

McQuesten: Elements of a Successful Neighbourhood Initiative

Welcome to McQuesten

Hamilton's McQuesten neighbourhood doesn't look much different from any other Canadian urban neighbourhood built in the postwar period. With two large 1970s townhouse projects and a few apartment buildings to add to the housing mix, its tidy streets, mature trees and wide lots create an airy sense of space. There are parks and elementary schools, one of which houses the McQuesten Community Centre (MCC). MCC is one of eight centres of activity sprinkled throughout this 7,000-person neighbourhood. On a sunny afternoon, there are pedestrians out walking, mothers and children meet up at the school bus stops, and only a few cars appear on the streets and in the driveways.

In fact, McQuesten gives the sense of being a quiet little island in the stream. Quiet has its advantages and disadvantages, however. Surrounded on all sides by large collector roads, McQuesten's meandering interior streets have less than a handful of bus stops. There are no convenience stores inside the neighbourhood and the closest, full-service grocery stores are too far away for an elderly person or a parent with small children and strollers to manage. On the other hand, the neighbourhood offers reasonably-priced houses and there is a low level of resident turnover.

If you look closely as you walk the streets, you will see that some of the houses have screen doors (owners live there) and some do not (renter-inhabited). Closer still, and you will notice very little litter or graffiti. If you spot the 'tag' on the outdoor sports storage box next to the baseball field, you will see that it was done by an obviously talented artist.

It looks like this:



At this point, McQuesten – one of eight neighbourhoods involved in the Hamilton Community Foundation's "Tackling Poverty Together II: Building Strong Communities" – reveals some of the gains it has made over the last nine years of focused, funded community development.

Rediscovering resident involvement

Tackling Poverty Together (TPT II) continues HCF's first six-year neighbourhood development initiative. Working in three Hamilton locations from 2002-08, "Growing Roots... Strengthening Neighbourhoods" helped build local leadership and residents' capacity to identify and solve community problems. TPT II will continue to extend the Roots work into eight of Hamilton's 200 neighbourhoods until 2013.

David Derbyshire was hired as a Community Development worker to engage residents in the three Roots neighbourhoods in 2002. Over the weeks and months, he began the painstaking process of getting to know people by walking the streets, going to local meeting places and becoming a familiar face at school and sporting events. In his 50s, with a ponytail and ready smile, David brings a background in social work and counseling to the job. In the McQuesten neighbourhood, he also came with personal anecdotes, history and credibility – he lived there from ages 3 to 13.

Cups of tea and David's ever-present Pepsi with some older McQuesten women – mostly in their Martha Street backyards since their houses were small and there wasn't any community meeting space – led to discussions about safety. Residents remembered the 1970s when their children were young and mothers were around to keep an eye on everyone. Offering cookies, correction and comfort to local children, these women understood the value of knowing who belonged in the community and who didn't.

After several months of discussion, they decided to plan a street party as a way to get to know more of their neighbours. In 2003, the Martha Movers started what is now an annual tradition in McQuesten. Every September, some 700 people come to the party to meet, renew friendships, play games, dance and celebrate.

The story of the Movers has helped build the modern tale of McQuesten's revitalization. All the while David was talking and listening, he gradually was stepping back from taking minutes and chairing meetings, allowing the Movers and others to hone their own community development skills. Creating the conditions for citizen action – dreaming with people and helping them find the right tools for the work they want to do – are the essential roles of the community developer.

In his first six years in McQuesten, David found many micro-communities and built connections between individuals, service providers and groups. By the launch of TPT II in 2008, this type of engagement had made the McQuesten Community Planning Team (MCPT) into a dynamic organization capable of taking little ideas and spinning them into any number of directions.

‘The McQuesten Way’

Residents contribute their strengths and resources to the work, but if these are not sufficient to the task, service providers are invited to help. This arrangement is an inversion of the traditional “we’re from the government, and we’re here to help” top-down approach, and there have been growing pains. Service providers have their own processes and are used to program delivery, not dialogue. However, since HCF ties its community grants to charitable organizations, David has worked to match planning team projects with appropriate service providers. This arrangement has allowed two-way information exchange and a shift in traditional power dynamics.

Christina Martin has been with the YMCA for 22 years. From her perspective, the level and depth of McQuesten citizen leadership distinguishes it from the other neighbourhoods in which YMCA operates its after-school academic support, social skills development and recreational activities. Says Christina: “The strength and confidence we see from McQuesten leadership is impressive. We have worked to be more collaborative in our consultations and recognize the fundamental difference between offering a set piece of programming and co-designing something that responds to community expressions of need. On the other hand, we try to bring as wide a client perspective as possible to leadership groups like the McQuesten planning team, knowing that there are always individuals and groups who are not represented at the planning table.”

Before HCF’s arrival, only one service provider offered on-site programming in the neighbourhood. STAR – a recreation-focused organization – opened the first of what are now three Hamilton sites in one of McQuesten’s two townhouse developments on Oriole Crescent. Today, more than 35 service providers operate in eight spaces around the neighbourhood, offering mainly activities to children, parents, seniors and, more recently, focused arts and recreational activities for youth.

Along with the street party, another large event evolved from a “service provider crawl” where residents met in the spring to do a community walkabout and check out the neighbourhood’s eight activity facilities. The crawl has been replaced with an annual springtime festival at the baseball field where service providers set up booths and organize games, food and entertainment for 650 people. Families can sign up for summer programs, most of which are offered free of charge.

Not all service provider stories end well. The McQuesten Community Centre is housed in a portion of St. Helen’s – a recently decommissioned Catholic elementary school. Hamilton Association for Residential and Recreational Redevelopment Programs (HARRRP) – an ecumenically-based community organization – was the founding administrative body for the MCC, and it recently has agreed to relinquish its role to Banyan Community Services, a youth-oriented service provider. Over the last few years, Banyan has built its capacity and will negotiate with the school board to act as property manager for a larger portion of the building, including the much-desired auditorium. The decision to replace one service provider with another was not easy.

**The McQuesten Community Planning Team
&
The McMaster School of Nursing**



**Working together to bring a
Nurse Practitioner Clinic to our neighbourhood**

Sometimes project ideas don't work out as originally envisioned. "The McQuesten Way" is to find partners who have the stomach for the long haul. One such partner is the McMaster School of Nursing. Its "Health in the Hubs" work reflected a move by the School of Nursing to involve faculty and students more deeply in community and civic life through the activities of learning, research and practice. Assistant Professor Dyanne Semogas had met with David while looking for partnership opportunities between the School and the planning team. This collaboration led to a focus on building a community-university partnership that would allow both parties to learn together how to better tackle the health issues raised by residents. The arrangement has allowed the School to provide service learning opportunities for its nursing students, mobilize resources and information, and work with residents to apply knowledge that will better the community.

An example of the partnership's resilience followed an unsuccessful bid to get a nurse practitioner unit established in McQuesten. A new effort is now investigating health concerns in three Hamilton neighbourhoods. Three residents have been hired by the School of Nursing to coordinate a door-to-door survey about residents' perceived primary health care needs. Resident Nasser Habib is currently working with four nursing students to speak with 300 McQuesten households. Their survey results will help identify health planning needs and priorities.

McMaster's new President Patrick Dean has embraced six new strategic directions, including community engagement. Cross-departmental connections continue to strengthen. Dyanne's colleague Anne Malott at the School of Midwifery submitted a Ministry of Health proposal to establish a prenatal care and labour coaching program for McQuesten residents. Says David: "Our planning work has told us that residents want locally-based, culturally

sensitive health care. If the midwifery bid is unsuccessful in securing the funds we need to help our expectant mothers, we will find a plan B or a plan C – whatever it takes.”

Turning problems into opportunities

Census figures show that 53 percent of McQuesten adults are either unemployed or not working (including students and retired seniors as well as those who have given up searching for work) [SPRC 2011].

Residents spent a Saturday in April 2010 mapping the assets they have to contribute to a neighbourhood roster of skills, time and interests. David hopes that this effort will help spur further employment projects, including efforts to bring social enterprise and business entrepreneurship training and micro-loan projects to McQuesten.

Access to high-quality, affordable food is a key issue in the neighbourhood. The McQuesten Food Bank opened in the early 1990s, but was always seen as only a preliminary measure to address food security.

Residents wondered if they could borrow or lease a van on a regular basis to shuttle residents to area grocery stores. A service provider knew the owner of a nearby car dealership. The owner offered to lend them a service van twice a month and covered the gas and insurance costs. MCPT treasurer Sharon Whiteside is a licensed school bus driver. Since June 2008, she has taken two groups of six people to two area grocery stores every second week.

In 2009, David invited University of Toronto Masters candidate Carla Klassen and her professor Sarah Wakefield to visit MCPT as a way to further the research they were conducting on food issues in low-income neighbourhoods. They held a participatory workshop to find out where people got their food (stores, food banks, restaurants), and the factors (nutrition, affordability, convenience) that determined purchase. They left behind a detailed map of the neighbourhood which helped in subsequent food planning activities.

Also in 2009, a community garden was established behind one of the Oriole Crescent housing developments on land loaned by City Housing. Now a focal point for activity three seasons of the year, it offers plots for 55 families to grow their own produce. Families not previously involved with MCPT are making new connections through the garden. Raised beds installed in the fall of 2010 will make it easier for seniors and people with disabilities to attend their plants. Mindful of the needs of others, families send excess produce to the McQuesten food bank. There are plans to use some of the space to build a pavilion capable of housing an outdoor kitchen.

David’s experience has taught him that an effective way to encourage new Canadians to participate in neighbourhood activities is to make regular, brief contacts with parents as they drop off and pick up their children at community activities. He first met Khelod Habib in 2005, not long after she arrived from Iraq.



Gardens are more than the food they provide

Says Khelod: “I began to learn more about our neighbours by coming to the community centre with my children. Our home is small and children need places where they can run and play in the winter. Little by little, David got our family more involved with the planning team. He invited us to the Movers block party, but asked us if we could help out by bringing our barbecue so that the Halal meat that Muslims must eat could be properly prepared.”



Muslim Children’s Club participants

Khelod and Nasser Habib have four children under 12. The couple began volunteering their Saturday mornings to teach Arabic at the school board-sponsored international language school. They could see that the children needed more opportunities to socialize with one another outside of the language instruction activities and, with David's help, established the Muslim Children's Club in 2008. The games, arts and crafts, movies, birthday and religious celebrations they have offered have so far attracted 25 children from McQuesten and other neighbourhoods. The group's second Eid celebration in 2010 had 200 guests, including Somali residents from the nearby Jamestown neighbourhood.

Leaders in waiting

Alex Caro served as the 2010-11 chair of the McQuesten Community Planning Team. His wife Theresa Phair is one of the Movers and was the first chair of the planning team. Her example of community involvement was what inspired Alex to work as a neighbourhood volunteer. Last summer, he helped build a shed and raised beds for the community garden, teaching some local youth the basics of carpentry and framing.

Alex's daughter Alexis and three friends came to the February 2011 planning team meeting and presented a proposal for funding to add a youth area into the garden. David helped the group put together an application for HCF funding, but they needed local partners to ante up. Throughout the meeting, the four girls offered assistance by passing around food and papers; they circulated Alexis' request letter and were asked to give their viewpoint on several agenda items. It was clear that they were considered full members of the group and that someday, the girls will themselves be directing meetings of this type. These children were modelling adult behaviour and absorbing the humour, respect, attention and focus of the group. Just as Alex had demonstrated wood framing know-how to the youth in the garden, these girls were being taught to lead.¹

Strengths and limitations of the neighbourhood approach

David Derbyshire has worked with McQuesten residents for nine years. That kind of time for relationship development is impossible to short circuit. Trust builds slowly, as does each resident's ability to get involved in planning and program work and accept leadership tasks. Natural leaders always emerge in any group; the trick is to help 'unnatural' leaders find their voice.

Though David works today with five HCF hubs, McQuesten stands out for him as a place where leaders are easy to find. Says HCF Manager of Grants Sharon Charters: "David's warm relationship with McQuesten residents creates a chicken-and-egg situation. His greatest strength is working with local leadership. The neighbourhood has good leadership in place and new people come forward because he's there for them."

One of the criticisms of the local planning teams established by HCF is that service providers often outnumber residents at planning sessions. At the February MCPT meeting, the balance was 24 service providers to 11 residents, but there was no question that resident executive members were in charge of the agenda, that David could be relied on for background information and that everyone in the room was afforded respect and courtesy. The tone was set by the group reading aloud its mission, vision and values statement before the evening began.

A more serious criticism is that 11 residents cannot possibly represent the full spectrum of concerns and needs that exist in a neighbourhood of 7,000. David and the MCPT members are aware that they must continually build new relationships and involve people in community planning.

For many in McQuesten, a looming question is whether residents have built sufficient capacity to continue developing the neighbourhood on their own – without HCF or David’s involvement. Pat Reid is considered McQuesten’s matriarch. She moved into the neighbourhood in 1991 and lives out her Baha’i faith by serving her community in many different ways. She laughs: “David is always encouraging me to ‘wonder’ with people. As in, ‘I wonder how we could do or get this or that.’ He and the HCF are essential to what we’re doing. We do not have the capacity to carry this work on our own yet, in particular, David’s ability to bridge agency operations and resident aspirations.”

As the Hamilton Community Foundation moves further into its efforts in neighbourhoods, it is facilitating a closer relationship among hub representatives. Discussions, newsletters and e-mail blasts are helping people share ideas and successes. For example, the Jamesville tool-lending library got off to a slow start, but an ad in a weekend paper brought in a huge haul of tools. McQuesten’s garden and grocery shuttle are sure to have other neighbourhoods considering new food security options.

Leadership development, program design, partner involvement, citizen engagement and stronger ties among neighbours have been the distinguishing features of McQuesten since shortly after David’s arrival in 2002. However, some issues – the maintenance of affordable housing, transportation and employment – are beyond the scope of neighbourhood planning teams. McQuesten residents have gone far and wide in their outreach activities; they will need outside assistance to go deeper to resolve their economic and physical infrastructure issues.

The City’s work on neighbourhoods

Hamilton is probably unique in Canada for having a region-wide understanding of the problems associated with poverty and the importance of building strong neighbourhoods. The City’s work in the early 2000s to develop economic and social plans that would help address plant closures and high levels of unemployment have helped inspire significant community development activity.

The Hamilton Community Foundation's neighbourhood initiative and the leadership of (then) HCF President and CEO Carolyn Milne found responsive partners in the City's General Manager of Community Services Joe-Anne Priel and business leader Mark Chamberlain. From 2005 to 2010, they were the leadership team that headed up the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction. The HRPR has continued its efforts to build collaborative partnerships with more than 1,000 community organizations, government and business representatives, and people with lived experience of poverty.

Beginning in 2005, the *Hamilton Spectator's* three-year focus on poverty and its more recent Code Red series linked poverty with health outcomes.² All of these efforts and more have created awareness and a desire to make a serious dent in poverty in Hamilton. A poll commissioned before the 2010 municipal elections found that residents identified poverty as the city's number one issue, even ahead of building a new stadium for their beloved Tiger Cats. It doesn't get much more serious than that!

Paul Johnson was the Executive Director of Wesley Urban Ministries and the initial Director of HRPR in 2005. Recently, he led a collaborative effort to close shelter beds in Hamilton and use the same provincial dollars to provide stable housing and wraparound services (education, health, employment assistance) to Hamilton's largest homeless population – men. Effectively opting to put the 'poverty business' out of work, he understands very well the balance that needs to be struck between meeting people's needs and the demands and constraints of public policy and funding realities [Makhoul, Purdon and Johnson 2010].

Paul is now employed by the City of Hamilton as its Director of Neighbourhood Development Strategies. He works closely with Chris Murray, Hamilton's City Manager. Both men have personal experience working with David Derbyshire – Paul through ongoing partnership work with HCF and Wesley Urban Ministries and Chris through a 90-day planning effort he was involved with in McQuesten in 2007-08.

In its 2001 social vision plan, the City of Hamilton identified affordable housing, skills development, and children and families as its three main areas of concern [Torjman, Leviten-Reid and Heisler 2002]. The Affordable Housing Flagship, which included senior leadership from the City of Hamilton, the private sector and community agencies at one table, was chosen to lead the implementation of the housing plan.

The twin housing complex on McQuesten's Oriole Crescent – one of the largest public housing projects in Hamilton – was seen as requiring significant attention. Between December 2007 and March 2008, MCPT and members of the Affordable Housing Flagship (including Chris, in his earlier role as Director of Housing) created a series of 90-day plans to address resident-identified concerns [Makhoul 2008]. Outcomes included signage and lighting upgrades and preparations for instituting the grocery shuttle, community garden and service provider crawl. Chris' personal integrity and can-do attitude so impressed residents that many now consider the City a friend and an ally.

Paul and Chris realize that a lot of the efforts made to date in neighbourhoods – especially the work that requires additional focus from the City – have been done in a piecemeal fashion. Says Paul: “HCF’s neighbourhood hubs have been a good starting point, but we now need to include more people and build an even larger skill set. Hubs showed that residents are eager to work alongside institutional stakeholders – in the voluntary, public and private sectors – and the City can create an environment where residents are at the centre and supported by institutions. To be successful, we have to develop a municipal culture around neighbourhoods and ask whether we can work together, listen well enough to understand important goals and act as good partners in the whole process.”

Says Chris: “There are many excellent models of community development and the question is how to rally around a single approach. Asset-Based Community Development holds much promise but we need to arrive at a common understanding of what it means and how it will unfold in Hamilton. Our work now is about constructing a long-term, City-led process of change. Sometimes we focus on projects, investment and policy changes, but forget that it’s about creating a broad capacity for leadership.”

Paul’s planning will help build a corporate understanding of citizen participation, engagement and involvement, and embed them into the City’s neighbourhood strategy. In his words: “We’re keenly aware that this work isn’t simply about volunteers making local level change happen. It’s a layered, inside/outside approach with a long-term view. Two things need to happen. We have to get connectors working on the ground, and we have to get at the relevant policy levers that will break down concentrated poverty at the neighbourhood level. Inclusive transportation and housing policies are part of the civic agenda, and there is much we can do at the municipal level to make those a reality.”

Along with its developing neighbourhood strategy, the 2015 Pan Am and Parapan Games are providing Hamilton with an opportunity to build social inclusion into its civic consciousness and structures. This work combines McQuesten’s “not about us, without us” ethic with the economic and policy levers of a city committed to poverty reduction and the care of its most vulnerable members. In Hamilton, the Movers are everywhere.

Anne Makhoul

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

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Endnotes

1. Alexis’ proposal to the HCF was submitted on time, with the necessary support from local partners, in early March 2011. Her fellow committee members are: Warrd Habib, Reem Habib and Jada Taylor.

2. On March 22, 2011, Steve Buist, the *Hamilton Spectator* reporter that wrote the Code Red series on pov-erty, was awarded the inaugural Canadian Hillman Prize. Originated by the US-based Hillman Foundation, the award recognizes outstanding journalism.

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This story is dedicated to Four Martha Movers, now passed away. Founding member Isabel Newstead's tireless efforts are remembered every year; the block party now carries her name. Don Gray brought his organizational talents to the building of a community playground in Oriole Crescent, then helped plan two Movers block parties before his untimely death at age 42. Former evangelical pastor Joyce Barnett's curried goat and rice was a block party staple, and she had great dance moves. Janice Ireland was the planning team's first treasurer who never let life's inconveniences – her confinement to a wheelchair after she was hit by a car, the effects of cancer that later took her life – stop her from participating in community meetings and events.



“Not about us, without us.”

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