Building Strong and Sustainable Neighbourhoods Through Citizen Action

Building strong and sustainable communities requires effective leadership as well as an active and engaged citizenry. This section begins with a fresh perspective from one of the most inspiring community engagement experts in the US. The remainder of the section looks at five examples where neighbourhoods and communities have mobilized, with exciting and inspiring results.

Community Engagement

Building a Community Voice

GARLAND YATES is one of the foremost figures in community mobilization and democratic action in the United States. He is well known for the work he did through the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Following the destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, he has been involved with facilitating direct action in the reconstruction of New Orleans.

> POWER IN PEOPLE

There is real power in people and I have seen in my life that real change can happen when people get together and decide that it's time to change: kids become better educated, neighbourhoods become safer over decades and not just during a particular crime initiative.

These things happen when people decide that they aren't going to accept the status quo and they decide that they are going to change. In my work, I have not seen a program that can make positive change in troubled families without taking account of the family itself, and in the larger context, without taking into account the community in which people live.

In our country elected officials look at community groups as a threat. That's for good reason: it's because they make elected officials more

accountable. But those officials who have an agenda of change find that these groups are invaluable allies.

I believe that the power of people is essential in making change in a community, but I don't for a minute believe that they can do it by themselves. I don't for a moment believe that they can do it without the help of local government and in most of the cases that I've been working on, the institution with the greatest resources and the greatest clout is government. For community change, we have to end up in a place where we have a solid relationship with local government and local officials in particular.

> COOPERATION IS ESSENTIAL

The strength and sustainability of any community change ultimately depends on the willingness and ability of individual residents to cooperate with each other on matters of mutual interest and take control of their community. The very first reason that people organize is to take control of their neighbourhood to make it safe for their kids.

Social and economic alienation and isolation is a major reason for the decline of many neighbourhoods. People don't talk to each other and most of the time they are overwhelmed with fear. They don't come out at night. They don't go to community meetings. They don't let their kids go to the playground. That results in isolation: people live next door to each other and don't know each other.

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Overcoming that isolation is essential in building a neighbourhood and that's the first step in our strategy. When we go in and help rebuild the community, the first thing we want to do is get people interacting with each other. Helping people break down isolation not only helps them get acquainted with each other but also helps people share their knowledge, which is a valuable resource. Getting people talking to each other and working with each other will help them improve their lives.

> HOW CAN WE HELP?

As outsiders, we asked ourselves how we could make these things happen. How could we encourage people to interact more with each other? The most logical thing was to go to people in the neighbourhood who had histories of interaction. That involved reaching out to community organizers and to community organizations.

Community organizing is controversial, so it's not every day that a big foundation is going to put resources into community organizing. In some places, there's a weird belief that these groups undermine democracy, when in reality there is no democracy without them.

After having worked in projects in Denver, Boston, and Detroit when I was at the Annie E. Casey Foundation, I learned that there are two factors that influence the willingness of people in neighbourhoods to get involved in local affairs. One factor is the burden of participation, which includes money and time and things like child care. The second factor is self-esteem; how people feel about themselves, their children, and their neighbourhood.

In a neighbourhood that has a lot of needs, people are going to be troubled with a lot of negative feeling about themselves. We know that connecting with the people that do the organizing and then working on the problems that form the barriers to participating are things to do right away. These were things that the Casey Foundation had never funded before. That was unheard of – funding things like child care and transportation was considered the same as giving out a welfare cheque.

> HIERARCHY OF NEEDS

One elected official in Denver told me that people have to deal with their immediate needs first before they can engage in neighbourhood affairs, something like Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Before this official understood this, he was surprised that people didn't come out when he called a community meeting. His understanding of that made him a more useful ally in getting neighbourhoods involved.

We found it useful to step back and take a look at what would encourage people to get engaged in their neighbourhoods. Some of the barriers are short term and some are long term. But then there are other characteristics that we had to understand so we wouldn't make things

worse. We had to understand as best we could the characteristics and composition of these neighbourhoods. Sometimes you have people who have immigrated from other parts of the world and you sometimes have groups that have migrated from other parts of the country. Understanding who was in these neighbourhoods was absolutely crucial.

We needed to find some targets of opportunity. That meant learning about neighbourhood events and celebrations, where people went and where they felt safe, and what organizations people felt were legitimate. We had to understand these things at a basic level before we took any steps to do anything in these neighbourhoods. We had to learn which events were part of a series of events, as opposed to a one-time event.

How do we get that knowledge? We sat down with the residents and asked them how we could learn about their community and create opportunities for them. In one neighbourhood in Denver a group had gone to Appalachia to learn about story circles, where people got together and talked about their experiences. These people were so impressed they wrote a study guide about story circles and used it as a tool.

They came to us and said, "Why don't you let us spend some money on things we think are important?" They were interested in cutting crime, strengthening families, and getting youth out of trouble. The list of activities they proposed to deal with these goals didn't go over well at the Foundation headquarters, but we set aside $100,000 to help them. Most of what they did with the money was social. They formed block clubs and they held multicultural dinners. They also designed Spanish classes to allow African-Americans and Vietnamese-Americans to communicate with Spanish speakers and they designed English classes so that the Spanish speakers could communicate with the Vietnamese-Americans and the African- Americans. They asked a local resource centre to help them create a good neighbour resource guide to better understand the neighbourhood and better talk to each other. So here we had three groups using this money to become familiar with each other's language and culture so that they could learn to work together. That would never have come from us.

> "Sometimes we have gone into neighbourhoods and tried to do too much. Sometimes we have underestimated the knowledge and understanding of local people and sometimes we have underestimated the impact of what outsiders say about a community. The biggest sin is not trusting the people in the neighbourhood."

> CREATING A NEIGHBOURHOOD VOICE

When you get people talking and interacting with each other, that's a good first step. Then how do you get people talking so that they can create what we call a neighbourhood voice? We wanted them to think collectively about community problems. How do we help them without intruding on them or manipulating them? How do we encourage them to work together and create an authentic voice? Somewhere, leadership has to show up. Anything that happens in the community has to have a centre. The authenticity of potential leaders was an issue that arose immediately.

One thing that people said to us about leadership was that there are too many gatekeepers, people who are anointed by outsiders because their views served the interests of outsiders. So we first had to deal with that fear. The fear of gatekeeping reflects a concern that someone might define and promote an agenda that reflects the agenda maker's personal interests rather than those of the community.

> REPLENISHING LEADERSHIP

We have to remember that leadership needs to be constantly replenished. People come and people go. Someone can become a leader in a school, for example, but may be forced to step back if something happens to his or her family.

Constant investments have to be made. Community organizers have to be funded, as controversial as that can be. What we all want is a model of leadership that reflects the community.

The first thing that we must recognize is that leadership should be representative, even if it is adversarial and works against the interest of the funding foundation. This of course wasn't easy for me to sell at the Casey Foundation. When people get organized and become powerful, we have to be ready for the possibility that the power will be exercised within their close relationships, not directed at some distant place.

Leadership development can be a double-edged sword. On one side there is the establishment of people in positions of power and influence and on the other side monitoring how and in whose interest that power is used. On one hand, we have to build leaders that have power and are authentic, and on the other hand, we have to make sure that they are

accountable to the residents under them and that they don't stray into the realm of gatekeeping for their own agendas

> TRAINING LEADERS

At the Casey Foundation we believed that the constant recruitment and training of new leaders mitigated the concentration of power and influence in the pursuit of individual agendas. There were three means we used to create an authentic community voice. The first was creating and supporting leadership development that was authentic and true. The second was leadership training so that these new leaders could understand that effective leaders require a following to which they are accountable. The third was understanding that the real work of community organizing was not just going to happen: we had to fund it.

If you go to a community and you help it get organized and ask it what it wants, then you had better be prepared to give it to them or work with them to help them get it. When you ask the question, you've got to be accountable for the results. The results can be powerful. A politician in Denver who listened to what people in his community wanted was able to help create a very strong partnership that enabled him make to make even bigger reforms than he had expected to be able to make. We learned that helping residents help themselves is the core ingredient of community organizing. This reflects what Saul Alinsky once said: "Never do for people what they can do for themselves."

"As a progressive, I believe that elected leaders have to come together with the people in the community who will have to live with the consequences of decisions that are made and I believe that organized labour should be represented. I do not believe that working people can have a just place in their communities if they are not organized around their common interests and those interests have to go beyond collective bargaining."

> LAYING FOUNDATIONS FOR CHANGE

Once we've gotten people to interact with each other and to think collectively, how does all that get converted into an agenda for change that is doable, to which people in the neighbourhood feel accountable, and to which they can make others in their community accountable?

Interaction and engagement cannot be ends unto themselves. They must become the foundation upon which neighbourhoods organize for long term sustainable change. The challenge is one of gathering the right information and creating the consensus for an agenda that addresses community concerns. This involves seeing what individual concerns will rise to the level of community concerns that become catalysts for action.

> THRESHOLD CONDITIONS

How can we frame those concerns so they become a framework for getting things done? Our work in this area involves examining two sets of threshold conditions. One of them is making residents feel that they are going to be heard in the public discourse. The other is that people need to know what will happen with the information they give. How will it be used? If residents are satisfied then they will likely want to work with others.

Some neighbourhoods are poor and some are in desperate need, but when people come together, there is no question about the difference they can make by using their collective wisdom and collective power.

In this case, we are talking about communities working with public officials, which is the most important constituency to which communities have to reach out. We can stop some kids from criminal activity, but we can't reduce the crime rate without the police department. We can help individual kids, but we can't improve the educational system for our kids without working with that system.

In distressed communities that may lack social organization, the mechanisms required to support community agenda building are often weak or absent. In the communities we're talking about, when you go about building a community agenda for action, the infrastructure and

resources are not there. These communities require help to develop the means to exchange information.

> INFORMAL WORK

We should work beyond social interaction to develop issue recognition and consensus building. A resident-friendly environment must be created for information sharing and consensus building and action. As much as possible must be done that's non-hierarchical. At the end of the day, people must know that we are being sincere and accountable.

Another way to encourage this is to sponsor informal opportunities for change such as story circles, multicultural dinners, block parties, etc. People just want to talk about what's on their minds. Social events can attract larger numbers of people without emphasizing the attendance of certain people. They bring everybody together.

In addition to these informal meetings, there is a need for focused discussion of topical events. We ought to do both, but we need to be strategic about when we do them.

> CONCLUSION

Community building involves some art, but you have to be direct and strategic and you have to be willing to invest in it. Where there's a healthy neighbourhood infrastructure that engages people around things they care about, those neighbourhoods tend to be healthier by far. Some neighbourhoods are poor and some are in desperate need, but when people come together, there is no question about the difference they can make by using their collective wisdom and collective power.

When other people are open to working with them and putting up with the headaches and accepting the fact that we don't know it all and that the people here are experts in their own way, there is the joy of making and sustaining change. If we want to make life better for these people, it is worth the journey.

Strong and Sustainable Neighbourhoods

Responding to Community Needs in Kingston

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ELAINE RADWAY has worked in the community development field for many years and has worked over the past few years with members of Kingston Community Health Centres.

Community health centres are holistic in their orientation, and therefore focus not only on primary health care for individuals, but also on taking care of community-wide health issues. In this article, Carolyn Davies and Elaine Radway show how a community health centre in Kingston supported the development of a vital neighbourhood-based and managed community centre in response to the city's decision to close down the neighbourhood arena.

> RIDEAU HEIGHTS

One of the arenas slated for closure was the Wally Elmer Youth Centre in Rideau Heights and it is there that this project took place. In this part of Kingston, which includes Rideau Heights and adjacent areas, a significant number of families live below the poverty line. The percentage of those living below the poverty line in the surrounding areas ranges between 27 and 42 per cent, compared to 7 to 22 per cent for the rest of the city.

Slightly more than half of the families are led by lone parents. The incidence of obesity in these areas is twice the national average. There are 1,500 children under the age of 14 within 10 blocks of the arena, a very high ratio that is twice the density of the average city neighbourhood. Unlike the rest of Ontario or Canada, the population bulges in the younger demographic. In many ways, this neighbourhood will play a huge role in our future.

There is a high concentration of subsidized housing in the Rideau Heights area, with 500 needy units within 15 blocks of the arena and a lot of privately-owned apartment blocks that cater to lower income residents. There is a low level of home ownership: 28.6 per cent compared to 58.4 for the rest of the city. The residential population is about 6,000, just over 5 per cent of the total city population. The average family income is $33,585, compared to $68,396 for the city.

> The average family income in Rideau Heights is $33,585, compared to $68,396 for all of Kingston.

> ACCESSING SERVICES

People in this part of Kingston have trouble accessing services, which appears to be getting harder as time goes on. The city commissioned a consulting firm to do a report, and in 2004 it recommended closing three arenas, primarily because of the cost of maintaining these older buildings. The city has gone ahead with that plan and is building a recreational multiplex in a suburban location that is probably a 25-minute drive from this neighbourhood.

There has been a lot of negative media coverage on the Rideau Heights area because of its demographics. In spite of that a strong surge of support came out of the neighbourhood to save the arena.

> COMMUNITY HUB WORKING GROUP

As the community health centre in the neighbourhood, we do a lot of community development work and we support a lot of community initiatives. We called a meeting between ourselves and the city. Both the city and CHC agreed to see what we could do to improve services through

the development of a youth centre. To this end, the Community Hub Working Group was set up in November 2005. In our work we put a priority on inclusion, and here we ensured that a number of community groups were invited to the table, along with community members, our city councillor, and city staff.

> COMMUNITY CENTRE

Out of the Community Hub Working Group's efforts came a vision for a true neighbourhood-based and managed community centre. The centre would involve an expansion of the Wally Elmer Youth Centre, as opposed to decommissioning the arena. This centre would deliver recreation programs and services and be a gathering place for all ages. It would be community-driven and supported by the city. We are looking at building on existing community group partnerships rather than replacing them.

Community building is about building relationships and bringing people together so they can create new conversations and activities.

Why is a community hub important? A number of studies have shown the importance of social structures in neighbourhoods and how they affect individual educational attainment, employment success, and social connectedness, which in turn can have a positive impact on individual health. That's why the community health centre is at the table. Community building is about building relationships and bringing people together so they can create new conversations and activities.

> NEW USES FOR THE COMMUNITY HUB

In the visioning process and the focus group work, the question of how the Wally Elmer Youth Centre could be utilized as a neighbourhood hub was posed and several different focus areas were identified.

Education was one focus area, where the community centre would be used to provide English as a Second Language classes and adult education programs. Health was another focus area. We discussed having a foot care clinic and a place to meet with nurse practitioners available right in

the community. Instead of having these services outside the community, people could actually walk to the community centre to access them.

Social services could also be delivered from this centre, including a place to meet with Ontario Works representatives and social workers. With regards to recreation, arts, and culture, the committee expressed the hope that the arena would remain available for events like skating classes, dancing, and other sports.

The community centre could be used to promote community beautification, pride, and safety. This would help make people feel comfortable walking in the streets and going to parks, and also foster pride in the community. The centre will also have to address the growing multicultural makeup of the community. The community centre could be a hub where multicultural awareness and activities could branch out into the community.

> VISIONING WORK

In the working group, we wanted to bring the various partners together to make sure that the vision was right, that the hub was a good idea, and that it had continued support. We have been able to move forward because of strong neighbourhood support for the Wally Elmer Youth Centre and support for community arenas, and because community members and organizations need a place to offer their services.

> TIPS FOR COMMUNITY ORGANIZERS

Here is what we recognize as the crucial items in this kind of community work:

- Take action when the time is right.
- Focus on the community action and partnerships.
- Be diverse and inclusive.
- Make sure you have the right people at the table at the right time. It's not always the same people all the time.
- Know when you need outside help. We're all busy, we all have jobs, and the momentum will not continue if work is left to staff only.
- Get the commitments and keep them going.

We held a visioning day session in September 2006 that was attended by 38 community organizations. We were fortunate that the city sent a consultant who had been hired to look into repurposing the community arenas. The consultant took an active part in our community discussions and used the information to write a report that addressed the planning and implementation process as well as how to build awareness.

In order to make the vision work, we had to look imaginatively at sources of money in addition to money that was already available. We had to look at partnerships, including those with city agencies, community groups, the province, and most importantly community members. We discussed potential programming and what would make sense for the physical space.

After the visioning session, the working group was very inspired and its members agreed that in order to keep the momentum going, they needed to go back to the different players and get a commitment in principle for the vision. It was essential that the City of Kingston and Kingston Community Health Centres agree to continue to provide staff support.

On November 16, 2006 a meeting was held with decision-makers from the City of Kingston and Kingston Community Health Centres. At this meeting, the Community Hub Working Group submitted a written report based on the community visioning exercise and 20 letters of support from community agencies. The meeting resulted in a firm commitment from all players.

> CONCLUSION

We are now working on establishing an interim planning group. We have invited the United Way to the table as a potential funder. The City of Kingston has assigned full-time coordination help and the health centre provides secretarial help. We are still at an early phase of our work, but we used community engagement to get us to where we are.

The renewed commitment to the Wally Elmer Youth Centre is taking form in a splash pad for use in the summer, which opened in 2007.

What is really exciting about our work so far is that we've turned a potential loss into what is going to become a major asset for the community.

Action for Neighbourhood Change Comes to Thunder Bay

SANDRA ALBERTSON is Manager of Community Capacity Building with Thunder Bay Action for Neighbourhood Change, a project of the United Way of Thunder Bay.

> COMMUNITY CAPACITY BUILDING

We in the United Way of Thunder Bay are working in an area that is new for us called community capacity building. Community capacity building is about engagement, learning, and change. It is also about engaging residents in the public, private, and voluntary sectors to develop visions for the future of their community. It's about learning to work together better to address complex community issues like poverty, safety, and declining neighbourhoods. This work is about long-term strategic change that will support the development of strong, vibrant communities.

Community capacity building work can address complex community problems in a way that is holistic, looking at the big picture from multiple views. It involves getting to know the population and who the people are that are involved. It's collaborative and multi-sectoral, bringing together people from different groups with a common vision.

This work is for the long term and we know that it takes a lot of time. It is inclusive of all the people who want to come to the table and work with you. And of course it is messy work. You have to get out there and try new things and take risks. You have to know the people in your community and know who is supportive, who is on the edge of being supportive, and who isn't supportive.

> OUR PROGRAM IN THUNDER BAY

Action for Neighbourhood Change (ANC) is a community capacity building program that began in February 2005.The United Way of Canada oversaw the program and funds came from five federal departments until March 2007. ANC took place in five cities across Canada – Thunder Bay, Surrey, Regina, Toronto, and Halifax.

ANC brings together a diverse range of people who live and work in a neighbourhood and helps them achieve a common vision. ANC involves re-establishing a neighbourhood's sense of itself and the connections between neighbours. In Canada we've lost that sense of neighbourliness and I believe that it needs to be regained.

The United Way of Thunder Bay selected the Simpson-Ogden neighbourhood as the place we were going to do our community work. We asked the community if they wanted the project to happen there and the people we talked to gave us an overwhelming yes.

To meet residents, we did something we in the United Way know well, which is throw a party. About 300 people came together and the outcome was very positive. People came to us and said, "This is the first time I've met my neighbour from down the street," and, "it's the first time I've felt like I was part of this neighbourhood."

> THE SIMPSON-OGDEN NEIGHBOURHOOD

Simpson-Ogden is the second oldest neighbourhood in Thunder Bay. It once had a thriving business district and Ogden Park has been a community park for over 80 years. Its population of 3,200 people includes a high proportion of descendents of European immigrants. A large number of Aboriginal people are moving in and out of the neighbourhood. A high number of seniors live in the area, as well as a very high number of youth and young people.

This population brings with it a high number of issues that revolve around youth. About two-thirds of the housing stock consists of small single-family residences and a number of larger houses have been converted into apartments.

The effects of a recent economic decline are seen in this neighbourhood in the form of boarded up businesses on Simpson Street. Out of 266 business addresses in the area, only about 60 to 65 are operating. There's a business improvement area with limited ability to leverage change due to declining participation. There is a high concentration of bars along the business development area, along with drug trafficking, visible street prostitution, and a high number of people who are homeless and living with addictions and mental illness. In spite of this, there's still a strong core of long term residents who really care about their neighbourhood and see it as their home.

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> RESIDENTS ARE KEY

From the outset, resident involvement was key because we wanted residents to take ownership. We worked to engage residents and representatives from the neighbourhood. We looked to the health organizations and groups involved in the arts and heritage, education and family services sectors, as well as the police.

The people themselves decided how the project would roll out. There was some poking and prodding along the way because people weren't sure what they could accomplish together. Residents were involved in the consultation, the planning, and in steering the process, and they are doing much of the work themselves.

The work of ANC focused on building the capacities of these community groups. They've come together to really plan for the future. The neighbourhood city councillor has also played a key role in this work.

The Simpson-Ogden Neighbourhood Advisory Committee is a diverse group of residents who care about the long-term future of the Simpson-Ogden neighbourhood. They've developed a vision statement in consultation with the residents of the neighbourhood: "The Simpson-

Ogden neighbourhood is a supportive community that will identify and respond to unmet needs allowing our diverse citizens to continue to strive for a proud, prosperous, unified place that we are proud to call home." They wanted to get all that in there to show what they want to achieve over time.

> DEVELOPING A PLAN

We invited people from the neighbourhood to meet us at a strategic planning event, but nobody came. So we decided to go where people were already meeting. It was much better because people were more comfortable in their own environment. We presented the information that we found and then put people together in groups. They then decided what priorities they would pursue.

We have now developed a strategic plan for the neighbourhood. Some of the things we are going to pursue are mental health services for the neighbourhood and a settlement and welcome program for Aboriginal people and families moving into our area from northern communities.

Local residents would like more recreation services for youth and they want to set up a public relations effort to combat the negative image of the neighbourhood. They want to deal with the community's safety concerns by working with the city. So now we're working on getting funding for these initiatives and helping people prepare grant proposals and look for grant money.

> GOVERNMENT SUPPORT

We have received $160,000 from the federal government to implement neighbourhood projects. Since we, as United Way staff, didn't want to select projects, we formed a neighbourhood advisory group to oversee project selection. Residents themselves selected the projects that came out of it, including the Simpson-Ogden Housing Project, where a group of residents came together to learn about housing and bylaw issues. Now they're trained to do housing inspections. People can call our office and have a volunteer inspector look at their concerns and report them to the bylaw office or the housing project.

The involvement from the City of Thunder Bay was low at first. However as time went on, more councillors got on board and got involved. The mayor is interested and our local councillor is very active. We've done two deputations to council and we've been successful in getting funding.

As United Way staff, our role is as conveners and facilitators. We work to get the discussion going, provide training, learning opportunities and get the project going. Residents are running what is becoming the structured project they wanted it to be and they're taking over those services.

> EARLY SUCCESSES

The community itself has begun to work out some problems, starting with beautification. The work so far includes an art walk and murals on boarded up buildings. A design by a 10-year-old is being transferred to banners that are being put up on local streets. Murals are being painted in a pedestrian underpass. Neighbourhood cleanups are taking place on

> SOME ADVICE WE GOT FROM THE RESIDENTS FOR COMMUNITY WORK

- Take time to lay the groundwork; it will take longer than you ever thought.
- Be directed from the neighbourhood.
- Pull together people who know community development and train those who don't.
- Go to people – don't expect them to come to you.
- Use an asset-based approach rather than trying to grapple with issues.
- Involve and trust local youth because they have really good ideas.
- Link with organizations where you can get leverage.
- Start small and build on small achievable results.
- Find your allies and people who can be your champions and advocates.
- Get the municipality on board and don't quit.
- Evaluate and celebrate your accomplishments.
- When faced with roadblocks, don't be afraid to improvise.

Wednesday nights. Last year people picked up 15 bags of garbage at one of these events and this year only five bags were collected. Youth are painting garbage containers. As a result of this work, things are looking better.

Thanks to people in the neighbourhood, we have soccer in this neighbourhood for the first time. About 55 children are enrolled in this soccer league. People are looking at Tai Chi and wellness seminars for this neighbourhood. The third annual block party is being planned and this time it's the residents doing it rather than us. Neighbourhood coffee parties are taking place where specific topics are discussed. These events have increased membership in the neighbourhood association. These activities have been managed by residents with a small amount of our own staff time and we've tracked about 8,000 volunteer hours.

The garden project, which involves backyard gardens, is just taking off this summer. An unusual program is the Underground Gym and Youth Shelter, which began when an individual bought three buildings for $200 and turned them into this gym. Many people were hesitant at first but they realize that this individual is reaching youth who otherwise wouldn't be reached. We provided some funding to help them repair the roof of one of the buildings. Here these youth are training to be boxers and they've participated in the Aboriginal games and have done very well.

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> LESSONS LEARNED

What have we learned about capacity building? We've learned that place-based and community-based solutions are essential. They have to be rooted and developed in the community to have long lasting effects. We need to have champions at many levels. We need to work to build the capacities of individuals and families to give them a voice to make lasting change. We need to work long term.

Building a Sense of Community in Toronto's Inner Suburbs

SEAN MEAGHER is president of Public Interest Strategies and Communications, a community development organization based in Toronto. In this article Sean discusses his company's work to build a sense of community in Scarborough Village, an immigrant community in south central Scarborough.

> REACHING OUT

We have learned that it is important to reach out to people because in order to be successful you need a variety of people at the table. Recently, we have been involved in community development work in Scarborough Village, an immigrant community in south central Scarborough.

When we work on community development processes, our goals are to reach out to residents, businesses, and community service providers, and to link up all the different parts of the neighbourhood and support the existing systems. We have found that building on the assets you have in the community is so much more efficient than other approaches, and is more respectful to the community. When we go into a community, we look at the systems that work there and try to find a way to build and strengthen them.

We have found that we need to find the issues and priorities that matter to people, and work on those issues and priorities. Everyone has their own vision of how to make the world better, and one's personal vision is a great thing to hold dear, when you're in someone else's neighbourhood, it is their vision that matters. Finding the community's key priorities is critical and so is building on lasting community structure and leadership.

> RESIDENTS DRIVING CHANGE

The people who live in the neighbourhood are going to be the ones who make community projects successful in the long term. If we are there doing a lot of terrific work and then going home, the neighbourhood doesn't get a lot out of it.

If we help people change the way their neighbourhood works the neighbourhood is going to get something out of that forever. That's not an easy thing to do, because even neighbourhoods that recognize that they are in significant distress have a lot of barriers to deal with when they work with folks who want to come into the area and do good.

> SUSPICION OF OUTSIDE HELP

People in these troubled communities are often disillusioned about institutional interests and many neighbourhoods in the greatest distress have been the subject of a lot of studies and all kinds of programs. Many of these programs are of the type that aims to fix problems overnight. The people who run the programs don't stay long and in the end the neighbourhood is left with very little.

The people left behind don't want to go through that cycle again. They don't have a lot of time, energy, or resources to squander on something that isn't going to make a lasting change in their neighbourhood, so they tend to be very wary of people like us. They also wonder who the winner is in these kinds of processes.

These are challenging neighbourhoods for many other reasons. As immigration grows, there are numerous fissures along language and cultural lines. There are limits on the level of connection inside the community. In many neighbourhoods the physical space to connect with each other and create relationships simply doesn't exist

In Toronto many of the problems are migrating to the inner suburbs. These are traditional suburban neighbourhoods that were built around car culture, where everything is far apart and accessed by car. Now the area is populated by a majority of people who don't have cars, can't afford to drive, or for various reasons are unable to take the bus so they end up physically and geographically isolated.

In such neighbourhoods, people are wary of you, they don't trust you, they're disillusioned, disconnected, and they are split along language and cultural lines. In addition to that, everything is far away. How do you get around all of these challenges?

In Regent Park we worked in nine separate languages. Every piece that we published, every meeting that we held, every discussion that we took part in, was in nine different languages at the same time. In Scarborough Village, we worked in the four languages that are predominant in the neighbourhood: English, Urdu, Bengali, and Tamil. Everything we did was available to all in the languages. We had to put that discipline on ourselves. It wasn't always easy and it wasn't cheap, but it was necessary in order to demonstrate that the process was about them and not about us.

> In Scarborough Village, we worked in the four languages: English, Urdu, Bengali, and Tamil. Everything we did was available to all in the languages. It wasn't always easy and it wasn't cheap, but it was necessary in order to demonstrate that the process was about them and not about us.

Whenever we go into a neighbourhood, we ask who is effective in communicating with a group of people and then we hire them. We have to make sure that the project economically benefits the people in the neighbourhood. We also have to make sure that the people who do the outreach are people who understand the language, culture, and local dynamics. Reaching out to people in familiar venues, such as community centres or places of worship, is also very important. We hold meetings in mosque basements, parks, kitchens, and living rooms, because that's where people are. People don't come to us; we need to come to them.

Our place-based, bottom-up, engaged approach to tackling these issues of crime and poverty doesn't have all the splash and splendour of a big national program, but it reaches more people more effectively.

REGENT PARK | Instead of just looking at who is living in poverty, who is a new immigrant, etc., SNTF overlays those questions by asking who has the infrastructure in the neighbourhood to tackle those issues.

This is because people in the community know the languages, cultures, and venues in their own neighbourhood. They also know those informal networks, those relationships between Urdu-speaking moms or Bengali taxi drivers, that spread most of the information in the community. Local people have to be the centrepiece of the process, because they are the ones who hold most of the cards and most of the tools for engaging and communicating.

> COMMUNITY ANIMATION

We have been using a process that we call community animation, where we have systems for training people to become the outreach workers for their own neighbourhood. That process is spreading in Toronto really fast, in part because of a group set up by the City of Toronto and the United Way of Toronto called the Strong Neighbourhoods Task Force (SNTF).

SNTF did two important things. First it built the political will to use place-based strategies to address social and economic challenges. Then it sketched out new tools for looking at the nuances of neighbourhoods. It measured social challenges as well as the infrastructures in place to address these problems.

Instead of just looking at who is living in poverty, who is a new immigrant, etc., SNTF overlays those questions by asking who has the infrastructure in the neighbourhood to tackle those issues. Interestingly, the places that don't have food banks, health centres, libraries, youth services, and seniors services are these areas out in the suburbs that were designed as neighbourhoods for middle-class homeowners but are now becoming home for low-income newcomers. This is where the real struggles are because the appropriate support infrastructure is not in place.

> SCARBOROUGH VILLAGE

Scarborough Village is one such neighbourhood that is lacking in infrastructure. One of the challenges is bringing together all the different people with different mixes of resources to work together to tackle these issues. That's what gives strength to the process. Although it is not monolithic or homogenous, everyone shares the same objective, which is to build a great neighbourhood in which to live.

The middle class homeowners are still part of this community. They still live mainly in nice little bungalows in one end of the neighbourhood, as opposed to the high-rise towers where the immigrants live. Both groups share an interest in making the area a safe, comfortable place to live, so they have a motivation to get involved.

About 14,000 people live in this neighbourhood and 72 per cent of them are people of colour. Sixty-one per cent are immigrants, most of them coming in the last 10 years. Approximately half of the population does not speak English as a first language.

There are some real challenges in this neighbourhood. The local elementary school has an annual 50 per cent turnover rate. Half of those who graduate in June weren't there in September and a large percentage of those weren't even in Canada when the school year started. The instability of the population in the neighbourhood makes it difficult to make connections.

> USING COMMUNITY RESOURCES

Our first task was to find out about the systems that work in the area. We found that social networks work well in the neighbourhood. We employed some of the people who were active in those networks to lead the process because they are familiar with neighbourhood cultures and languages.

We worked within these social networks in order to have an impact on issues that mattered to community members. Poverty, unemployment, and other such prevalent problems were not identified as the most important. Instead, they were concerned about what programs and activities they could establish for the neighbourhood kids in the summer. They said, 'It's May now. What have we got for kids to do this summer? We were able to help them put together a couple of youth programs.

From the outset it seemed as though English-speaking residents, who are mostly African, and newcomers had different objectives in mind. The English-speaking residents seemed to be most concerned with establishing youth programs, whereas the newcomers talked more about language programs. However, after speaking with newcomers, we found that while they talked about youth language programs, underneath it all it was actually youth programs that most concerned them. We found that these two groups were all on the same page. They were simply describing their objectives differently. After gathering people together in small

meetings in familiar places, we were able to launch youth programs to serve 75 people in approximately 60 days.

Eventually we were able to enroll 300 people in language programs by that fall. Once the various ethnic communities understood that language programs were available, word spread through the social networks. We even got calls from another city where there's a Tamil community. The Tamil grapevine got the word out there and they began to dream new dreams.

The next step was to link people in larger cross cultural forums, where we could create links across the boundaries that divided the community and help people experience new ways methods of working together other than the informal networks they knew.

> At Scarborough Village local elementary school has an annual 50 per cent turnover rate. Half of those who graduate in June weren't there in September and a large percentage of those weren't even in Canada when the school year started.

> A SURPRISING GOAL

Once these firmer linkages were made amongst the different ethnic communities in the neighbourhood, we helped them establish structures that were useful to them. The first thing these communities wanted to do was create a neighbourhood association. I was surprised because I thought they would first build little groups to deal with specific problems, but the first thing they wanted to do was create a neighbourhood association. They built their own steering committee and wrote their own constitution drawing on various elements they found in other neighbourhood association constitutions. They later revised their constitution when they found that some things didn't work right, but it was important that they got to choose how to run their own organization.

They organized their own safety committee and carried out a safety audit of the area, they organized a forum with a new superintendent, and they built youth programs that were relevant to what they wanted—homework clubs, job fairs, basketball programs, a cricket team. Cricket, the most popular sport in South Asia, is becoming the most popular sport in Scarborough Village. Kids in the neighbourhood started to make movies about what wasn't working in their community. They not only had an exciting activity, they came away talking about how this

The community convinced the city to convert an ice rink into a gym during the summer, because there was no gym that kids could use. Now there's basketball and other sports programs used by 300 kids in what used to be an empty ice rink all summer long.

showed them how to plan ahead. It takes a lot of discipline and structure to make a movie and they were able to learn those skills.

The neighbourhood association built new services by attracting service providers from other neighbourhoods to come because there was an authentic and unified neighbourhood voice calling them in. That was compelling to the funders, and so these service providers started getting grants. They've raised about $250,000 in various grants by learning how to become grant applicants and by developing partnerships with some of those service providers. Now those service providers are beginning to develop their own structure to better meet the needs that are coming from the neighbourhood. They're building a community hub and developing access for community services through a central point.

> PROGRESS IN 18 MONTHS

Some of these accomplishments took place in the first 18 months of being organized as a community. The people of Scarborough Village built a neighbourhood association, launched a video program, started a YWCA 'girl power' program for girls, and began language schools. They started a two-night-a-week public volleyball program for youth, and set up a Pakistani women's group that meets every month to raise issues and talk about what's happening in the neighbourhood. The Pakistani community there

> The first thing these communities wanted to do was create a neighbourhood association. They built their own steering committee and wrote their own constitution drawing on various elements they found in other neighbourhood association constitutions.

developed an earthquake response strategy when the Pakistani earthquake took place during that time.

The Bengali community now has their own club where about 100 people from that community get together every month to figure out how they can do good things for their neighbourhood and they painted a massive mural on a big wall in one of the scariest places in the neighbourhood. The spot is dark and out of the way, and when a man was murdered there the group decided to paint a mural to take back that space.

They raised $250,000 in community grants, they have started parenting programs, they have new health programs operating in Tamil, a co-op

literacy program, a youth job fair, a volunteering project for youth, two different theatre programs, and a community safety office. They built a playground in a park that people never wanted to go in to. It's now full all the time.

The community convinced the city to convert an ice rink into a gym during the summer, because there was no gym that kids could use. Now there's basketball and other sports programs used by 300 kids in what used to be an empty ice rink all summer long. The community cricket program is run entirely by volunteers. The community has developed its own community garden and a homework club.

That's what they could do in 18 months just by being organized and drawing on the networks they knew with a bit of skills development from folks like us.

> COMMUNITY COMMITMENT

One thing I will underscore is that there wasn't a lot of money in that work. The people didn't come out because a level of government decided to fund a cluster of programs. The people in the neighbourhood came out because they decided that they could make some meaningful changes in their neighbourhood.

There's been some interesting research done by Felton Earls and Robert Sampson in Chicago that shows that if you want to find a neighbourhood where it is most likely that crime will go down, the best test is to find where people are most likely to believe that they can make changes in their neighbourhoods. If a significant number of people believe that they can make change happen, five years later crime is on the decline. If they feel they can't make changes, crime is increasing five years later.

Shortly after we started, we asked people what they would like to do and most said they would like to leave the neighbourhood. Eight months later, the day after a murder, there was a packed public meeting where people said that they can't allow this to happen in their neighbourhood. They wanted to do something about that problem and visibly showed that they didn't want to give up. They firmly believed that the way to change the neighbourhood is to work collectively.

That's the kind of change you can make in a neighbourhood by connecting people and giving them that subjective sense that they can change their neighbourhood by dreaming about what it could be.

Imagine London

Grassroots Politics in a Complacent Town

GINA BARBER is a member of the Board of Control for the City of London, Ontario. She taught sociology at Fanshawe College for many years and she is one of London's foremost social and political activists.

> LONDON'S GOVERNANCE

Imagine London was formed by a group of activists in 2005. It has changed the face of politics in London, Ontario.

A city of 352,000 people, London is home to University of Western Ontario and Fanshawe College. It was once a major financial centre but many of its head offices have left. London is now a major health care centre. When a large amount of land was added to the city in 1993, developers moved in quickly and serious problems related to sprawl resulted. It has acquired many big box stores and the doughnut effect is seen here as development has moved to the outskirts of town.

London has a unique governance system with a mayor and four members elected at-large who become members of the board of control. The member of the board of control who gets the most votes becomes deputy mayor. This is the only remaining board of control in Canada and probably in North America. Council also has 14 councillors – two elected from each of seven wards.

As it existed prior to the 2006 election, the board of control was an executive committee that drew up the budget and made recommendations about who got appointed to which committee. It had a lot of power over what proposals went to council because it met first and controlled the information and the agenda. Not surprisingly, it was regarded as an old boy's club. Although women got on from time to time, it was usually a core group of the same men with ties to the development industry who made up the board. Members of the board of control were almost always funded by development interests and that was evident in the things they did.

> THE REFERENDUM

In 2003 London had a referendum over reducing the number of councillors and eliminating of the board of control. Both questions got majority approval but because only 35 per cent of the electorate took

> CITY COUNCIL TOP TEN "14 WARD" EXCUSES

1. You mean we have to listen to the citizens? Man! That sucks.
2. We'll consider it later when we figure out how to do nothing about it.
3. What? A special-interest group telling us what to do?
4. No one will seek office because the job isn't secure
5. It will lead to a dysfunctional city council... everyone will have different ideas.
6. Couldn't we find a way to do this without spending any more of the taxpayers' hard-earned money?
7. Okay, so Council ignored the vote... and ignored Imagine London... but Gates misunderstood us! Two wrongs don't make a right... oh, wait... that's three...
8. In the entire history of political science never before has one person made a difference. Something is screwy.
9. I don't know what to think. I'll have to wait for my lawyer to tell me what to do.
10. One councillor per ward? Who is going to babysit my constituents when I'm away at a governance convention?

COURTESY DOUG ROGERS

part in the vote – far short of a majority – the results weren't considered as binding.

The seven wards were distributed like a pie, which meant that a great deal of power was concentrated in the suburbs. The downtown had little power and had become depopulated. It was very difficult to get change in the board of control because of the expense of city-wide campaigns.

There were problems of accountability on council. Many people liked having two councillors because when one councillor didn't work very hard, people would go to the other councillor. If two councillors worked together well, the system was effective, but the seven wards were too large for effective representation People had little sense of ownership of their council.

Shortly after the referendum, the Chamber of Commerce came out in favour of keeping the Board of Control, but reducing the number of councillors.

Some of us began to look at the relationship between the handling of development issues and contributions from developers.

> IMAGINE LONDON

During that time, eight people got together and Imagine London was born in January 2005. A number of progressive political and community groups got involved. Some were issue-based, such as people fighting pesticides.

As the 2006 election began to draw near, council called a public participation meeting to discuss the referendum results. Imagine London also had a meeting where we talked about a new set-up for the wards. We drew up a new map based on existing communities. A number of people from Imagine London spoke at the public participation meeting, not representing any organization but as individuals to promote this map.

Council looked at four options, including the status quo, but voted to retain the system as is.

> GOING TO THE ONTARIO MUNICIPAL BOARD

Under Section 223 of the Municipal Act, 500 citizens in a municipality (or 1 per cent in smaller municipalities) can sign a petition to propose a ward map of their own to council, and if council rejects it, citizens can propose the new map to the Ontario Municipal Board (OMB).

The city persuaded the OMB to separate the board of control question from the map question and the ward map went to hearings at the OMB.

The OMB's decision in November 2005 on the ward map came out in Imagine London's favour and called on council to work with citizens to create a new ward map. The city chose to appeal the decision and stall on implementation, so the OMB imposed a map that was similar, but not identical to our map. The new map has 14 wards, each represented by one councillor.

Under the Ontario Municipal Act, 500 citizens can propose a ward map to council, and if council rejects it, they can propose it to the Ontario Municipal Board. London's new map, imposed by the OMB, has 14 wards, each represented by one councillor.

During the city's appeals and stalling against the OMB decision, it came out that the city was paying a lawyer $545 per hour to fight the case. Ultimately, the city lost its appeals against the new wards.

> NEW BLOOD

In the election of 2006, we in Imagine London decided that we needed some new blood on city council. Imagine London didn't sponsor people, but a number of us ran on our own. I ran for the board of control on the platform of abolishing it. I didn't originally plan to run on that promise, but in my canvassing everybody asked me about abolishing the board of control. I had been thinking that way, so that became my position. I won a seat on the board of control with the second greatest number of votes and turnout in the election was up by 20 per cent.

Today the fight to reform politics in the City of London continues. We are now addressing the issue of governance in our work on council and in the community.

> RESOURCES

Imagine London: www.imaginelondon.ca

City of London: www.london.ca

Citizen Action for Democratic Communities

The Path in Guelph

KAREN FARBRIDGE is the Mayor of Guelph, Ontario. She became the first woman mayor of Guelph in 2000 and she was returned to the position in 2006. She holds a Ph.D. in biology and has taught classes on democracy and environmental sustainability at the University of Guelph.

> ROOTS OF CONSULTATION

After graduating from the University of Guelph, I worked for a community group that was funded by students from the university, the Ontario Public Interest Research Group (OPIRG). For 10 years I was a paid community organizer with OPIRG and for six of those 10 years, I was on city council. I view my work on council as an extension of my work as a community organizer and my work as mayor as the ultimate community organizing position.

Guelph is a rapidly growing mid-sized city of 120,000 people with a university and a community college. The city is expected to grow to 180,000 people by 2031. Sustainability is becoming a big issue.

In the late 1980s, public consultation came to Guelph with the waste management master plan that the city and the county were working on.

This plan included an incinerator, which got people mobilized. Rather than fighting an anti-incineration campaign, people fought a campaign promoting the three Rs – reduce, reuse, recycle. That set us on the path to sustainability and got us to where we are today. Out of that process came a public liaison committee for council.

As a member of council, I have a most unlikely mentor who had been on council for 30 years and had been an industrialist. He told me that before that time, there had been no public delegations to council or council asking the public for input. Council made decisions behind closed doors, came out and voted, and then played cards. The waste management issue ended that arrangement.

> ROUNDTABLES

During the 1990s, the Brundtland Commission report on sustainable development was a real catalyst for roundtables on the environment and the economy. We had a national roundtable, an Ontario roundtable, and a Guelph roundtable, which is still active. The roundtables were successful in bringing diverse people together and beginning relation-ships between people who had never talked before. In fact, one co-chair of Guelph roundtable was the general manager of a local chemical company; the other co-chair was a representative from a local ENGO. In developing our recently adopted community energy plan, those relationships were once again drawn upon.

The Guelph roundtable was active through the 1990s and was part of developing the City of Guelph's Green Plan and a green communities initiative that was ultimately killed by the Harris government.

Because of the multi-stakeholder work in the community, this approach began to be adopted at city hall and we began to use it as the foundation of a number of public consultation processes such as the water conservation and efficiency strategy and the transportation strategy. In both cases, community consensus was established before we brought the strategies to council. When you have a consensus among groups that include trucking companies and cycling activists, it brings a level of comfort to council.

> CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT

There was a growing expectation of citizen involvement, and this led to the creation of a number of groups such as Citizens Urging Responsible

Budgeting, which promoted alternative budgeting. This group looked at our capital budget process and exposed how much money was going to roads as opposed to other services the community was looking for. There was just an explosion of different groups on water issues, waste issues, capital budgets, and on transportation that came out of this growing expectation that people should have a say in how the community is run.

I give credit to our former chief administrative officer who met with all of the councillors during my first term on council. I said my big goal was public involvement and he brought in a group of citizens and asked them what the principles should be for public involvement. They developed a clear set of rights and responsibilities for citizens, staff, and councillors for participation in these processes. This was the mid-1990s and these principles are still important today.

During my first mayor's term from 2000 to 2003, the planning department was missing these guidelines. You can never be sure that the communication is there and we had to work to get the planning department involved in these processes.

> SMARTGUELPH

We had this growing expectation of public participation and it culminated in a process we launched in 2001 called SmartGuelph. Its goal was to develop a strategic framework for growth and was an ambitious public consultation program to determine what people wanted the city to be in 25 years. We were growing quickly and we wanted something to help manage change.

We liked the smart growth framework that was coming out of the United States, especially the links it made between quality of life, development, and economic vitality. We were also looking for integration. What was coming out of the Guelph roundtables were discussions of the triple bottom line of economic vitality, environmental sustainability and social well-being. Some people also add emphasis to culture and governance. When we make a decision we should consider all these factors.

If we wanted to get community support for a growth program we also needed a program of community engagement. We asked a committee of citizens if we should do this and when they said yes, we then asked how they would like to be consulted. Our consultation process was created by the community for the community, rather than as a staff-driven process.

We had focus groups targeting different sectors from developers to business to youth to seniors to neighbourhoods. There was the mayor's bus tour, bicycle tour, and a walking tour. The fact that the mayor's bus tour attracted new Canadians was an unexpected bonus. We had displays and pamphlets translated into many languages. We took back input in various languages and translated it. We even had SmartGuelph TV on cable. Through that process we identified common positions on principles and strategies.

> POLITICS INTERVENES

That's when things began to unravel. We had a political split on council in the worst sense of the word "political." The 2003 election was coming up and people saw an opportunity to leverage it for personal political gain. The balance was tipped one evening when one member of council had to leave because of a babysitter going home and the result was no decision from council on a set of principles for growth in Guelph.

The community reacted with letters to the editor and council and delegations at council meetings. All of this highlighted the importance of consultation. The principles for growth returned to council and were adopted. This decision turned out to be of lasting importance. In the years that followed the terms of reference for our local growth strategy were based on these principles despite political changes on council.

The implementation plan was approved, but then the 2003 election took place. The development industry mobilized with a lot of money and a new council was elected that had a different perspective from the outgoing council.

Citizens wanted to be engaged. More than 1,200 people took part in SmartGuelph. This wasn't talking about their backyards, it was visioning for the future. In the election the fact that not every single person took part in SmartGuelph was twisted, but we eventually learned that when people buy into an agenda, they become your best ally. The people who had taken part in SmartGuelph stuck with it and in 2006 they came out and restored a progressive council to office.

There are two real threats to sustainability: the vested interests of certain segments of the development industry and low voter turnout that distorts democracy. If you look at what most people expect and what city councils do, there's a massive gap. In our process, we began to move beyond the common ground, the easy pickings that we all could agree

on. We were starting to challenge some fundamental values and sector biases. Sustainability is one of those values.

> CITIZENS, NOT STAKEHOLDERS

You need to know who is at the table and why. There's the involved citizen who will donate to the food bank, there's the participatory citizen who will organize a food drive and tree planting, and then there's the justice-oriented citizen, who asks why people are hungry and acts on that. You can't make assumptions about who is around the table. You need to understand who is there to be effective.

SmartGuelph engaged people as citizens, not as stakeholders. Interestingly, both the environmental and development communities reacted to this, because they traditionally had preferential access to decision-makers and processes. Change is never easy and sometimes I think things really have to get worse before they get better. Things got really bad in Guelph after the 2003 election before they got better. The loss of participation processes really highlighted to people what we had before and where we were going.

SmartGuelph, as an initiative, was and is optimistic, underscoring a role for local government in building communities. It says we can envision different futures and that collectively we can look at the values that are involved with those different futures and choose which future works for us.

After the 2003 election, the Guelph Civic League (GCL) got organized around what happened after that election. It was a wonderful way of capturing the dismay people felt around the 2003 election result and is one of the most ambitious civic organizing initiatives in the history of the city.

GCL's values are based on the SmartGuelph principles. Its members believe that an informed, active, and voting citizenry can make a difference, and in the election of 2006, they did make a difference. The Guelph Citizen's League was instrumental in increasing voter participation and continues to engage Guelph citizens in community participation. Community values have been restored to city hall.

> RESOURCES

Guelph Civic League: www.guelphcivicleague.ca
City of Guelph: www.guelph.ca