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Leading to Enable: Government Engagement in Vibrant Communities Saint John

Vibrant Communities (VC) initiatives are dynamic processes, bringing together community leaders from business, government and the nonprofit sector with low-income residents in developing and delivering strategies to reduce poverty, foster inclusion and improve quality of life. How might representatives of all orders of government most appropriately and effectively participate in such initiatives? How is it possible to link immediate objectives with longer-term goals? This series of VC stories explores these questions and the engagement of governments in four VC sites: Saint John, Hamilton, BC's Capital Region and Calgary.

Introduction

The capacity of residents to aspire to and achieve well-being lies at the core of sustainable communities. Enabling that empowerment is made more challenging when a city's poverty rate, like that of Saint John, New Brunswick, is 24.5 percent. This is one of the challenges that gave rise to Vibrant Communities Saint John (VCSJ). In its third year of a poverty reduction strategy, VCSJ is convening the three orders of government, business, the nonprofit sector and individuals living in poverty. Through this forum, led by and in response to community voices, governments at all levels are coming together to discuss and deliver a resident-focused strategy.

Collaboration can be a difficult process. The departments and agencies within government have been created to carry out specific tasks – whether providing public education, promoting community safety and

crime prevention, or carrying out local planning and development. Frequently, their mandates are fulfilled by partnering with members of the nonprofit sector. Beyond these partnerships, how might departments respond to the complex challenges that transcend particular mandates, when those challenges do not fit departmental boxes as they were designed?

This story focuses upon one such response. It describes how departments and agencies are envisioning and practising a different kind of leadership – one that chooses to listen and to enable. This is a leadership that plays a supportive and complementary role as part of a larger community empowerment process.

Leading by letting go – sharing leadership to achieve common goals

I've said all along that I believe the City has a leadership role to play in social development. In fact, with prosperity all around us, a poverty rate that drops from 29 percent to 25 percent is still unacceptable.

Mayor Norm McFarlane,
January 17, 2006

Greater Saint John is on the verge of significant economic growth. Estimates indicate that \$5 to \$20 billion in investment will be made in the region in the coming decades. With low unemployment and a looming labour shortage, the City has recognized the need to ensure the full inclusion of residents in emerging opportunities while encouraging the development of a community that is attractive to potential newcomers and that retains its young people.

Although provincial and federal governments have primary responsibility for

social and economic programs in Saint John and surrounding area, municipal officials have also identified their own role as significant. Recognizing that the City's very success depends on social and economic vitality, the local government is actively working to strengthen social and economic development at the regional, city and neighbourhood levels. As the order of government most closely connected to residents, the City has accepted partial responsibility for leading a comprehensive change agenda that will enhance community vitality and well-being.

Regionally, the five Mayors of Greater Saint John are working together to promote a *True Growth* strategy, recognizing that what is good for the downtown is also good for the suburbs. *True Growth* requires working together – rather than in competition – to ensure a supportive, economically thriving and enriching community where people, ideas and investment come to stay.

To formalize its participation in *True Growth*, the City of Saint John launched its own comprehensive plan entitled “Vision 2015: A Program of Excellence.” This holistic vision includes reworking City Council's portfolio and committee structure to better address the diverse dimensions of a vibrant community, while also welcoming citizen input and concerns through town-hall style City Council meetings in neighbourhoods across the region.

The City was a founding partner of Vibrant Communities Saint John (VCSJ) and shares a common interest with VCSJ in strengthening neighbourhoods. To this end, the City provides needed infrastructure (e.g., community policing and road improvements) and works at both the administrative and political levels to help neighbourhoods achieve renewal. For example, the City is actively

pursuing provincial support for the enactment of stricter bylaws to ensure landlords uphold minimum property standards.

The City of Saint John is not alone in embracing a renewed leadership agenda; others are recognizing that leadership need not be equated with sole responsibility for solutions. Staff at the Saint John Service Canada office – considered a model office within that organization – are exploring ways to strengthen Service Canada’s community service work. They are building on recent experiences to bolster their role as enabler of community action, providing not only money but also information and facilitation skills.

Local officials with Service Canada recognize the rising expectations on the Government of Canada to respond more comprehensively to community needs. The officials are maximizing their capacity by reorganizing multidepartmental responsibilities and capacities. Jim Woods, Director of the local Service Canada office, notes: “People in poverty need us to be responsive to their needs.” That responsiveness means bringing together the federal family and equipping staff with information to address a range of community questions, sometimes pertaining to initiatives under way in other federal departments or agencies. Jim has taken on the role of organizing and chairing meetings of senior federal officials about four times per year.

These examples illustrate an enabling leadership – one which recognizes that successful attainment of objectives can sometimes best occur when groups join together to tackle community priorities.

Actions to enable community empowerment

Governments are often criticized for their limited capacity to support communities. Project funding is restrained by narrow terms and conditions which are more commonly defined by a department’s objectives than a community’s vision. Such criticism may be well founded but, in Saint John, collaborative leadership involves the alignment of policies and program investments with community wishes – which may result in greater neighbourhood empowerment.

The effects of these initiatives become evident in several snapshots of local activity. With its goal of assisting individuals and households to move out of poverty, VCSJ is helping to guide the efforts of residents of several neighbourhoods, including its support of the resident-led Crescent Valley Planning Committee. Moved by the power of residents organizing themselves in Crescent Valley, one of Saint John’s more vulnerable neighbourhoods, the New Brunswick Department of Family and Community Services made a small, but strategic, investment to support a neighbourhood residents’ survey. A Survey Action Team composed of local residents was trained with the help of the University of New Brunswick to conduct a door-to-door survey of 400 households to help determine local priorities.

Another example of empowering the community is the work of Don Connolly, the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) Corporate Representative in Saint John, who has made it his priority to listen to local voices. Soon after his position was created in May 2005, he began meeting with

the Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative (BCAPI), VCSJ and other local groups to learn of Saint John's housing priorities. Hearing that improved housing in the Old North End and Crescent Valley neighbourhoods were community priorities, Connolly began attending Old North End and Crescent Valley activities. He recognized that he needed to know the community in order to respond to it. Through his efforts, CMHC supported a five-day planning exercise in the Old North End in late 2005, resulting in the identification of more than 170 ways in which the community could help itself.

Finding ways to improve the financial well-being of residents is another empowerment strategy that various governments are pursuing. Recognizing the province as the sole landlord in Crescent Valley, MLA and former Minister of the Environment Trevor Holder has made it a priority to explore strategies that enfranchise residents through homeownership, an area of interest to Connolly as well.

Connolly continues to make available support for research and evaluation by tapping into CMHC's rich history of community involvement, and sharing success stories and techniques from other parts of the country. He has helped bring together a group of 16 local nonprofit, public and private sector partners to plan a pilot project on affordable home-ownership in the Old North End. All orders of government agree that the aging local housing stock must be improved. They have secured record levels of investment, including the highest proportion of provincial housing dollars ever assigned to Saint John.

Working with the private sector and empowering youth

Governments are also responding to the commitment shown by the Saint John business community. Spurred by the Canadian Council on Social Development's Urban Poverty Project and its mid-1990s identification of Saint John's 27 percent poverty rate (1996 Census figures), Bill Gale and Paul Meier mobilized the business community and formed the Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative (BCAPI). BCAPI commissioned Deloitte, an international audit, tax, consulting and financial advisory services organization, to identify poverty priorities in Saint John. Deloitte's report helped BCAPI establish nine areas for intervention and investment.

Convinced of the importance of early childhood development, prominent local businessman J.D. Irving engaged Provincial School District 8 Director of Education Beverly MacDonald and began pilot testing an initiative to provide enhanced supports for Prince Charles School, an inner-city school near the Irving offices. Working with officials at School District 8, Irving developed PALS (Partners Assisting Local Schools), a package of investments that includes funding for extra teachers, physical building changes, sports uniforms, a band program, student leadership and field trip resources.

After five years, the project was able to report lower school leaving rates, improved nutrition among students and even higher morale among Irving's staff, who were increasingly volunteering in a number of capacities. The model has been replicated in

two more Saint John schools and a further two are gearing up for involvement. Why the investment? As Irving himself notes: “This is a long-term initiative. Give it 15 years or so and the dividends will be enormous. Faith in young people is the source for powerful change” [Davis 2007]. Irving and officials with School District 8 recognize that by focusing on youth, they are investing in the next generation of Canada’s workforce. PALS is only the latest significant initiative undertaken by BCAPI (see Makhoul 2005 for more information about BCAPI’s investments in Saint John youth).

Empowering neighbourhoods

While investments to date in VCSJ may not have been financially significant, they have been strategic in seeking to empower local residents. Local initiatives may require only small amounts of support to ensure ongoing momentum. Trevor Holder points to O.N.E. Change – a community association started by residents of the Old North End neighbourhood to tackle issues of safety and well-being – and continues to urge governments to be on the lookout for these kinds of community activity. Says Holder: “Governments can’t create solutions for communities. Community development will happen when communities want it; governments need to provide support when residents are ready for help.”

The idea of using community engagement as a strategy for enhancing local safety led the National Crime Prevention Centre (NCPC) to offer financial support to O.N.E. Change, which included the establishment of a neighbourhood-developed tracking mechanism for measuring changes in crime patterns.

Similarly, in response to the expressed wishes of residents of the Crescent Valley neighbourhood for a community meeting space, the New Brunswick Department of Family and Community Services (FCS) – as landlord of public housing – has offered a four-unit building for renovation. FCS officials hope that investment in neighbourhoods will be part of a learning agenda that allows residents to share information, ideas and expertise, and emerging leaders to be supported and encouraged.

The successful initiatives in Crescent Valley are made possible, in part, by the neighbourhood scale. Following a centralization of services in New Brunswick in the 1980s, and arising from use of per capita funding models, disparities between neighbourhoods in cities like Saint John have grown. According to the 2001 Census, 25 of Saint John’s 200 Dissemination Areas (small areas made up of neighbouring blocks, each with a population of between 400 and 700 people) had an incidence of poverty exceeding 40 percent. All 25 are concentrated in five vulnerable neighbourhoods, including Crescent Valley and the Old North End [Human Development Council 2006]. But while the challenges being addressed may appear more manageable at the neighbourhood level, provincial officials also caution against advocating province-wide policy changes as a result of one neighbourhood’s activities. This caution gives rise to the question: How might a community pursue broader systems change?

It is possible that the collaborative arrangements central to these new forms of leadership appear to develop more naturally within a smaller centre like Saint John – where residents can converse with Cabinet Ministers

at the supermarket and MLAs attend local Town Hall meetings. Donna Beaton and Barbara Kierstead Shanks, senior officials with the New Brunswick Departments of Family and Community Services, and Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, both point to a collaborative spirit and a shared sense that “this is our community.”

These officials are all leaders within their organizations, finding ways to direct government systems to community priorities. The examples of leadership may appear modest when considering the breadth and depth of public operations. However, they serve as examples of a different way of working – an approach that positions the long-term well-being of a community at the centre, and that sees investment as a tool to achieve a community’s vision. Such a comprehensive framework is difficult. Funding allocations to departmental policies and programs are usually time-limited and constrained, presenting challenges for the dialogue needed when pursuing comprehensive, multistakeholder responses. Other challenges also remain.

Will there be sufficient time, for instance, to collaborate and implement the vision of Crescent Valley residents for a new community centre, as identified by the Survey Action Team and by the community during a SpeakOut event spearheaded by VCSJ and the Survey Action Team? Given the challenges of identifying affordable and appropriate space, how will the new Community Police Centre be positioned vis-à-vis space for other community activities? Following the organizational change and evolving priorities of a new federal government, will the National Crime Prevention Centre’s new Crime Prevention Action Fund continue to identify alignment

between its own priorities and those of the community? Will the long-term change being pursued through the work of O.N.E. Change effectively meet the demands for specific, immediate and measurable results?

The importance of commitment and innovation

Many of the successes of departments and organizations noted above are made possible by the dedication of politicians and public servants, and their commitment to collaboration with other partners in the community. Crescent Valley MLA Trevor Holder, formerly the Minister of the Environment, saw his role as a politician both to participate on the Crescent Valley Planning Committee and to raise relevant issues like housing at the New Brunswick Conservative caucus table – effectively bridging local and provincial government structures.

Nonetheless, the challenges presented by departmental silos and jurisdictional responsibilities are significant – making even more praiseworthy the efforts of politicians and public servants who pursue comprehensive approaches. The New Brunswick Department of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour successfully allocated research funds to support the Education to Employment Working Group and the Crescent Valley neighbourhood’s engagement strategy. In responding to community priorities, however, the department continues to be limited by the specific programs, criteria and activities made possible through its other program parameters. Funding envelopes are still allocated to specific departmental priorities – with less attention paid to a community’s articulation of its challenges and how to overcome them.

One of the difficulties in working more horizontally is identifying the resources required to build connections and bring together the pieces. Some organizations, such as the City of Saint John and the Saint John Police, appear ready to participate in leading efforts in areas in which they were not previously directly involved. The City's investments in housing – a provincial responsibility – and the province's contribution towards a Community Police Centre in Crescent Valley – a municipal responsibility – acknowledge the connections of local and provincial priorities. Saint John Police Chief Allen Bodechon recognizes his organization's inability to resolve crime issues by itself; his officers now support community development by working with community organizations in educational, literacy and recreational programs, thereby helping to build a culture of crime prevention. The different orders of government are recognizing that going it alone is no longer an effective course of action.

During its own recent reorganization, Service Canada officials found themselves listening to the community in order to develop approaches that better respond to their assets, challenges and priorities. Jim Woods, Director of the local Service Canada office, sees this as a period of opportunity. Woods has long recognized the need to work with business, youth and neighbourhoods to ensure that residents are ready to be employed when new investments are made in Saint John. Defining precisely what this effort will look like is yet to be done. What is clear is the commitment that Jim and others bring to community work. They are finding ways to support local revitalization efforts by sharing policy and program information, exploring potential support for neighbourhood initiatives, and providing leadership or participating in dialogue with

federal, provincial, municipal and nongovernment representatives.

Seeing the whole picture – with the help of a third party

Organizational and transformational change is challenging. Working with other partners, such as the nonprofit and business sectors, is often a valuable process in helping an organization to step back and see its work within a larger context. VCSJ's Leadership Roundtable (LRT) is one such forum. LRT Chair, Tom Gribbons, Vice-President and Branch Manager, RBC Dominion Securities, helps convey the message that poverty adversely affects all parts of the community – residents who experience it firsthand, businesses and the City's very vitality.

Soon after BCAPI's formation in the late 1990s and its commissioning of Deloitte to identify potential areas for intervention, Paul Born (from Tamarack – An Institute for Community Engagement) urged a number of local organizations and networks – the Human Development Council, Urban Core Support Network, City of Saint John and BCAPI – to formulate a poverty reduction plan for Saint John. Monica Chaperlin was hired to develop a proposal, and soon after, VCSJ was born. While BCAPI has continued to pursue its own activities, its convening of the Leadership Roundtable has enabled business voices to join with those from government and the community in a broad learning and action coalition. The LRT provides a common forum or table at which the contributors to a comprehensive approach for the community can be linked.

The experience of working together allows LRT members to offer small contri-

butions to larger initiatives. Soon after the formation of BCAPI, for example, founders Bill Gale and Paul Meier worked with other community partners to develop models of support for teen parents of infant children. Many of these efforts have been very successful [Makhoul 2005]. However, BCAPI and others working with them believe that progress on the issue of teen pregnancy must be seen within a broader context. How might high school completion be encouraged? What are the relationships between early pregnancy and school leaving, and higher rates of drug pregnancy in teenage girls? Asking these and other questions is one way that VCSJ, and particularly those sitting around the Leadership Roundtable, can explore the bigger picture and help shift community attitudes about poverty.

Several of federal and provincial departments have benefited from the more holistic approach offered by the Leadership Roundtable. Jim Wood's VCSJ participation and fellow Service Canada employee Carolyn Stephenson's involvement on the LRT's Education-to-Employment Working Group enable members of the department to engage directly with the province, community and private sector to improve the education and employment pathways for Saint John residents. Their efforts have included the production of a well-received report (including CBC coverage) and growing private sector support.

However, while recognizing the complexity of issues, LRT members also identify difficulties in sitting around a common table. Some feel the pressure of having to be responsive to expectations placed on individual departments and agencies around funding allocation. The extent to which support is made available for efforts that fill in the gaps between existing programs, and the degree to

which current programs are stretched to their fullest capability, are ongoing discussions. Clearly, the LRT is not just a table at which potential funding allocations might be discussed. It is also a space for learning and reflection. The LRT seeks to find a balance between supporting its public sector partners while also suggesting policy and program measures, which may be more conducive to longer-term learning and systems change.

By making the link between their own work and broader social development objectives, LRT members have been able to bring together a wide range of public officials interested in pursuing their efforts in a more comprehensive, values-driven approach. Over time, the relationships it nurtures will allow disparate positions to be reconciled and deeper collaboration achieved. A number of officials refer to VCSJ's added value, pooling and coordinating efforts among the many community organizations and working groups in Saint John. Monica Chaperlin, BCAPI's full-time Coordinator, is credited with bringing substantial community experience to the work. The relationships and history she has developed in the community act as connective tissue for the Leadership Roundtable as a whole.

The LRT's broad membership and holistic approach provide core leadership to this important and comprehensive work. It acts as a forum for focusing the energy and momentum of initiatives like O.N.E. Change and the Crescent Valley Survey Action Team, and for generating support for furthering community leadership skills. Multisectoral responses are potentially less vulnerable to shifting political winds and changes in government. However, situated within a context shaped by the particular responsibilities of governments and departments, will it

be possible to sustain these relationships in the years to come?

Conclusion: Enabling community leadership

Accountability is fundamental to governments' relationship with the public. As stewards of social, economic and environmental well-being, governments are responsible for the efficient and effective investment of public dollars. However, accountability for these investments are best achieved through a transparent process in which residents have a voice in the development of mandates and objectives.

Policies and programs are in place to support individuals and the communities in which they work and live. True accountability might be determined by measuring the responsiveness of public investment decisions to individuals and their communities. The process by which residents gain the assets and self-confidence needed to pursue social and economic opportunities does not happen overnight. The future is uncertain, but for now, governments in Saint John – in association with the private and community sector – are learning about the benefits of creating an enabling environment for this work.

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