



community stories

April 2006

ISBN #1-55382-182-3

ANC in Toronto: Scarborough Village Grows in a Positive Direction

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

Scarborough Village was chosen for participation in ANC by the United Way of Greater Toronto (UWGT) mainly because it was a clear example of the new face of poverty in that city. One part of a former suburban area designed around the automobile, Scarborough Village has few local amenities, is chopped into several pieces by large roadways and has an ill-conceived mix of densely clustered high-rise apartments and sprawling bungalows. Its residents represent many cultures and speak many languages. Over the last few years, youth and drug violence have increased. The summer of 2006 saw the highly publicized shooting of an older Scarborough Village resident who had been agitating for an end to gun violence in the neighbourhood.

Just one month before this incident, Action for Neighbourhood Change had opened a storefront in one of the many small strip malls that



form a continuous chain of commercial venues along Eglinton Avenue – the Village’s main thoroughfare and one of the longest streets in the Toronto Region. Literally across the block from the public housing development where the shooting took place, ANC arrived – in the minds of some residents, at least – in the nick of time.

Mauricio Tabares has lived in Scarborough Village since he arrived from Colombia at the age of 10 in 1989. He and a friend began to investigate the possibility of building some kind of community centre for teens in the early summer of 2005. Says Mauricio: “I read about the United Way giving funds to a project in Scarborough Village and was really happy to see that my ideas and this program came together at the same time. I’ve been seeing more teens hanging around with nothing to do and it’s been my dream to get more activities into the neighbourhood. For me, ANC came along at the exact moment I needed it.”

Assets and needs

The United Way of Greater Toronto has been giving special attention to high need neighbourhoods in the inner suburbs since the early 2000s. Its 2004 publication, *Poverty by Postal Code*, pinpointed neighbourhoods that were in real need of action and Scarborough Village was one of them [UWGT and CCSD 2004].

UWGT hired an experienced community development firm to manage the ANC project for Scarborough Village. Sean Meagher, the team leader, knew Scarborough well. He had helped organize two Scarborough Civic Action Network forums in 2003 and 2004 which documented resident concerns on many issues – access to services, employment and economy, housing, youth and a worsening public image. Sean brought a

team of four co-workers to Scarborough Village. Having individuals on the ground who were well trained, well versed in the issues and well connected to resources and programs were important first ingredients in launching ANC.

Early research into the neighbourhood’s community organizations, cultural and faith groups, schools, business owners and residents’ associations showed evidence of the hard work that had been done to improve Scarborough Village’s quality of life. The ANC team’s first job was to find and communicate with as many people and groups as possible to tell them about the program and its goals.

Engagement

ANC staff opened a project office in June, held numerous one-on-one conversations and small group discussions, and tried to speak with residents from all ethnic, age and income groups. They held a forum in late June to further explain the ANC process. The event was attended by about 45 people who began the evening as skeptics and left excited by the project’s possibilities. Another 100 or so individuals who had expressed interest in ANC but who did not attend the forum were sent a summary of the discussions through ground mail and e-mail. Also in the summer, ANC staff published a multilingual newsletter in English, Tamil and Urdu, which described ANC and invited contributions for future editions. Delivered door-to-door, it was an effective way to communicate the project message.

Says Mauricio: “The ANC staff worked really hard to get residents to come out. Using fliers and different languages was a good idea. They tried to get people’s attention and get the kids involved. In a neighbourhood like this where

there are so many new people coming in all the time who don't know how things work, talking to them about something like ANC can be difficult.”

It was becoming clear that reaching new Canadians was going to present a challenge. Scarborough Village has 13,725 residents and 49 percent have a home language other than English. ANC staff decided to identify and train interested residents who belonged to a particular ethnic group or who spoke other languages to become community animators. Tanya Harding's family origins are partly Caribbean. She got involved early in ANC activities and received animator training. Says Tanya: “We were trained over a one-week period and learned how to reach out to people. We were taught about different ethnocultural backgrounds and we were given a community-based orientation to the work.” To further her training, Tanya volunteered at several local agencies and discovered her own capacity for learning and appreciating other cultures.

Animators would often bring more participants to ANC. Says Sean Meagher: “If we had had more time, we would have made far greater use of our animators. Time was a factor, but if we had had two years to get started, we would have spent much more time with this type of activity. The animators played a critical role in building trust and understanding of the culture and social dynamics in the neighbourhood. They understood the networks and had the capacity to reach out in a way that our staff team could not.”

ANC staff worked with the adults and youth who live in the social housing development where August's shooting had occurred to identify what they wanted and needed to make their neighbourhood feel safer. These discussions demonstrated the ability of agencies to contribute small amounts of resources that added up to a big

difference. That success led to ANC convening a joint agency-resident process that looked at Scarborough Village's community priorities, resources and opportunities.

Says Sean: “That meeting sparked the firm belief that the process could be extended into an Agency Table. In early December, we invited all of the service providers in the surrounding area to a meeting with the idea of building one service access point in the neighbourhood. They all came, and after four meetings in two months, we got a working model that makes service providers available on a rotating basis in borrowed spaces. We're matching partners' program and strengths to cover more needs – a case of the whole being greater than its parts.”

Throughout October, project staff conducted numerous small community forums where they laid out priorities. Because of the program's short, 14-month initial phase, staff and residents were aware of a time pressure to create the structures they needed to sustain long-term action. In early November, volunteers organized themselves into small action committees and, later that month, they decided to form a neighbourhood steering committee and defined a basic structure. By February 20, they had adopted a constitution and established committees to work on the issues of youth, access to services and safety.

Oma Maharaj has lived in the Scarborough area for 15 years and was very impressed and excited by the ANC project. Says Oma: “I worked on the Steering Committee and helped to write the constitution. February 19 was quite a night. We all stayed late to get the job finished, then presented a draft to a large group meeting the following night. It was very productive and it was a really good experience.”

Citizen action

The City of Toronto has recently established a Neighbourhood Action Team for Scarborough Village, composed of representatives from all city departments and agencies that provide neighbourhood services. ANC staff members were invited to provide input to the city process because they were perceived as having a good sense of what is happening at the grassroots level. By encouraging residents and small NGOs to band together and present their concerns as a group, ANC is helping people to speak clearly in a way that represents the community. In this way, ANC is providing the city with access to important information and also suggesting structural changes that will make the model work better.

The built environment – houses, businesses, apartment and roads – shapes a community’s personality. Scarborough Village’s miles of strip malls have been the subject of discussion and research. Successful malls offer diversity – both in terms of the services they provide and the cultural groups they service – and business people and residents often disagree on the appearance and social impact of strip malls on a neighbourhood. ANC is assembling a report on its findings and will offer it as a tool to the business community.

Community animators were asked to gather the names of Tamil- and Urdu-speaking children in grades 1 through 8 whose parents are interested in language and cultural programs. Thanks to the 100 names collected, the school board was convinced that they should begin organizing a program at a local school. This was an important organizational and empowerment experience for residents.

Fahmida Siddiqui is an Urdu-speaking resident of Scarborough Village who is well known and well regarded by her community. She first heard of ANC through the settlement worker at her children’s school and is pleased to see the things that people have long talked about changing are being acted upon. Says Fahmida: “The after school Urdu language classes have given a lot of confidence to the Urdu-speaking community. People had also been asking for help for high school students who had to fulfill their community service hours – it is often a barrier for kids who are graduating from high school. Now that is happening too.”

A group of Pakistani women organized and met with their local city councillor and presented a list of municipal issues about which they were concerned. They secured a commitment to hold monthly meetings to discuss specific follow-up action on public health and housing-related issues.

Small acts of courage and kindness are what can transform an impersonal neighbourhood into a caring, vital one. Lisa McDonald has lived in Scarborough Village for 12 years and is noticing a shift in how people in the neighbourhood interact with one another. “People are starting to get together to solve issues. A lot of different ANC teams are working across cultures – Tamil and Urdu, Canadian and Afro-Canadians,” says Lisa. “Adults are now talking and expressing their needs, concerns and feelings – the neighbourhood is coming together. The new services Agency Table is being told what people need and this is already changing the community. In two or three years, if this kind of commitment and action can be sustained, it will change the community a lot.”

Youth continue to be a source of concern. Sean Meagher is particularly pleased that the \$80,000 grant money made available for community projects in February will help establish a number of youth recreational programs, where none existed before.

Says Sean: “When we first arrived in Scarborough Village, we immediately got our National Film Board partners to provide video technology training for youth at the local community centre. The community was pleased that we recognized the lack of creative outlets for kids and, 14 months later, we’ve come full circle.”

Thanks to the Steering Committee’s work – whose members also received valuable training in writing grant proposals – the project grant money has been allocated to capital projects. Says Sean: “If the Neighbourhood Association had had a bit more time, program initiatives might have been started, but since the time line was short – all money had to be allocated and spent by the end of March 2006 – the general membership chose equipment over programs.”

Sean continues: “We’ve gone from having no free, publicly accessible recreational opportunities to offering summer cricket, basketball and soccer programming. ANC program grants are covering most of the costs, and because the money is there, people are really keen to volunteer as coaches or managers – whatever is needed. We’ve also established an after-school recreational program two nights a week – one for girls, one for boys – which includes life skills training.”

Fahmida Siddiqui’s experiences of life in Pakistan taught her the value of getting involved in one’s community and sums up the potential energy that lies within each ANC project and within each resident. Says Fahmida: “You must do what you can do to help the people around you – to contribute your share and to give back to others. ANC has given me the opportunity to give back in a fruitful and helpful way. Regardless of where you are – be it in Pakistan or Canada – it is important to give to your neighbourhood.”

Anne Makhoul

Anne Makhoul coordinates the ‘community stories’ series for the Caledon Institute.

Reference

United Way of Greater Toronto and Canadian Council on Social Development (UWGT and CCSD). (2004.) *Poverty by Postal Code: The Geography of Neighbourhood Poverty City of Toronto, 1981-2001*. Toronto. http://www.unitedwaytoronto.com/who_we_help/pdfs/PovertybyPostalCodeFinal.pdf

Copyright © 2006 by The Caledon Institute of Social Policy

1600 Scott Street, Suite 620
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
K1Y 4N7

Phone: (613) 729-3340
Fax: (613) 729-3896
E-mail: caledon@caledoninst.org
Website: www.caledoninst.org