

CRUNCH: Improving Victoria's Downtown Core

Introduction

"Hey brother, can you spare a (para)digm?"

What is a new paradigm worth? The old witticism says about 20 cents. But fresh ways of thinking about social issues get us a little farther down the road of social change and the value of projects like CRUNCH, Downtown Victoria's innovative community development process, cannot be underestimated.

CRUNCH devises innovative and cooperative solutions to the problems facing Victoria's downtown core. It is a process built around a new paradigm which suggests that social change in Downtown Victoria is effected through the development of new relationships and a better understanding of downtown issues.

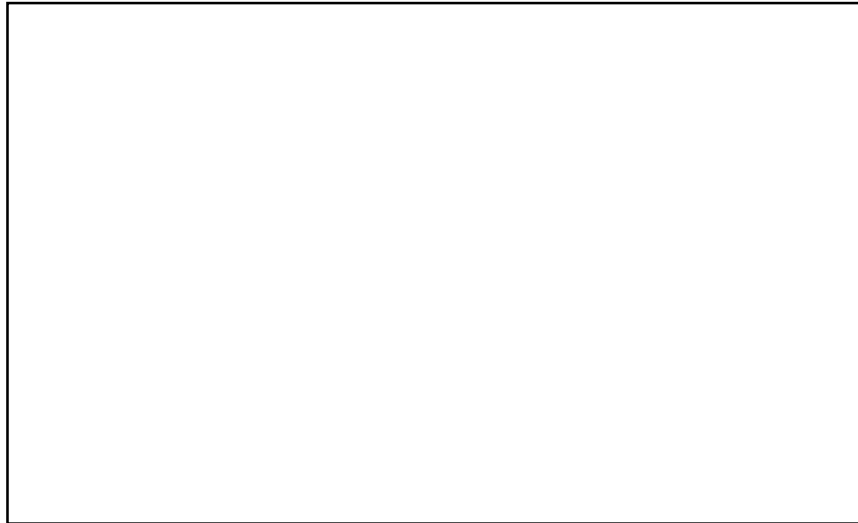
CRUNCH's goal is to develop community capacity to deal with complex problems which have important human, economic and cultural components. The project brings together partners from various sectors to develop common vocabulary, goals and trust. At the same time, it

tries to recognize and mediate diverse perspectives on downtown issues.

By bringing together representatives from many sectors, CRUNCH has generated greater awareness about the complex issues that face the downtown core. New relationships are being formed among downtown's various stakeholders which, in turn, have produced various creative initiatives and involved people other than traditional service providers in trying to address downtown's social issues.

Background

Home of the capital of British Columbia, Downtown Victoria is an international tourist centre. However, it faces critical challenges, including unused commercial space, reduced government support for people requiring income assistance, and the public perception that downtown streets are unsafe. In November 1996, social agencies in Downtown Victoria were starting to feel the crunch stemming from federal and



Community members come together to discuss the CRUNCH project.

provincial cutbacks and downloading programs which increased the demand for services while reducing resources. The Downtown Group, an informal network of service providers and funders, had reached the point of despair. The Group felt it could not address the underlying issues without additional support and decided to approach other downtown stakeholders for their points of view. Not surprisingly, all groups had similar concerns. This realization engendered a new hope: If everyone worked together, it would be possible to make real progress.

This recognition of the need for concerted action was highlighted by an apparent increase in the number of street people, especially youth, and a subsequent hardening of the municipal government attitude toward them. The City wanted to pass by-laws preventing street people from playing bongo drums, panhandling and camping on the street.

At the same time, the City was formulating a new corporate strategic plan, one goal of which was to develop a vibrant and healthy downtown core. Possible strategies included the crea-

tion and implementation of an economic development plan and the formulation of a Community Social Services Plan in partnership with others.

Conflicting messages were coming from City Hall and different sectors of the community were being pitted against one another. But the challenges were apparent: fear on the streets, lack of housing, poverty, poor health, increasing needs and shrinking resources. Addressing these issues would require the building of new relationships across the different sectors that make up the downtown core: public, private, nonprofit and community organizations.

Getting together

Everyone agreed that Downtown Victoria should be a healthy and safe place for all: crime-free, drug-free and racism-free. However, it is difficult to get beyond what the CRUNCH group describes as a 'culture of blame' among the various groups involved in the downtown area. Business people are concerned about the deterioration of the core. They claim that it is increas-

ingly difficult to do business in the city's core and that many businesses are choosing not to move downtown altogether.

Downtown dwellers and the street community view downtown as their home. They believe they have a right to live there and should not be targeted as the cause of all the problems in the area. They note that they often are blamed for situations caused by people who live elsewhere and visit downtown only briefly.

Early CRUNCH participants agreed there had to be a change in attitude to increase mutual tolerance and respect. They asked the Community Social Planning Council of Greater Victoria (the Community Council) to facilitate the process. A neutral, widely-respected entity not connected to any of the downtown parties and with skills in community development was required if the diverse participants were to be kept together and rallied around a common goal.

Principles of Collaboration:

- community development approach
- flexibility
- respect for philosophy
- autonomy
- active consumer involvement

A Council-commissioned briefing paper, based on interviews with downtown's various sectors, reiterated the need for *collective* action. The 35 participants who attended a breakfast meeting in February 1997 formed working groups to gather information and resources, and examine possible models as they prepared for a larger May CRUNCH workshop.

Finding a direction

With financial assistance from Pacific Coast Savings Credit Union, the May workshop

attracted 60 people who represented a wide range of stakeholders. The participants identified four main priorities: effective, integrated service delivery; resource development; increased communication among collaborators; and creation of employment and investment opportunities in Victoria's downtown.

Stakeholders also established desired outcomes of the CRUNCH project:

- a common advocacy for community and government support
- a model for community-based development of resources for downtown services
- a comprehensive community health strategy for downtown
- an employment strategy linked with the Community Economic Development Corporation and City of Victoria Economic Development Strategy
- indicators and tools to evaluate socioeconomic changes
- a communications plan, including newsletters about downtown activities.

Building a model

Armed with increased clarity about the direction of the project, participants prepared briefing sheets, draft budgets and funding proposals during the summer of 1997. In the fall, a Steering Committee was established with each sector designating its own representative. Funding proposals were submitted and a temporary coordinator was recruited. The 'handshake relationship' between CRUNCH and the Community Council was formalized into a contract and the Community Council received United Way funds for its CRUNCH activities. The importance of the contract lay in its clear statement of the roles and responsibilities of the Steering Committee.

A January 1998 Roundtable, attended by more than 100 people, moved the CRUNCH process forward another step. Six Action Groups were formed in response to participants' concerns about translating the process into concrete action. As these groups began to organize their own meetings over the next few months, another piece of the model started to evolve, namely a three-part division of labour.

One broadly-based group was required to identify needs and create an overall vision for meeting needs downtown. Smaller groups of people with specific interests, commitment and expertise in substantive areas were asked to translate visions into actions. Another body, with links to all the Action Groups, was needed to stimulate and coordinate activities, maintain communications among the Action Groups, and monitor and evaluate the process.

Broadening the circle

At the same time, the goal of broad representation in CRUNCH was formalized. CRUNCH identified the groups to be represented on the Steering Committee and on each Action Group. Participants included business, the City of Victoria, residents from the Downtown Neighbourhood Association, First Nations, the Capital Health Region, the Community Social Planning Council, and downtown housing providers, youth and churches.

CRUNCH Action Groups

By early 1999, each of the Action Groups had moved forward in some way. The Action Groups within the CRUNCH model are unique in that they are composed of people who are already working on the key issues, either as staff or as volunteers.

i. safety

The Mayor's Task Force on Downtown Safety, Downtown Pride, is the primary vehicle addressing issues of safety in the downtown core. Though CRUNCH did not have an Action Group which looked specifically at safety issues, participants made an impact on the Mayor's Task Force.

Initially composed of business people and city staff only, this Task Force was broadened in its composition through the assertive presence of CRUNCH. Representatives succeeded in having the Task Force acknowledge that the presence of street people and panhandling are *systemic* issues that require *long-term* solutions rather than simplistic, 'get-tough' responses. When the Mayor's Task Force delivered its final report, CRUNCH was given the responsibility to help implement the recommendations pertaining to public education and service integration.

ii. health

A CRUNCH Action Group has made health care a priority issue as it pursues its goal of formulating a comprehensive downtown health strategy. Working within a framework that acknowledges the social determinants of health, this group is developing plans to strengthen the harm reduction network for injection drug users in order to improve mental health and prevent illness.

The group succeeded in having the Mayor support its presentation to the regional health board which resulted in the board making a grant to CRUNCH. The Mayor's Task Force recommendations also recognized CRUNCH's crucial role in expanding services for youth, seniors, inner-city families and First Nations groups.

iii. housing

CRUNCH's Housing Action Group has brought together a diverse set of players, including residents, developers, private housing providers, social housing organizations, planners, youth and funders, to focus attention on affordable housing.

To date, the group has systematically analyzed housing needs and identified six priority projects. True to CRUNCH form, several of these proposals emphasize the forging of new partnerships to create more affordable housing units. Thanks to CRUNCH's involvement, the Mayor's Task Force acknowledged the importance of diverse housing in the downtown core.

iv. economic development

Service agencies are interested in the opportunities for new downtown businesses, such as grassroots enterprises run by youth or former street people. But business owners fear that the new enterprises could create unwelcome competition for small companies already struggling to survive in a difficult environment. Moreover, they say the competition would be unfair if the new businesses were subsidized by tax dollars.

A need was identified to create a forum to look at the range of economic development plans that previously had been prepared for Victoria. A recent CRUNCH roundtable synthesized several existing ideas into one action plan which embodies the principles of community economic development.

An example of a recent project which met several agendas is the formation of a business which employs former street youth to clean buildings and remove graffiti downtown.

v. food

Food issues are being addressed through the Capital Region Food Roundtable which has few structural ties to CRUNCH. The Roundtable successfully lobbied for provincial 'Good Samaritan' legislation to reduce the risks associated with hotels and caterers contributing excess food to charity. Members also organized a food cooperative and are working on The Urban Harvest project which redistributes food from Victoria's hospitals.

Other activities include liaising with the provincial government on agricultural policy issues, sponsoring community kitchens and becoming involved with organizations which have an international focus. The Capital Region Food Roundtable is currently organizing itself into a nonprofit society.

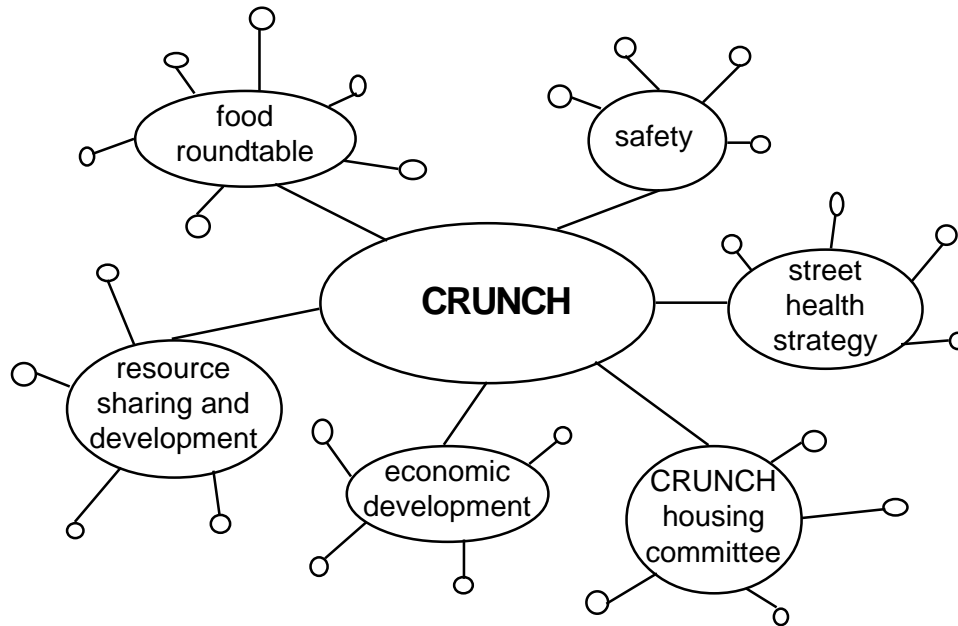
vi. sharing resources

The final Action Group is focussed on resource sharing. Its challenge is to secure funding, sponsorship and in-kind donations to help implement some of the solutions to downtown problems. It is crucial to find new ways of using existing resources. Still in the early stages of coming together as a viable group, the active participants are developing a 'CRUNCH card' through which participating retailers would offer loyal customers a discount and social agencies would receive the proceeds of selling the cards to consumers at a small mark-up.

What does it all mean?

Clearly, CRUNCH is still evolving. At this point, its leaders feel most comfortable describing it as a *process*, not a project and certainly

**The CRUNCH Galaxy:
In touch with the issues**



not an organization. CRUNCH is a process for community problem-solving that brings together partners from a number of sectors to develop a common vocabulary, understanding, goals and trust. At the very least, CRUNCH helps participants realize their own efforts are part of a bigger picture and that no one sector should shoulder the full weight of difficult issues by itself.

Structurally, CRUNCH could be described as a loose consortium. The term 'loose' is used in the sense that CRUNCH participants are not necessarily formally designated representatives of their sectors. Often these sectors are not cohesive or unified to the point where they can collectively and legitimately decide on a representative. For example, the downtown business community has an umbrella organization, the Victoria Business Improvement Association, which is responsible for designating a representative; the church community can rely on the Downtown Council of Churches. However, there is no comparably structured and empowered

entity to select a spokesperson for the private landlords.

The CRUNCH process depends on loosely-knit Action Groups to implement plans. Participants do not necessarily define themselves as members of the group and are not fully accountable to the CRUNCH Steering Committee. The Action Groups are a means to organize and encourage community action.

CRUNCH operates with a division of labour: Roundtables, with broadest representation, identify issues and formulate a vision. Action Groups, whose members are most in touch with the relevant issues, act to implement the vision. The Steering Committee, with a small, relatively tight and formal structure, coordinates, handles communications, fundraises and tries to keep up the momentum. The Community Social Planning Council acts as a secretariat to provide facilitation, administrative and fiduciary services.

CRUNCH often uses an analogy and graphic model of a galaxy to convey an understanding of its structure. At the centre is the Steering Committee (the sun), and Action Groups are orbiting planets. Each planet represents a particular sector and has many orbiting ‘moons’ – agencies, organizations, projects and initiatives – around it. However, a representation of the model on paper cannot convey fully the dynamic and tenuous nature of all the links.

CRUNCH is not actually ‘in control’ of the many parties, groups, organizations and agencies orbiting around it. Essentially, the arrangement might be likened to our expanding universe, with planets threatening to fly out of the solar system at any time due to centrifugal forces! Yet CRUNCH has managed to survive thanks to the new relationships and awareness it has created, which in turn have generated new action and social change.

Conclusion

CRUNCH is simply Victoria’s unique way of seeking solutions for systemic issues of poverty in a sustainable and interactive manner. Our model has generated much interest at recent conferences in Regina and Ottawa.

Fundamentally, CRUNCH is seen as a way to increase awareness of different perspectives and of various sectors’ responsibility when it comes to issues facing the downtown core. Using this approach, CRUNCH has been able to develop the capacity of the community to work together effectively to create and sustain a vibrant, safe and healthy Downtown Victoria.

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