



THE CHRA CONGRESS SESSIONS SERIES 2015

**Building Community Capacity Through
Neighbourhood Based Initiatives**

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BC Housing

With thanks to BC Housing for
their generous support for this initiative

October 2015

Speakers

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Moderator

Daryl Sexsmith: *CHRA Regional Director, Saskatchewan and Housing Analyst, City of Saskatoon (SK)*

Date

April 30th, 2015

This session, held at CHRA's 2015 National Congress on Housing and Homelessness, focused on two neighbourhood-based initiatives aimed at building community capacity. The first, Station 20 West in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, is the result of a community-driven initiative that succeeded without government support. The second presented the implementation of a federally funded program, the Building Neighbourhood Capacity Program (BNCP), in three distressed neighbourhoods in Fresno, California. Each provides lessons for how communities can create positive neighbourhood change using local resources generated by means of community support.

Len Usiskin: Station 20 West, Saskatoon, (SK)

Station 20 West is a Community Enterprise Centre (CEC) in Saskatoon's Pleasant Hill neighbourhood. It was initiated through Quint Development Corporation (QUINT), a not-for-profit organization that uses a community economic development approach to enhance economic and social well-being, as well as through CHEP Good Food, a Saskatoon based organization focused on issues related to food security.

Pleasant Hill is located in one of Saskatoon's core neighbourhoods, an area that faces many challenges and is made up of five adjacent communities in Saskatoon. They are some of the oldest neighbourhoods in the city, and include the downtown and surrounding area. The



Station 20 West is a Community Enterprise Centre in Saskatoon's Pleasant Hill neighbourhood offering housing, health, grocery, public library and social service supports, all under one roof.

neighbourhoods in this area are amongst the poorest in the city, and significant disparities exist including high concentrations of individuals living with mental illness, high rates of teen births, heart disease and infant mortality as compared with Saskatoon as a whole¹. Of the core neighbourhoods, Pleasant Hill has some of the lowest household incomes, with 44 percent of households living on \$20,000 or less annually², as well as the lowest home sale prices in the city³. The neighbourhood has also faced food security challenges as larger grocery store chains have moved out of the area, with the last withdrawing from the neighbourhood in the 1990s.

Around the time the last grocery store withdrew from the neighbourhood, Quint Development Corporation and CHEP Good Food conducted a feasibility study and organized a year long consultation process to gain a better understanding of what issues were the most pressing for people in the neighbourhood. The process revealed the need for a grocery store, employment opportunities, and adequate low-cost housing as the highest priorities for residents.

The two organizations partnered with the initial goal of bringing a grocery store to the neighbourhood and created a business plan in 2004. They identified a large lot in a central location ideal for a grocery store accessible to community members. However the lot was able to accommodate a much more expansive scale of development. As the project grew in scope, other agencies such as the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation, the Saskatoon Public Library and the Westside Community Clinic expressed interest in co-locating. They were also hoping to find office space for community based organizations and an opportunity to develop housing on the site. As well, the University of Saskatchewan's Colleges of Medicine and Dentistry expressed interest in co-locating, which would have provided significant additional services to the community.

As more organizations expressed interest in co-locating and the vision grew to that of a Community Enterprise Centre, the original business plan from 2004 needed to be revised. In the spring of 2007, the provincial government announced it would provide funding for the project, which created an even greater interest among potential partners. The project outcome was seen as a vital opportunity to increase food security as well as access to health services, affordable housing and community supports for local residents.

However, an election in the fall of 2007 brought in a new provincial government, and \$8 million in funding was retracted in the spring of 2008. This changed the course of the project significantly. Many of the organizations who had shown interest in participating in the project withdrew. In particular, primary health care providers and dental services withdrew from the plan – a loss that was felt greatly by Station 20 West's organizers. The project faced looming uncertainty in moving forward, and its organizers worried that it might not be completed at all. There was concern that the project would not be viable without government support and would be halted entirely. Affordable housing, owned by Saskatchewan Housing Corporation and managed by Saskatoon Housing Authority, was already being developed on the site, as well as a branch of the Saskatoon Public Library. Both were concerned with the slow down of the project and worried they would become isolated in the location.

The province's withdrawal of funding, however did not deter public support. A rally of over 2,500 people took place – one of the largest rallies in Saskatoon in decades – as the community showed their support for Station 20 West. In particular, churches, the labour movement, arts groups, musicians, the coop sector, and other grassroots organizations came through to support the project. Although provincial funding was not recovered, the overwhelming show of community impact motivated organizers to continue moving forward on the project. In light of the new circumstances, they revisited their business plan once again, scaling the plan

¹Saskatoon Health Region. Healthy Families Plus Health Communities Equals Healthy Children, 2008

²City of Saskatoon. Thirteenth Edition Neighbourhood Profiles, 2014

³Saskatoon Region Association of Realtors. MLS Home Price Index.

down to involve only those partners who chose to remain involved, and shifted from building a 50,000 square foot, four-storey building to a 29,000 square foot two-storey building. The entire process lasted from the creation of the first business plan in 2004 until construction began in the summer of 2011.

Now complete, Station 20 West brings together multiple agencies to build on community strengths and tackle challenges in a coordinated way. The agencies accommodated within the Social Enterprise Development are:

1. The Good Food Junction Co-op Grocery Store
2. Saskatchewan Health Region – Health Disparity team
3. CHEP Good Food Inc.
4. Kids First
5. Saskatoon Mother's Centre
6. University of Saskatchewan Community Engagement
7. Quint Development Corporation

As well, a Public Library branch and 55 units of subsidized housing, owned by the Saskatchewan Housing Corporation and managed by the Saskatoon Housing Authority, are located adjacent to Station 20 West. There are two types of housing available, a four-storey apartment-style building, as well as townhouses. The library is located on the main floor of the apartment complex, and there is a central green space accessible to everyone in Station 20 West, as well as to residents in adjacent housing.

The development received no direct funding from any level of government, although the City of Saskatoon sold the land for the site to the developers for \$1. As well, the development benefits from a five-year property tax abatement, however this policy was in place for all new construction in Saskatoon's core neighbourhoods and is not unique to Station 20 West.

Although the lack of direct government funding created significant challenges for the development – the large mortgage required has limited their financial flexibility, for example – community support for the project was strengthened. Today, Station 20 West benefits from being autonomous in that it does not have to be accountable to funders and has the freedom to respond to community identified needs.

Preston Prince: Building Neighbourhood Capacity Program, Fresno, California (U.S.)

The Building Neighbourhood Capacity Program (BNCP) is a federally funded program in the U.S. that brings together multiple stakeholders to provide assistance to distressed neighbourhoods. The program defines community capacity as: *"the knowledge, skills, relationships, processes and resources that neighbourhood residents, local organizations and cross-sector partners need to work together to achieve better results in public safety, education, housing, employment and other key areas."* Communities funded by the BNCP undertake a variety of actions that are informed by a framework for creating positive neighbourhood change. Each community selected to participate in the program must:

1. Develop a Community Process to Achieve Results
2. Build Community Capacity
3. Design and Implement a "Learning While Doing" Project
4. Develop a Results-Driven Revitalization Plan

Although these are required activities by participating neighbourhoods, they are not strictly enforced in all cases. Rather, participating neighbourhoods are able to engage in these activities as they choose, depending on the priorities and needs of each area.

Through a competitive selection process based on community need, three neighbourhoods in Fresno, California have so far been selected to participate in the BNCP. These neighbourhoods are El Dorado Park and Southwest, selected in 2012, and the Yokomi neighbourhood, selected in 2014.

The City of Fresno has faced many challenges such as low educational attainment and high rates of poverty. The neighbourhoods selected to participate are some of the most distressed in the area. El Dorado Park, Southwest, and Yokomi have poverty rates well above the city average, with 76.4 percent, 40.2 percent, and 56.2 percent of the population living below the poverty line respectively, compared to 23.4 percent in the City of Fresno⁴. As well, significant education disparities exist, with between 45 percent and 60 percent of residents in these communities having below a high school education⁵.

A significant focus of Fresno's approach to neighbourhood revitalization is based on Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD). This involves shifting the dialogue away from a deficit model that identifies community shortcomings, to an approach that focuses on the strengths present in the community as well as on asset building. According to ABCD, there are five key assets in every community. These include those who live and actively engage in the community, as well as partnerships and associations, local organizations and institutions, the physical geography of the neighbourhood and a local economy, whether it be informal or more formalized.

An ABCD approach often starts by completing a Community Needs Assessment, and then goes further by conducting an Asset Inventory. In Fresno, an Asset Inventory highlighted unique strengths present in each of the participating neighbourhoods, such as libraries, citizen associations, culture clubs, and a strong youth presence. It is believed that using an asset-based approach to highlight strengths rather than weaknesses leads to more positive outcomes from the community development process.

Case Study Highlight: San Ramon Apartment Resource Centre, El Dorado Park



San Ramon Apartments in El Dorado Park, Fresno, CA was chosen as one of three initial sites for the federally funded U.S. Building Neighbourhood Capacity Program that brings together multiple stakeholders and community member to rebuild distressed neighbourhoods.

The San Ramon Apartments were a dilapidated apartment complex in El Dorado Park known for attracting drug and gang activity⁶. The Fresno Housing Authority (FHA), a public agency that seeks to support individuals and families in accessing quality housing, and to become engaged in their communities⁷, took over operation of the San Ramon Apartments in 2010. FHA reached out to BNCP and the City of Fresno, the lead agency for BNCP, to initiate a community engagement process with the goal of strengthening social capacity and resources for the residents of El Dorado Park.

⁴Building Neighbourhood Capacity Program, 2015a, 2015b and 2015c

⁵Ibid.

⁶Your Central Valley. "Revitalization in El Dorado Park Neighbourhood West of Fresno State".

⁷Fresno Housing Authority. n.d.

Between 2012 and 2015, FHA and BNCP spent time in the community building connections with residents. Through an iterative process involving a number of community meetings, it became clear that there was need for a community space in the neighbourhood. The San Ramon Apartments were suggested as a location for such a community space, as the re-development of a single suite in the building would provide the necessary space.

FHA and BNCP then engaged residents in a process to define the vision for the space. Discussions focused on what the space would look like, what it would be used for, and how it would fit in to the neighbourhood. Residents envisioned a space to use for meetings and seminars, education purposes, a computer lab and as a gathering place, and the concept of using the space as a gathering space and resource centre developed. A timeline for the project was discussed and agreed upon between those involved. It was believed that allowing residents to take a lead in guiding the vision and participate in project management would help to build a sense of commitment to the project while ensuring that the project was grounded in community need.



San Ramon Apartments in February 2014, following extensive renovations, including a communal space used to host community meetings, guest seminars, parenting skills and basic computer skills classes.

Renovations began in 2014. One suite was converted into the community gathering space, and the remaining 31 two bedroom suites were renovated. The finished community space now hosts guest seminars, parenting skills and basic computer skills classes. In order to take advantage of existing skill sets in the neighbourhood, the local United Methodist Church has taken responsibility for legal considerations such as insurance and contract negotiations, while organizing the use of the space and booking events is left in the hands of the residents.

Since the rehabilitation, Fresno Housing Authority and the BNCP have engaged other partners such as First Five Fresno County, an organization that works as a catalyst for creating an accessible and effective network of quality services for young children up to 5 years of age and their families, as well as Fresno Circles, an organization addressing issues of family poverty in the area.

As well, there have been strong efforts to include use of residents' skills and capacities. For example, one resident of the San Ramon Apartments took a lead in raising funds and donors to contribute to the creation of the computer lab, and has since been teaching basic computer skills courses in the lab. Another resident has been hired as property manager and for building maintenance.

Organizers continue to seek community partners as they move forward, and hope to find even more uses for their community space in the future. As well, it is envisioned that the process used for this project can be replicated in other neighbourhoods. The BNCP has recently provided funding for the rehabilitation of another dilapidated apartment building in the nearby Lowell neighbourhood. The program seeks to partner with neighbourhood organizations and use the San Ramon Apartment's Resource Centre project as a model.

Conclusion

These two initiatives offer insight into how community members can work together to build neighbourhood capacity through collaboration, partnerships, skills and knowledge sharing. Station 20 West highlights how communities can band together to address an issue when government support is lacking, while the initiatives taking place in Fresno through the Building Neighbourhood Capacity Program demonstrates how federal funding can support local communities to strengthen capacity at the neighbourhood level.

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