

Using Creativity to Enliven Urban and Rural Villages

At first glance, a community in northern Ontario settled by mine speculators and lumbermen and a downtown Toronto neighbourhood along St. Clair Avenue might seem to have little in common. Both are building on the traditional virtues of the village – physical proximity, mutual dependence and concern for neighbour – as a means of encouraging participation and building a vibrant future. Both also have woven Richard Florida’s creative cities concepts¹ into projects that combine arts initiatives with community economic development projects.

Hillcrest Village

In early 2004, Brenda Sedgwick was hired as the General Manager of a Business Improvement Area (BIA) in Hillcrest Village in Toronto. The first Toronto BIA was created in Bloor West Village in 1970 as a response to the flight of shoppers to suburban malls. Since its creation, independent business owners have recognized the benefits of working together and the BIA model has spread to other cities and towns across the province. Once a Business Improvement Area is established by a municipality, levies are collected from all businesses

in the designated area, initially to pay for beautification, advertising and promotional projects. Over the years, BIAs have acted as social and economic anchors in their respective neighbourhoods.

By networking with adjoining Business Improvement Areas, mutually supportive projects can be undertaken without compromising individual autonomy. BIAs are made stronger by sharing expertise, staggering or combining events, and supporting one another’s marketing efforts. Hillcrest Village has many restaurants but no hotels, so Brenda and neighbouring BIA representatives are discussing ways of attracting bed and breakfast and specialty shops to their part of the city. “People think of Toronto as one big city, but in fact, it’s a collection of neighbourhoods – some small, some large, some well off, others not,” says Brenda. “Part of my work is to look for projects that develop good networks of support for Hillcrest Village, in an effort to increase its economic and social development capacity.”

Though the Hillcrest Village Business Improvement Area was established in 1984, little was done to improve the area until 2001.

community stories

Since then, small capital improvement projects – the installation of flower pots, hanging baskets, Christmas lighting displays and street benches – have helped make St. Clair West look more like a main street. City Councillor Joe Mihevc is working to get the Hillcrest Village BIA included in Toronto’s Commercial Façade Improvement program, which will allow businesses in the area to apply for one-time matching grants of \$12,000 to help pay for façade facelifts.

“BIAs are recognized as having three levels of development,” says Brenda. “Initially, their boards may undertake simple projects like bench installation, then move into events planning, but in the third stage, they are expanding their ideas of how their communities can work together better and are actively undertaking business mix planning exercises. Hillcrest Village’s inclusion in the façade program will be recognition of our mature BIA status.”

Brenda’s position as BIA Manager also speaks to the City of Toronto’s commitment to the concept of strengthening and expanding the role of local economic centres. The decision to

hire her came as a result of collaboration between Human Resources and Social Development Canada, Toronto’s Economic Development Office, and the Toronto Association of Business Improvement Areas (TABIA). Says Brenda: “Hillcrest Village is a relatively small BIA and is located on the periphery of the busier and more prosperous downtown core. St. Clair Avenue West will soon be in the midst of a streetcar track reconstruction project which likely will result in short- and long-term economic disruptions. Business and property owners in Hillcrest Village will no longer be able to afford staffing costs as part of their BIA levy, despite the growing recognition that staffing is essential to the sustainability of marketing, events and capital improvements.”

“Part of my job is to educate business people about the benefits of working together. Working with the Board and area businesses, I’ve created a newsletter, developed a BIA logo and a branding strategy to define Hillcrest Village’s distinctive personality. The newsletter’s impact paled in comparison to the change in attitude that came from my first project, which



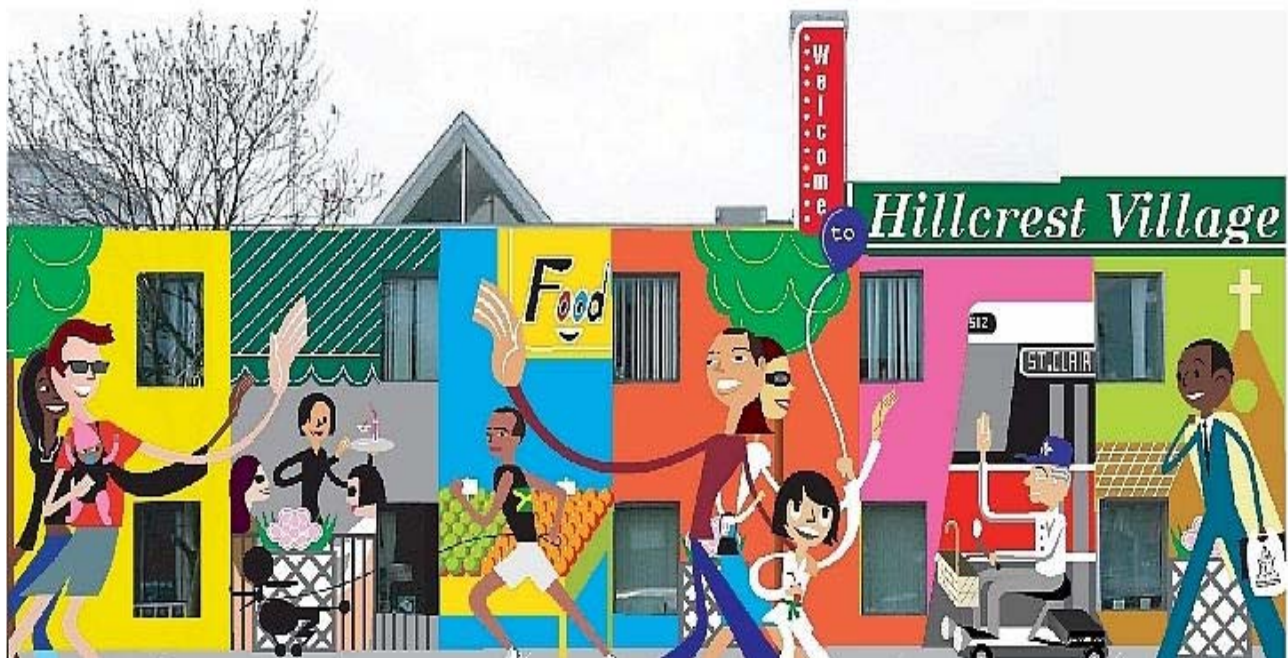
Hillcrest Village community mural project gets under way.

was to organize the village’s first annual street festival in July. More people came into the area during that event than ever before, demonstrating the benefits of my position in a way that words never could.”

A second artistic project that generated substantial local interest was the installation of a block-long outdoor mural. Working with the Board, Brenda facilitated a partnership with Skills for Change, an immigrant services organization, to apply for funds from the city’s Mural & Banner Funding Program. Skills for Change agreed to donate the wall space, helped organize a community-based design contest and provided some members for the mural selection team. The winning design was submitted by pizza chef Joel Castillo, and its depiction of the neighbourhood’s predominantly Spanish-Latin and Italian residents sparked discussions of whether the mural reflected the area’s historical roots or its newer, more ethnically diverse character. Says Brenda: “Ultimately, the discussions provided a natural lead-in for suggestions that the BIA apply

for future mural and community arts projects to reflect local diversity.”

Brenda secured funds from Wood Green Employment and Immigration Services to hire two youth artists for the mural, and another six artists were hired using funding from a number of sources, including Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, the BIA members’ levy and the Toronto Parking Authority. When the mural was nearing completion, she assigned some of the artists the task of compiling a photo story of people who use the village’s warming room, soup kitchen and shelters. Brenda is hoping to display this work in the BIA storefront window that faces St. Clair Avenue. “Knowing someone’s name is the first step in creating relationship,” says Brenda. “Like all parts of Toronto, Hillcrest Village is trying to find supportive and proactive ways of addressing homelessness. When we remove anonymity, we are encouraging people to work with one another – not simply to improve appearances, but to learn to care for others in the community.”



The completed mural creates a lively focal point for residents and visitors.

Brenda combines her part-time work as the BIA's General Manager with intra-agency tasks she undertakes as the Resource Coordinator for a youth shelter network. This ten-member organization currently is developing a communications strategy aimed at creating core funding for shelters. Says Brenda: "Our municipal government is supportive of youth employment, the arts, and of using community artists to effect streetscape improvements for BIAs. Hillcrest Village is putting these three things together as part of its business mix planning vision. Hillcrest Village's interest in employing artists for community improvement projects lends weight to the argument that there needs to be greater support for arts training and social development programs for youth at risk."

In partnership with Wood Green Youth Job Centre and Art Starts Neighbourhood Cultural Centre, Hillcrest Village has submitted a proposal for funding to Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada's Community Mobilization Program. If their bid is successful, the partners will operate community arts youth training and employment projects in Hillcrest BIA that will add to the sector-specific projects for addressing the mental health and housing issues affecting youth. Says Brenda: "Ultimately, the long-term vision of the partnership is to advocate that the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities needs to develop and fund an Apprenticeship Training Program in Community Arts and Community Economic Development. We believe it is time to acknowledge the role the arts play in stimulating creativity, innovation and community capacity building."

Temiskaming Shores

That sentiment is mirrored in an ambitious project now in the planning stages in the amalgamated community of Temiskaming Shores,

population 10,000. A six-hour drive north of Toronto, the area was first inhabited by members of the Algonquin nation. In the late 1800s, its minerals and thick forest attracted miners and lumbermen and its rich soil nourished a healthy agricultural sector. Nearby Kirkland Lake gained unwanted attention during the late 1990s when local land speculators suggested that the abandoned Adams Mine quarry be used as a dumpsite for garbage brought in by rail from Toronto. A second suggestion – that a toxic waste incinerator be built in the area – also was overturned, in part because area residents vigorously protested both proposals.

Some of these residents helped found Deepwater Regional Development Corporation (DRDC), a nonprofit citizen organization dedicated to developing a creative-based economic development plan for the area. "We began to see that our size and depressed economy made us more vulnerable to being viewed as a possible location for 'not in my backyard' projects that would never be considered in more centrally-located communities," says DRDC Board member Ambrose Raftis. The group also is concerned with the problem of youth out-migration; more than 220 youth leave Temiskaming Shores each year.

Says Ambrose: "The very people we need to build our economy – the creative ones – are the first ones to leave. Many creative youth are looking for more than just a job. People with a strong desire to create will not be satisfied working for someone else. They want to build a life which meshes with their own values and ideas. They need an environment that supports their creative energies, and they need to meet with other creative people to generate new ideas and to have their own work validated. Many have gone to school in larger, urban settings; when they return to a town with few entertainments and social outlets, many choose to leave. Small communities need to be more supportive of new and returning members."

DRDC's plan for the area focuses on the establishment of the Cobalt Centre for Arts and Innovation, a living and work space designed around the needs and wishes of creative people. Deepwater's board members believe that by creating a space that is attractive to artistic and creative people of all ages, they can find innovative solutions for projects of interest, some of which have been identified by the larger community. Combining environmental sensibilities with the desire to create an affordable living space, the centre will be built to LEEDS² standards. This will ensure that operational costs remain low – something that creative people require in order to develop their skills. Ambrose believes that a cutting-edge, sustainable facility will provide the kind of exciting living environment upon which the next generation can build.

DRDC has completed a preliminary feasibility assessment for the centre and has built a basis of support for the project among representatives of government, business and the arts community. Says Ambrose: "All of the funding is in place and we are on target for construction to begin in 2005. This project will combine the talents and energies of the artistic and environmental communities in a way which has never been tried before. We believe this project is a perfect fit for our community. Our preliminary inquiries to artistic groups, training centres and other municipally based arts organizations have been very encouraging. We believe that our rural, affordable lifestyle will attract about 80 percent of potential applicants, and the remaining 20 percent will be drawn from the youth who previously left us for larger centres. Though arts, creativity and innovation are the focus of the project, we believe that a substantial number of applicants will be people who wish to realize their lifelong passions, change career directions and apply their talents to more creatively-focused work."

One of the reasons youth have chosen to leave Temiskaming Shores has less to do with location and more to do with the community's inability to meet its current needs. Says Ambrose: "Our young people are telling us that part of the reason they are leaving the area is because they are looking for a richer existence – that forging productive relationships requires a lot of opportunities for meeting and working with people, and that our traditional, small town activities aren't fitting the bill. We believe that by focusing on creative projects, we will offer a rich environment for realizing the potential of our youth, and for reinvigorating their sense of community and relationship."

Hillcrest Village Business Improvement Area members and the planners at Deepwater have seen the excitement and positive change that happen when artistic and creative projects are used as a starting point for community development and planning. These two very different communities have both tapped into creative projects to help address key concerns and to create the necessary environment for new ideas to flourish and communities to reinvent themselves.

Anne Makhoul

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Endnotes

1. Richard Florida's book entitled *The Rise of the Creative Class* (New York: Basic Books, 2002) has sparked interest in creativity as an economic force and stimulated debate about the drivers of economic growth and development. Florida developed an indicator he calls the Creativity Index, which he uses as a barometer of a region's longer-run economic potential.

2. Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design (LEED) is a self-assessing system designed for rating new and existing commercial, institutional and high-rise residential buildings. Developed by the US Green Building Council, it evaluates environmental performance from a "whole building" perspective over a building's life cycle, providing a definitive standard for what constitutes a green building. LEED is based on accepted energy and environmental principles, and strikes a balance between effective practices and emerging concepts. Further information is available at: www.usgbc.org

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