on the table – the first one, I find intriguing – what makes people go beyond their mandate? As I think about who else we should bring to the table, it would be important to me to have an answer to that question – it might direct me to a department (if it's about structure) or an individual (if about a personal quality).

Caroline – It was a real question! I don't know what the answer is. There is obviously an element of personal qualities, but Donna mentioned community traditions. I am interested in what elements of organizational culture or structure make it easier or more difficult. Is it support from the immediate superior, or a more generalized idea that this is the mission of the organization? I look forward to discussing this more in the calls on Hamilton and other places.

Don – I think it is recognition by the community that we are all linked. The business community in Saint John knows that, in order to move ahead, there need to be linkages between people. There is a recognition here that in order to address poverty, we need to do it together.

I found Caroline's first point interesting. It has a “dark side,” though – those were happy stories, but I think the other issue is the kind of instability, change, and sometimes fickle attention from government to an issue. People in place are there for a long time, and public officials quite often move on in their roles. How will you handle the phase where you may not be able to give the same degree of attention?

Don – Once the community becomes organized, then it is difficult for governments to ignore people.

Donna – In fact, we have lived that. We have had a change of government. The announcement of funding for the Crescent Valley work was made by the previous government, and then we had a provincial election, and I was hearing questions from a number of partners about what that might mean. I believe what Don says is true – as a government official, it is difficult for us when we have changes of government if our voices are the only ones advocating for a path. But it is much more difficult for a new government to ignore when the community is stating their needs and wants. In Saint John, it has become infectious. It started with ONE Change, and we actually brought some Old North End residents in to inspire the Crescent Valley group. Now there are other initiatives – a group in the South End is getting organized and doing something similar.

What are the corporate elements that make it easier to cooperate? Could someone comment on the ability to take risk and risk aversion?

Donna – In this department, there is a supportive environment created by the senior management group. I joined this department at a time when they were going through tremendous change. I think when that happens, it creates an opportunity. It gives you the chance to push the envelope a bit.

Don – CMHC has been in the risk business for many years, on our commercial side (mortgage default insurance). I worked on that side for many years before coming to the community development side. There was a risk to what we did in the Old North End. I had a supportive regional management – as soon as they knew the situation and the needs, they jumped on board – there was support right up the line to our national office. We were able to balance some of the risk, hire the right people to do the facilitation. You have to accept some risk to move forward, but all of our organizations have different levels of risk tolerance.

