



## ***Action for Neighbourhood Change in Thunder Bay***

*The Action for Neighbourhood Change project (ANC) may be complex but its purpose is clear. The initiative is about real people helping one another to make their neighbourhoods better places to live. Since the project began in February 2005, it has generated optimism and hope among community members. The partners are excited that the program is having the desired results: Citizens are becoming involved in changing their neighbourhoods and government is hearing the feedback it needs to support them effectively. This series of stories presents each of the five ANC neighbourhoods as they existed at the start of the initiative. A second series will be published at the end of the ANC's 14-month run to document the changes and learnings that have resulted from the effort. For more information about ANC, visit: [www.anccommunity.ca](http://www.anccommunity.ca)*

### ***A brief history***

Before the arrival of Europeans, Ojibway was the dominant culture of the area between Georgian Bay on Lake Huron and the Prairies. French fur traders in the 1600s are credited with first calling part of the northern shore of Lake Superior *Baie de Tonnaire*, but it took until 1970 to amalgamate the former twin cities of Port Arthur and Fort William into the City of Thunder Bay. Long ago, Aboriginal tribe members traversed their homeland through a network of lakes and rivers. Those same waterways and rail lines, which were laid down in the 1880s, established the area as an important shipping point for grain and logging. In the 1920s, the former twin cities had the greatest grain handling capacity in North America.

Over the years, logging and shipping activity in the region has declined. The pulp and paper industry is going through major restructuring and many high-paying jobs are disappearing.



On a more positive note, the establishment of Lakehead University and Confederation College of Applied Arts and Sciences, the reconstruction of Old Fort William, and numerous national and international sporting events have helped to establish Thunder Bay as an educational and tourist destination. On balance, however, the local economy is not offering the opportunities of larger, southern cities and many university and college graduates are moving away. Graduates who remain face heavy competition for entry-level jobs.

In 2001, Thunder Bay's population was 121,986, a decrease of 3.6 percent from the previous Census period in 1996 (126,643). The population is also aging. In 2001, 25 percent of

residents were over age 55 (up from 22 percent in 1996). The proportion of Aboriginal citizens is 7 percent, compared with 1 percent in the rest of the province. Average income levels, employment and labour participation are lower than the provincial average and the number of people on fixed incomes is higher (13.7 versus 9.8 percent). Alcohol and substance abuse and dependency are serious problems among young people and the region ranks poorly on lifestyle indicators (e.g., body weight, smoking rates, exercise and eating habits).

Despite economic challenges, residents of Thunder Bay remain proud of their northern Ontario heritage and have deep connections to their community and family members. Says

### *The United Way of Thunder Bay*

Since its founding in 1964, the United Way of Thunder Bay (UWTB) has kept its focus on funding community organizations and, until the ANC project, had placed only a small emphasis on community-building activities. Recent donor interest in longer-term, comprehensive solutions to local problems inspired UWTB staff and Board of Directors to pursue the ANC project.

Says Joanne Kembel: "Because community building has a long developmental lead time and can take a while to generate tangible results, our Board of Directors moved cautiously in this direction. In addition, our community and United Way campaign are smaller than the other four United Ways participating in ANC, and we were concerned that the project might deplete resources traditionally used for our annual fundraising campaign. However, the opportunity to network with the ANC partner organizations and to learn more about a sustainable practices approach was extremely attractive."

UWTB staff members believe that this new way of working has already generated results, both in the selected neighbourhood and among the community organizations they sponsor. Says Cameron Nicolson, UWTB Past President and ANC Project Advisor: "Many people in Thunder Bay recognize that our community has to work more collaboratively and adopt a more positive approach to our future. The ANC model offers an opportunity to make a long-term, comprehensive impact on a neighbourhood and likely will influence UWTB's future operations."

Cameron's involvement in ANC is unique. Working in a volunteer capacity, he has been an active leader in selecting the neighbourhood, orchestrating the project launch and guiding the work.

Joanne Kembel, Executive Director of the United Way of Thunder Bay: “The realities of our economic situation are serious, and rising oil and gas prices will add another stress for many small businesses now struggling to remain competitive. We also are in the process of rebuilding trust in our community, having weathered a previous, difficult municipal council. It will take time to overcome people’s concerns, but Action for Neighbourhood Change offers a long-term approach to the types of difficulties we are experiencing and we are optimistic about its potential impact on our larger community.”

### ***Neighbourhood selection process – Thunder Bay style***

In preparing to choose a location for the Action for Neighbourhood Change (ANC) project, a member of the ANC Thunder Bay Steering Committee held stakeholder consultations with federal, provincial and municipal government officials and area service providers. Each was asked to suggest areas in the city that would benefit from inclusion in the project. From this work, the names of five neighbourhoods were brought to an introductory ANC meeting with 30 community group members. The meeting gave participants the chance to consider the assets and concerns in each of the five proposed project sites.

The three-member ANC management team then distributed questionnaires to service provider organizations in the five prospective neighbourhoods asking for more information about assets, potential leaders and possible project participants. Next, a researcher was contracted to conduct follow-up research with police, a Thunder Bay literacy organization, the Lakehead Social Planning Council and the City’s planning department.

“One of the outcomes of our research was the realization that none of our local agencies tracks information by neighbourhood,” says UWTB Executive Director Joanne Kembel. “This project already has convinced local agencies and planning departments to consider the benefits of collecting information on a neighbourhood basis and will likely inform future statistics gathering efforts.”

After all the information was collected, the ANC Steering Committee viewed each prospective neighbourhood against six criteria: existing leadership; the number of organizations, service providers and businesses present; neighbourhood size; assets and issues; the presence of a diverse population; and whether issues could be successfully addressed within the project’s 14-month time frame. The Simpson-Ogden neighbourhood quickly rose to the top of the list and, after further consultation with residents, organizations and service providers, was selected as the ANC site.

### ***Neighbourhood description***

Simpson-Ogden was named for two citizens who assumed civic prominence in the 1800s and is the second-oldest residential neighbourhood in Thunder Bay. Simpson Street developed as the area’s first business district in the early 1900s and Ogden Street has been the site of a community park for more than 80 years. Travelling north to south on Simpson Street provides a glimpse of the neighbourhood’s ethnic and socio-economic diversity. The street itself is often heavy with traffic and widens to four lanes inside the Simpson-Ogden neighbourhood. Its commercial buildings are mostly two and three stories high, often with apartments on the second and third floors.

Though once a thriving business location, Simpson Street is now showing signs of decline. Although an estimated 175 businesses remain, many have closed, leaving behind boarded up doors and windows. The Simpson-Ogden Business Improvement Association (BIA) planted trees and installed benches and hanging flower baskets in an effort to improve the neighbourhood's appeal. But the unkempt appearance of many of the buildings embodies Simpson Street's struggle to find a better footing in Thunder Bay's modern business community.

A railroad yard and warehouses form the neighbourhood's eastern border and its western boundary is a second business district, May Street, which continues north as Memorial Avenue. The neighbourhood's southern and northern ends are bounded by large shopping malls. Residents must travel three blocks from the south end of Simpson-Ogden to reach the closest grocery store near the Victoriaville Mall. This shopping centre also provides access to a number of municipal offices – planning, parks and recreation, and nonprofit service providers.

A little further south in the Victoriaville neighbourhood are City Hall, a food bank, homeless shelter, public library and the Fort William Gardens Curling Club and Multipurpose Arena. In 2003, the Victoriaville BIA members and a group of concerned residents formed a coalition called "Downtown Now." They have worked with municipal staff to establish a core renewal plan which recently was presented to City Council for approval. Though Simpson-Ogden falls outside of the improvement area, opportunities to share renewal plans with ANC will be explored.

Besides business areas along Simpson and May Streets, the remainder of Simpson-Ogden is

made up of residential properties. About two-thirds of the housing stock is composed of small, single homes; more than half of these were built before 1946. Some larger houses have been converted into multi-unit apartments. Though many properties are tidy and well kept, residents are concerned about the dozen or so vacant, burned-out or boarded-up houses sprinkled throughout the neighbourhood. In addition to the neighbourhood's business and housing elements, Simpson-Ogden has a public pool, community centre and two elementary schools. Other than the school yards and play areas adjacent to the pool and community centre, the neighbourhood has no other parks or public green spaces.

Simpson-Ogden residents have fought hard to keep the services they have. Both the pool and one of the elementary schools were slated for closure in the last few years, but strong local opposition convinced officials to leave them open.

### *The people of Simpson-Ogden*

Simpson-Ogden has approximately 2,500 households and an estimated population of 5,000. At the beginning of the ANC project, the few statistics available which helped to describe the residents of the neighbourhood were extrapolated from three Census tracts that most closely fit the Simpson-Ogden boundaries. According to the Census, low income levels range from a 'low' of 16.3 percent in the northernmost neighbourhood tract to 22.8 percent in the middle and 35.7 in the southernmost tract. Even the lowest rate is higher than the overall low income rate for the region, which stands at 11.4 percent.

The neighbourhood is populated mainly by the descendents of European immigrants, including Poles, Ukrainians, British, German,

Finnish, Dutch, Germans and Italians, and by a high proportion of Aboriginals. ANC staff members have met with representatives of the Thunder Bay Urban Aboriginal Strategy to share data and discuss linkages between the two programs. Plans to collaborate on policy and capacity-building efforts are under review.

### *Community assets*

Thanks to the involvement of UWTB Board and ANC Steering Committee member Dr. Joanne Zamparo, the Simpson-Ogden neighbourhood was incorporated into a month-long theory course at Lakehead University's School of Social Work. The ANC staff asked students to help conduct focus groups for business representatives and seniors, structure a policy forum and analyze the historical context and outcomes of previous change plans in the neighbourhood. Students were pleased with the opportunity to have a real-life experience of theory in action, and several volunteered extra time to the project.

The NorWest Community Health Centre is considered an anchor organization in Simpson-Ogden and its staff helped introduce the ANC to other community members and services. NorWest's Simpson Street location is one of three branch facilities. It is staffed by doctors and nurse practitioners to the equivalent of three full-time physician and three full-time nurse practitioner positions. Staff salaries are paid by the Ontario Ministry of Long Term Care.

Though originally built to serve the Simpson-Ogden neighbourhood, the health centre's mandate has expanded in the last three years to serve the entire city and its two satellite programs cover all of northwestern Ontario. The

centre's three locations together offer an estimated 50 community-g geared programs. In Thunder Bay, the centre focuses on the early years population (ages 0 to 3), Aboriginal residents and seniors. It also educates residents about nutrition and Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. The centre offers a number of outreach programs, including FOCUS which works to address problems and injuries associated with drug and alcohol abuse. FOCUS Coordinator Darren Borg is an active member of the newly formed ANC Policy Validation Group.

A mobile needle exchange and intravenous drug use education program, called Superior Points, also operates from the health centre and serves a large population of program users living in the Simpson-Ogden neighbourhood. The program supplies needles and educational materials to all parts of Thunder Bay.

The Ogden Community Centre is a second, well used facility in the neighbourhood. The City runs several park programs and events from the centre at no charge, serving a variety of ages and interests. The Ogden Community School gym is attached to the centre and is available free of charge to nonprofit organizations.

The Lakehead Social Planning Council in nearby Victoriaville Mall is a community information referral centre. Some of its members began work in 2003 to establish a 211 social services help line. In 2001 the Council published *Hard Times*, a community handbook, which it is currently working to update and republish. This reference will be useful to the many Ojibway and Cree residents who are moving into the area from reserves and who can benefit from settlement services.

These provincial and municipal government-based services are important resources for



the residents of Simpson-Ogden, but the neighbourhood also is enriched by a variety of private and faith-based programs.

Among the neighbourhood's biggest assets are the small church groups that have evolved programs and services over the years and helped build a sense of community in their immediate surroundings. New Life Christian Fellowship provides a weekly, year-round pancake breakfast which draws up to 130 people from various backgrounds. Monthly barbecues and regular invitations to local youth to come and play basketball have brought many people to the church's door. Though she is new to the area, the pastor's compassion for people in difficulty has won many friends in the neighbourhood.

The Thunder Bay Christian Community Centre runs programs from a semi-detached house. One paid coordinator and a group of volunteers offer (free of charge) a food bank, clothing depot, cooking classes, a mother and child drop-in program, literacy help, school preparation assistance, craft groups, food hampers and community dinners. Children are invited to a summer Sunday school program. The centre has become a community anchor and neighbours feel very comfortable with the workers at the centre.

Ten months of the year, Knox United Church serves Sunday night dinner. What began as an offering for students grew to include up to 100 guests each week. Members of the church community have reached out to their neighbours with small gestures of goodwill, including the distribution of garden plants to homes in the church's vicinity. The church keeps emergency food supplies, though it does not operate a formal food bank. The minister lives in a home attached to the church and neighbourhood residents come

to her door in need of food, clothing and advice. The church's grounds are an oasis of beautifully kept gardens, and its fruits and vegetables are distributed regularly to people living nearby.

The Underground Gym – an evening recreational facility for youth – was established in 1999 by Peter Panetta, a postman by day and community volunteer by night. In 2004, Peter bought three vacant buildings in Simpson-Ogden for \$200 each. By soliciting donations and help from local businesses, Peter has made structural improvements to the buildings' interiors, and a recent grant from the Trillium Foundation will pay for roof repairs for one of the buildings.

Using donated gym equipment, Peter and another volunteer offer a boxing program, fitness classes, and workout and computer facilities three nights a week. The local hospital donated ten computers to Peter, and the City provides the program with free high speed Internet access. Between 60 and 80 youth use the facilities and Peter makes sure that they all have input into program design decisions. Says Peter: "My dream is that kids will do for other what I have done for them, causing a ripple of positive effects."

Says ANC Local Manager Jodi Carlson: "The churches and other neighbourhood groups have been extremely positive about ANC to date and many are requesting to participate in focus group sessions. We are in the process of meeting and hearing from a variety of neighbourhood groups as well as mapping asset locations and learning more about the challenges people face." Jodi, Community Development Facilitator Sandra Albertson and Administrative Assistant Lorraine Alarie opened an ANC office in the neighbourhood on August 1.

### *Moving ahead*

The Thunder Bay ANC official launch on May 26 was attended by 45 neighbourhood residents, service providers, the Mayor, and provincial and federal government representatives. An evening block party event on July 13 attracted 400 residents and offered entertainment, food and fellowship. Says Sandra Albertson: “The party was an important opportunity to demonstrate ANC’s ability to organize an event and bring people together. Even though we’re only a staff of three, people in the neighbourhood could see for themselves the possibilities that exist when even a small number work together. The party generated a sense of optimism and a renewed commitment to strive for positive change.”

Since the kickoff and block party, the ANC project staff have been consulting representatives from private, public and nonprofit groups that operate in the neighbourhood. As staff continue to learn more about the assets and organizations present in Simpson-Ogden, they are preparing residents to become involved in developing a vision of change that will direct their improvement efforts.

The National Film Board – one of the ANC partner organizations – filmed residents and produced a short video about life in Simpson-Ogden that was used as part of the this year’s UWTB campaign launch. It both captured and created enthusiasm for the process of neighbourhood revitalization and will help extend awareness of the project and its application to other Thunder Bay neighbourhoods.

Over the years, many individuals and groups have worked hard to improve the quality of life in Simpson-Ogden. Says Jodi Carlson: “ANC has begun to stimulate a region-wide interest in the neighbourhood and people are seeing the possibility of building on Simpson-Ogden’s assets. That understanding, combined with ANC’s partnership structure and government support, are a powerful means of improving life in the neighbourhood.”

*Anne Makhoul*

*Anne Makhoul coordinates the community stories series for the Caledon Institute of Social Policy.*

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1600 Scott Street, Suite 620  
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada  
K1Y4N7

Phone: (613) 729-3340 Fax: (613) 729-3896  
E-mail: [caledon@caledoninst.org](mailto:caledon@caledoninst.org)  
Website: [www.caledoninst.org](http://www.caledoninst.org)