

Speak Up Winnipeg Gets Loud and Clear Input

Caledon's 'community snapshots' present brief overviews of promising new initiatives founded by Vibrant Communities and other community organizations.

Challenge

Formed in 2008, the Winnipeg Poverty Reduction Council (WPRC) Recreation and Culture Working Group looks at ways to increase access to recreation and cultural activities for people living on low incomes, particularly focusing on children and youth. Members decided to approach municipal representatives to consider Winnipeg's recreation policy and the City's role in increasing accessibility and reducing barriers to participation. They had a first meeting with Chief Administrative Officer Glen Laubenstein in early summer 2009 to talk about their concerns. He agreed with much of what they had to say, but the bulk of the session was spent discussing the City's 25-year "Our Winnipeg" plan and the process leading to its formation. Michelle Richard, chief planner for Our Winnipeg, described the one-year "Speak Up Winnipeg" initiative that has allowed residents to add input both virtually and in person through roundtables, blogs and e-mails (see <http://www.speakupwinnipeg.com/blog/>). By the meeting's end, Michelle and Glen recommended that WPRC get involved in Speak Up Winnipeg in order to ensure that poverty featured prominently in the forthcoming plan.

Strategy

In mid-July, the City asked a United Way of Winnipeg representative to host a roundtable on poverty and that individual suggested that the City contact WPRC. In turn, WPRC recommended the event be hosted collaboratively with numerous Winnipeg agencies involved in poverty reduction. Given the wealth of community experience represented by these groups, it would be possible to considerably advance the poverty-related elements of the City's 25-year plan. Accordingly, 12 people from a variety of constituent groups held a planning meeting in August and the roundtable was held on September 3.

Organizers were ecstatic when 75 community leaders from all sectors arrived for the event – tripling the number that had attended previous roundtables and completely filling the number of available participant spots. All had received personal invitations and their collective knowledge in regard to the complex issue of poverty represented years of work and the lived experience of many thousands of people living on low incomes.

The day began with seven, 15-minute presentations from WPRC, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA), a combined CCPA and Make Poverty History Manitoba submission, Right to Housing Coalition, Social Planning Council of Winnipeg, a City presentation on its crime prevention through social development initiative, and an outline of the City’s Aboriginal youth strategy. The balance of the roundtable was spent formulating a list of specific poverty-related recommendations that the City would be able to turn into action. A preliminary list of topic areas was augmented by material from the short presentations. Recommendations were ranked to reflect participant priorities and were grouped according to the various categories of action the City could take – whether corporate (e.g., planning, employment purchasing), community (e.g., housing, child care, transportation) or those that could be addressed as part of a collaborative partnership.

Outcomes

City officials were appreciative of the roundtable’s concrete, succinct input. Previous roundtables had been open to the public and participants had had widely divergent understanding and experience of the issues raised (e.g., seniors, disabilities concerns, housing and Aboriginal issues).

Michelle Richard and her team at the City will shortly publish summaries of the roundtable and other Speak Up Winnipeg events. Over the next five months, consultation papers will be released, a draft “Our Winnipeg” plan will be prepared and two further rounds of Speak Up Winnipeg will gather community input. The final version of the plan will be announced in April 2010.

Winnipeg Mayor Sam Katz has stated his goal of creating a dynamic plan for economic, social and environmental sustainability. WPRC and its roundtable collaborators are helping to ensure that “Our Winnipeg” receives the best possible poverty reduction input.

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