

Report to:

Canada Mortgage & Housing Corporation  
Saint John, NB

*Crescent Valley – A Community in Motion*

Vibrant Communities Saint John  
October 25, 2006

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

We wish to thank Don Connolly, Corporate Representative for Canada Mortgage & Housing Corporation Saint John, for his generous contributions of technical and moral support and encouragement, as well as facilitation of the \$10,000 contribution for which this report accounts.

Members of the Vibrant Communities Saint John Crescent Valley Planning Committee who have faithfully attended meetings for 18 months are also gratefully acknowledged.

It is surely the tireless teamwork of the Survey Action Team that can rightfully claim responsibility for the success of the survey and dissemination of results both in their own community and further afield.

We are confident that the work begun in Crescent Valley is a rich seedbed for future endeavors and momentum generated by the community survey and follow-up will grow incrementally as Crescent Valley residents and Vibrant Communities Saint John partners innovative collaborations for change.

Gail Taylor, Community Coach  
Colleen Grattan Gick, Project Manager

October 25, 2006

## Introduction

Crescent Valley is a 388-unit public housing project located in Saint John, New Brunswick. The housing project, owned by the Province of New Brunswick and managed by the Department of Family and Community Services, was constructed in the late 1950s. A great number of housing units are in need of major renovations inside and out to modernize their appearance and enhance comfort and safety.<sup>1</sup>

The community consists of two main boulevards – MacLaren and Churchill – with a maze of branching courts and avenues. Altogether Crescent Valley covers more than 11 hectares or 27½ acres. Approximately 1000 people reside here, and the survey described in this report indicates that 65% of households have children under 18; it has been estimated elsewhere that over 600 children and youth reside in the neighbourhood.

Of all adult females in Crescent Valley, 42% are single parent mothers. Of those who responded to the survey, 83% were female, confirming that this neighbourhood among others in Saint John has an unusually high ratio of females to males.

Nearly 56% of survey respondents are between the ages of 25 and 44 and another 30% range between 45 and 64. There is an equal distribution (7% each) of those over 65 and those between 18 and 25.

Crescent Valley is identified as a neighborhood at risk because well over 40% of the population live below the poverty line – and so far below, in many instances, that it is not very useful to use accepted standards of poverty as measurement. Neighborhood residents express feelings of isolation and stigmatization by the wider community. Lack of green spaces and leisure activities go hand-in-hand with inferior infrastructure such as sidewalks, roads, and crosswalks, and maintenance issues are common. Rates of high school completion are low – only 33% of the population has completed high school – and consequently, enrolment in post-secondary training and education as well as labor force participation are limited. These are just a few markers of life in Crescent Valley that work against a sense of hope for a brighter future.<sup>2</sup>

Nonetheless, using an assets-based framework, the community has tremendous potential in terms of human spirit, a willingness to work together, resourcefulness, and readiness for change.

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<sup>1</sup> *Crescent Valley Revitalization: An internal report prepared for Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative, Inc (BCAPI) by Elizabeth de'Luisa.*

<sup>2</sup> *Poverty and Plenty: A Statistical Snapshot of the Quality of Life in Greater Saint John.* Prepared by partnerships between Vibrant Communities Saint John, Human Development Council, & the Community University Research Alliance of the University of New Brunswick Saint John. (<http://www.humandevlopmentcouncil.nb.ca/page4.htm>)

## The Evolution of the Crescent Valley Community Survey

Below is a timeline and glossary of key events in the history of community development in Crescent Valley since Vibrant Communities Saint John and partners were first involved 18 months ago:

- February 2005: Establishment of Vibrant Communities Saint John (VCSJ), a non-profit poverty reduction strategy forging partnerships for research and action with three levels of government (senior bureaucrats as well as elected officials), community-based organizations, the faith community, business, and people living in poverty.
- March 2005: Vibrant Communities Saint John convenes a core committee to explore community revitalization in Crescent Valley. Core group for this initiative is New Brunswick Family and Community Services (regional director), City of Saint John (city councillor), and director with what would become Service Canada.
- Spring 2005: Crescent Valley Planning Committee is fully convened as one of several new VCSJ working groups, comprised of representatives from City Police, community-based organizations, three levels of government, business, committed individuals with prior and current links to Crescent Valley from the literacy and education sectors, and VCSJ community developers. Community Coach Gail Taylor is tasked with researching community development theory and best practices with particular reference to public housing neighbourhoods in Canada and elsewhere.
- Spring/summer 2005: Planning committee adopts the comprehensive community initiative development model as a framework for going forward in Crescent Valley, building on assets and focussing on capacity building. Project proposed to committee by staff lead is resident-driven community survey to fulfill two functions: mobilizing residents to drive neighbourhood change by enhancing community capacity and resident buy-in; and a research vehicle to identify problems, issues, and ideas for change from residents' perspective.
- Fall 2005: Planning Committee supports City Police in holding community meeting to ask for residents' input on issues related to community safety.
- Fall 2005: Comprehensive survey questionnaire developed by VCSJ community coach and circulated for input from experts in crime, domestic violence, housing, recreation, and others. Survey goes through several drafts to capture wide spectrum of input.
- October 2005: Community coach works with long-time literacy worker in Crescent Valley, Cheryl Brown, to convene 11-member focus group that provides input on every question and phase of the survey. Residents determine survey should be delivered *to every home* (not a random selection) and just as importantly that properly trained residents will facilitate the survey door-to-door.
- November 2005: Local MLA Trevor Holder, a member of the Crescent Valley Planning Committee, announces \$25,000 from the provincial government to administer community survey and conduct follow-up community development.

- December 2005: Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CHMC) pledges a further \$10,000 for community survey and strategic planning processes related to action team development, community reporting of results, and follow-up processes.

## Key Events in Community Survey Process

The following events highlight community development principles of inclusion, accessibility, and capacity-building.<sup>3</sup>

- January 5, 2006: Crescent Valley Survey Center opens at 154 MacLaren Boulevard, a partial unit donated by Family and Community Services from which to coordinate the survey. Centrally located along one of the main grids of the neighborhood, the survey centre proves to be an excellent location for conducting training and overseeing the survey facilitation, as well as for subsequent meetings, preparation for presentations, and celebrations. While it was not an obvious issue for those who conducted the survey, the location is upstairs and could represent a major barrier for residents with mobility issues.
- Survey team assembled by VCSJ Community Coach: Survey Coordinator (Ann Barrett, retired Vice-Principal of community school); St. Thomas University Social Work intern Colleen Grattan Gick; and Community Literacy Worker Cheryl Brown. This core coordinating team will support the work of residents to facilitate the survey.
- January 13, 2006: Ten women from Crescent Valley show up for a 3-hour training designed by Gail Taylor, Colleen Grattan Gick, and UNBSJ sociology professor Lee Chalmers. They receive training on confidentiality and procedures to ensure anonymity of response, as well as learn techniques and strategies to assist residents who need help filling out the survey, and dealing with various possible reactions. The survey questionnaire is reviewed question by question to ensure complete understanding of what is being asked.
- January 24, 2006. Crescent Valley Community Survey begins. Originally advertised as a survey site and school drop-in format, the team changes strategy after a week of sporadic response and decides to take it door-to-door. The survey is 17 pages long and takes on average 45 minutes to complete. Team members remain at the Center during survey hours in order to brief and debrief facilitators, who are instructed to return sealed questionnaires at the end of each shift.

Facilitators are paid \$10/hour and carefully scheduled to avoid duplication calls. They also receive childcare expenses incurred while working. The team sets its own motivating goals: 1) to ensure every household has an opportunity to respond (call-back cards are left and follow-up calls conducted); 2) to obtain a 50% participation/completion rate of response.

- February 11, 2006. The last day of the survey and evidence in over 200 sealed brown envelopes that a phenomenal response rate of 54% has been achieved, and that One Hundred per cent of the neighborhood was canvassed and given a chance to participate.

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<sup>3</sup> For detailed analysis, see *Your Voice Counts*, Appendix i, by Colleen Grattan Gick.

- March 22, 2006. Survey facilitators continue to meet and prepare to report survey results to a variety of audiences, culminating with the promised report back to their own community. The Crescent Valley Survey Action Team (CV-SAT) is formally established as a resident leadership team representing members as well as non-members of the pre-existing Crescent Valley Community Tenants' Association (CVCTA).
- April – May 2006. Through Jim Woods, member of the CV Planning Committee, Service Canada contributes labor-intensive data entry for survey responses. Subsequently, Dr. Lee Chalmers of UNBSJ volunteers to transfer data to compatible software and assembles print-out of all results.
- May 2006. After meeting to examine preliminary results and prepare a presentation highlighting key findings, CV-SAT invites Crescent Valley Planning Committee to meet over pizza in the neighbourhood and makes an extensive presentation of survey results. This is the first interface between the CV-SAT and the CV Planning Committee and it is an unqualified success: VCSJ partners are galvanized by the scope of the survey and by the SAT's ability to present issues and ideas belonging to their neighbourhood.
- July 26th, 2006. VCSJ community coach prepares powerpoint presentation of survey results and together with other team members prepares SAT members to make full presentation to the community. Over 80 people attend the presentation at the Somerset Community Centre, an audience evenly divided between CV residents and VCSJ partners, politicians, senior bureaucrats from Fredericton, and interested community members. The event is a huge success, media interest is high, and buzz on the street is that residents are engaged. The SAT is rightfully proud of their continuing public presence – the result of many hours of meeting, strategizing, analyzing, and discussion behind the scenes.

## Summary of Survey Results

The Crescent Valley Neighborhood Survey (Appendix ii) contains questions under these headings: *Background Information, Services and Supports, Crime and Safety, Training and Education, Work, Government Supports, Housing, Buildings and Access, Working Together, Suggestions for Action and Demographics*. The July 26<sup>th</sup> Power Point presentation and the script used by SAT members (Appendices iii-pdf & iv) provide detailed survey highlights and commentary for each category. A separate presentation made to the Community Health Centre aggregating and analyzing results spread throughout the survey data related to the social determinants of health is also included (Appendix v). A sample of highlights follows:

### Background Information

- Asked whether residents would stay or leave if they had their choice, 65% said they would like to stay in CV and help to create change.

### **Services and Supports**

- The vast majority of services and programs are not available within the community or within walking distance, including necessary services such as food purchasing, health care, and emergency services.
- The chief barriers to accessing services outside walking range were first and foremost lack of money, inadequate affordable transportation, information on services and criteria for their access; and quality affordable childcare.
- Residents need a recreation centre in the Valley to house programs for all ages. They are especially concerned about the needs of youth (which they feel should be treated separate from other programming), and children.

### **Crime and Safety**

- Crime and safety are definitely long-term concerns. Vandalism, physical attacks, bullying of children en route to and from school, and violence in all its forms are of special concern, with one-third of all residents saying they were directly affected in the past two years.
- Usually considered a hidden problem surrounded by a shroud of silence, residents were very vocal about domestic abuse as a significant problem in Crescent Valley. They confirm there are no prevention, education, or intervention services in the neighbourhood, and made a strong plea for a safe, confidential space for women, a 24-7 hotline, and prevention programs for youth as well as adults.

### **Housing, Buildings and Access**

- 42% of residents indicated the need for upgrading inside and out with their unit. Open-ended responses painted a picture of general deterioration due to age and lack of maintenance, and specific suggestions ran the gamut from the need for paint to the necessity for better plumbing.
- The most frequent complaints concerned an urgent need for wiring to be upgraded; mold was also a priority issue, with poor insulation and garbage in hallways adding to a rodent problem close behind.
- Residents were asked about their preference for other affordable housing options and 47% said they would be interested in home ownership with special mortgage programs with 35% interested in the possibilities of mixed income non-profit rental.
- 87% of those surveyed stated that better garbage control was needed. Other high percentage responses included endorsement for recreational space outdoors – parks, green spaces, walking pathways, playgrounds, safe sidewalks and fenced-in yards.

### **Training, Education, & Work**

- Formal education levels were somewhat better than predicted though only 33% of those surveyed had completed high school with another 15% who had completed Grades 10 or 11; 13% had some college or university and 12% had graduated college or university. Very few residents are enrolled in upgrading or GED programs.
- 76% of residents do not work outside the home for pay. Barriers to work include health and disability, transportation, affordable quality child care, lack of skills and experience, and support and information related to job availability and training opportunities.
- Suggestions for overcoming barriers included a job centre in the neighbourhood, bridging workshops and courses to prepare people to enter the job market, and consistent supports such as affordable childcare and transportation. Financial assistance for training is an urgent persisting need.

### **Working Together**

- When asked how residents and police could work together, residents indicated a desire for a mutual relationship of trust and respect with police that recognized both parties need to make efforts towards this. Several residents suggested police participation in community events and meetings as a good neutral way to begin improvement of relations.
- Residents want a safe confidential way to cooperate with police in order to sidestep the fear of retaliation and reprisal associated with being known as “a rat”. An anonymous tip line was suggested.
- Residents indicated a strong desire to work more closely with the community school. As parents, they would like to be more involved in their children’s progress and viewed respectfully as an important resource for problem-solving.
- Working together was seen as the most important way to create a new community with better communications and more opportunities to meet informally as well as for specific changes. The need for inclusiveness and tolerance rank high on the list of values that residents want to promote by working together.

### **Suggestions for Action**

- An overwhelming number of residents feel isolated and suggest a range of activities and gatherings with more things specifically for women to do, better public transit, and a library and bill payment depot in the neighbourhood; and a community centre.
- Support groups of every kind and description were heavily endorsed: groups for youths, single mothers, substance abuse and gambling, and domestic violence, to name a few. A trusted facilitator and support for child care and transportation would be needed to really make groups work.

- Communications need to be improved within the neighbourhood. Residents suggested a newsletter, face-to-face meetings where people could say what was on their mind without being judged, opportunities to get out and let people know you're there and that your voice counts.
- Education, leisure and recreation opportunities are needed for all ages. One of the biggest assets in the neighbourhood is seen as StoryTent – but much more is needed in every season.
- Priorities were seen as health and wellness clinics, parenting skills, programs for teens, domestic violence programs, creation of a community centre.
- CV residents want to partner with government at all levels, business, politicians, community-based agencies and community development personnel.
- An outstanding 85% said they believe that working together can create change in Crescent Valley.

## Next Steps

A synopsis of events occurring in the late summer and early fall of 2006 follows:

- Minister Trevor Holder announces \$½ M for Crescent Valley to be allocated as follows: (1) exterior household repairs; (2) a community police officer for 3 years; (3) renovation of a complete unit of 4 apartments to serve as a community centre. Family & Community Services will administer the funds.
- FCS seeks resident input on location, administration, and usage of renovated unit in order to determine which unit will be renovated (with residents moved to rent supplemented market housing or within Crescent Valley) before fiscal year end.
- The generous offer of a partial Charette from CHMC to determine an action plan for the neighbourhood is vetoed with thanks by the SAT on the basis that much of the research associated with a Charette has been done through the survey.
- Team member Colleen Grattan Gick researches appropriate potential community forums and discovers SpeakOut model in the literature. A SpeakOut is a participatory public consultation event that is interactive and invites neighbourhood residents to prioritize and plan through creative hands-on techniques. It is a hybrid between an open house and a meeting, includes children and youth, and will be open to service providers, business, government, and other VCSJ partners at specific points during the day.
- The first expanded resident meeting takes place in the Community Room of the Police Station on Somerset Street, with over 40 people attending. The SpeakOut is approved for November 2006.
- VCSJ team working with the CV-SAT and "new" residents go forward with weekly planning meetings to create booths in each of the various issue areas matching the survey, with the culminating booth in the sequence devoted to input for the community centre. Residents will be invited to attend the SpeakOut to register their views and priorities on short- and longer-term actions from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. on November 9<sup>th</sup> at the Somerset Community Centre gym. The event will

be documented by filmmakers Jon and Freda Pedersen and youth will also play a prominent role in documentation and planning.

- The SAT continues to meet separately in order to make key decisions, to discuss and resolve barriers to action, and build capacity for teamwork and leadership. They will be strongly represented at a special Training on November 1<sup>st</sup> for the facilitators and listeners who will staff each Booth at the SpeakOut.
- SAT members with VCSJ community coach and guidance from Human Development Council Randy Hatfield and City Councillor Peter McGuire will present to Common Council on November 6<sup>th</sup>.
- SAT members participated with members of the South End Area Community Action Team (SEA-CATs) at a national conference of Community Health Centres hosted in Saint John in October 2006, presenting to an appreciative break-out group of 18 delegates from across the country on the evolution and future directions of neighbourhood action.
- Further neighbourhood networking between Crescent Valley and the South End will occur during an upcoming Community Economic Development workshop (November 8<sup>th</sup>) with presentations from a micro-development expert from Nova Scotia and local participation from the Saint John Community Loan Fund. Residents will participate in an interactive brainstorming to determine potential viable enterprise projects for incubation in vulnerable neighbourhoods.

Respectfully submitted:

Gail Taylor, Community Coach  
Colleen Grattan Gick, Project Manager

