

# PROFILES OF EFFECTIVE PRACTICE IN NEIGHBOURHOOD RENEWAL CORPORATIONS

## VARIOUS NRCs

## INNOVATIVE HOUSING PROJECTS

Shelter is a basic human need. Like water, food, or clothing, housing influences our health, our economic opportunities, and even educational outcomes for children. However, the traditional concept of shelter defined by individual families owning a single-family residence, often does not address other concerns like affordability, cultural appropriateness, community, or a sense of belonging. Housing development is important for turning abandoned or derelict properties and buildings into safe places, for creating or maintaining safe and affordable housing for all community residents, and for opportunities to build important partnerships. This deeper definition of housing is an important component of community renewal through a community economic development approach.

The following case studies provide a brief overview of instances where NRCs are helping to provide affordable shelter and comfortable homes for Manitobans that might otherwise rely on emergency shelters or worse. These stories demonstrate that housing matters to communities and that community can become a part of the solution. The following snap-shots also show that there is no one right way to approach housing development in communities.

### **Thompson Neighbourhood Renewal Corporation (TNRC)**

#### **– Our Home Kikinaw**

Our Home Kikinaw (the Cree word for ‘home’) is a project administered by TNRC that assists low income families in achieving homeownership by providing an affordable and innovative way to purchase a home.

Created in 2008, the goal of the project is to build five homes in five years using a variety of funding sources, volunteers, donations, as well as a sweat equity component. The first home was completed in 2011 and is occupied by a single-parent family. The second family was selected in the summer of 2011 and construction began on their home in September 2011.

Family partners are selected before the construction of each home. Applicants must demonstrate a job history of at least two consecutive years, and they must be able to enter into a no-interest, down payment-free mortgage with the TNRC. Mortgage and property tax payments are calculated annually at the rate of 25-30 percent of a family’s annual income. Instead of the traditional down payment, families earn sweat equity by helping with construction, fundraising, and other relevant tasks. The amount of sweat equity depends on family size, with single-parent and two-parent families completing 350 hours and 500 hours, respectively.

TNRC’s Board of Directors has governing responsibility and final decision making power for Our Home Kikinaw. The TNRC Housing Coordinator oversees the project with assistance from a volunteer-based Community Team. Other assistance comes from three volunteer committees; the Building Committee, Fundraising Committee, and the Family Selection Committee.

A number of partners are active in helping Our Home Kikinaw reach its goals through in-kind donations, volunteering, or funding arrangements. The City of Thompson has provided approximately \$50,000 per home for the land and required services. The provincial

government, through Manitoba Housing and Community Development, has also been a major contributor by providing \$100,000 towards the first home and \$50,000 for the second home. The business community has made important contributions as well. A plumber and electrician have provided in-kind labour, and suppliers have reduced costs or donated cabinets, paint, siding, shingles, and flooring. Crucially, “Volunteer Days” have been organized for both the first and second home where community members and local students offered their labour during various stages of construction.

The fundraising efforts and the mortgage structure of Our Home Kikinaw have been essential for making this affordable homeownership model successful, and financially sustainable. Several local organizations have held fundraisers in support of Our Home Kikinaw, including the Thompson Christian Fellowship, Operation Red Nose, and Winter Wonderland. Volunteers have also served hot chocolate at the Winterfest in February, and in return, the City of Thompson’s Culture and Recreation Department has provided the program with funds. Alongside fundraising, the mortgage is structured so that payments from the first home go toward building the second home, creating on-going financial sustainability for the project.

Several challenges have arisen due to the voluntary nature of the project. For example, TNRC has experienced difficulties securing a volunteer Construction Manager. During the construction of the first home, Our Home Kikinaw was fortunate to have a carpentry instructor from a local high school contribute a significant amount of time supervising volunteers on the building site, as well as contributing his own labour. Unfortunately, this volunteer no longer lives in Thompson, which has left the construction management duties to the volunteer Building Committee. To counter volunteer challenges, the Community Team completed a strategic plan for growing the volunteer base in order to spread the work among a larger group of people as well as to increase their fundraising capacity.

While five homes in five years will not solve the housing crisis in Thompson, this model has proved to be very effective at mobilizing the community to volunteer their time, contribute or discount building materials, make donations, and work together in order to create an affordable home ownership opportunity for families that would otherwise not have that option.

## **Spence Neighbourhood Association (SNA) - A Comprehensive Approach**

Housing has been at the heart of SNA since its inception as a non-profit housing association in 1997. In its early stages, SNA was led by a group of local volunteers who joined together to work on several community improvement projects. This resourceful volunteer group helped clean up a back lane and renovate a young family’s house. They also carried out a security lighting initiative that enabled them to engage with hundreds of local residents, and then began dealing with the numerous boarded up properties in Spence.

As SNA evolved into an NRC, their activities broadened into various strategic areas as set out by the community-designed Five-Year Plan. However, housing has always remained a high priority for the local residents, and their housing strategy as set out in the complementary Housing Plan, has become more diversified and comprehensive. Over the years, SNA has built 33 houses and relocated two others, while other non-profit partners in the community have built and renovated many more. The Housing Fix-Up Grants program has enabled over 400 residents to make improvements to their homes. SNA also works with tenants to improve their safety, and ensures that homeowners, landlords, and tenants have full awareness of the housing supports, programs, and resources available to them.

Recently, SNA’s housing strategy has begun to shift once again, as most of the suitable spaces for new infill housing have now been built on. They have turned their attention to mapping marginal spaces that they see as providing potential for what they call ‘unique initiatives.’ For this new housing/physical improvement project, SNA first mapped and recorded different properties that are dilapidated, empty, or up for sale. They have taken a picture of each of the 17 identified lots and posted them in the front sitting room at SNA’s office. Below each picture is a comment box where SNA invites all community members to make suggestions on potential uses for those sites. This is an easy and non-intensive first step to gather the community’s ideas and thoughts on what might be done with these properties. In the end, SNA may not do all the renovation or reclaiming work itself, but they are getting people engaged in the conversation. This simple project is also sparking the neighbourhood’s imagination, by helping them to dream about ways they can improve the local housing stock, recreation facilities, and create

mixed-use development in a very dense community with many needs.

The SNA approach to housing has evolved over the years due to a combination of circumstances, opportunities, and community priorities. Their experience demonstrates that adaptation, flexibility, and innovation are key to maximizing opportunities and results. The SNA's experience also shows that keeping the community engaged is an integral component of an NRC's housing strategy.

**West Broadway Community Organization (WBCO)**  
– Greenheart Housing Co-op

Most NRCs - WBCO included - have pursued housing initiatives that are either directed at homeownership or non-profit rental housing. Putting an innovative spin on this tendency, WBCO sought to achieve their housing objectives through the creation of a housing co-op.

Greenheart Housing Co-operative, located on Sherbrook Street in the West Broadway neighbourhood, was developed through the leadership of neighbourhood residents with the support of WBCO. The co-operative model was selected as an innovative way to create affordable housing in the community. Taking a co-operative approach would also provide a governance structure where the residents of the housing co-op would participate in democratic decision making on matters related to their home. This adds an extra layer to the development process, as new members of the co-op are likely to require some orientation to the opportunities and responsibilities of belonging to a co-op. It is also essential that the co-op's board develop strong capacities to ensure good governance for the co-op. However, as the WBCO's experience demonstrates, these added challenges bring long-term rewards.

At the time that this project was proposed, there were few accessible sources of funding available for the creation of housing co-ops, particularly considering the lack of a national housing strategy by the federal gov-

ernment. However, after working with government to change some of the requirements, WBCO was able to access Winnipeg Housing and Homelessness Initiative (WHHI) funding. WBCO also gained access to Tax Increment Financing (TIF), which is offered through the municipal government, with a mortgage covering the balance.

*'Visitable housing':  
can be accessed by elderly and disabled people, but may not be adapted enough to allow them to live there.*

*'Universal housing':  
can fully accommodate disabled tenants.*

Greenheart has had many challenges but has managed to overcome them, and is now considered a success in the co-operative housing sector. The co-operative offers 24 suites, some of which are universal or visitable for seniors or people with disabilities. As a result, the co-op accommodates a wide-ranging group of tenants, which is a huge benefit in a diverse community like West Broadway. Greenheart has had nearly full member participation at their last two AGM's, were awarded LEED certification for their building, started a composting project, and successfully applied and

received grants for grounds beautification. They continue to self-define their community and embrace the co-operative spirit.

**Brandon Neighbourhood Renewal Corporation (BNRC)**  
– The Massey Building

Nearing completion, the Massey Manor housing project is a massive collaboration to reclaim a dilapidated warehouse and create new units of affordable housing in Brandon. Driven by the issues of high rents, near zero vacancy for apartments, a lack of affordable units, and slum landlords renting terrible living spaces to some of the most vulnerable residents in Brandon, the Brandon Community Advisory Board decided to establish a housing development at the Massey Building.

Originally built as a tractor assembly plant in the early 1900s, the building had deteriorated due to a lack of permanent tenants over the years. The four floors and 64,000 sq. ft. of space was run down and had a leaking roof, water damage to the upper floor, broken windows, and an accompanying pigeon problem.

The lead organization in the initial stages of this project was the Canada Mental Health Association (CMHA), who partnered with Habitat for Humanity and the Brandon Friendship Center (BFC). BNRC was brought in to help facilitate the project and communicate the concept to community leaders, funders, and media. The Provincial Department of Science, Technology, Energy and Mines (STEM) also contributed to the planning process by organizing a “design charette” with stakeholders. Meanwhile, a Crocus Plains High School Drafting & Design class provided design and layout drawings of all suites in the building. Major funders have included Manitoba Housing, the Federal government through the Homelessness Partnership Strategy (HPS), and the City of Brandon. CMHA and BFC have also contributed funding in addition to the time that they have contributed in developing the project.

When completed, Massey Manor will include five emergency self-contained units, eight supportive housing units, eight transitional housing units, 23 affordable housing units, and hopefully 14 condo units. However, such a large scale project with such a diverse range of models in one complex can face difficult challenges. The concept of including emergency shelter and condo units in the same building is a hard sell to potential condo owners. In fact, Masse Manor would be the first of its kind in Canada to achieve this.

Partnerships like this one can be tested when goals diverge. Finding consensus on objectives can become even more complex when dealing with local chapters of national organizations, as their goals or priorities may also not align with each other. For example, while Habitat Brandon was prepared to join the project, the national and international Habitat offices did not approve the partnership, thereby forcing Habitat Brandon to withdraw. Currently, a number of options are being explored by the remaining partners and Manitoba Housing Authority to ensure the units allotted to (now defunct) Habitat Brandon remain designated as affordable housing.

The partnership model of this project has presented both strengths and significant challenges. Therefore, Martin Snelling, Executive Director of BNRC, advises to constantly nurture all partnerships in a larger scale housing, and ensure backup plans are available. Successful partnering begins with selling the concept of how your community will improve as a result of the project. Communicate to community leaders the ways in which your housing development will contribute to a better community and a better quality of life for those living on low incomes or social assistance.

Despite the significant effort that Massey Manor has required, it is through great challenges that great successes are achieved. Given the acute shortage of affordable housing in Brandon and everywhere else in Canada, it is important that community organizations such as BNRC and all their partners take bold and large scale approaches to improving housing opportunities for everyone.

## **CONCLUSION**

Whether big or small, these four housing development profiles have illustrated the immense potential of communities working together to solve complex problems. None of the case studies would have been successful if it were not for the collaborative efforts of government, the non-profit sector, business communities, residents, and NRCs. Most importantly, these stories have shown that NRCs are integral to the process of building affordable homes, exploring new and innovative definitions of providing housing, and building inclusive and renewed communities.

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