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You know the old saying, “One person’s waste is another’s treasure”. Imagine if the treasure didn’t have to be buried and later found. Instead, it was simply donated to someone who could use it. Right now.

That’s the way the Resource Exchange works.

A 2010 initiative of the Strathcona Business Improvement Association in Vancouver, the new program eases the burden on the landfill and provides materials to those who seek them by simply connecting the two.

There’s a serious cost to dispose of waste ethically.

Nor is it cheap to buy materials.

These cost barriers can stress the bottom line of small businesses and working artists. Understanding that all waste is nothing more than a misplaced resource, the Strathcona BIA created the Resource Exchange so members could redirect their waste. Businesses contribute their waste and surplus materials and the SBIA beats the bushes finding takers. It’s so successful that, in September 2012, a Resource Park was opened to

provide a storage location for materials for the Exchange to alleviate the timing challenges between supply and demand.

One of the keys to its success is the BIA’s ability to engage local artists. Pace Fabrics donated about one ton of fabric scraps and with it, visual artist Siobhan Humston was able to start a new business line.

“The potential for Business Improvement Associations to take an active role in community economic development is huge.”

The Resource Exchange is open to any business that’s a member of the SBIA. The program reduces business costs and the environmental footprint of the neighbourhood.

How did the Strathcona Business Improvement

Association get there?

In 2006, the SBIA started hosting a series of expos discussing sustainability. Speakers, ranging from Gregor Robertson (before he was Vancouver’s mayor), to Majora Carter (Greening the Ghetto), and Bob Willard (Corporate Social Responsibility for IBM), came to this small, East Van neighbourhood. The events attracted crowds averaging 300 people, conversations took place, and networks started to form. The idea for

Strathcona Green Zone was born and the BIA led the process of rebranding this neighbourhood.

“Those events established our intent to focus on sustainability as a BIA,” says the organization’s executive director, Joji Kumagai, a 35-year-old SFU grad.

In 2010, the SBIA received a \$48,000 Vancity enviroFund grant, allowing them to hire a full-time sustainability coordinator to drive the sustainability initiative from concept to implementation.

“We brought in other partners like Climate Smart. They have a team of specialists who hold three-session workshops for businesses,” explains Kumagai. “They examine energy and waste. The program cost was split between the City of Vancouver, Metro Vancouver and the BIA.”

Kumagai acknowledges that the local business community (the SBIA has 850 members — all businesses and commercial property owners) appreciates the program because it shows tangible outcomes.

The program doesn’t include a full supply chain analysis, but business owners naturally start critically examining their supply chain.

“One of our businesses wrote to all his vendors [asking about the environmental impact of their supplies] and all replied to him. Most businesses indicated that they are trying to work sustainability into their operations,” explains Kumagai.

And the SBIA hasn’t stopped there.

They’re now in partnership with the Hastings Crossing BIA to launch an urban tree nursery, which, like all their initiatives, incorporates social, economic, and environmental objectives. The nursery will bring more green along Hastings Street; the planters will be designed and crafted by local social enterprises; and the sale of the trees will directly support the program. There’ll be 25 planters straddling both BIA areas, starting at Gore Street and going east and west along Hastings. Local business owners anticipate the move will attract more customers.

Strathcona Business Improvement Association Vision by 2016

- a model mixed use community
- a green and sustainable community
- a desirable place to do business
- a widely recognized positive brand as Vancouver’s Green Zone, a community that celebrates green business, the arts, and diversity
- a successful catalyst for area revitalization and overall sustainability - viable, green, and economically sound

It’s not just business and aesthetics that the business improvement association has been focusing on, however.

Kumagai points out that the SBIA has also injected new energy into what is normally the staid, but necessary, convention of security and graffiti removal.

The Christian humanitarian agency Mission Possible (www.mission-possible.ca) was brought on board to

handle both the removal of unsightly graffiti and in a pilot security program.

The latter, called MP Neighbours, uses a peer-to-peer community outreach model. Staff of MP Neighbours live in, and around, the downtown eastside and have had a rough go of it. Many have experienced what it's like to be homeless. And that's the Mission Possible mandate: to transform lives by helping those challenged by homelessness and poverty achieve a renewed sense of dignity and purpose through meaningful work.

MP Neighbours workers attend a security-training program at the Justice Institute, then, working in patrols of two, are responsible for the 300-block of East Hastings. Kumagai says they understand the community and know the neighbourhood. And since they've lived through similar issues as the people that they're dealing with, there's a diminished sense of hierarchy and power that typifies many relationships between street-involved people and private security firms.

"We had good reviews from the pilot and extended it nine months," beams Kumagai. The SBIA's annual budget is about \$600,000. Nearly a third of that goes to private security. It's a sizable chunk, says Kumagai, adding that the Mission Possible program is being funded from the BIA's surplus.

All SBIA revenue is generated from a levy paid by its membership. The levy is decided by the members at the AGM. The city then collects the money, but, notes Kumagai, there's direct accountability to the businesses within the BIA's geographical region.

Business Improvement Associations have flourished since they first appeared in B.C. in 1989 (the first two were established in Vancouver neighbourhoods Gastown and Mount Pleasant). And they've evolved into sophisticated entities.

Kumagai's vision for BIA's goes well beyond traditional BIA activities designed to attract shoppers. "People weren't sure what the potential was. But since they formed there's been some great initiatives." For instance, Hastings North and Collingwood are working on a program on how to work with sex trade workers in the area. And Collingwood BIA started a Junior BIA program to get kids thinking about business and entrepreneurship.

"I think the BIAs do a tremendous amount for their communities and have potential to do much more. The potential for BIAs to take an active role in community economic development is huge." Kumagai says tapping into the bounty of strength that already exists in each community in a sound strategy. That's how the Strathcona Business Improvement Association went about business to develop its Resource Park.

"We took a vacant lot and dozens of volunteers, and turned it into a resource park that provides green jobs for locals and businesses divert waste from the landfill."

For more information...

strathconabia.com
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