



community stories

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Thunder Bay's Simpson-Ogden Neighbourhood: Gifts in Unexpected Places

Action for Neighbourhood Change (ANC) was launched in February 2005. Originally conceived as a two-year project, its first phase finished on March 31, 2006. This is the second of a series of stories on each of the five local sites. While the first set of stories provided a wide-angle view of each community at the outset of the initiative – its geography, demographics, needs and assets – these updates focus more on resident perceptions of the work unfolding in their neighbourhoods. They are snapshots of an evolving process which seek to capture both progress and the inevitable strains of communities in the midst of change.

Introduction

The Simpson-Ogden neighbourhood was selected by the United Way of Thunder Bay (UWTB) for participation in ANC. Simpson-Ogden was chosen on the basis of five criteria: existing leadership, the presence of service providers and businesses, assets and issues, the diversity of its population and whether issues could be addressed in 14 months. Simpson-Ogden was the clear and early leader of the five neighbourhoods initially under consideration for ANC.

Lynne Moss-Sharman has lived in Simpson-Ogden for more than seven years and is one of the founders of the Elizabeth Fry Society of Northwestern Ontario. Says Lynne: “The neighbourhood has seen hard times, and with the long-standing presence of a motorcycle club and the drug and sex trade activity that accompany those organizations, security has been an issue.” An ongoing police investigation into club activities



resulted in a raid in January 2006. Some club members have been charged and investigative work continues.

Deb Sveinsson is a long-time Simpson-Ogden resident, a neighbourhood business owner and secretary of the local Business Improvement Association. Says Deb: “Changes in consumer spending habits, the advent of big box shopping and an increase in vandalism have taken a toll on businesses along Simpson Street. Over the last five years, many have closed or relocated, leaving boarded-up storefronts behind.”

However, the drama and deterioration that have marked Simpson-Ogden in the minds of some Thunder Bay residents are only one side of the story. Many people have lived in the area for a long time – owning homes, raising their families and feeling safe. The quiet, tree-lined residential streets and affordable house prices have drawn various ethnic groups over the decades.

Assets and needs

Many service organizations – private, government-based and nonprofit – have opened their doors in the neighbourhood. Peter Panetta is a Thunder Bay resident who went through hard times as a youth and turned his life around with sport. As a way to pass along the favour, he established a ‘shoestring operation’ called the Underground Gym, for youth in Simpson-Ogden. Young people can go to his facility in the evening to use the gym, learn to box, access a computer lab and relax with friends over pool, foosball and air hockey. They can get warm meals, clothing and shoes, and their parents can get food to tide them over hard times, thanks to the Regional Food Distribution Association (RDFA). “I do this work because the kids here really need a place to go,”

says Peter. His commitment to neighbourhood youth demonstrates the kind of care and concern which many residents feel toward their community and express through their work and volunteer efforts. The RDFA, for example, is a community association of some 24 food banks and community kitchens. Largely funded by the United Way of Thunder Bay, its staff and volunteers provide a critically important service to residents across the city.

The Simpson-Ogden Business Improvement Association (BIA) beautified the business section of the neighbourhood by planting trees and installing hanging flower baskets and benches to attract shoppers. There are also many service organizations and faith-based groups that offer assistance to residents. The experience of the Action for Neighbourhood Change team has shown that the potential for growth and improvement exists in Simpson-Ogden. By encouraging residents, business owners and community organizations to join together and created a unified vision for their neighbourhood, new programs and synergies may emerge. The progress they have made in 14 short months has been successful in tapping the neighbourhood’s biggest resource: its hope.

The core mission of Action for Neighbourhood Change is community engagement – a process of hearing from as many people and groups as possible – in order to help them detail their concerns for their neighbourhood, develop a vision of where they would like to go and build a plan of action for getting there. Unlike many programs where people are told what someone else thinks they should do, ANC asks people what they think they should do for themselves. It can take a while for this community-driven process to be fully understood.

Neil Otke is a Lutheran pastor who works as a street chaplain in Simpson-Ogden. Employed by the Lutheran Community Care Centre, Neil has spent the last six months developing a group of volunteers who are accessible to people in the street. They talk to people over coffee and food, listen to their concerns and direct them to sources of emotional and spiritual support. Neil was invited to get involved with ANC in November 2005. Says Neil: “After a while, people get tired of experts coming into an area and trying to organize work projects in the neighbourhood. ANC has made a real effort to help people find their own voices, identify themselves or their neighbours as leaders and find their own answers. People have to believe that their neighbourhood is a great spot to live.”

Engagement

From May to September, the ANC project staff worked on five foundational project components: holding discussion groups, developing communications tools, establishing a policy validation group, planning and hosting workshops, and organizing a giant block party. Says ANC Local Manager Jodi Carlson: “We wanted people to see that our project was about getting things done, and we also wanted to celebrate what we already knew existed in the neighbourhood – a strong sense of community pride.” Some 400 residents came out to the block party on July 13. The National Film Board (NFB), one of the ANC national partners, captured the event on film and it was later shown at the United Way of Thunder Bay’s annual campaign kick-off breakfast in early September. “What Makes Your Community Home?” introduced hundreds of Thunder Bay residents to the citizens of Simpson-Ogden.

During the summer, Jodi and the ANC staff established a project office in a Simpson Street storefront. They met with individuals and small groups – both to inform them of ANC’s presence and mandate, and to begin the process of building relationships within and among groups. They developed ties with Lakehead University, providing placements for eight Social Work students who helped with research, conducted focus groups and reviewed past neighbourhood project proposals and documents. Two political science students helped prepare ANC promotional posters and compiled research on substandard housing.

In July, ANC hosted a workshop called “Hearing All Voices: The Power of Community and Working Together to Effect Change.” It was attended by 23 service providers and two residents. In October, a meeting held with local business representatives signalled an important turning point. After a discussion of the community revitalization work done in an adjoining neighbourhood, the Simpson-Ogden business participants realized that they could not work in isolation – they were part of a diverse community whose members would need to work together to effect change.

Says Deb Sveinsson, secretary of the Business Improvement Association: “ANC is here to give us the tools we need to make ourselves better. People who have a real stake – a business or a home in the area – can see that there is a lot to do. It needs to be done and those of us who are becoming involved really want to help.”

Donnalee Morettin received a copy of ANC Thunder Bay’s first newsletter (there have been four to date) in her mailbox in the summer, shortly after the block party. She had lived for several

years in the United States and became familiar with neighbourhood committees that helped build community belonging. She was immediately drawn to ANC as a way to volunteer and meet more people in her neighbourhood. In October, Donnalee was hired to conduct events planning for ANC. At that time, she organized the first meeting of people who had expressed interest in being block leaders – individuals who could act to spread information to their neighbours.

Says Donnalee: “ANC has provided the group with training and support, and our membership has grown to approximately 24. People have forgotten how to be neighbourly and now, more than ever, we need friendly, helpful eyes on the street. ANC has shown us effective tools – newsletters and fliers – and now we have to establish who we are as a group and what we want to do.” In the fall, the block leaders renamed themselves “Neighbourhood Volunteers for Change.”

Fellow volunteer Trudi Jones also joined the Neighbourhood Volunteers for Change. Her belief in grassroots revitalization has made her a firm believer in the ANC process. “From my point of view, there can’t be anything more important than getting people connected,” says Trudi. “Though it’s too early to see any real changes in the neighbourhood, I feel that collectively, we’re more together as a group and that change is coming. The really great thing about this program is that after all the issues are brought forward, we stop talking about problems and start talking about solutions. There is an orientation toward action and a positive outlook.”

The rate and number of neighbourhood consultations increased. In November, ANC staff conducted nine focus groups with residents and service providers. Groups varied from four to 18

participants. They served a range of ages, ethnic backgrounds and interests. Some were organized by the groups themselves, others by ANC. In addition, one-on-one questionnaires were filled out at the street level to provide snapshots of residents who were not likely to participate in larger group discussions.

In early January, a long and short version of a neighbourhood Interim Report were released, which integrated qualitative and quantitative information about Simpson-Ogden. In all, the report was informed by interviewing 229 discussion group participants and individuals. On January 7, volunteers and project staff delivered fliers door-to-door to advertise a January 14 vision and planning meeting. Many more people became aware of ANC and its work through this direct personal contact. Some 60 residents and another 40 service providers attended the January 14 meeting. The event was planned, organized and provided with entertainment by a self-named “Neighbourhood Vision Squad” – all members of the Neighbourhood Volunteers for Change.

By the end of the day, participants validated the six priority areas identified in the Interim Report and arranged them in descending order of importance:

- recreation/social
- safety
- housing
- infrastructure
- income/poverty
- health.

At the end of the meeting, nominations were taken for the formation of a Neighbourhood Advisory Committee. This group met for the first time on February 13, 2006.

Citizen action

In preparation for the end of the first phase of ANC, the project staff began to assist the new, 21-member Neighbourhood Advisory Committee in its task of building a structure that would make it capable of addressing the six priority areas. By early April, they will have identified the tools they need – e.g., a constitution and an efficient operating structure.

Each of the five ANC sites was provided with a project pool of \$80,000. ANC Thunder Bay invited Brenda Reimer, past director of the Lakehead Social Planning Council, to coordinate the project pool selections committee in December. She was joined in this work by two United Way of Thunder Bay board members, three residents and one member of the community at large who had experience with funds allocation. The group reviewed 15 applications, focusing on proposals that filled identified gaps from among the neighbourhood's priority needs.

On February 13, project pool recipients were announced. These were:

- **Lutheran Community Care Centre** – Neil Otker's drop-in centre for people living on the street will be relocated from its temporary, borrowed quarters. The new centre will be renovated and outfitted with laundry and cooking facilities.
- **Aboriginal Arts and Heritage** – a project which will identify and promote neighbourhood Aboriginal artists and crafters. The Aboriginal Awareness Program will be provided with traditional cultural instruction and drum and regalia-making workshops in preparation for a multicultural showcase on April 1, 2006.

- **Underground Gym** – funding will be provided to help with extensive renovations to the building which now houses Peter Panetta's youth-focused initiative.
- **Dream Catchers Project** – organized by the Neighbourhood Women's Coordinating Committee based at the Elizabeth Fry Society, this program will provide a community and intra-agency workshop to create a network to help teen and adult women who are trying to exit the sex trade.
- **Community Gardens** – the Regional Food Distribution Association will support the development of 20 communal gardens, linking gardeners with available garden space (e.g., on the properties of elderly homeowners who no longer can tend their gardens).

ANC has also established a Simpson-Ogden neighbourhood website which complements the ANC national website (www.anccommunity.ca). The site – www.simpsonogden.ca – offers an easily updated Idea Bank where anyone interested in community development can list suggestions for social, economic or quality-of-life improvements in the Simpson-Ogden neighbourhood.

Now that the action phase of the project is under way, residents and ANC staff agree that even more interest in the ANC process will be generated. Says Community Development Facilitator Sandra Albertson: "Many residents are now engaged with ANC's work. It took most of the project run to get the word out and to see people get really interested in doing things for their neighbourhood. There has been a slow evolution of hope and the continuum of interest spans from wary engagement to fully committed project advocacy."

Some areas of focus have yet to be fully explored or developed. Sandra Albertson continues to lead a policy validation group which is currently assembling materials for later work in the six priority areas. Though no formal system of support for ANC's work has been developed at the municipal level, meetings with the Mayor and City Administrator have been positive. ANC staff members are beginning to see better communication and collaboration among service providers within the Simpson-Ogden neighbourhood, which will further strengthen and enrich the services they provide.

Bruce Pailing has been a resident of Simpson-Ogden since 1979. Though he has been an active member of the Neighbourhood Volunteers for Change and is currently a member of the policy validation group, the project pool selections committee and the Neighbourhood Advisory Committee, he believes the project is still in its infancy. Says Bruce: "The project has potential, but we all need to know more about who our neighbourhood leaders will be. If further money is made available to ANC, there's the possibility of helping people develop more leadership skills. My preference would be to have more money in the hands of citizens and let

them test the theories of how to make change happen. Telling people when they are ready still doesn't go much past the top-down model of government that we're all used to. However, I remain cautiously optimistic."

Lynne Moss-Sharman volunteers with women in conflict with the law who struggle to leave the sex trade and get off drugs. As a long-time neighbourhood resident, each spring she tries to create beauty in Simpson-Ogden as a way of offsetting the grim realities that accompany the poverty she witnesses every day. She dug up the earth along the side of a building and planted wildflowers. She carried water from three floors up to nourish and sustain the alley garden. Says Lynne: "Children and their mothers walk along these streets and alleyways every day. I grow the flowers for them." ANC has helped many people in Simpson-Ogden to find their own inner gardener – now is the time for them to plant the seeds and see what the harvest brings.

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