



community stories

March 2009

ISBN: 1-55382-356-7

The Station 20 West Project Keeps on Chugging

Introduction

In March 2008, Saskatchewan's newly elected provincial government withdrew \$8 million from an \$11.5 million community-based project in Saskatoon. Station 20 West was moments away from going to tender and had taken organizers several years to put together. How do communities – residents and the organizations that serve them – keep initiatives alive under such circumstances?

Station 20 West was the name coined in 2003 for a community development project envisioned for the crossroads of 20th Street and the CPR tracks in Saskatoon. Three parcels of City-owned land were to be sold to a group of community organizations and developers interested in improving access to three basics – healthy food, affordable housing and a public library. To date, Saskatchewan Housing Corporation has built 55 affordable housing units on the site in two multiple-unit structures. The ground floor of one unit will soon be the home of a new branch of the Saskatoon Public Library.

The portion of the project placed in jeopardy by the provincial decision was to be a service-rich Community Enterprise Centre. The project site plan incorporated green spaces, green building technology and a nonprofit business model with social, financial and environmental benefits. Organizers were working to ensure that the services and amenities co-located at the site would be brought in according to the needs and desires of residents (<http://station20west.org/index.html>).

Station 20 West is in the western portion of an older part of Saskatoon called the core neighbourhoods. The area houses some of the poorest people in the city; home and car ownership

This story is one of a series that describes work done by members of a community of practice that was established to explore community-government collaborations on policy. Funded by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, the community of practice developed policy tracking procedures and produced a “Collaboration on Policy” manual. Visit www.caledoninst.org for more details of this 13-month initiative.

rates are low. Saskatchewan's recent boom has had the effect of pushing up rents and removing rental stock from the housing market. Worse, a 2006 study conducted by the Saskatoon Health Region that compared the health status of residents in the core neighbourhoods with the rest of the city found substantial disparities: "...the magnitude of the disparity in health outcomes is shocking for a city in the western world. For example, the infant mortality rate in Saskatoon's low-income neighbourhoods was 448% higher than the rest of the city, which is worse than war torn nations like Bosnia" [Lemstra and Neudorf 2008: v].

As often happens when communities age, food and retail stores, professional offices and services have drifted away from the core neighbourhoods to more affluent parts of the city. Since the last large grocery store closed its doors in 1997, residents without vehicles have had to add long bus rides to their schedules when they needed to go shopping. In particular, high-quality fruits and vegetables come at a premium or are non-existent in local convenience stores. This situation was partly relieved by the opening of a Giant Tiger store in the early 2000s, but a full-service, locally owned grocery store has remained at the top of the Community Enterprise Centre's priority list.

Early days

Planning for Station 20 West was spearheaded by two community partners: Quint Development Corporation – a community economic development organization – and CHEP, formerly the Child Hunger and Education Program.

Says CHEP Executive Director Karen Archibald: "Our two organizations share values and a similar way of working. CHEP's work in food security and food programming in Saskatoon is about building capacity, supporting dignity and respecting others. One of Quint's main programs involves helping low-income residents in five of the core neighbourhoods purchase and renovate homes. We both saw housing as a key element affecting hunger and food security. In the early 2000s, we worked together to establish a Core Neighbourhood Planning Council that would support revitalization work in the City's downtown. Though this initiative ultimately withered away, it led us to the idea for Station 20 West. Quint and CHEP formed a partnership to develop a food store and the co-location project."

Karen Archibald and Quint Executive Director Len Usiskin began meeting with other community organizations to discuss a services hub idea. A cooperative medical clinic, the University of Saskatchewan's College of Dentistry, Saskatoon Health Region, an AIDS organization and others expressed interest in the initiative. The enthusiasm and interest of the other groups soon altered the original idea of establishing a 7,000 square foot cooperative grocery store. Instead, they would build a 50,000 square foot Community Enterprise Centre.

Three years after planning began, organizers spent 12 months educating the provincial government about the project and lobbying for its funding support. Ultimately, the decision to support Station 20 West rested on the conviction that the government should invest public funds in

community enterprise projects when the market fails to provide people with essential goods and services.

By the time the province announced its promised \$8 million in February 2007, new combinations of energy and program planning had ignited widespread interest in the project. By spring 2008, architectural design drawings were ready and the project was going to tender.

Changes in plan

Shortly after the funding withdrawal announcement in March 2008, some 2,500 supporters of the now-threatened project participated in a community walk to protest the government's decision. A FaceBook group attracted 5,000 supporters and a "Friends of Station 20 West" group was established from among that population. Many of them attended the community walk and 175 have since helped organize fundraising and media events.

Meanwhile, the provincial government issued several statements about its decision to remove funding; some demonstrated a lack of awareness about the project's planning history. One statement said the community had not yet collected any money toward the building's construction. In fact, project organizers had already collected more than \$350,000 in donations and loan guarantees on the strength of the anticipated announcement. The new government also stated that revenues would be directed toward its own budget priorities, but the former Premier refuted this, saying that the \$8 million in question had been contributed from the previous year's budget cycle.

Since the removal of provincial funding, organizers have altered their building plans from 50,000 to 29,000 square feet. Rather than a four-storey centre, they now plan to erect a \$5.3 million wood construction two-storey building. More importantly, what began as an experiment in long-term revitalization and community economic development has won the support of a wide range of residents, organizations and businesses. Rather than a death knell, the provincial government's funding decision sounded a clarion call to everyone connected with the core neighbourhoods.

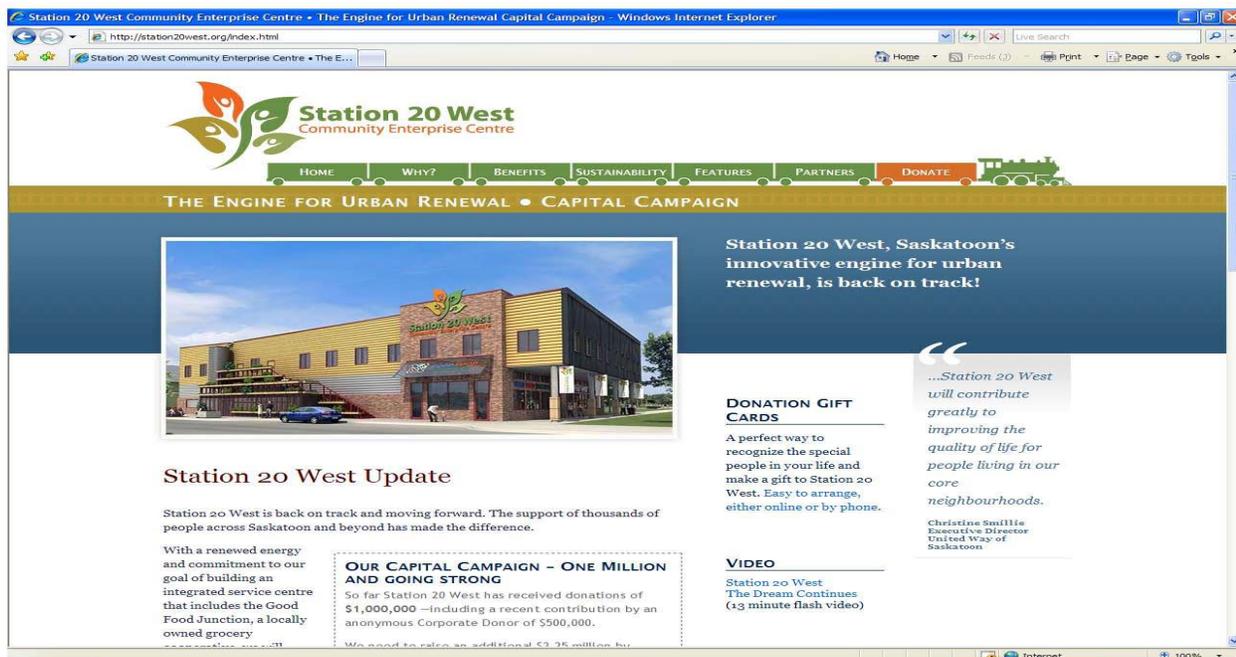
Between March 2008 and March 2009, some 750 individuals, corporate donors and community organizations have donated a total of \$1.1 million to the project. Two-thirds of that amount has been collected by the "Engine for Urban Renewal" fundraising campaign, launched in September 2008. The City of Saskatoon sold the three parcels of land to the project operating committee for \$1 and agreed to extend the construction start date by one year. A \$50,000 pre-development grant was supplied by the Samuel and Saidye Bronfman Family Foundation in recognition of the project's potential as a national demonstration site for place-making. The Saskatoon Centre for Ecumenism organized fundraising events and encouraged its members to make direct donations to Station 20 West. In addition, the Canadian Union of Public Employees and the Saskatchewan Union of Nurses have each donated \$100,000 along with commitments for loan guarantees up to \$800,000. Organizers are proceeding with the development of new blueprints and detailed drawings.

The co-locating partners have also changed. An updated list includes Quint, CHEP, Community Clinic – Westside, Saskatoon Health Region (primary health services, public health, mental health and addiction services), University of Saskatchewan’s Colleges of Dentistry and Medicine (outreach clinical services), the Student Wellness Initiative Toward Community Health (SWITCH) and the Good Food Junction Co-operative Grocery.

Says Quint Executive Director Len Usiskin: “The provincial government funding decision was extremely unfortunate, but our commitment to this project is the result of years of study and thought. We see Station 20 West as a community economic development initiative that takes a sustainable approach to long-term social and economic revitalization. The Community Enterprise Centre will offer skills training, nutrition education, affordable housing, entrepreneurial training for youth and outreach education which we hope will reduce the health disparity between the rich and poor in Saskatoon.”

Lessons

Knowing exactly when to involve government partners in community development projects is an uncertain science. Station 20 West organizers began lobbying provincial government officials in 2006 – three years after planning had begun. That round of discussions was ultimately successful in securing financial support, but the provincial election changed everything. In hindsight, organizers might have spent more time educating all parties about the project in the lead-up to the 2008 election. But how much time would have been sufficient? Says Len Usiskin: “Despite meeting with candidates and sitting members and hearing them publicly endorse the project, the funding was removed.”



In addition to planning and lobbying questions, there remains a vitally important, unanswered one: What is the role of government in situations where market forces fail a disadvantaged population? The former government committed \$8 million on the strength of this question. Late in its mandate, however, it announced several health-related projects and assigned responsibility for Station 20 West to the Saskatoon Health Region. This shift had the effect of initiating protracted discussions between the Health Region and Saskatchewan Health regarding which services would be delivered at the Station 20 West centre and under whose jurisdiction they would fall. These conversations added to the construction delay.

The incoming provincial government stated that a new, expensive building was unnecessary and that it was not in the business of investing in built structures nor in appearing to be in competition with private enterprise. Community organizers had tried since 1997 to attract private, full-service food stores to the core neighbourhoods, without success. Retailers seek locations that maximize their profits – it is not a usual business practice to operate stores that earn less money. Who else but community-based organizations (CBOs) can fill the gap, and what kind of support are governments willing to give them?

A second difficult lesson had to do with funding and local partnerships. CBOs are recognized by governments as being able to deliver services and programs faster and more efficiently than the public sector, but they need government funding, particularly in the start-up phase. Previously agreed-upon funding arrangements place CBOs in position of great risk when governments change. Some co-locating partners withdrew from the project after the funding was withdrawn and did not forcefully express their opposition to the government's position.

Part of the Community Enterprise Centre story had to do with not moving quickly enough to the construction phase. Much time was spent trying to work with a disparate group of co-locators about interior spaces, integrating health components, collaborative guiding principles and governance models. Had organizers been less focused on completely satisfying everyone's concerns and started construction sooner, would the new government have been willing to withdraw its commitment? Says CHEP Executive Director Karen Archibald: "We realize that we put too much faith in the fact that the previous government had directed the Saskatoon Health Region to hold the project money in trust. There was a community expectation that the funding was secure."

Community-based organizations focus on root causes of poverty and are small enough to take a flexible approach to their work. Large institutions have many layers of approvals through which decisions must be made. Partnering with the health region, for example, required an 18-step accountability process, just as organizers were ready to break ground on the project.

Says Faith Bodnar, Station 20 West Project Coordinator: "There are always lessons to be learned, even in the best designed projects like Station 20 West. Sometimes projects are subject to forces and agendas far removed from the community level that have nothing to do with the tenets and merits of a particular project. Station 20 West's innovative design and operating philosophy have proven their resilience. The project continues to inspire broad-based support."

Will they or won't they?

Friends cannot always turn personal support into institutional commitment. Karen and Len felt the chill of partners leaving the project one week before it went to tender in March 2008. Solidarity which had been built through strategic advocacy melted away; CHEP and Quint were left holding the project alone. On the other hand, the community's response has been to come out in droves.

The Community Enterprise Centre can now best be described as a social movement. Says Faith Bodnar: "People of all ages and situations identify with what the Centre represents, particularly since the withdrawal of funding. More than 700 businesses, organizations and individuals have donated to our fundraising campaign and that number grows daily. This project is more than bricks and services. It is about equity, dignity and justice, and what we value as a society."

Len Usiskin and Faith Bodnar met with Health Minister Don McMorris in February 2009 to update him on their efforts. In early March, Premier Brad Wall sent a letter to the Station 20 West Project Committee in which he encouraged businesses and corporations to provide support to the project. Says Faith: "This is a huge step forward for Station 20 West. It signals an improved relationship with the provincial government which will help overcome donors' reluctance to be associated with the project."

Where there's a need and a will, a way can be found to improve relationships and keep an important project on track. While the train has not yet arrived, the station is within sight.

Anne Makhoul

Reference

Lemstra M. and Neudorf C. (2008). *Health disparity in Saskatoon: analysis to intervention*. Saskatoon: Saskatoon Health Region.

Copyright © 2009 by The Caledon Institute of Social Policy
1390 Prince of Wales Drive, Suite 401, Ottawa, ON K2C 3N6 CANADA
Phone: (613) 729-3340 Fax: (613) 729-3896
E-mail: caledon@caledoninst.org Website: www.caledoninst.org