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Neighbourhoods Making Decisions

A bitterly cold January night couldn't deter more than 30 residents of Spence neighbourhood who had come to take part in an example of innovative grassroots democracy and community development in Winnipeg's inner city. In the process, they were helping to re-build Winnipeg's deteriorating core.

Spence is one of Winnipeg's poorest neighbourhoods. Houses are boarded up; average incomes are low; unemployment is high; neighbourhood girls in their early-mid teens can be seen working the local streets as sex-trade workers.

But this is not a tale of deficiencies and short-comings. On the contrary. This is a story of poor people who smash to smithereens all our stereotypes about poverty. It also reveals that effective community-based decision-making models are already in place in Winnipeg's inner city, and that community-based decision making can and should be incorporated into the new development agreement currently being negotiated by the city, the province, and the federal government.

The mid-January meeting was called by the Spence Neighbourhood Association to consider the latest round of proposals for funding for neighbourhood revitalization initiatives. The provincial Neighbourhoods Alive! program makes available to Spence (and six other neighbourhoods) an annual amount to fund projects initiated, designed and implemented by neighbourhood residents and community organizations. Neighbourhoods Alive! decides which projects get funded, but in Spence the proposals are first presented, debated and evaluated at a neighbourhood meeting called by the Spence Neighbourhood Association.

The process of evaluating these funding proposals is worthy of any Board of Directors. Each project is presented by its

proponents. Presentations, accompanied by a brief written description and budget, are limited to five minutes, with ten minutes for questions. The projects presented at the mid-January meeting were excellent; the questions and observations were pointed, perceptive and constructive.

Effective community-based decision-making models are already in place ... and should be incorporated into the new tri-level development agreement

Community Cupboard

One group wanted funding for staff time for a project called the "Community Cupboard", which provides small amounts of non-perishable food and household supplies at cost to neighbourhood residents in need of a bit of help until their next cheque. The Community Cupboard was started by the Women's Project, itself a dynamic and effective group of Spence neighbourhood women. Part of the Women's Project's strategy in developing the Community Cupboard has been to train a group of neighbourhood women in handling cash and dealing with inventory and

other tasks associated with retail food operations. As a result, some of these women, currently on social assistance, have gained skills to enter the paid labour force. In addition, many have developed the confidence to become active on the Women's Project advisory committee. When one participant at the meeting observed admiringly that the Women's Project is doing great work, one of the women training at the Community Cupboard, who had been quiet to that point, exclaimed with feeling—"yeah, we're kickin' butt!" Laughter and applause followed. Another resident, a woman with a well-behaved five-year old who helped by handing out pens to participants, asked whether Community Cupboard hours might be extended to at least one week-day evening and/or weekend day. She explained that she works full-time but her wages are



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so low that she can barely make ends meet, yet she can't get to the Cupboard during the day because she is at work. The Community Cupboard people promised to look into the possibility.

Another project requested \$6500 to run two neighbourhood arts projects: an art show for local, low-income artists; and a series of free-of-charge art classes for neighbourhood residents. Excellent questions and comments followed the presentation: do the artists get to keep all the proceeds of art show sales (the answer is yes); would the 'hire locally' principle of the Spence Neighbourhood Association be complied with (the answer is yes); and what are the long-term benefits of these projects (the answer was a fine description of the power of art to inspire people's lives).

Buzzers

Another group requested funding for a pilot project to install peep-holes in rooming house doors, and buzzers at outside doors. This proposal— aimed at improving the safety and security of rooming house residents, and improving the possibility of their becoming involved in the community—arose from a recent, innovative research project on Spence rooming houses (Source). The research project, funded by the University of Winnipeg's Winnipeg Inner City Research Alliance, utilized community researchers who are resident in and familiar with the Spence neighbourhood. The study made numerous well-supported recommendations, and a community organization was now proposing to implement one of them as a pilot project.

What followed this group's presentation was a first-class discussion about the responsibilities of inner city landlords. Some present argued that slum landlords who own multiple rooming houses that they allow to deteriorate ought to be *required* to invest in their properties to ensure tenants' safety. Others pointed out that the rooming house study had found that some landlords are community-minded, and everyone would benefit from a project which involved working with them. The debate on this issue would have been found fascinating and informative by any Winnipegger.

Each of the nine proposals was evaluated on a sheet provided by the Spence Neighbourhood Association, which required participants to consider: how the project would benefit the community as a whole; whether community residents had been consulted in the design of the project; whether the project includes opportunities for local hiring and skill development; and whether and to what extent the project fits with the community-developed Spence Neighbourhood Plan. The proposals, together with the neighbourhood's evaluation of each, will be forwarded to Neighbourhoods Alive!, where the final decisions will be made. The final decisions will be made with the views of Spence residents very much in mind. Says Linda McFadyen, Director of Neighbourhoods Alive!: "The communities comments are given a lot of weight. The whole initiative is based on the notion that the communities know best what is needed in their neighbourhoods".

Overturing Myths and Stereotypes

Solutions to the problems in Winnipeg's inner city are seriously hampered by overly-negative images of the core area and its

residents, and by the prevalence and persistence of myths and stereotypes about the causes of poverty. Many of the people participating in the Spence Neighbourhood Association project proposal meeting in mid-January are poor. They are also bright, informed, articulate, and actively engaged in the process of collectively working to re-build their community.

Winnipeggers have good reason to be proud of this wonderful example of grassroots democracy and community development in the inner city. The many inner city initiatives like this one would, if more people knew about them, begin to transform our images of this part of the city, and make Manitobans feel much more optimistic about public dollars invested in the inner city. These impressive community development initiatives would benefit, and we would all benefit, from an expansion of the provincial Neighbourhoods Alive! program— which is very effective, but *much* too small— together with the implementation of the renewed, tri-level inner city investment fund called for a year ago by the inner city Urban Futures Group.

—Jim Silver

Jim Silver is a professor of Politics at the University of Winnipeg and Past-Chair of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives board of directors.

Related Reading

Distasio, Jino, Michael Dudley and Mike Maunder. *Out of the Long Dark Hallway: Voices From Winnipeg's Inner City* (Winnipeg: Institute of Urban Studies, Nov., 2002).

Jim Silver. *Building On Our Strengths: Priorities and Principles for a Renewed Tri-Level Inner City Funding Agreement* (Winnipeg: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Manitoba, 2002).

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