

PROFILES OF EFFECTIVE PRACTICE IN NEIGHBOURHOOD RENEWAL CORPORATIONS

NORTH END COMMUNITY RENEWAL CORPORATION (NECRC)

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DEVELOPING A COMMUNITY PLAN VS. AN ORGANIZATIONAL PLAN

Neighbourhood Renewal Corporations (NRCs) play a unique role in their communities. One thing that sets them apart from other community development organizations is their engagement and inclusion of local residents and stakeholders in community consultations. These consultations lead to the creation of comprehensive five-year plans designed to achieve the renewal of a neighbourhood using community economic development principles.

NRCs are well positioned to be a connector of various organizations, creating a web that strengthens everyone's work for the benefit of the whole community. That is precisely the role NECRC hopes to play in the North End of Winnipeg. Rob Neufeld, NECRC's Executive Director, suggests some helpful ideas and methods for creating community plans, learned through both success and challenges.

What's the Difference?

Creating a community-wide plan requires strategic thinking and trust building. This is especially true in a neighbourhood like the North End, where a diverse, strong, and active community development sector must work together to create and implement the plan. The difference between an organizational plan and a community plan may seem subtle, but can deeply affect the way an organization interacts with the community.

Organizational plans, or a strategic plan, is designed through stakeholder engagement and lays out an organization's goals and the actions it will take to achieve its goals. While this might include listing partnerships or relationships with other organizations, it is very focused on specific actions and the organization executing the plan.

A community plan, while similar to an organizational plan in some respects, is different. It is a broader vision for the community as a whole (in this case, a geographically defined community). It is the difference between a plan for NECRC and a plan for the North End. This means that the community plan attempts to encompass the priorities, goals, and actions of all stakeholder groups and residents in the community – not just the NRC.

Avoiding Potential Misunderstanding

If the community plan is perceived by these organizations to be a strategic plan for the NRC, it will likely be misunderstood as duplicating the planning, work, roles, and expertise of the existing groups working in the community. This will confuse residents and stakeholders, and may generate hostility and distrust from other organizations. In cases of confusion, local stakeholders may reasonably fear that the organization facilitating the community plan

intends to take over activities and compete for the resources required to do so. This is why clear communication, transparent processes, and strong relationships built on trust and mutual support are essential for creating an effective community plan.

Also, the broad vision of a community plan can only be successful if it includes the work of other community development organizations. These existing organizations, often focused on specific social services and economic development, may use different principles or methods than an NRC. For example, they might focus on one particular issue or population group, or they might work on programs with shorter-term community goals. These organizations do great work and provide important services and supports to their clients and the community, usually key goals in a community plan.

This is not to suggest that the organization facilitating the creation of a community plan does not have a role in implementing the plan. As a convening organization, it has the role of building the partnerships required to implement the plan, monitoring actions and reporting results back to the community. When gaps are identified, the convener's role is to either look for partners to fill those gaps or develop the needed initiatives themselves. So again, a clear plan and partnerships built on trust are essential.

Understanding NECRC's Role

Creating a community plan may not be necessary in every community, but stakeholders made it a core mandate of NECRC when it was first created in the North End. This made sense in a community where there was considerable community development work occurring, but little effort to coordinate the various efforts into a comprehensive community renewal strategy. NECRC was encouraged in various planning processes to "facilitate, coordinate, and communicate." Those directives shape the way Rob and the rest of the staff see themselves in their community – a hub that connects various groups to build partnerships, nurture collaboration, and bring stakeholders together to pursue a common vision.

As mentioned, there are times where NECRC also develops programming to fill gaps in the community

plan. In a community with so much already going on, this makes sense, while in a community where there might be very little activity, the coordinating organization might be asked to take on a much more involved programming role. Each community, and therefore each community plan, as well as the role of each convening organization will differ according to the context and capacity of each community

Making it Work

Given that there are many active plans in the North End including a plan for coordinating government services, a Live SAFE plan regarding youth safety, the Merchants Hotel development, as well as the Aboriginal Visioning Strategy, and a new Transition Winnipeg group, it is important to be aware of all ongoing consultations and planning processes. The advantage of all this planning is that each of the processes might engage different people, or engage people in a different way. They may be able to mobilize more stakeholders in a local planning process than any single strategy could. However, this amount of planning can confuse stakeholders or lead to consultation burn-out, which may eventually decrease participation.

So, avoiding confusion, duplication, and consultation burnout might be good reasons to do a community plan. This will help your organization to determine how each specific or existing plan can become part of the larger, more comprehensive community vision, allowing you to connect and map out all the different pieces in a broader strategy to renew your neighbourhood.

NECRC has always had sectoral representation within their governance structures to ensure that all stakeholder groups are directly involved in the planning and governance of the NRC. In fact, the early goal was to have each sector meet separately with their own constituents (businesses, Aboriginal organizations, residents, etc.) to identify their priorities, and then bring these priorities to the board. This system was established to create a feeling among organizations, institutions, businesses, and local residents that they were all a part of this collective North End "federation."

The stronger the connection that each organization has to the common vision, and the more they see themselves as part of a team of community leaders, the clearer the concept of a community plan becomes. If groups envision their involvement as simply sitting on the board of another local non-profit, they are more likely to perceive the community plan as an organizational plan.

Embracing Tension and Using a Good Process

Creating an effective community plan takes time, and it takes the right people to lead and facilitate the process. Rob says that in undertaking this kind of activity, you should embrace the tensions and conflict that often results. It is a sign that people are very passionate about their community, their future, and their role in realizing these goals. The differing perspectives, priorities, and ideas that emerge are all part of what stakeholders want and dream about, so they are all important parts of the conversation and resulting plan. These discussions can also be first steps to developing relationships with stakeholders. To do this well, you will need to work hard at building trust and relationships, and be willing to 'eat humble pie' when you are wrong.

To avoid these tensions, it is wise to use a facilitator during consultations that knows the community well and has established credibility with many stakeholder groups. For its most recent community plan, NECRC appointed a strong facilitator that had a long-time working relationship with many groups in the North End. The presence of a trusted facilitator was an important dynamic in convincing others that this was a community planning process with integrity.

You can also ease tension by ensuring the inclusion of all voices in the community. To do this, NECRC held nine sector meetings that included the engagement of Aboriginal, Business, Community Service, Cultural, Education, Recreational, Religious, Residen-

tial, and Youth sectors. The process was carefully explained before and during meetings. And, alongside this sectoral process, there was a community survey process that gathered additional information.

The final step in the planning process was a community feast where all participants enjoyed food together while ranking the outcomes from all prior consultations through a fun engagement process using Monopoly money as an indicator of what was most important to them. Ultimately, nine priority areas were identified including strong support for youth-oriented goals due to a well-organized group of young people ensuring their voices were heard. In an open and consultative process like this, different stakeholders – like youth – are able to get involved and put action to their priorities.

Conclusion

Creating a community plan takes a lot of work and dedication. A successful community planning process depends on relationships and trust between different organizations working on similar goals. NECRC is guided by a strong set of organizational values, ensuring they remain accountable to the community and committed to an inclusive process. The community planning process is further strengthened by bringing community partners together and giving them leadership roles in the process. Keeping everyone involved like this is an empowering process as it assures the community that the NRC is there to facilitate action, solutions, and relationships while helping other organizations recognize the plan as a community vision, not just another organizational plan.

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