

PROFILES OF EFFECTIVE PRACTICE IN NEIGHBOURHOOD RENEWAL CORPORATIONS

Various NRC's

THREE MODELS OF BOARD STRUCTURE

Neighbourhood Renewal Corporations take a community economic development (CED) approach to achieving vibrant neighbourhoods, and they do so through building community capacity and local leadership to design and oversee the pursuit of these objectives. One important component of this is to ensure that the Board of Directors is comprised of the appropriate people with the knowledge required to help the NRC achieve this vision. However, there are different approaches to board design among Manitoba's NRCs. There is no right or wrong answer, but each approach has its own strengths and challenges. To help clarify this process, this profile considers three different models of board structure — geographic area, sector participation, and an open model.

Spence Neighbourhood Association (SNA) – *Governance by Geographic Area*

SNA has taken a grassroots approach to governance by structuring its board around representation from various geographic areas within their neighbourhood boundaries. Eight of the twelve board members are area representatives, who must collect signatures from ten residents in the neighbourhood to be nominated for election. These prospective board members must then be elected to represent their area at the SNA Annual General Meeting.

Ensuring that community members have a strong place on the board has been a structural part of the

SNA's objective of building community capacity and being locally led since its beginning. This approach works well in the Spence neighbourhood due to its small geographic size. It has also been effective due to the fact that there were few organizations directly involved in community renewal work before the SNA was established. Therefore, early on as the organization was formalizing its governance structure, there would have been fewer relevant organizations to draw on for board representation if the SNA had pursued a sectoral model of governance instead.

With only four members-at-large on the board, SNA is clearly less focused on having board members solely for their specific skill sets or organizational/sectoral representation. Rather, the emphasis is placed on including people who are engaged and directly invested in the community life of their areas, and who have the support of their neighbours.

Jamil Mahmood, Executive Director of SNA, acknowledges that this can cause more work for his position. This is due to the potential of a lower overall professional skill level of the SNA's governing body, as there may be fewer board members with extensive board and governance experience or expertise in particular issues (legal, financial management, etc.) that would assist with some aspects of governance. However, Jamil feels that the level of community engagement this structure provides more than compensates for any potential challenges that it creates.

Jamil cites this structure, as well as community led committees that staff report to, as being key to the grassroots acceptance of the SNA's activities in the Spence neighbourhood. The residents really feel that this organization, the Five-Year Plan, and the actions taken to pursue this vision are theirs.

North End Community Renewal Corporation (NECRC)

– Governance by Sector

NECRC's governance model has been one of formal representation from different organizational and resident sectors.

This approach was based on the success of R E S O (Regroupement économique et social du Sud-Ouest) in Montreal which was a model that influenced the development of NECRC.

When NECRC was created, Executive Director Rob Neufeld says that structuring the organization's board on sectoral representation was seen as a way to ensure that each sector was engaged and involved in a leadership role. This would allow each sector representative to bring their distinct perspectives and priorities to the board table. This approach also provided an opportunity for each sector to work collectively towards a broader community renewal effort. The initial composition of the NECRC board of 16 included representation from business (4), residents' associations and housing groups (4), Aboriginal organizations (2), community service organizations (2), religious and fraternal organizations (1), labour organizations (1), and individuals chosen with special expertise (2).

In the early days of NECRC, it was envisioned that each sector would meet to discuss priorities before each Annual General Meeting, as NECRC was being positioned as a federation of organizations, where the different sectors convened and could plan collectively. It was hoped that the sectors would self-organize their representatives, identify their own sectoral priorities, and bring these to the NECRC

board and planning processes. Having sector representation can increase the likelihood that you have both voices of and ambassadors to, different demographic groups and stakeholders in your community. Hopefully, using this kind of model will also encourage participation from people who bring different kinds of governance experience to the board if they are from varying organizational structures (i.e. non-profits, unions, associations, etc.).

Part of the early focus at NECRC, according to Rob, was to work hard at including the business sector in the community renewal work. This was one way that

RESO had built cross-sectoral strength in the Montreal context, and it also fit with the employment and business development

priorities set by earlier North End community plans. This was the reason for setting aside four seats on the board for representatives from the business community, including the relevant Business Improvement Zones (BIZ). However, over the years the focus of NECRC has shifted more to social well-being in the North End, and board representation has similarly shifted to reflect this.

Rob noted a few issues to keep in mind if taking a sectoral approach to board structure. If the sectors choose their own representatives to the board, there is a risk that the people chosen may not share the collective vision of the community and organization. In addition, it is not guaranteed that these appointed representatives will be fully committed to the well-being of the community. One way to help mitigate this problem is to include representative spots for residents associations to ensure a mix of perspectives. Another is to allow the board the flexibility to appoint members who would bring strategic and significant benefit to the overall vision of the organization, such as NECRC's current position created for youth representation. Having elections where the sectors may nominate a candidate for the board, but the whole membership is able to vote on all director candidates is another way to keep the system structured and representative, yet flexible

The origins of NECRC:

<http://www.anccommunity.ca/Downloads/MW130120.pdf>.

The RESO model:

<http://www.resomtl.com/en/home.aspx>.

and democratic.

If potential challenges are addressed, and board members bring with them a commitment to not only their sector but to the broader well-being of the community, this is a governance approach that can strengthen a holistic, CED practice of community renewal.

Thompson Neighbourhood Renewal Corporation (TNRC)

– An Open Model of Governance

Of the three models highlighted in this profile, TNRC takes the most open approach to their governance structure. Their board is made up of residents from anywhere in their geographic area (City of Thompson), and is elected annually. Any resident is welcome to be nominated, without any particular designation based on sector or geography for different positions on the board. While there is one position that is formally designated for a representative from the City of Thompson, all the other positions are open to any resident within TNRC's geographic boundaries.

While this leaves board membership open to anyone, Executive Director Dawn Sands says that most of the people who join are currently employed at other non-profits. While it is not a formal part of their mandate or role on the board, many of these people come to the board with their professional lenses in place. This creates a natural amount of engagement, familiarity, and common vision from the board. With backgrounds and professional interests in community development or other non-profit sectors, many of the individuals providing governance for TNRC have a passion for grassroots work and have community interests in mind.

Finding board members can sometimes require a concerted effort by Dawn to seek out and invite peo-

ple to let their name stand for election to the board. When looking for candidates, she is mindful of TNRC's Five-Year Plan and looks for like-minded people who fit into the mandate set out in that plan.

Ensuring involvement by other non-profits also helps TNRC gain exposure and credibility with those organizations and their broader stakeholders, as those individuals become ambassadors for the TNRC. This is also a natural way to ensure that in planning the work of TNRC, the work and roles of existing organizations in Thompson is front-of-mind for the board, increasing potential partnerships and reducing duplication of services. For Dawn, this model not only provides the required governance for the NRC, but also strengthens relationships with key partners and can lead to new opportunities.

The open model for board governance has been working well for TNRC. However, Dawn may consider changing the timeline for elections and board terms. Annual elections mean a short working season, particularly with summers typically taken off due to the difficulty of meeting while many people are on holidays. While there has not been a lot of turnover in the board despite this annual election process, Dawn feels that longer board terms may enable greater stability.

Conclusion

What these different models of NRC governance demonstrate is that there is no one right way to do it. What matters most is that the board of directors effectively represents the community and ensures that the organization pursues the vision set by the community in the Five-Year Plan. This representation can be achieved by bringing the various sectors and stakeholders to the board table, focusing on building local leadership through resident representation, or by creating a board structure that pursues a blended model.

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