



community stories

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ANC in Surrey: Bridgeview is Still in Motion

Action for Neighbourhood Change (ANC) was a two-year action research project which ran from February 2005 to March 2007. It operated in five cities – Surrey, Regina, Thunder Bay, Toronto and Halifax.¹

This paper is the third in a series of community stories which chronicle the path of ANC in the five sites. Series one introduced each neighbourhood and the process by which it was selected for participation. The second provided a mid-process snapshot of involvement and activity. The third summarizes the work accomplished over two years, including project staff and resident perceptions of ANC and its impact on the neighbourhood.²

Neighbourhood history

Bridgeview is a small part of a very large city. Surrey is one of Canada's fastest-growing municipalities. Its population is currently estimated at 388,000 and it is expected shortly to overtake Vancouver as the largest city in British Columbia.

Bridgeview (population 1,895) has often been overlooked by municipal and other officials as but a small piece of Whalley – one of Surrey's six municipal centres. Isolated behind barriers of water, bridges, expressways and heavy industry, its defining physical features include quiet residential streets without curbs or sidewalks and large drainage ditches, which help carry away the storm water that inevitably finds its way to this low-lying location. Residents fought long battles with municipal officials in the 1970s to finally secure federal government funds to build an adequate – though expensive and experimental –



sewage system, but the fight over curbs and safe walkways continues. A new four-lane expressway called the Gateway will soon carve a path along Bridgeview's northern perimeter. The community is divided over whether the increased noise and vehicle pollution balances the demolition of some badly neglected properties that were cleared to make room for the expressway.

Over the course of ANC's two years of operation, United Way of the Lower Mainland's ANC Manager Linda Western was pleased to see a high level of interest and participation in Bridgeview by members of a group of 40 government and agency representatives that she originally had assembled to help select a neighbourhood for participation. Though there were many points of comparison by which to choose a possible location for the project, it was the low scores on a provincial kindergarten readiness test that tipped the balance in Bridgeview's favour. Scores obtained were similar to those of children living in isolated northern regions of BC.

Bridgeview's physical isolation has a positive side, however. It helped create strong bonds among residents who learned to devise home-made remedies to the challenges they faced. They established traditions and routines that made community life enjoyable. Not having a strong municipal presence also meant that they did not have to worry too much about outside accountabilities. Says long-time resident Linda Isaac: "People feel that we have a great community here in Bridgeview. Isolation works to our advantage, particularly our sense of safety with our youth. Our only public space is the Community Hall – we don't have the congregating structures like malls and theatres that draw in negative influences."

Close relationships can also appear exclusive. Bridgeview residents may purchase annual

memberships at the Community Hall for \$5 but, in recent years, many residents had been unaware either of the Hall's existence or its programs and activities. In order to generate revenue to cover the Hall's operating expenses, the board of directors of the Bridgeview Hall Community Association has to strike a balance between renting out space to large organizations like Scouts Canada and Alcoholics Anonymous and resident-requested programming which may generate smaller revenues. To some people in the neighbourhood, this arrangement has made the Hall appear less responsive to resident inquiries or suggestions.

When ANC staff arrived in the summer of 2005, they were initially invited into the Hall, but soon relocated to Bridgeview Elementary School. Space and privacy were at a premium at the Hall, but principal Michael Gordon found a spot for ANC in his school. The move did not go unnoticed. ANC Bridgeview staff would have to spend a lot of time working at relationships with Hall members over the course of the project. Says Linda Western: "The association has a 62-year history of activity, and change is rarely easy. Having a new process operating was exciting for some and disturbing for others."

"When ANC first arrived, we thought it would bring in specific programs like English as a Second Language training for parents and grandparents," says Hall coordinator Rhonda Hanley. "It hasn't worked out the way I thought it would."

A different way of working

ANC's resident and relationship focus brought a different element to Bridgeview community practices. Over the first year, Linda Western and ANC site manager Gill Redfern spent

a great deal of time engaging individuals and small groups in discussing their perceptions of the neighbourhood and the challenges they faced. Slowly but surely, a core group of volunteers emerged that by year's end had formed a new, eight-member neighbourhood association called Bridgeview in Motion. Members considered either eventually merging their structure with the Bridgeview Hall Community Association or arriving at a comfortable coexistence in which each group would pursue separate but complementary activities. By March 2007, both organizations were continuing to operate side by side; three individuals serve on both committees.

In the spring of 2006, Gill Redfern returned to her home in New Zealand and Jamie MacKay was hired as the new ANC Bridgeview site manager. Says Jamie: "Whenever a person takes over the reins from someone else, there is a certain amount of adjustment required. My skills were different from Gill's, but the job of hearing resident voices and providing support for their efforts have continued as the central pieces of my work."

In the summer of 2006, Bridgeview in Motion members felt it was time for ANC to move back to the Community Hall. In September, ANC hired WeiHsi Hu, a musically and artistically talented community development worker whose language skills helped attract members of Bridgeview's Chinese community to the work of ANC.

Brian Brubaker has lived in Bridgeview for 19 years and chaired the Hall Association for 15 years. In board elections held in March 2007, he moved over to the treasurer position. Brian and two other board members also belong to Bridgeview in Motion. Says Brian: "ANC has encouraged more people to become active in the community. Some are older residents who have been less involved, others are new. Though I may

not agree with everything they say, they have the right to voice their opinions. I'm hoping that more new families will become members of the Hall Association board, because they're the ones who need to help design programs and activities for their children. Some of the older board members forget how much change we dealt with 20 or so years ago. We've gotten comfortable with our routines, but now we need fresh people and fresh ideas."

The recent board elections provided a reason for many Bridgeview residents to join the Hall Association. Elections in past years had attracted less than 20 voters; this year approximately 80 people turned out. One group of residents chose to boycott the election, expressing their concerns that the Hall Association's policies and procedures were unclear. Says Jamie MacKay: "The good news is that more Bridgeview residents are interested in how the Hall operates. Once people begin to ask questions about how voices are heard and projects are chosen, it's important to earn their trust by making sure that structures are sound and procedures are enforced. Association members are aware that their charter is old and their policies and procedures need to be updated. This is an important learning opportunity for Hall board members. As they attend to procedural details, their association is becoming a more equitable, open structure that is responsive to all the residents of Bridgeview."

It is clear that ANC has brought to the fore a conflict between established relationships and traditions, and the needs of the entire neighbourhood. Getting through the rough patches takes a significant amount of time. Fortunately, United Way of the Lower Mainland has agreed to continue funding Jamie's position for another year. Says Brian Brubaker: "It's been good having Jamie here to help with mediation and meeting operation. I have found it hard to deal with the

divisions that have surfaced in the last year and I really appreciated the information and support he provided. In some ways, I think it would be good if more initiatives like ANC arrived in Bridgeview because it might speed up the changes we need to make in our organizations and the ways we interact with one another.”

Bridgeview in Motion successes

Bridgeview in Motion (BIM) members chose their name partly to reflect the action orientation adopted early in their involvement with ANC. They were instrumental in reviving regular community cleanups and in getting more people to participate in Surrey’s Adopt-a-Street campaign. Cleanup sessions were followed by potluck lunches in the Hall, and the pride and relationships that resulted from this work have continued to generate new ideas and activities.

Persistent, unanswered requests to City bylaw officials to deliver trash cans for Bridgeview led BIM to purchase its own cans with funds that eventually were reimbursed by ANC’s Action Grants. BIM members decided to offer children and youth the chance to paint the cans – partly as a way of getting them involved in beautifying their neighbourhood and also as a deterrent to graffiti artists. At the 2007 Bridgeview Days annual community celebration in the summer of 2007, BIM will unveil the results of a trash can art design project. They are hoping Adopt-a-Street participants will also adopt a can, and that local businesses will do the same during a proposed later phase of the project – especially if they are offered a receptacle that has been embellished with their company name and an appropriate graphic.

Says Linda Isaac: “Bridgeview has a long history of pestering bylaw enforcement officers,

and it takes a lot of time before our requests get a response. ANC has continued to encourage our efforts and we’ve been pleased to see some movement. For example, a few buildings that had almost disappeared behind piles of garbage are now cleaned up, and a pathway that joins the neighbourhood to the Skytrain has been cleared of shrubs. The safety issues surrounding curbs and sidewalks, however, have never received serious attention. The City feels that the project is too expensive, but with the construction trucks that will soon move into Bridgeview to build the Gateway, I’m even more concerned about pedestrian safety. I hope this is an issue which BIM can move forward by harnessing the influence of the United Way of the Lower Mainland and others.”

BIM also initiated a movie matinee event for children and their families. The positive response has led to plans for a second and subsequent screenings. Though BIM meetings take place at the Hall, its community activities can be bumped by paying customers who might wish to book the facility.

WeiHsi Hu worked with BIM to design and implement a neighbourhood survey tool in October 2006, which was later supplemented by an ANC-led Neighbourhood Vitality Index³ (NVI) survey undertaken in February 2007. Results from the NVI process are pending, but the data collected in October confirmed that the majority of respondents approved of the projects and direction BIM was taking. It also confirmed earlier BIM perceptions that most residents like to help carry out events, but that planning and procedures work is attractive to only a few. Says WeiHsi: “We held a Chinese New Year celebration in February that confirmed this finding. Two volunteers and I planned the entire event, but as people began to arrive, they pitched in and helped us get everything done.” About 300 people attended the celebration.

Action Grant achievements

literacy gets support

Bridgeview Elementary School principal Michael Gordon is aware of the tensions swirling around the Community Hall, but feels that the necessary discomfort felt by the adult community pales in comparison to the benefits being enjoyed by Bridgeview children as a result of ANC's arrival. Thanks to Linda Western's efforts to create a circle of supporting organizations – which are referred to as the Friends of Bridgeview – he now has direct access to people and programs that will make significant positive changes in his students' lives.

Says Michael: “ANC really helped us with a push for programming that would encourage early literacy. Our school has been chosen as the site for the provincial government's literacy pilot project, ‘StrongStart,’ and we landed it by virtue of ANC's groundwork. It operates five mornings a week in a dedicated room and allows caregivers – many of whom are grandparents – to connect with one another and participate with the children in pre-literacy activities that include play, socializing and instruction. Year two ANC Action Grant funds were secured by a partnership between BIM and the school's parent advisory committee to establish an on-site community library for children aged 0 to 6. A new partnership forged with Surrey Public Library sends us books on a rotational basis. A large part of the library's function is to provide books and materials in languages other than English to serve the needs of Bridgeview's non-English speakers.”

One of ANC staff member WeiHsi Hu's tasks was to ask what Bridgeview could do as a community to help children live healthy lives. He

visited groups of older children in the elementary school to get their input and, in turn, they have consulted children in younger grades. The results of these enquiries will be fed into policy and program plans for Bridgeview Elementary's re-installation as a community school – one of ten new sites recently announced by the Surrey school board. (This designation had been terminated in the 1980s as a result of diminished board funding.) The input will also form the basis of a community presentation in April with representatives from Friends of Bridgeview in attendance. WeiHsi's background in youth engagement has allowed him to turn the final product for the presentation over to the children – a leap of faith that is the best foundation for engaging trust and creativity.

ANC's resident-focused process trusts that neighbourhoods can identify areas of need and ways to address them. The approach puts the process of engagement first and outcomes second. It requires its own particular leap of faith from government funders whose departmental mandates emphasizes outcomes which must be achieved within specific time frames. As the Bridgeview experience demonstrates, it can take a long time to work out differences in vision and approach. Says Michael Gordon: “ANC gave the community a chance to talk about itself and listen to other voices. The waters at the Hall may still be rough, but people remain active through the storms.”

WeiHsi also helped organize a large event at Bridgeview Elementary in November 2006 where residents came out to meet representatives from community organizations, visit information booths and talk about issues of concern around child rearing and child care. Arts activities were provided for children and the event also reinforced and extended new connections and relationships.

supporting partners

Sahra-Lea Tosdevine-Tataryn has worked in Bridgeview for eight years as a Surrey Parks, Recreation and Culture liaison officer. Though the neighbourhood is only a small part of her area of responsibility, she has worked diligently to build partnerships and support Hall Association members in their programming and events. She also was involved in establishing a kindergarten readiness program at the elementary school, and is particularly happy to see youth activities in the Hall become more prominent. Says Sahra-Lea: “ANC’s grant funding has brought together a lot of people to work in new ways. It’s allowed me to meet new residents and the face-to-face exposure helps them relate to Parks, Recreation and Culture in a different way. I think the relationship building has created awareness and improved communication links to our department and other City services.”

focus on youth

ANC’s first year brought a new nonprofit organization to Bridgeview. Pacific Community Resources Society (PCRS) operates in partnership with the Ministry of Child and Family Development, designing programs for youth at risk between ages 13 and 19. ANC paid the salary of a part-time PCRS youth worker named Rebecca Wykes to engage Bridgeview teens. When the ANC money ran out in late 2005, PCRS decided to continue funding the position, splitting the cost with Surrey Parks and Recreation.

As a way to demonstrate its responsiveness to youth requests heard by Rebecca and ANC, the Hall’s youth lounge was refurbished with year one ANC Action Grant funding. Chris Weekes took over for Rebecca in September 2006. Says Chris: “When I arrived, some of the

youth would tell me that they needed this or that on the assumption that I would make things appear. Gradually a shift occurred and now they ask how we – collectively – are going accomplish something.”

In the summer of 2006, several youth were paid by the Hall Association to set up and take down booths and materials for Bridgeview Days, the community’s July celebration. In October, they created a wildly popular haunted house for the Halls’ Halloween event. In recent years, both of these tasks had been contracted out by the Hall Association, often to non-residents. This time, fees remained with the youth group – now called the Youth Council – which deposited the money into an account for new equipment purchases. They followed the haunted house project with a successful penny drive. Weekly Youth Council meetings now regularly attract between five to ten members.

The Youth Council inspired Pacific Community Resources Society to submit an Action Grant proposal in partnership with the Hall Association to beautify the neighbourhood. Called the “All in a Day’s Work” project, 50 youth will contribute 24 hours each to do street and yard cleanup and prepare a community garden. Individuals will earn a maximum \$240 over the course of 12 weeks, beginning each work session with a healthy breakfast prepared by Hall Association members.

Chris’ PCRS supervisor, Michel Pouliot, is a member of Friends of Bridgeview. Says Michel: “ANC was the catalyst that helped our organization build stronger ties to Surrey Parks and Recreation. Bridgeview’s youth represent only three percent of the youth in Surrey as whole, so we could not have justified working at this level without ANC’s programmatic support. We plan to continue our partnership with the City,

and if possible, expand services to include teens younger than 13.”

In addition to partnering with PCRS for the All in a Day’s Work project, the Hall Association secured Action Grants to retrofit the Hall’s kitchen, build a walking track for seniors and parents with children, and establish sports and cultural activities for children that will provide opportunities for their parents to socialize.

Concluding remarks

“Everyone has the sense that ANC has just moved in,” says Linda Western, ANC Manager for United Way of the Lower Mainland. “In the year ahead, we look forward to residents developing an even deeper understanding of how they can shape and influence the changes happening in their community. Relationships and trust are the basis of this work and they take time to build.”

Sarah-Lea Tosdevine-Tataryn agrees: “Even five years is very short for this type of renewal initiative and ANC Bridgeview definitely needs more time. Things are now really getting going, but this work is like a business – it takes two years to lay the groundwork, and then you start to enjoy the rewards.”

Says Chris Weekes of PCRS: “This neighbourhood is used to handling challenges on its own – which is good. Like the old McGyver television character, however, they often had to make do with what they had on hand, rather than locate the best possible tool for the job. There are now better linkages to services, and residents can see for themselves the type of resources that can be brought into Bridgeview.”

The tension experienced among Bridgeview’s residents as they work through the issue

of empowerment must run its course. Integrating and acting upon the ideas and problems expressed by new and newly-raised voices is challenging. This work is typical of neighbourhood and community revitalization efforts. How well Bridgeview can mediate its various groups, acknowledge differences and continue on a path of revitalization is yet to be seen.

In mid-March, youth from the All in a Day’s Work project spent the weekend removing blackberry brambles that had completely overtaken a house in the neighbourhood. The dwelling had been hidden for as long as Linda Isaac’s husband could remember – and he has lived in Bridgeview for all of his 56 years. Says Linda: “Whenever we drive into the neighbourhood, we remark on that house. Bridgeview may have been overlooked by Surrey in the past, but we ourselves have contributed to some of the problems we are experiencing.”

Like a structure freed from the tangle of old habits, Bridgeview is demonstrating its resilience and ability to adapt. Its residents are beginning to see that they have the capacity to build a neighbourhood where all can feel welcome.

Anne Makhoul

Endnotes

1. The purpose of ANC was to work at a neighbourhood level, providing funds and partnership opportunities to help residents effect positive change. ANC also presented a structure for building collaboration across five key federal government sponsors, United Way of Canada-*Centraide Canada*, five local United Way agencies, Tamarack – An Institute for Community Engagement, the Caledon Institute of Social Policy and the National Film Board. The lessons learned by the national partners are captured in *Final Reflections from the Action for Neighbourhood Change Research Project* [Gorman 2007].

2. Two previous ANC stories about Bridgeview can be found on the Caledon Institute and ANC websites:

ANC in BC Selects Bridgeview (October 2005).

A Return to ANC in Surrey: Bridgeview in Motion (April 2006).

3. ANC has been engaged in an ongoing effort to create an index to measure neighbourhood vitality. Its Neighbourhood Vitality Index (NVI) was released and tested in the five ANC sites in February 2007. Further information on the index can be found on the project website: www.anccommunity.ca

Reference

Gorman, C. (2007). *Final Reflections from the Action for Neighbourhood Change Research Project*. Ottawa: Caledon Institute of Social Policy, May.

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