

PROFILES OF EFFECTIVE PRACTICE IN NEIGHBOURHOOD RENEWAL CORPORATIONS

WEST BROADWAY COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION (WBCO)

www.westbroadway.mb.ca

GARDENING FOR FOOD SECURITY

Greg Macpherson is the Executive Director of WBCO, but he knows that much of WBCO's success is owed to the immense skills of its staff, and the strengths and collective action of the community at large. As Greg puts it, sometimes you need to lead the charge when working in a neighbourhood, but other times you just need to "put a bit of wind in the sails of a boat that is already moving." This has certainly been the case for community gardens and the spectrum of food-related programs in West Broadway. WBCO has been involved in the development of community gardens in addition to those began long before WBCO existed, the Good Food Club (and its related programs), and launched the Soup Bee social enterprise as it seeks to enhance local food security, mobilize neighbourhood residents, and build a stronger and more vibrant community through a community development and community economic development (CED) approach.

Community Gardens

Community gardening is an effective avenue for community renewal and engagement because it engages a diverse range of people of all ages, ethnicities, and ability-levels. It also gets people active and talking, provides opportunities for learning and exercise, and builds relationships and bridges to other NRC activities and initiatives. On

top of that, gardening provides affordable and healthy food, reclaims unused and sometimes dangerous community properties, nurtures community pride and improves neighbourhood aesthetics, and can bring income opportunities to growers. With such wide ranging benefits, gardening is a natural fit for the holistic and multifaceted CED approach taken by NRC's.

Long before WBCO was formed, several local residents were already guerrilla gardening — a practice that refers to people growing food or flowers in empty or unused spaces in their community, regardless of the formal ownership or purpose of the land. Although this was an important community asset and something to build on, it also meant that WBCO needed to be sensitive in managing the expectations of the long-standing gardeners.

WBCO stepped in to facilitate and expand the gardening already occurring with help from a grant by Winnipeg City Councillor, Jenny Gerbasi. At the time, councillors had budgets with which they could support groups or projects in their districts. The other "Growing Communities" profiles in this series have information on other potential funding sources for gardens.

Of course, one of the first things you need to expand gardening activity is locating property to gar-

den on. Choosing the right land for gardening will depend on the intended purpose, identified community needs, and the limitations of what might be available. If your goal is to improve the physical aesthetics of a community, your NRC would seek highly visible property. If the intent is for large volume food production, your NRC would require land with good quality soil, and any garden requires access to water.

Once you find the right location, you still need to figure out who will own the property, who will manage the property, how decisions will be made, and how the gardeners will be involved in the process. In some cases, WBCO has a long-term use agreement with the City of Winnipeg, where they have secure occupancy of the land, and are treated like caretakers of those lots. In other gardens, there are land-use agreements with the City, similar to those used by other NRC's. WBCO also directly owns one of the community garden lots. Some of the gardens are generally gardener-run (documents like gardener contracts and land agreements would be kept centrally at the WBCO office), and some are completely facilitated by WBCO staff. They have funding for one permanent staff-member, and then apply for Manitoba Green Team and other seasonal funding to help during the busy growing season.

WBCO is now involved in nine community gardens with over 130 gardeners growing food each year. Their advice for starting a community gardening program includes:

- 1) Find out what has worked elsewhere.
- 2) Know your neighbourhood— who already gardens, and who might benefit from a community garden plot.
- 3) Be creative with your neighbourhood — if people don't use spaces in the community as they were originally intended, maybe they can be reclaimed, as in having seniors garden on an unused green space, for example.

The Good Food Club

The Good Food Club — and it's related programs the Veggie Van and Good Food Box — was de-

signed to provide access to healthy, affordable food and to build capacity in the community. Here's how it works: residents of West Broadway can volunteer on partner farms and food programs to earn sweat equity credits that are then applied to reduce the cost of food provided by the club.

The food provision aspect happens in two ways. First, the Good Food Box sources inexpensive food through companies like Pratt's Food Service, and then members of the Good Food Club can share the cost of food deliveries. That way, residents gain access to wholesale prices through collective purchasing. Second, through the growing season WBCO has developed several partnerships with farms and gardens like the Wien's Family Farm where club members get out of the city, do some farming, and earn points towards food from the Good Food Box or the Veggie Van, which sells fresh produce to the public throughout the summer. These programs are used by over a hundred local residents, earning almost 10,000 sweat equity dollars.

This program makes positive progress toward the WBCO goal of community renewal because of the practical and long-term benefits. These include building skills and work ethic through growing and selling food in a population that is often underemployed, as well as supplementing the food security of people with little disposable income. Another benefit is providing opportunities for people to get outside of the urban environment. This is particularly beneficial for those with low-incomes and difficult circumstances, as green space and gardening have been shown to improve psychological health. The Good Food Club also facilitates social inclusion and active citizenship as it gets people involved in the community. Participants in the program often go on to volunteer or participate in other programs and begin to take on community leadership roles.

Good Food Club programs are resource intensive, but don't have to be overwhelming. They require strong staff and volunteer capacity, at least one vehicle, and a great deal of organization. However, it is important to remember that programs

like these often grow out of small beginnings. Starting a program like this may begin with a few interested residents sourcing their groceries together and splitting the cost. As interest and capacity grows, it will become easier to find funding, expand the club membership and develop volunteer skills.

Soup Bee

Continuing to build food related initiatives toward the NRC objectives, WBCO also looked to the social enterprise model and created The Soup Bee. The Soup Bee's goals are "to provide supportive employment opportunities in the downtown core, promote food security and local producers, all while leaving a small carbon footprint." This innovative social enterprise takes orders for soup by the litre from people who live and work in the downtown core, makes the soup with as many locally sourced ingredients as possible, and then uses a local, worker-owned bicycle courier cooperative to deliver soup to subscribers. People can make a one-time order, or subscribe to receive soup weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly – and catering orders for meetings and events are also welcomed. It took a few years to develop, and was supported by various grants, funded internships, and local community organizations who worked with dedicated staff from WBCO to develop this idea.

*Find out more about
Soup Bee, at
www.soupbee.ca.*

In the 2012-2013 season, Soup Bee made and delivered over 700 litres of soup to over eighty-five subscribers and dozens of one-time customers in close to forty workplaces (and a handful of private

residences). Of the two people employed in the first year, one has now found permanent employment in the food services industry and the other has returned to school for her GED. This is a strong example of a community economic development approach that takes the three pillars (social, economic, and environmental) of sustainability seriously.

Community Food Initiatives Meet Local Needs

Using space effectively, listening to resident priorities and getting them involved, being entrepreneurial, and continuing to build on initiatives that meet local needs, WBCO has used a garden and food focus to improve the West Broadway neighbourhood aesthetically, while also increasing access for residents to green space, food, skills, and jobs. To find out more, check out their website at <http://www.westbroadway.mb.ca/>. Contact Greg or any of the program directors listed there to talk about gardening or food in West Broadway!

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