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A "New Deal" for Inner-City Winnipeg

While the attention of Winnipeggers has been focused on Mayor Glen Murray's New Deal, an equally important "new deal" has been emerging in Winnipeg's inner city. Out of a transparent and participatory process directed by the Urban Futures Group over a two year period, a democratic body has emerged that could become something like a level of governance rooted in and directly accountable to Winnipeg's inner city. This innovative example of participatory democracy could be an important part of the solution to long-standing inner city problems.

The Urban Futures Group Steering Committee has emerged out of the struggle for improved funding for inner city revitalization. The Urban Futures Group, a coalition of community-based inner city organizations, has been working for two years to get governments to implement a new tri-level urban development agreement with a strong inner city and Aboriginal component. The new agreement appears to be close: a Memorandum of Understanding was signed in late January, 2003, and negotiations have been ongoing since.

Winnipeg has a 20 year history of urban development agreements. The Core Area Initiative One, and CAI Two, in the 1980s, and the Winnipeg Development Agreement in the 1990s, put \$15-20 million per year into Winnipeg. A part of that funding went into Winnipeg's inner city, and some of the inner city money funded the creation of and/or sustained existing community-based organizations (CBOs).

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Community-based Organizations

It is the emergence of these CBOs that is arguably the most significant legacy of the tri-level agreements. Indeed, one way of looking at the issue is to say that the past 20 years have been a practical experiment in determining what works and what doesn't in re-vitalizing inner cities.

One of the most important things that we have learned is that community-based organizations are a big part of the solution to inner city decay. They are the means by which inner city residents themselves become directly involved in solving community problems.

This was made clear by Winnipeg's 1990 *Community Inquiry Into Inner City Revitalization*, which found that inner city residents are the key to sustained revitalization efforts, and that if inner city problems are to be successfully addressed, in a preventative rather than remedial way, resources should be allocated to community-based organizations that foster local ownership and responsibility.

A study commissioned by the Urban Futures Group and published by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives in 2002, based on interviews with representatives of 100 organizations, reached similar conclusions. *Building On Our Strengths: Inner City Priorities For a Renewed Tri-Level Development Agreement* found that while there are still many problems in Winnipeg's inner city, there are grounds for cautious optimism. The study found that this is the case where two condi-



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tions prevail: where genuinely community-based organizations have emerged in response to local needs; and where these organizations have been successful in securing reasonable levels of funding. *Building On Our Strengths* added the cautionary note that instant results can't be expected from this approach. "But when community-based solutions are adequately funded over time, neighbourhoods and communities can be gradually turned around. We are now beginning to see the evidence of that." A walk through those inner city neighbourhoods where community-based organizations have emerged and are being funded will reveal that this is the case.

The Urban Futures Group has been working for a new tri-level urban development agreement in order that these gains are not lost, but rather are built upon and expanded.

The Steering Committee

An important expansion of the gains made by community-based organizations in Winnipeg's inner city over the past 20 years is the creation of the Urban Futures Group Steering Committee. The purpose of the Steering Committee is to work closely with the three levels of government in allocating that portion of the funds attached to the proposed new urban development agreement earmarked for the inner city and for Aboriginal initiatives. It is expected that at least 50 percent of the total funds available in the new agreement will go to the inner city and to community-based Aboriginal organizations, and the Steering Committee will bring to the process of decision-making about the allocation a remarkable and invaluable wealth of practical inner city experience.

The composition of the Steering Committee is the result of a process that started with a call for nominations sent out widely to inner city organizations. The process involved both the Urban Futures Group and the Winnipeg Aboriginal Coalition soliciting nominations, and the two organizations establishing Selection Committees, each of which selected seven nominees to the Steering Committee based on criteria determined by the organizations.

The result is a fourteen person Steering Committee (to which the three levels of government are expected to add three additional members) which is characterized by years of dedicated and hard-earned experience in working with, and directing the work of, community-based inner city organizations. I estimate that the 14 people on the Steering Committee have well over 250 years of cumulative experience in working in Winnipeg's inner city. Most of the 14 are Executive Directors of inner city community-based organizations; most were raised in and/or live in the inner city; most have university degrees; most are women; most are Aboriginal; all are extremely

talented and dedicated to the revitalization of Winnipeg's inner city.

The Steering Committee was built as part of a community process that was open, inclusive and transparent. It is rooted in and accountable to the inner city community. Its involvement in the allocation of urban development agreement funds to community-based inner city and Aboriginal organizations will mean that funds are much more wisely and productively invested than has ever before been the case. By virtue of their practical experience, those on the Steering Committee know what works and what does not, and they know, from their own experience in the inner city where funds have always been scarce, how to stretch a dollar.

The creation of the Urban Futures Group Steering Committee is an important step in an on-going process of inner city revitalization in Winnipeg. We have learned much over the past 20 years in Winnipeg's inner city, and we are making some visible gains. With the establishment of the Steering Committee and their involvement in the new urban development agreement we are in a position to build on those gains, and to make Winnipeg's inner city a model of vibrant urban revitalization.

—Jim Silver

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