

# PROFILES OF EFFECTIVE PRACTICE IN NEIGHBOURHOOD RENEWAL CORPORATIONS

## THOMPSON NEIGHBOURHOOD RENEWAL CORPORATION (TNRC)

[www.tnrc.ca](http://www.tnrc.ca)

### PARTNERING BY DOING

Partnerships are crucial to community renewal work. There is no one organization that has all the specialized skills, knowledge, and resources required to address the challenges in a community. With inherently broad mandates, NRCs often act as hubs, connectors, and supporters of several diverse community development and CED initiatives. In other words, NRCs are partnership brokers. However, without the trust and established credibility of its partners, others may perceive that the NRC is looking to centralize community planning and authority. This can be seen as a threat to the existing leadership, capacity, and roles of other community organizations. However, Dawn Sands has worked hard in Thompson to gain trust, build partnerships, relationships, and networks between local community development groups, helping TNRC avoid this potential problem.

#### **Get Involved: Being Helpful and Flexible Goes a Long Way**

Dawn takes a practical approach to partnering. She says that the best way to get started is to simply get out there and get involved - particularly in a small or closely knit community. As you and your organization earn a reputation as being very engaged and always helpful, the community will gain trust in you and be increasingly willing to collaborate. It should not be hard to find opportunities to

get involved, as there is likely lots of good work already happening around you. Find out where people and partners are currently working and go join them. Over time, as you build trust and gain their respect, you can become bolder in offering your opinion on strategic decisions, or taking the lead on projects. The key is that a willingness to start out as a supporter and helper can earn your organization a lot of goodwill in the long-run.

This kind of early partnering could take different forms depending on what is going on in your community, who you meet and what they need, and what skills and resources you might have. You may have skills as a note taker and be able to provide that service for meetings and working groups. You might also have research skills, or you might be able to help organize volunteers for events. Your organization may be able to provide basic services for local partners or other emerging groups like allowing them to use extra office space or offering other administrative supports. Working in this way allows relationships to grow organically, but it can also be a strategic way to establish partnerships and find your niche role in the community. Your NRC's five-year plan can be used as a guide for what and whom to partner with. Find out what is already happening in your community, who is involved, how you can get yourself invited to the

various tables, and be practical and helpful in your role when you join.

Partnership development and engagement are time-consuming components of community work, but are essential and can truly strengthen the quality of community renewal taking place. Be patient and flexible as you look to implement your community plan, take the time to focus on building relationships early, and engage with partners in a way that ensures that both you and all potential partners are having their needs met. Eventually, rather than inefficient duplication of work or “turf wars” over roles and power, a network of people and organizations each working in their own distinct areas of experience and expertise within a broad, collective vision will emerge as a powerful collaboration for community renewal.

### **The Importance of Having Staff and Boards that Value Partnerships**

In many organizations, staff members are on the frontlines, working daily with partners. This means that who you have on staff will determine how effective you will be at building partnerships in the community. For leaders, this means that hiring the right person is important. For TNRC, Dawn looks for people who are outgoing and are comfortable sitting down to talk with new people. They need strong communication skills, must be trustworthy, able to inspire trust in others, and must be willing to work flexible hours if they are going to be effective at building partnerships.

However, beyond the individual, it also requires an organizational culture that fosters the time, flexibility, and values that contribute to healthy working relationships both inside the organization and with community partners. When you find someone who is very effective at their job and really contributes to healthy partnerships, executive directors and boards should find ways to support and retain them. Appropriate remuneration, personal recognition, and employee benefits are effective rewards, but supporting employees also requires creating a workplan that satisfies their interests and provides them with opportunities to

build their skills and take leadership roles in the organization and the community.

Boards can also help to create a good working environment through decision-making and guidance that fosters a flexible environment and encourages collaboration. As organizational ambassadors, board members can also facilitate partnerships through their own connections in the community. And as “keepers of the vision,” board members can also ensure that partnerships are being pursued within the context of the five-year plan, both as a way to identify priority partnerships to achieve the plan and also as a way to determine which potential partnerships might not fit or be prioritized.

### **Struggles and Key Principles for Partnerships**

Despite having learned a great deal in her time at TNRC, Dawn says community engagement is an ongoing challenge. For example, despite their best efforts, TNRC did not get the participation that they had hoped for in their last round of public consultations. In part, this is due to a highly transient community base in Thompson, where residents regularly move between Thompson and their First Nations communities. Another challenge for Thompson is that their labour market has a high component of contract workers that live there briefly for a temporary job and then move away again. These temporary community members are not always aware of established groups like TNRC and the opportunities to participate in the community planning events because they participate in the community differently than long-term residents.

However, you cannot simply wait for people to come to you. You have to go to the people. A community planning process needs to be varied, diverse, and flexible enough to go to where the residents and partners are. While a general call to the public and open meetings at larger venues are important for transparency, accountability and participation, more targeted outreach is often required. Having built up partnerships and community credibility, through the approach noted above, TNRC can now go to those partners who

may have older or deeper community ties and regular group meetings that are well attended to get feedback. For example, when TNRC wanted to include the City of Thompson in the planning process, but couldn't get them to a larger meeting, TNRC sat down one-on-one with key contacts at the City to ensure they got the necessary feedback and input. This approach is slowly building a distinct role for TNRC as a link between organizations and other key decision makers in the community such as city employees.

Having a broad mandate and working with partners can raise issues around 'jurisdiction and roles.' However, Dawn feels that TNRC has avoided this problem by taking a supportive and transparent approach. While Dawn was able to build on existing relationships and partnerships when she started, she has also invested time into meeting others on a regular basis. Dawn takes advantage of the small town feeling in Thompson that creates regular opportunities for her to stop and chat with partners and allies throughout her day, regardless of whether she is on work hours or not. Importantly, when Dawn is invited to meetings with other organizations, she is open and honest about the NRC, its mandate, as well as being upfront about her goals, intentions and what she has to offer. When entering into a partnership, she also practices an attitude of respect, and ensures that there is a matching mandate that will be beneficial for both sides. Starting a partnership with the attitude that you and the partner will be able to accomplish more together, and being able to offer practical assistance are good ways to avoid feelings that the NRC is trying to overpower the community.

Dawn lists a few key tips to building relationships and trust that she has learned over the years. Be consistent, reliable, and dependable. Make sure that you do not overstretch yourself, and let your

board keep you in check. This will ensure that you do not take on more than your organization can handle and that you only make promises or commitments that you can truly deliver on. And never underestimate the usefulness of small, practical things like a printer or fax machine that other groups can use! NRCs have the potential to be much more than a funder or administrator of grant programs if you take a 'roll up your sleeves and get to work' approach. Time and resources already spent on existing NRC programs - like small grants or business fix-up funding - can also be used to build capacity and partnerships in the community.

TNRC is able to accomplish much more by being a partner, convener, and supporter of the various organizations doing good work in their community than they could on their own. This kind of flexible role embodies the holistic, locally specific, and multi-faceted approach of CED. Fostering good relationships, retaining staff that can support this work and thrive in a collaborative environment, and lending a hand wherever work is being done that matches your mandate can create the conditions for taking advantage of every relevant opportunity that presents itself.

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