

Policy Change from the Ground Up
Call #3 – Working for Changes in Neighbourhood Revitalization Policy
Lessons from Saint John, Surrey and Saint-Michel
May 24, 2006

Introductory comments – Sherri Torjman

- A quick recap about the purpose of the learning series (to enable participants to learn from one another by looking at the practical experiences that various community initiatives have had trying to bring about policy change for poverty reduction).
- A comment about neighbourhood revitalization as a somewhat different type of policy area because it involves so many different policy issues as well as the overall support for the neighbourhood development process.
- Welcome to ANC and a brief description of the ANC initiative.
- Introduction to the interviewees:
 - Vibrant Communities Saint John: Monica Chaperlin, VCSJ Coordinator and Kurt Peacock, VCSJ Researcher
 - Action for Neighbourhood Change (Bridgeview) and Vibrant Surrey: Linda Western, ANC Project Manager, United Way of the Lower Mainland
 - Saint-Michel: Pierre Durocher, charge du projet (Project Director), Vivre Saint-Michel en sante
 - Dal Brodhead, New Economy Deveelopment Group and a Tamarack coach working with Saint-Michel (Dal will be assisting us with interpretation today – and likely adding a few comments of his own!)

Interview with Monica Chaperlin and Kurt Peacock, Saint John

How did VC Saint John come to be involved in neighbourhood revitalization, and how has that impacted policy development? Why do you feel a focus on neighbourhood development is important for poverty reduction?

Kurt –

- *Research revealed the presence of high poverty neighbourhoods, a real geographic distribution when it comes to poverty and plenty*
- *High concentration of lone parent families, **substandard housing, limited economic opportunity** in these neighbourhoods*
- *Many different factors that contribute to poverty and poverty reduction (**decent housing, early childhood development, crime prevention, wellness and recreational programs, continuing education and training, employment, transportation and community leadership development**), come together in high poverty neighbourhoods. Working with a described neighbourhood allows VCSJ to help develop and evaluate a comprehensive, multisectoral approach to poverty reduction.*

- **Knowing the neighbourhood's needs – as well as their assets – can help produce a more focussed policy response**
- *An opportunity to work supportively and in multi-faceted ways with low-income residents to identify and address challenges and record improvements.*

What is your role working with neighbourhood residents and government to strengthen government support and improve specific policies?

Monica -

- *We're working with 4 neighbourhood groups. We're leading the development in two neighbourhoods and providing support to the leaders of the other two neighbourhoods.*
- *The VCSJ roles:*
 - a) researching and providing a **geographic and socio-demographic profile** to help describe the neighbourhood as compared to the City and other neighbourhoods. Information includes: Age groups, gender, housing stock, level of education and income, crime rates, labour force participation rate, type of jobs the workers hold, etc.*
 - b) Being a trusted **honest broker**. On one hand, suggesting and searching out resources that the neighbourhood may need, i.e., funding, expertise, programs and on the other hand, bringing to the attention of business leaders, professionals and politicians, the neighbourhood profile, goals, successes and needs.*
 - c) Providing **community development leadership training** for low income residents.*
 - d) Offering an **evaluation and reporting component** to ensure the neighbourhood development work is measured, recorded and reported.*

What kinds of 'policy-related' results have been achieved to date?

Kurt -

- *On energy poverty, we used the data we had collected concerning the age of Saint John's rental housing stock to help make the case that utility rate increases would place a considerable financial burden on low-income households.*
- *We held intervention status at the regulatory board, the Public Utilities Board, for over a year*
- *By the end of the hearing, some of the corporate intervenors would echo some of our concerns*
- *Through media interviews, and the invited testimonials of low-income New Brunswickers, we raised awareness about how a significant rate hike could jeopardize the well-being of thousands of NB households*
- *In early Spring, the provincial government effectively cancelled the proposed utility rate hike; there is now an increased willingness to consider how low-income households need greater support in the transition to higher rates*

- o *In the North End, there are a number of ways in which the use of numbers is helping to influence policy and promote new investment*
- o *Given the fact that more than 85% of units in the neighbourhood are rented, a community Charette (comprehensive neighbourhood planning process) identified tougher action on slum lords, increased opportunity for affordable home ownership as areas to focus action*
- o *Given that the numbers suggest that the community is much younger than the rest of the city, there is an increased focus on targeted youth investments, including: a friendly neighbourhood police presence, more funding for youth recreation, promotion of good health, etc.*

What advice would you offer to another community seeking government support for issues related to neighbourhood revitalization?

Monica -

- o *Know the neighbourhood – survey, focus groups, interviews, etc.*
- o *Describe the neighbourhood - statistical profile, survey results and stories*
- o *Identify and develop resident leadership (builds trust and skills)*
- o *Identify and involve community partners/leaders as early as possible to create a multi-sector learning community)*
- o *Make it clear upfront that “funding” is necessary for neighbourhood improvements and that the “investments” will reap major economic and social benefits for the whole community.*
- o *Clear long term vision and concrete short term project plans/actions*
- o *Address resident priorities while communicating opportunities for funding, resources, etc.*
- o *Document the progress and report on every success.*
- o *Patience, persistence, long term commitment.*

Questions & Answers

How do you go about defining the neighbourhood? You went block by block? How did you go about identifying the unit of measurement?

Monica - The neighbourhood did it themselves, the residents defined their natural neighbourhood. Then we used Stats Canada info to match it as well as we could to what the neighbourhood defined as their boundaries.

Kurt – There are some wonderful maps on the Stats Can website that break down neighbourhoods on the dissemination level. What helped us was that some of the boundaries that Stats Can put together were very complimentary to what our neighbourhood residents defined. So check out <http://www.statcan.ca/>

You were talking about these neighbourhoods with an older stock of buildings in them and your desire to make them more efficient. Have you been in touch with local heritage

groups, associations, and attempted to bring in those organizations to help in this public awareness and revitalization?

Kurt – Not in the north end, but fortunately in Saint John all of the various activists generally get to know each other over the years. In south end there's also a significant older housing stock, that entire neighbourhood of the city is protected by a heritage by-law. There, affordable housing cooperatives work with the heritage office to ensure that traditional building elements are maintained. There is not the same degree of discussion in the north end. At the same time, there's an understanding that this neighbourhood has distinct architecture. At the Charette residents really highlighted their desire for the buildings to maintain their character. There is an understanding that if the buildings are invested in, they'll remain an asset for decades to come.

Was there anyone at NB Power trying to help, any example that you would suggest we look at?

Kurt – The best example was in Montreal, Ecut'air, an environmental organization in Montreal that worked closely with Hydro Quebec to develop measures specific to low income neighbourhoods. You don't necessarily have the same investment in the housing stock like there is in communities with a lot of home ownership. They were the best example of efficiency example.

Interview with Linda Western, Surrey

Now Linda, let's turn to your efforts in Surrey to build relations between government and neighbourhoods.

United Way of the Lower Mainland has adopted a community building approach to its work. Your involvement in both Vibrant Communities and Action for Neighbourhood Change is a reflection of that community building perspective. Can you briefly share with us why the United Way has moved in this direction and how it informs the work you are doing in VC and ANC?

- o *Adopted a community capacity building approach in 1999*
- o *To really support community need to pursuing a broader partnership approach, not only with agencies who receive UW funding but with many others in the community*
- o *Building this broad collaboration was seen as critical for realizing community well being.*

Your work in ANC is, of course, specifically geared to neighbourhood revitalization per se. Part of the ANC effort in general is about building better relations between neighbourhoods and what we are calling the system of support – the whole range of government and community agencies which do or can provide programs, services and other supports to neighbourhood residents. In your ANC work in Surrey you have made

a special effort to engage the system of support as a partner in the work of neighbourhood revitalization. How did you go about doing this? And what were the results?

- o *Wanted to involve the system of support from the outset for a number of reasons:*
 - i. *Wanted to frame the initiative as a community process with UW as the lead rather than a UW project*
 - ii. *Wanted the process to be transparent throughout*
 - iii. *Felt it would build greater ownership for others to be involved from the outset*
 - iv. *ANC was an action research and learning process so wanted other agencies to participate in learning how to go about the selection process; also hoped that the lessons learned would be used in other initiatives in Surrey?*
- o *Who was involved? Municipality (Parks and Rec), school board, other agencies*
- o *What did the process involve? Engaged these groups in the neighbourhood selection process; prepared data about various neighbourhoods for discussion with the group; facilitated the selection process; formed 'Friends of Bridgeview' and 'Bridgeview Advisory Committee' as ongoing bodies to follow the neighbourhood process and allow members to build a closer involvement with the neighbourhood (as well as with one another).*
- o *Results? The Municipality (Parks and Rec) has been a very active and supportive partner, open to having officials meet with neighbourhood residents to share information and explore ways they can contribute; the local school, especially principal, has made itself accessible to the residents to support their work – becoming a real community school and encouraging interest within the board to develop community schools elsewhere.*

Are you pursuing similar efforts in the context of Vibrant Surrey and what results are you seeing there in terms of stronger collaboration between government and community around poverty reduction issues?

- o *Many of the same government and community agencies are involved in both ANC and VC so the ANC work is reinforcing VC efforts to build partnerships.*

Based on your experiences in Surrey, what advice would you offer to other communities seeking to engage government as partners in neighbourhood revitalization or community building more generally?

- o *Provide sound information*
- o *Go slowly*
- o *Be responsive to the input provided government – sensitive to their perspectives, e.g., language of 'poverty reduction' was a concern because it*

cast a light on problems and created a negative impression that was not helpful as opposed to working for the 'economic well being of all'.

- o *Timing – when government partners are ready to move forward in this type of initiative they will; can't push too hard; do what you can, when you can; keep those who are not ready to act informed and involved as much as possible so that the opportunity is created for more later on.*

Questions and Answers

As you were talking about neighbourhood selection you mentioned assets and readiness as criteria. Can you tell us about the indicators you used – about the readiness?

We saw it as what organizations were already there. There was a community hall which offered different programs already, people were very interested and were working to a certain extent through this community hall. There was a weak parent advisory committee and the school principal was committed to the community. These assets were already there and we looked at the ability of the people already working to achieve some of these goals. Because this was a research project and happening over two years, we knew that we had to move quickly. We thought Bridgeview was the best example, as groups had worked together, for example, parks and rec had worked with the hall association, there was a strong liaison between the RCMP and the school.

Did you collect data on all the neighbourhoods or how did you do that?

We looked at five short listed communities and used demographics to look at those. We then followed the process of using the knowledge of the community – the community policing group, parks and rec, police - everybody brought their collective knowledge of the community, all brought what they knew. Once we put that up in front of ourselves, it was clear as that unfolded that some looked more amenable to the process than others.

Interview with Pierre Durocher and Dal Brodhead

Welcome Pierre and Dal. Like Surrey, you are really in the midst of building a relationship between government and the low income neighbourhood of Saint-Michel. In your case, however, the focus at the moment is specifically on the City of Montreal and the process you are using is also somewhat different.

The convenor organization in Saint-Michel, Vivre Saint Michel en sante, has been working in this neighbourhood since 1991. One of the key aspects of your current work is to build strong relationships with agencies and structures outside the neighbourhood, including government. Why is building the link with external structures, such as government, important for tackling poverty and social exclusion in your neighbourhood?

- o *Vivre Saint Michel traditionally had involvement from much more local partners (individuals, organizations, institutions)*

- o *External agencies bring additional resources, capacities etc. needed to support neighbourhood revitalization*
- o *The City of Montreal, in particular, has a number of important departments (economy, environment, culture) that would be helpful for addressing issues of interest in Saint-Michel. Up to now, the link with the City was more through its department of social development which is not one of its more powerful agencies.*

A very important partnership that you have been building has been with the City of Montreal. How have you been working to build that relationship?

- o *Through an intervention with the Mayor of Montreal, managed to secure support for the neighbourhood to partner with the city in the development of a new shopping centre located in an old quarry that once was a centre of the Saint-Michel economy. The centre is to be developed with a particular focus on rejuvenating the local economy and creating economic opportunities for neighbourhood residents.*
- o *The partnership is an experiment in how the neighbourhood and the City can work together. Lessons will be learned that likely will contribute to future initiatives.*

What have been the major challenges you have faced and what, if any, successes have been achieved?

- o *Major challenges: shifting attitude of City officials from doing to or for the neighbourhood to working with the neighbourhood; developing trust between neighbourhood residents and City officials.*
- o *Successes: have 25 people at the table working collaboratively on this initiative – unusual.*

Based on your experience with the City of Montreal, what advice would you offer to another community seeking to build a stronger partnership with local government to address neighbourhood issues?

- o *We needed enough stature to be dealt with in a respectful fashion, seen as a group who deserved respect.*
- o *Second, to build a sense of trust between the partners at the table.*
- o *It's a little early to talk about success, but I'd say, getting the mayor to the table was a big boost and making sure that the mayor understood the situation was important, and this was particularly supported by the role of United Way which was ongoing and UW already having links with the city was able to build on this relationship and support the work under way at the neighbourhood level.*

Questions and Answers

I have a question around health status. Did people look at the relationship between poverty and health, what was the role of health regions in any of this?

Monica – The regional health authorities played a big role. They collaborated with the public health agency of Canada and did a chronic health condition status study, relating it to poverty. Their results were clear that people living in poverty have much more elevated issues around hypertension, diabetes, etc. It's nice to have that data.

Pierre – There wasn't a particular focus or reference to it in this project except that the local public health authorities of the City of Montreal publishes a report annually that links health & poverty and makes the link nationally as well.

Linda – This is one of the groups that we had the most difficulty in engaging. We had one health indicator, but the way they gathered the information wasn't relevant for us. We do have a public health nurse engaged quite intensely through the school, she looks after immunization, babies in Bridgeview, etc., so that's a strong relationship, but that's at the ground level only. This is partly because the region itself is going through a lot of changes, a lot of shifting of staff, focusing on different directions. It had 20 municipalities in it as well. It hasn't been helpful for us to connect at the neighbourhood level.