

The Tale of the Core Neighbourhood Development Council in Saskatoon

Caledon's 'community stories' series has documented many initiatives undertaken by Vibrant Communities participants. This story describes some of the challenges associated with maintaining the mission focus and momentum of community collaborations.

Introduction

Between 2001 and 2003, organizers in Saskatoon worked diligently to forge a partnership and common vision that would support revitalization work in eight neighbourhoods in the City's downtown core. Residents and representatives from organizations, businesses and government agencies used a strategic visioning process to identify community aspirations and develop a plan of action. Unfortunately, as goals and strategies came into focus, the process stalled, development funds ran short, two important partners lost faith in the initiative's leadership, and the plan was left high and dry by a wave of receding enthusiasm. Why did such a well-conceived process founder? What lessons can be learned from the experiences of community organizers in Saskatoon?

Beginnings

Quint Development Corporation was a founding member of the planning team. This nonprofit organization was formed in 1995 by residents of five neighbourhoods that comprise Saskatoon's inner city. It adopted a community economic development (CED) perspective in which residents direct a multifaceted, long-term renewal process. At that time, and for the next decade, CED was a relatively unknown concept. The idea that a profit-generating enterprise would be devoted to bettering the lives of community members seemed at odds with the norms of both the business and nonprofit sectors.

Quint's first major effort was the development of an innovative affordable housing renovation and home ownership project that continues to help residents rebuild their neighbourhoods physically, socially and economically. Quint members gradually expanded their activities to tackle other

important issues, including housing and education for young single mothers, self-employment training and a local industrial development strategy. Quint remains an exemplary model of how communities can take action to address their own social and economic needs.

In late 2001, Quint and several other community representatives initiated a series of meetings to discuss whether they could scale up a CED approach in the original five core neighbourhoods and attract partners who were willing to work collaboratively. Interest in such an approach had been expressed by residents in three additional neighbourhoods, bringing the total to eight. Residents and stakeholders groups named themselves the Core Neighbourhood Development Council (CNDC) and began establishing a community revitalization strategy.

Even as the work began, however, some CNDC members began questioning the organization's mandate. Others wondered about Quint's motives for the work, and it was unclear whether Quint itself understood the implications of the process it was now encouraging. What did it mean to be a convenor organization – what Vibrant Communities now calls a 'systems change intermediary'? Was a multisectoral collaboration the right mechanism for Saskatoon at that moment and was there sufficient interest, understanding and commitment to getting one established?

The CNDC visioning process was extremely detailed and labour intensive. Focus groups, surveys, survey analysis, newsletters, public meetings and production of a draft plan were all designed with residents' needs and schedules in mind. Participants were offered help with child care and transportation, and those who could not attend in person were provided with electronic and paper response options. By the end of the planning phase, two full years had passed.

Getting past the plan

The Core Neighbourhood Development Strategy was the focus of a community congress held to prioritize the 13 goals and 64 strategies developed by CNDC participants. The six goals chosen were: rental housing, home ownership, food security, job training and career supports, youth, and safety (called "safe and caring communities"). Over the summer of 2003, a group of 15 CNDC members debated options for putting ideas into action. They chose to establish an administrative executive, issues-based working groups and an evaluation working group. In a half-day strategic visioning session in July, two issues – food security, and safe and caring communities – were identified as top priorities, based on CNDC's capacity for progress, the presence of promising opportunities and the community sense that these issues required immediate attention.

CNCD members decided that they would address food security needs by supporting the development of a community-based food store. CNDC would oversee a local engagement process to ensure that residents and organizations were involved and would take ownership for the food store's establishment.

Safe and caring communities efforts centred around establishing a seven-member working group, which included representation from the Saskatoon Police. However, when the police force set

up a separate network of its own to discuss violence and youth issues, CNDC members decided not to proceed with what they saw as a parallel process. The Core Neighbourhood Development Council's two major priorities were reduced to one.

While Saskatoon's Chief of Police had been invited to get involved in CNDC's work early in its development, he delegated the force's participation down the chain of command. Corporate awareness of the effort remained low. The decision to establish a second violence and youth issues network signalled a disconnect between police participation in CNDC and the force's processes for addressing community concerns.

Buy-in from the municipal government was also lukewarm. One councillor and one city planner came on as CNDC members, but the councillor lost her seat in a subsequent election, leaving the planner as the sole municipal voice in the initiative.

Says Quint Manager Len Usiskin: "If a project is not being officially sanctioned by government, some people may question its legitimacy. If the community is perceived as stepping into areas that are traditionally handled by government, groups are sometimes uncomfortable getting involved without the sanction of a mayor or a premier."

Another blow to the organization's long-term viability was its inability to win the support of the Regional Intersectoral Committee (RIC) – a human resources planning body with representatives from the Aboriginal community and local, provincial and federal departments and agencies. RIC helps determine spending priorities and funding distribution for Saskatoon as a whole. Says Len: "We're uncertain why CNDC's work didn't interest the intersectoral committee. Our efforts to lobby elected and staff officials in government departments were largely unsuccessful and our failure to secure long-term federal funding limited our activities."

Community organizers have two choices when launching a new initiative. They can establish a new group – knowing that it generally takes a couple of years to build the necessary infrastructure, excitement and credibility. Alternatively, they can use an existing organization and face questions – as Quint did – about whether they are acting in the interest of the community or themselves. Even with a proven track record for organizing and carrying out innovative projects, Quint was unable to help CNDC achieve similar success.

Perceived sovereignty

The question of leadership dogged CNDC from its first, Quint-initiated meeting. Despite its nonprofit status and neighbourhood focus, Quint's role in CNDC was under constant scrutiny. Staff members at Quint are well versed in community development processes and they had forged good connections with many local organizations and government agencies. A few CNDC participants worried that Quint might be trying to expand its reach and authority at their expense, despite assurances to the contrary.

Unknown to CNDC members, the organization's name was added to a list of potential coordinator organizations in the event that the federal government established an Urban Aboriginal Strategy (UAS) in Saskatoon. Representatives from two Aboriginal agencies saw the list and equated CNDC with Quint. They did not wish to see a non-Aboriginal organization receive funding for Aboriginal-focused work. By September 2003, relations with the Central Urban Métis Federation Inc. and Saskatoon Tribal Council reached a critical point and their members withdrew from CNDC. Its credibility suffered as a result.

Says Len Usiskin: "Relationships are always delicate things. We had thought we were being very clear in stepping back from a lead role in the planning work. Quint's own workload was increasing over the CNDC formation period, which meant that our human and financial resources were being severely taxed. CNDC had become an 'off the side of the desk' project, so even if we had wanted to, we didn't have the time or energy to assume a leadership role. In hindsight, we may not have reacted strongly enough when some of the partners began to suggest that we were looking to position ourselves in competition with local Aboriginal groups that might be interested in convening a UAS initiative."

Getting the work done

Council members continued to meet throughout 2004. Despite the fact that CNDC did not move from a planning to an action phase, partners continued to achieve progress on many of the identified issues. Several projects were already in the works before CNDC was formed, but were enriched or extended by partnership meetings and discussions. Planners at Quint, for example, used the priorities developed through CNDC to guide their work in the areas of housing, food security and programs for youth.

At the end of the Council's planning phase in the spring of 2003, Quint began an affordable rental housing initiative which today continues to purchase and renovate rundown apartment blocks and create better quality, rental-focused housing. Other groups have also applied for provincial funding to pursue affordable housing projects. Unfortunately, they continue to work in isolation rather than creating a table where community priorities can be set and addressed.

Spring 2003 also saw efforts to establish an affordable food store inside the downtown core expand into an ambitious endeavour to create an inner-city services hub. Quint and CHEP Good Food Inc. used funds from the Community Economic Development Technical Assistance Program (CEDTAP) to do a feasibility study and create a business plan for establishing a community-owned food store.

The study's positive outcome convinced the two organizations to begin scouting a location. They identified three long-vacant parcels of land – two owned by the City – at the crossroads of 20th Street and CPR railroad tracks. The City, in partnership with Saskatoon's Urban Development Agreement, purchased the third parcel of land, cleaned up areas of contamination and sold the property cheaply to Quint and CHEP. Since then, the list of partners has grown to include the Good

Food Junction Co-operative food store, the Saskatoon Public Library, Saskatoon Community Clinic, Saskatoon Health Region (public, primary and mental health services) and the University of Saskatchewan, including the Colleges of Dentistry and Medicine. The Saskatchewan Housing Corporation joined the partnership and is in the process of building 55 affordable housing units.

CHEP, Quint and their co-location partners decided to call the whole development “Station 20 West” – a name which blends location with history. Now referring to the project as a community enterprise centre, Station 20 West planners are designing a market square at the heart of the development which will provide space for public meetings, shopping and performance [Cabaj, Makhoul and Leviten-Reid 2006].

Says Len Usiskin: “Quint and a few other organizations are honouring the vision and strategies developed by the Core Neighbourhood Development Council. It was probably one of the most extensive planning processes ever undertaken in Saskatoon.”

Fresh perspectives

In the fall of 2006, Mark Cabaj from Tamarack – An Institute for Community Engagement, met with members of the influential Regional Intersectoral Committee to talk about possible participation in Vibrant Communities. That group, along with Saskatoon Communities for Children, United Way of Saskatoon and Area, Urban Aboriginal Strategy, Health Region, City of Saskatoon, the Saskatoon Anti-Poverty Coalition and the Community University Institute for Social Research were aligning themselves to work on a poverty reduction and quality-of-life agenda. With the exception of RIC and UAS, all of these organizations were members of CNDC.

A new Quality of Life Roundtable has begun to work for change in Saskatoon. The CNDC experience is directly relevant to the current round of process and partnership negotiations. Multisectoral collaboration hinges on funding, the sovereignty of partner organizations and the important – but unpredictable – chemistries of relationship. “Nothing is ever really wasted,” says Len Usiskin. “Everyone involved in CNDC has learned something from the process and the Quality of Life Roundtable benefits from that experience.”

The work to create an open, collaborative process in Saskatoon continues.

Anne Makhoul

Reference

Cabaj, M., A. Makhoul and E. Leviten-Reid. (2006). *In From the Field*. Waterloo: Tamarack – An Institute for Community Engagement, May, pp. 67-68.

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