

PROFILES OF EFFECTIVE PRACTICE IN NEIGHBOURHOOD RENEWAL CORPORATIONS

SPENCE NEIGHBOURHOOD ASSOCIATION (SNA)

www.spenceneighbourhood.com

NEIGHBOURHOOD GREEN PLANNING

Although community gardens are a vital part of SNA's programming, the community's vision for greening their neighbourhood is about much more. In fact, SNA's Environment and Open Spaces Committee is one of the most active groups of staff and residents in their organization. The Green Plan, which compliments SNA's 5-year Community Plan, has provided a guide for the community's direction leading to many successful and ongoing projects that improve physical space in the Spence Neighbourhood.

Green Plan activities have included: mapping and maintaining tot-lots and green spaces; creating a community greenhouse; bringing a recycling program to the area; starting a creative composting program; running a Green Kids program; and creating a "Green Map" in partnership with the Manitoba Eco-Network. Jamil Mahmood, Executive Director at SNA, explained how their green initiatives came to be, and why SNA takes such a broad view towards "greening."

Check out the Spence Neighbourhood interactive Green Map, one of SNA's innovative community greening projects at:

Beginnings

Before SNA was incorporated in its current form, a concerned group of residents took it upon themselves to improve the boarded-up and run-down houses in their neighbourhood. This concern with the physical space and image of the Spence neighbourhood has continued and broadened over the years as the scope of work and development capacity of SNA has grown. So, if the current Green Plan seems overwhelming, remember these much smaller beginnings!

Also preceding SNA's official Green Plan were a group of guerrilla gardeners on vacant lots in the area. Hoping to build on resident-led community renewal already taking place, SNA began working with the City of Winnipeg to protect and secure those spaces for long-term community use.

These projects were particularly important for the Spence community given the neighbourhood's geographic location. Bounded on all sides by major roadways with a dense inner-city population, there is a chronic shortage of open and green space in the Spence neighbourhood. In fact,

Spence had the least amount of green space per person of any area in the city at the time. The community identified these issues as a priority, and SNA discovered that green space, like community gardens, has wide-ranging benefits for individuals and communities. Passionate residents, volunteers, and staff members took the initiative to complete a community consultation process, and the first Green Plan was the result.

Why such a broad plan?

The idea to create a complementary Green Plan that expanded the “Environment and Image” section of SNA’s 5-year plan arose for several reasons.

- First, given the community’s lack of green space, it was important to secure the open space that currently existed. This required support and cooperation from the City of Winnipeg. Although the City of Winnipeg doesn’t view the Green Plan as an official document, they do recognize it as key information and can refer to it during any planning process that affects the Spence neighbourhood.
- Secondly, the concerns of residents for the community were about more than gardening space – they wanted safe places to meet and play, safer walking and bike ways through the neighbourhood, as well as a more beautiful and environmentally friendly place to live.

For these two reasons, a comprehensive Green Plan was developed together with the community.

Jamil is now grateful that SNA completed the Green Plan for many reasons. The intensive process of community consultation, research, and plan preparation created a wealth of knowledge about the community. The process also helped SNA establish relationships with residents, which have helped SNA succeed in other strategic areas of its community renewal objectives. In addition, the plan gives SNA a clear mandate from residents to proceed with opportunities as they occur, and voice their concerns at the municipal level. This planning process exemplifies a holistic community development approach, helps keep residents and community members involved leadership roles,

and maintains SNA’s “grassroots” tradition of in-depth community engagement.

Jamil will admit that at times, the 5-year plan can seem overwhelming to accomplish, given its broad mandate and vague direction. However, elaborating key pieces of the plan and identifying clear action plans for implementation can make it easier to see actions and results, as well as ongoing needs or remaining gaps. The information gathered in a planning process can also simplify the process of approaching funders or partners to obtain needed resources for specific activities. Green initiatives are a smart place to start within this kind of approach, as improving the physical and visual characteristics of the community can be a strong trust-builder, while simultaneously addressing many other neighbourhood concerns.

Making this work in other communities

To be sure, this far-reaching, comprehensive planning process may be unrealistic for smaller NRC’s and community organizations. However, it may be possible to use the SNA example to imagine creative ways to engage people in your communities in visioning what the physical improvement of your neighbourhood might look like.

Jamil also suggests that green spaces should be seen as an investment in the community development process – when you create safe, beautiful places for the community to enjoy, you also create a place where you can meet them. After all, as he is quick to point out, this work is all about relationships. Undergoing any planning process will help build trust and engagement with community members, as long as they see dedicated effort and results addressing their expressed community needs.

Jamil finds that engaging people in a collaborative approach can also help mobilize the expertise and innovative ideas that SNA needs to achieve their broader vision. In a smaller community, it might be wise to start with a targeted Community Gardens, Composting, or Recycling planning process. This would be an effective way to start engaging

local residents and collecting their ideas for action beyond the broader 5-year plan.

Finally, although it is all about engagement and relationships, you can also start planning from your desk – check out SNA’s green plan, and start reading or thinking about all the ways greening initiatives can effectively improve your communities and the lives of your residents. This will provide ideas for both engagement activities and for residents wanting to explore potential initiatives in your own community.



Spence “Community Compass” art installation in Furby Park

To find out more about the Environment and Open Spaces Committee of SNA, and a link to the most recent Green Plan, go to the SNA webpage at <http://spenceneighbourhood.org/>. Find the “Environment and Open Spaces” link at the top of the page to see a drop-down menu.

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