

Local Heroes: CAW 199 and Community Partners Build Affordable Homes and Community Spirit

Ontario's Niagara Region is grappling with a serious affordable housing shortage. It ranks among the top five Ontario cities most in need of this type of dwelling, according to statistics compiled by the Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing. In 2000, the Niagara Homelessness Committee identified

Established in 2002, Vibrant Communities is a pan-Canadian initiative that explores promising local solutions to reduce poverty. Fifteen communities from across Canada have formed a learning partnership through which they share ideas, resources and strategies related to poverty reduction. Each of the participating communities already had done considerable work to alleviate poverty and saw Vibrant Communities as a way to extend and enrich their efforts. This story is the sixth in a series which highlights successful strategies for reducing poverty and building more caring communities. For more information, visit: <http://www.vibrantcommunities.ca>

the provision of safe, permanent, affordable and emergency housing as a top priority for the community.¹ Unfortunately, little was done immediately to meet the needs of the 9,000 people (4,227 households) on the region's affordable housing waiting list. In 2001, four transition housing units were built by Bethlehem Projects of Niagara, but in the summer of 2002, seven shelter beds were lost. On balance, things were getting worse.

That changed in the summer of 2003 when the St. Catharines Community Housing Projects Committee presented a proposal to St. Catharines City Council to build a 40-unit affordable housing complex for Bethlehem Projects of Niagara. Bethlehem is a multi-service organization that provides transitional housing and life skills programs for low-income people trying to improve their lives. The 40-unit Bethlehem complex will be an addition to Bethlehem's 33 existing housing units.

The proposal was quickly endorsed and planning for the project began shortly thereafter. Opportunities Niagara – the Vibrant

Communities local partner in Niagara Region – invited (former) Minister of Labour and Federal Coordinator on Homelessness, the Honourable Claudette Bradshaw, to visit the region in July 2003 to further discuss the Bethlehem project and other local initiatives related to homelessness. She was enthusiastic about the plan and suggested that regional representatives consider applying for funds under the new federal/provincial Affordable Housing Program² and the federal government’s Supporting Community Partnerships Initiatives (SCPI).

Important ingredients

Two factors were responsible for the region’s success in creating excitement and progress around affordable housing initiatives. The first was the powerful network of business, nonprofit and municipal government leaders – members of Opportunities Niagara and the Niagara Homelessness Committee – who had come together to support poverty reduction and affordable housing efforts. The second was the gift of skilled labour.

“We were made a wonderful offer by members of the local chapter of the Canadian Auto Workers union,” says Peter Papp, Project Manager of Opportunities Niagara. “CAW Local 199 representatives had expressed their interest in getting more involved in local affordable housing projects. Mark Roy, a member of the union’s executive, was invited to a community forum in December 2002 presented by the Niagara Homelessness Committee and Opportunities Niagara. By the end of the meeting, Mark was ready to begin discussing how union members could contribute to an affordable housing initiative.”

CAW 199 is an amalgamated local union which has served Niagara communities for more than 60 years [<http://www.CAW199.com>].³ CAW 199 members have been active in community projects since 1936. Member donations helped build Brock University in the 1960s and the Pelham Medical Arts building – a ‘one-stop’ health services facility which opened in the 1970s. Members have answered numerous other requests for funds from community organizations over the intervening years. CAW 199 recently contributed funds for the purchase of CAT and MRI units for area hospitals.

Setting priorities

The Regional Municipality of Niagara has a combined population of 430,000. Twelve municipalities comprise the region: the Towns of Grimsby, Lincoln, Pelham, Niagara-on-the-Lake and Fort Erie; the Townships of West Lincoln and Wainfleet; and the Cities of St. Catharines, Niagara Falls, Thorold, Welland and Port Colborne. Peter Papp and Malcolm Allen are both City Councilors for the Town of Pelham – a municipality of 14,000. They knew one another well and their professional and personal relationships helped to build a level of trust before the Bethlehem initiative was even conceived.

Says Peter Papp: “The largest proportion of people in the region who are in need of affordable, safe and supportive housing and the greatest number of homeless people live in St. Catharines, so we began our investigation into likely projects in that city. Mayor Tim Rigby has been the driving political force in moving forward with the affordable housing initiative.”

Initially, an impromptu group made up of Peter Papp, Mayor Rigby and Community Care of St. Catharines and Thorold representatives Betty-Lou Souter and Bob Barkman met informally with Malcolm Allen to discuss project and partnership possibilities. In early 2003, the group had evolved into the St. Catharines Community Housing Projects Committee and invited Malcolm and representatives from other community organizations to attend its inaugural meeting. Discussion focused on the themes of affordable housing and how organized labour could be involved in improving living conditions for low-income members of the community. Says Malcolm: “Because we were offering short-term construction expertise, we wanted to partner with nonprofit organizations that had program management expertise and could look after running the housing program once it was built.”

Peter Papp and Mayor Rigby agreed to look for one or more potential partners who would be interested in working with CAW. After identifying the housing projects and speaking with the parties involved, Bethlehem Projects seemed the best partnership fit for the union. Says Bethlehem Projects of Niagara Executive Director Julie Dennis: “Peter’s knowledge and experience in housing were extremely useful in helping bring this project together. Opportunities Niagara was helpful in brokering relationships and coordinating activities.”

On behalf of the housing committee, Peter Papp drew up an outline for the Bethlehem project which the CAW 199 executive brought to their members for approval.



Bethlehem Place's current transitional apartment building.

Gail Richardson, Chair of Bethlehem's Housing Steering Committee, recruited her husband, Tom Richardson – a respected municipal lawyer in Niagara – who decided to lend his time to the project *pro bono*. City Council voted to sell a centrally located property to the project at its appraised value. As the development unfolds, Mayor Rigby and Peter Papp are committed to maintaining their involvement and turning to their network of resources to aid the project.

By the winter of 2004, the regional government had secured a commitment from the federal/provincial Affordable Housing Program Agreement for 150 affordable housing units – the equivalent of \$4 million in funding. Over the next eight months, a project review committee prioritized 13 project submissions, ending with a short list of five projects (including the Bethlehem Project). The list was submitted to the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing for approval in October 2004.

“All the help we needed came when we needed it,” says Peter. “We have been told by federal and provincial government representatives that the Vibrant Communities model is seen as a highly successful mechanism for uniting all sectors of the community in support of poverty reduction.”

CAW 199 members will donate time and expertise to the Bethlehem project. Once the building's multi-storey structure is in place, the project proposal calls for craftspeople to help with landscaping, kitchen installation, finished carpentry, doors and installation, drywall, painting, washroom accessory installation, floor finishing, and mechanical and electrical tasks.

In order to engage the cooperation of the area's five local construction unions, the St. Catharines Community Housing Projects

Committee adopted a Habitat for Humanity model of involvement. Says Peter: “The Habitat model is based on supplementing the work of the construction industry through volunteer labour and charitable contributions. It doesn't intrude on the scope of work of trades or professional people or the boundaries of their collective agreements. Because skilled labour is in great demand, the unions saw this project as a way to relieve some of the pressure on their workers. Since they each have similar groups volunteering time to building projects, union leaders saw that CAW members' efforts would complement overall construction and assist in potential efficiencies and savings.”

Vibrant Communities' impacts

Affirms Peter: “Building strong relationships is the first ingredient in any successful undertaking. Using those relationships as a base, we have begun to effect real change in the area of affordable housing in the region. Opportunities Niagara has been able to bring the right players to the table and is now seen as a model for action that is non-parochial, non-biased and community-driven. People who normally wouldn't work together get a chance to build new relationships. We are able to engage multiple sectors, draw on one another's resources and create interrelated projects. We get the work done and build new skills within our organizations at the same time.”

Nothing succeeds like success. The collaborative framework which was established for the Bethlehem project helped ensure that Bethlehem Projects of Niagara received 40 of the 150 affordable housing units allocated by the federal and provincial governments. The balance of the 150 units went to four other affordable housing projects throughout the Niagara peninsula.



(left to right): Julie Dennis, Malcolm Allen and Gail Richardson review drawings of the new Bethlehem apartment building.

Besides making large financial contributions to various community projects over the years, CAW 199 members were interested in finding other ways to support and serve their community. In 1999, they began hosting a Christmas dinner for community agencies that operate food banks and other food outreach services. Since that time, the guest list has grown from 125 to 650. Volunteers now outnumber tasks and are assigned to waiting lists; clearly, the desire to help is strong. The Bethlehem project will enable retired and active union members the chance to donate their time and skills to an important community undertaking, and could pave the way for similar projects in the future.

Howard Webb is a forge inspector for General Motors and a CAW 199 member. Howard and his family have volunteered over the

years to help rebuild homes and lives in the southern US after the catastrophic effects of tornadoes, hurricanes and wildfires. He and members of his church's youth group are excited at the prospect of helping to build Bethlehem Place. Says Howard: "When you give your time to this type of project, you find yourself learning so much about others and about what it takes to foster hope and self-respect. The work is a pleasure, the fellowship on the job is powerful, and the sense of accomplishment you get at the end of the job is incredibly satisfying."

According to Bethlehem Executive Director Julie Dennis, the partnership with the CAW is critical to enabling the Bethlehem project to proceed. Without the contributed labour provided by the CAW, the financial challenges of the project would be severe. "As it is," notes Dennis, "Bethlehem Projects is

undertaking a major capital campaign to support the initiative. Without the CAW's involvement, pursuing such a project would really be an uphill battle."

And every great match needs a great match maker. Opportunities Niagara's ability to create opportunities for involvement was central to the successful partnership arrangement between Bethlehem and CAW 199. Says Malcolm Allen: "This project wouldn't have happened without Opportunities Niagara. All the key people involved knew each other to some extent before we got started, but probably not intimately enough to put a partnership like this together. It needed someone to play a facilitation role and that's what Opportunities Niagara did. Too often, things don't happen because groups are either isolated from each other or forced to compete for limited funds. Opportunities Niagara is helping people in this area find ways they can work together to make projects like this happen."

Anne Makhoul

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Endnotes

1. The Niagara Homelessness Committee is a grass-roots group that represents social agencies from the Niagara Region. In 2002, it oversaw the development of the region's multistakeholder Community Plan for Homelessness in Niagara which received approval and funding from the federal government's National Homelessness Initiative.
2. In May 2002, the governments of Canada and Ontario signed a five-year Affordable Housing Program Agreement which provides \$489.42 million to increase the supply of affordable housing in the province. Federal funding of \$244.71 million, together with matching contributions from the province of Ontario, municipalities and other private and nonprofit partners, will help create an estimated 10,500 units in Ontario between 2002 and 2007.
3. CAW Local 199 is an amalgamated local union whose members are employed by a number of businesses including auto manufacturers, car dealerships, auto parts suppliers, a credit union and a library service.

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