

Your Voice Counts!
The Crescent Valley Community Survey

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I would like to gratefully acknowledge the people who gave so generously of their time to be interviewed and shared their reflections on the community development work in Crescent Valley. A special thank you to Gail Taylor and Cathy Wright for their editorial input.

Colleen

Introduction

On a late spring afternoon along The Boulevard in the Crescent Valley neighborhood, there is a warmth in the sun that seems to draw the children to play longer and harder than the cold of winter permits. The neighborhood is teeming with the sounds and movement of the children. There are children everywhere- skipping, running, bicycling and young ones being pushed in strollers. Three young girls catch my attention as they meander hand in hand across the open field within my view. It should be no surprise to see all the children. The statistics show 30- 40% of the population in this area is under the age of 14. One youth said some residents call this neighborhood “the Boulevard of Broken Dreams”; statistics also show that MacLaren Boulevard is home to the highest incidence of poverty among residents of the City of Saint John. Statistics tell you a lot of things about Crescent Valley but they don’t tell you everything.

This is the story of something that is happening in Crescent Valley that many are hoping will improve life in the neighborhood, something known as community development. It’s really only the beginning of the story, because as anyone who’s ever participated will tell you, community development is a long, multifaceted and ongoing process. It is not just about putting new programs and projects in place, although it may include that; it is also about the potential for individuals, families and neighborhoods to take hold of their destinies. A story of successful community development will mean various forms of transformation within high poverty neighborhoods and within the wider community that supports their empowerment process. This story encompasses a period of approximately a year and a half; the beginning is hard to determine precisely, the ending is unforeseen.

My purpose in writing this report is to describe and reflect on my experience of being involved in the training, implementation and aftermath of the Crescent Valley community survey and to document the invaluable learning I have received from it. I arrived at Vibrant Communities Saint John as an intern doing a 700- hour field placement for a Post-Degree Bachelor of Social Work degree. The opportunity to experience community

development work in an agency devoted solely to this area is not only unique among my classmates' placements but perhaps singular in the experience of most New Brunswick social workers. Social workers, while traditionally employed in areas that provide direct service to individuals and families living in difficult circumstances, have few opportunities in areas aimed only at community change that address root causes of poverty and injustice in society.

In addition, this report provides a detailed account of the community building process for Canada Mortgage and Housing (CMHC), which contributed \$10,000 to the survey project funds. Information in CHMC's *Guide To Affordable Housing Partnerships* demonstrates support for partnerships with both affordable housing and community development components. This experience adds to the body of information available to CMHC on affordable housing partnerships of this nature.

It will also serve to account, in narrative terms, for the \$25,000 grant from the Province of New Brunswick, secured through the auspices of Trevor Holder, MLA for Saint John Portland.

Vibrant Communities Saint John Beginnings

In February 2005, the non-profit poverty reduction organization Vibrant Communities Saint John (VCSJ) opened its doors. The groundwork for this initiative had been solidly laid under the leadership of founding partners: the Saint John Business Anti-Poverty Initiative (BCAPI), the Urban Core Support Network (UCSN), the Human Development Council (HDC), and the City of Saint John. Saint John is a community that prides itself on a history of caring for its citizens who live in poverty. The extensive directory of a multitude of diverse services published by the HDC testifies to this history. With representatives from all founding agencies, Saint John was able to respond to the invitation from Vibrant Communities Canada to attend a meeting of communities from across Canada looking for new ways to increase their capacity to address poverty. Vibrant Communities Canada (VCC) was formed by Tamarack –An Institute for

Community Engagement in 2002 as a community driven effort to reduce poverty in Canada by creating partnerships between people, organizations, businesses and governments. The mood of Saint John participants returning from that meeting has been described as “cautious but excited”. Spurred on by this excitement, Saint John partners organized community meetings and focus groups and began the work of establishing the priorities for the work of VCSJ.

The Framework of Comprehensive Community Initiatives

Saint John went on to become one of six trail builder communities of Vibrant Communities Canada committed to using a comprehensive community initiative (CCIs) approach to tackle complex issues such as poverty in their communities. Also identified in research materials as community change initiatives, CCIs are characterized by all sectors of a community - business, government, non-profit organizations and citizens - working together to increase their community’s capacity to reduce, not just alleviate, poverty. Tamarack identifies poverty reduction as the process of relieving the depth of people’s poverty by ensuring access to political, social or economic resources by building and engaging communities. Reducing poverty means addressing the root causes, not just the symptoms, of poverty. There is ample evidence worldwide that makes it apparent that socio-economic dilemmas such as poverty do not respond to narrow or short-term actions taken by governments, charities, business or other sectors working in isolation, but rather demand a deeper, more comprehensive approach.

Community change initiatives consist of two essential components: an *action* component, often associated with programming or project activities, and a *process* of building networks and increasing capacities of individuals and organizations to act for change. Programming activities are comprehensive in nature. They work across a wide spectrum of social, economic and physical spheres with all the sectors connecting to share information, develop and implement plans, and evaluate what they have learned by acting together. The process operates according to community building principles aimed at

strengthening local leadership and building social capital; emphasis is on engaging the whole community, particularly those most affected, such as people living in poverty.

In a proactive approach to community engagement, CCIs engage residents actively in information- gathering, decision-making and as agents of change. Tamarack research indicates there are benefits to a community engagement process that succeeds in involving those who might not normally be included. Benefits such as building community spirit, working cooperatively and empowering individuals counteract the exclusion and marginalization of living in poverty. In essence, CCIs espouse the belief that resident involvement is the only reliable indicator for change that will be strongly connected to the genuine needs of the community, producing solutions with authentic and relevant impacts.

Methodology

From a literature search of comprehensive community initiatives and community engagement principles, I will draw heavily on a document from Tamarack, *Our Growing Understanding of Community Engagement* as well as literature from the Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change, *Building Knowledge About Community Change-Moving Beyond Evaluation*. These two documents are valuable in defining key community engagement concepts as well as evaluating CCI experiences. The VCSJ documents such as minutes from Committee meetings and annual reflection reports help trace events and the rationales for action plans.

In addition to a review of literature, I conducted 10 key informant interviews with representatives of stakeholders from the four sectors of VCSJ (business, government, non-profit community organizations and neighborhood residents), which included 6 members of the Crescent Valley Planning Committee, 2 residents and 2 staff of VCSJ. Informants were asked to address three general questions that related to 1) events leading to establishing the Crescent Valley Planning group; 2) the context for the decision to

conduct a survey of residents; and 3) hopes for community development in Crescent Valley.

Finally, this report draws on my own participant observation.¹ In terms of participation, I took an active role in developing the facilitators' training package and collaborated closely in planning and implementing the 3-hour session. I was present at frequent intervals at the Survey site during the 3 weeks the survey took to conduct and I attended the wrap-up and evaluation event. From the outset to the present and through ongoing meetings of the newly formed Crescent Valley Survey Action Team (CV-SAT), I have supported their discussions and group building activities as they explore possible next steps. As an insider I have had the privilege of a close relationship with the people and process. The rewards of this are immense in terms of connecting with people and their world, if only for a brief time. As an outsider, I consciously impose limits on my contributions in order to honor the fact that outcomes of this endeavor belong to the residents of Crescent Valley.

Phase I- Crescent Valley Planning Group Begins

My field placement coincided with the first day of the opening of the Survey center at 154 MacLaren Blvd on January 5, 2006 when I immediately became involved with this project. I was told that neighborhood based work was a new approach in VCSJ's poverty reduction strategy. I was interested in knowing how this had happened. My first impression was that it resulted from statistical analysis and identification of Crescent Valley as a high poverty neighborhood in a report called *Poverty and Plenty* released by VCSJ in October 2005. Further inquiry has helped me to realize that this move emerged from leadership of representatives of the 3 levels of government meeting with VCSJ to brainstorm points of entry into community development in Crescent Valley. Informants all concur that the Regional Director of Family and Community Services (FCS) expressing concerns about the situation in Crescent Valley precipitated early foundational

¹ A recognized social research methodology which acknowledges the interactive nature of both observer and observed and the effect each has on the other as well as the privileged position of the observer in relation to action on the ground.

meetings. Crescent Valley is a 388-unit public housing project owned by the Province and managed by FCS. For a year prior to this, the Regional Director had been a member of VCSJ's principal governing body, the Leadership Roundtable. Her connection with this group provided an appropriate venue in which to explore what could be done to create improvements in Crescent Valley.

The Crescent Valley Planning Committee (CVPC) formed in March 2005 with representation from all three levels of government, politicians from the municipal, provincial and federal arena, VCSJ staff, police, and some community members. As of yet there are no residents of Crescent Valley sitting on this committee but this may change after a pivotal meeting that will see residents and Planning Committee members sit down over supper and presentation of preliminary survey results on May 17th. In the early days of its work, the committee relied on VCSJ staff to conduct and present relevant research on "best practices" in community development in high poverty public housing neighborhoods. Initial efforts to better understand the needs of the neighborhood included input from community members on the CVPC with close ties to Crescent Valley and half-day daylong workshop led by a local community developer.

There is a shared understanding among informants that VCSJ being present at a particular moment in time has provided an opportunity to animate a change process in Crescent Valley that is part of what one person interviewed called "the undercurrent" happening in Saint John. The work of Old North End (ONE) Change, a community-based organization for change in the neighborhood known as the Old North End, emerged as another sign of this undercurrent. A close look at the work of ONE Change left one informant saying "WOW", as she was struck by the activity level and involvement of people in their neighborhood. "The beauty of working in neighborhoods is that it has that much more potential to make an impact in people's lives." was her observation.

Minutes also reveal that the committee engaged in a visioning exercise in which they were asked what their hopes for Crescent Valley were. Responses indicate a consensus emerging on having a stronger voice for Crescent Valley residents and the need for their

involvement in anything that would happen. Once the idea of doing a survey took shape as a way to canvass the views of residents while simultaneously engaging them in the process, the CVPC 's major concern became accessing money for the survey and looking to neighborhood funding needs in the future.

The political context painted by those interviewed indicates they thought that there was a window of opportunity available to access funds, possibly from federal housing dollars, as 2005 was drawing to a close. For various reasons, the situation of Crescent Valley as a high poverty neighborhood headed for crisis was drawing political attention. “ The timing couldn't have been better. The stars were aligned” was the way one person described political trends at all three levels of government that favored an interest in Crescent Valley. In early November, local MLA Trevor Holder announced \$25,000 in funding for the Crescent Valley Survey and CMHC pledged \$10,000. At the time of the announcement, Holder told residents “We want to work with you to help make this a better community. If you give us a plan we will do everything in our power to help you execute that plan.” One big question around resources, which surfaced from one informant, was a concern that governments do not have a tradition of funding community development. Funding usually comes through limited channels, often referred to as “silos” that generally represent departmental budgets. Neighborhood development would require a wider vision. One CVPC member believes, however, that government will respond if it can be demonstrated that neighborhood residents are engaged and participating in the process.

Phase II- Your Voice Counts! - The Community Survey

The process of listening to the residents' voice through a survey was launched during the fall of 2005 as the survey was being drafted. The VCSJ staff member who developed the survey is quick to point out the fact that the survey went through multiple drafts as neighborhood residents, members of the CVPC and outside experts reviewed it. This is perhaps a small but telling instance of the complexity of working across all sectors. The survey in its final form was 17 pages long and contained both tick off responses and

open-ended narrative questions. In the end it reflects what the residents thought should be asked and the interest of those in the VCSJ network who need to have a sense of how and where they will fit into the Crescent Valley revitalization process.

Community coach Gail Taylor remembers the excitement following a 3-hour focus group of neighborhood residents convened to review the questionnaire. Participant level was high and everyone present had a chance to speak to each question. “It was exhaustive,” according to Gail, but the message was clear: “People from the community have to do the survey.” The neighborhood resident I interviewed also remembered that evening, saying it was a good experience; she described it as a time of learning fresh ideas from others. She signed up that night to become a survey facilitator. It was at that meeting also that residents rejected the idea the survey would be administered to only a random sample of houses and instead insisted on coverage as wide as resources would allow.

The location of the Survey Center at 154 MacLaren, a unit temporarily donated by FCS, was at first a contentious issue for some in the neighborhood. The principal citizen’s organization in the neighborhood, the Crescent Valley Community Tenant’s Association (CVCTA), operates out of two units further down on MacLaren Blvd, which felt by some to be natural site. VCSJ had been told that confidentiality was a large issue in the neighborhood. Not all Crescent Valley residents are CVCTA members despite the overtures made to involve everyone. The survey contains questions the CVCTA hopes will inform the reasons behind this dynamic. The decision to have a separate location for the survey was therefore shaped by an overall wish to make sure the survey was neutral and accessible to all, which called for an independent location. It proved to be a wise decision in the end and one that was eventually endorsed by those who opposed it initially.

The Center literally began to hum with energy and excitement the evening the 10 women arrived for the Facilitator’s training workshop. Diverse in age, personalities, experiences and circumstances, these women are all truly “engaged” in their families and community. From the beginning they never wavered in their pride and commitment to

Crescent Valley. Together with the Survey Coordinator, they set two goals that drove them: 1) seek input from every household and 2) obtain a 50% participation rate. They formed a strong group bond through their single-minded determination to achieve these goals. It will likely be the exceptional response rate of 54% they achieved that most people will remember, but this is closely intertwined with the work it took to contact the whole neighborhood.

Facilitators will tell you how much confidence the training they received gave them. They particularly appreciated the confidentiality component because confidentiality is such an issue in the community. It helped to have UNBSJ sociologist and survey expert Lee Chalmers present to answer specific questions related to survey integrity. Facilitators took themselves and the survey seriously and that is how their neighbors responded to them. People thanked them for bringing the survey to them. VCSJ ensured the women felt their work was valued and respected by paying a fair wage and offering childcare and transportation support where needed.

The survey process was physically and emotionally demanding. The plan originally called for people to visit the Center to fill out surveys with the door-to-door approach for the few who couldn't come in. It was obvious within two to three days, especially after some advertising glitches, that the drop-in approach wasn't working. Everyone rallied around the decision to go door-to-door. Some facilitators put in long days that extended into the evening. They sometimes waited outside homes for the forty-five minutes it took to complete the survey. They adhered strictly to procedures that maintained the confidentiality of completed surveys and respected the decision that no uncompleted questionnaires were left around the community.

Facilitators experienced strong emotional reactions when they encountered people who didn't want to do the survey or who did the survey in haste. They perceived this as a lack of caring and they were very disappointed, sometimes angry, particularly if the person was a long time resident. They were grateful for the presence of the Survey Coordinator, Ann Barrett, who was always at the Center when facilitators were out working. She was

trusted and respected, well organized, and always had fruit and nuts for them and time to talk. Both she and VCSJ community coach, Gail, received resounding applause at the wrap & evaluation for their support. After asking Gail, “What brought you to us?” one resident facilitator said, “ You care. We can tell you care”. Certainly for me, this was a telling moment in the community engagement process. In a neighborhood that often experiences stereotyping, stigma and isolation because of living in poverty, trusting that someone cares is not taken for granted; it requires time to build relationships. As someone that evening remarked, “I agree change is needed, but every time something goes wrong, we get pushed to the back burner and it doesn’t feel like Crescent Valley matters.”

Phase III- The Crescent Valley Survey Action Team

The strong commitment to their neighborhood and the desire to involve everyone in change was evident among facilitators by their unanimous decision to continue to meet. The Crescent Valley Survey Action Team has emerged out of that group. An unexpected opportunity to participate in a collective action advocating for children’s health issues in Crescent Valley meant that one young woman who missed the facilitators’ training joined the team. The agenda for the first meeting included some group building exercises as well as a discussion on their role in bringing the survey results back to the community. The group struggled to choose a name for itself, possibly a sign of its struggle to identify its role. Discussions resurfaced from the Wrap-up meeting about the differences between the Crescent Valley SAT and the CVCTA. As well, the Crescent Valley Planning Committee, previously only in the background for them, now appeared in their minds as an unknown entity to consider as they planned the community meeting to present results.

The CVCTA has traditionally taken the lead in organizing community-building activities in Crescent Valley. It has attained some prominence in this regard and made important contributions. The high level of response to the community survey is a signal that the community is ready to get involved in neighborhood change. With the release of survey results, will there be expanding numbers of people and groups involved beyond the

CVCTA? Some key informants see it that way and believe that is a positive thing. If so, these groups will undoubtedly have some connections to CVCTA, but the nature and structure of such connection is unclear. The level of cooperation among trained facilitators augers well for joint efforts by the CVCTA and the Survey Action Team to find a way to respond in an accommodating and versatile fashion to the needs of everyone who wishes to participate. The survey process is a good model of using the principle of inclusion. For example, the location of the Center in a neutral spot and the slogan “Your Voice Counts” used to promote the survey all point to an inclusive, accessible approach. The facilitators understood the need for this approach when they dedicated themselves to making sure the whole neighborhood was given a chance to participate in the survey.

The questions arising for the Survey Action Team about their interface with the CVPC echoed the concerns heard from CVPC members whom I interviewed. The struggle here is the same - it is about working in an inclusive way. As Tamarack literature acknowledges, “Any player, including citizens, organizations and governments, can initiate community engagement, as long as the process works collaboratively with communities.” This report shows that the Planning Committee, formed over a year ago without resident involvement, has faced the challenge of how to proceed in order to guarantee that community revitalization plans would be community driven. The survey was a community engagement approach that succeeded in creating new opportunities and new openings for Crescent Valley residents to speak out about who they are, what they value and what they need to make things better. It now remains to be seen how the CVPC will approach the need to expand its way of working to include these voices. The desire of one committee member was expressed when she said, “ The idea of inclusion is what has kept me going on this committee.”

Listening to the Voices –Three Steps

According to Tamarack's understanding of community engagement: "Citizens need to be at the center of the community engagement process. This process ensures communities are empowered and have control over their resources and the decision-making process." One of the biggest challenges VCSJ and partners could be facing is the need to address what happens if people do actually become empowered and proactive in wanting control over resources and a greater voice in decision-making. The question that arises is who will ultimately decide what kind of plan for change is implemented.

The first step in addressing decision-making issues would be a power mapping exercise. Community developers Anne Bishop and Jeanne Fay, who have both worked with many marginalized communities in Nova Scotia, believe that an analysis of power dynamics is essential in situations of unequal power such as vulnerable neighborhoods. The nature of the CVPC, or any multisectoral group in a CCI, will be inherently representative of inequalities within society - inequalities that arise from differences in access to wealth and power. Power analysis would assist everyone in their ability to be transparent about the process of change which is unfolding. This includes dynamics within Crescent Valley itself.

Once a power analysis is completed, the next step would be to arrive at a method of decision-making that seeks to address the power imbalances while keeping the voice of residents in the forefront. I believe this could guarantee a decision-making process that respects and values the relationship of trust begun through this survey.

In conjunction with the need for an effective decision-making tool, the third step would be developing a structure for the two groups – the CVPC and the CV-SAT- to work in some connecting, collaborative fashion. Casting around for best practices could point in the direction of a body such as a residents' advisory council which links to the CVPC in a way that meets the needs of the two groups. The community engagement principles used in CCIs recognize that communities such as Crescent Valley who have been stigmatized and isolated from the wider community benefit from support needed to strengthen leadership and capacities of those who organize and work together for social change. This

implies the continued involvement of VCSJ until such time as the residents would see no need for this support.

Conclusion

This report examines the successful use of community engagement as a strategy with a two-fold objective: to gain from the Crescent Valley neighborhood residents a clear idea of programming or project direction for the revitalization of their neighborhood, and secondly, to begin to foster development of the leadership capacity and social capital needed to drive and sustain that revitalization. Using the strategy of involving the residents themselves in facilitating the survey, a phenomenal rate of 54% of resident respondents was achieved. This is a concrete quantifiable and qualifiable outcome that will help set the direction of any plan developed. It means that the voices of the resident will be heard and will inform any changes that occur in Crescent Valley. On May 17th, the two groups – the Crescent Valley Survey Action Team and the Crescent Valley Planning Group - will meet to begin the process of getting to know each other. The eventual outcome of neighborhood revitalization in Crescent Valley will be shaped by many factors, political will among them. The success of the community engagement process will hinge on the degree to which all sectors are able to participate as equal partners.

