

**Vibrant Communities Calgary:
Community-Driven Policy Change
May 23, 2007**

Conversations with
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John te Linde, Manager of Social Policy and Planning, City of Calgary
Commentary by
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Interview with Derek Cook

Can you first speak to Calgary's understanding of, and definition of, the term "living wage"?

Understanding and definition are different. We generally have a common understanding of what a living wage IS – a wage that meets basic minimum needs by local standards – and we can then disagree about the nuances of definition. In Calgary, VCC has defined living wage as \$12/hour based on the wage that would be required for a single person. It has been adjusted upwards with inflation.

How did you first become engaged with Vibrant Communities Calgary?

The City has been involved with VCC from its inception. One of the functions of the Policy & Planning Division is to provide support to the community. Calgary does not have a Social Planning Council, and so the division has stepped in to fill that role. We provide consultative advice to the community and have taken that role with VCC. I became involved with VCC when they requested that consultation, and in late 2005 joined the Living Wage Action Team.

In January, City Council passed the Sustainable Environmental and Ethical Procurement Policy (SEEPP). Can you briefly explain the SEEPP, and tell us about the City-led (internal) working group (and your role) that developed it?

It is a policy requiring city suppliers to meet certain ethical and environmental performance standards. It is related to a number of other sustainability initiatives – Imagine Calgary, our triple bottom line policy, and the green procurement policy.

There are two parts – a policy that provides direction, and a supplier code of conduct establishing minimum performance standards. We are the first Canadian municipality to roll both environmental and ethical standards into one policy. Vancouver has an ethical procurement policy, but it is focused on a specific range of goods and services – Calgary’s is comprehensive.

Living wage is not part of SEPP at the moment. It covers working conditions, rates of pay, and includes a reference to paying a wage that meets basic needs by local standards, but it is a non-mandatory condition. It applies to City suppliers more than it does to the City itself.

How was VCC involved in the development of SEEP? Were there challenges?

Any successful policy requires action at two ends – a pincer approach – you need direction from the top and the bottom. VCC and the No Sweat group worked to get a political champion on Council in 2004.

Interview with John te Linde

How did you first link up and become involved with VCC?

Our involvement predates VCC. Many of us in the community were interested in doing something about poverty in Calgary. A number of us from community agencies and government departments formed a group called Sustained Poverty Reduction. Quickly, concepts like living wage came to the front.

A year or two into that, we realized that for some of us, it would impact our own operations. In the case of the United Way, it might impact their donor base. About the same time, VCC came along, and we spun off some initiatives to VCC. They took over work and advocacy on some of the initiatives that some of the rest of us might have difficulty in advancing too strongly due to our positions.

I sat on the VCC Steering Committee. My interest was in advancing concepts about living wage, doing a single-point-of-entry means test for some of our programs, working on the cost of transit in Calgary (this is an example of something that would affect the organization I worked for).

What has been your role?

As Derek mentioned, Calgary doesn't have a Social Planning Council. Part of our division's role is to do the community consultations that an SPC might normally do. We are not, however, well positioned to do the advocacy, particularly in terms of City policy.

What are some of the challenges that arise at the interface between your work at the City and that of community initiatives, like VCC?

On two fronts – the low-income transit pass and the SEEPP policy – as Derek mentioned, he was involved in VCC and doing work with them on living wage when the SEEPP team was being formed. Derek was our representative on that team. Early on, there was discussion of terms of reference, and some other members of the team felt that living wage would be too difficult to tackle. After discussion, it was decided to keep that as something to be explored.

As this moved ahead, Derek's dual role with VCC and this team was questioned by some other team members – whether there was a conflict of interest. That was dealt with by Derek stepping back from his involvement with VCC. Another of my people continued the work with VCC.

Have there been supports provided to your initiative through political relationships that VCC has had with local Councillors? Is there a role community initiatives can play that a government official cannot?

As the SEEPP policy was being finalized and brought to Council, there was some resistance to the term "living wage." VCC pushed strongly to have a strong living wage component in the policy. But, near finalization, a decision was made to go forward without mandatory living wage. VCC was then able to be helpful as they were able to continue moving forward with politicians after we were not. Through that, they were able to have an amendment made asking the living wage piece to be looked at again. That work is going on this summer, and recommendations will be made in the fall around adding a mandatory living wage piece to the policy.

Commentary, Katherine Graham

I will focus on three areas. The first is the fact that research underlies a lot of what has happened. Exploration may be worthwhile in thinking about the role of the research done through VC, other community groups, and municipalities. This is very grounded research, intended to be instrumental in developing grounded policy at the local level.

Secondly, the notion of local standards – the definition of a local living wage in this case. We've talked about differences among communities in other calls in this series. Here we have an example of an effort to develop a hard, but moving, benchmark as to what constitutes a local living wage. That is laudable, but I

wonder whether the fact that this is possible is not in some way the root of part of the challenge in terms of being able to engage the federal and provincial governments in locally-based initiatives. The living wage in Calgary is somewhat higher than in, perhaps, Lethbridge, and perhaps lower than in Fort McMurray – so how should the provincial government respond to these local differences?

Thirdly, we see the theme of the importance to Vibrant Communities of getting political support. There is a delicate dance between political people and staff in City governments. This story points to the adroitness with which municipal staff must juggle their roles as professional public servants and how they are drawn towards advocating for an issue. This is a fundamental challenge for local public servants, as well as for any public servants who are placed in a locality. John's solution of separating the roles of corporate thinker and community engager by having two people fill those roles is a practical approach. In Alberta, people tend to go for the practical, and that sometimes gets you farther than thinking in terms of high principles.

