



community stories

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A Return to ANC in Surrey: Bridgeview in Motion

Action for Neighbourhood Change (ANC) was launched in February 2005. Originally conceived as a two-year project, its first phase finished on March 31, 2006. This is the second of a series of stories on each of the five local sites. While the first set of stories provided a wide-angle view of each community at the outset of the initiative – its geography, demographics, needs and assets – these updates focus more on resident perceptions of the work unfolding in their neighbourhoods. They are snapshots of an evolving process which seek to capture both progress and the inevitable strains of communities in the midst of change.

Introduction

The Bridgeview Action for Neighbourhood Change (ANC) project was officially launched on July 25, 2005. Over the eight months since ANC began working in Bridgeview, project staff have helped encourage as wide a collection as possible of Bridgeview residents to dream, plan and act upon a vision of positive change for their neighbourhood.

United Way of the Lower Mainland (UWLM) Planning Consultant Linda Western shepherded the ANC project through the neighbourhood selection phase and, as manager of the project, has continued to act as a resource and guide. UWLM hired Gill Redfern, a community development consultant from New Zealand, as the local ANC Coordinator. Both women provided a link to important human and financial resources to which residents could



apply for assistance with their ideas and projects. Both were committed to the UWLM's goal of giving Bridgeview residents the skills they needed to direct the course of their own future. Says Gill: "Linda and I see ourselves playing the roles of mobilizer, catalyst and coach."

All five of the ANC communities from across Canada were selected on the basis of locally identified criteria. In Bridgeview's case, a balance of community assets and needs was key in selecting it for participation. Among Bridgeview's assets is the existence of a long-standing community association and sense of community pride and "can do" attitude. From the perspective of the selection committee, a lack of agency resources and isolation from the rest of Surrey were identified as important issues. The neighbourhood's physical isolation may partially explain the extremely low scores shown by Bridgeview children on a provincial Ministry of Education school readiness tool.

Assets

The Bridgeview Hall Community Association ("the Community Hall") has organized a number of community events over the years. Bridgeview Days – an annual community celebration which offers a parade, games and activities and a family dance – provided Gill and Linda with a first opportunity to introduce ANC to many Bridgeview residents.

The Hall's Board of Directors have established an annual roster of recreational and social activities for residents. Board Chair Brian Brubaker has lived in Bridgeview for 18 years and has chaired the community association for 15 years. "When ANC first arrived, I thought the project would be good for our community," says

Brian. "Linda and Gill have attracted people to community work who were not active volunteers in our association. With all the different ethnic groups in our community, it's been hard to find the right invitation that would make our community centre more accessible to all cultures. So far, ANC's work to translate fliers and information into different languages has been a good start."

The real work of ANC is community engagement, which means getting as many residents as possible involved in creating a picture of what an improved community might look like and then working to make it happen. Finding the most effective way to reach residents is slow, painstaking work. Most community developers would prefer a three- to five-year window to lay the relationship groundwork that is the basis of community change.

Paradoxically, another of Bridgeview's assets is its geographic isolation. Like an island, Bridgeview is cut off from the larger community of Surrey by high-traffic roads and industrial lands. This very isolation has helped create a sense of cohesion among members of the community. At the same time, Bridgeview is changing. New voices and ideas are being added to the discussion of Bridgeview's needs and aspirations, thanks in part to the encouragement provided by ANC.

Mandeep Sondhi and her husband moved to Bridgeview two years ago. Originally from India, she speaks Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu and English. Says Mandeep: "When we first arrived in the neighbourhood, I was a bit nervous about telling my family where we had bought our house. The drainage ditches and run-down properties made us wonder if this could really be Canada. I had spoken with people about the idea of starting a petition to make the city come and clean the

garbage out of the ditches, and then I met Gill Redfern at Bridgeview Days. The project was exactly what my husband and I had been hoping and dreaming for – something that would help us to make change in the neighbourhood.”

In November, Mandeep joined an ANC Conversation Circle whose members include representatives of other cultural groups. They meet weekly to talk about specific concerns and they have come to see the value of widening the circle of people reached by the project. They have discussed the possibility of conducting a door-to-door survey as a way to make it easier for people to talk about their ideas and make a commitment to become involved. At the same time, however, Mandeep recognizes that people are tired of talking. In any community engagement process, people reach a point where they become impatient for action. Once excited about the possibilities for improvement, they are eager to begin work.

Says Mandeep: “Many of my neighbours feel frustrated at the lack of action. ANC has been operating for eight months, but they feel there is very little to show for the work. Bridgeview has been a neglected part of Surrey for a very long time, and I want to help change people’s opinion of the neighbourhood. I really feel that the community is more together since ANC arrived, and that this may be the time for change to start.”

Sahra-Lea Tosdevine-Tataryn, a Surrey Parks, Recreation and Culture liaison for Bridgeview, has worked in the neighbourhood for eight years. Her department has been involved with Bridgeview Elementary School for many years, offering after school programs and, over the last two years, a successful kindergarten readiness program. Says Sahra-Lea: “My efforts in the

community have been based at the Community Hall and I have provided the community association with programming and events support. Parks, Recreation and Culture partnered with the Bridgeview Association to establish a computer lab, a seniors’ event and after school programming, for example. ANC has enhanced existing relationships and encourages people to ask questions about how things operate.”

Mike Ryan has lived in Bridgeview for two years and has written a number of letters to city officials to get more help to clear garbage-clogged ditches and improve street drainage – a perennial issue in a low-lying part of the soggy-but-beautiful Vancouver region. Says Mike: “Until recently, I wasn’t aware that the Community Hall was there to help residents improve the neighbourhood. Linda Western encouraged me to keep asking questions and I learned about Surrey’s ‘Adopt-a-Street’ program. They had bright yellow garbage bags to give away, and we began having monthly street cleanups in December. Bridgeview has a large Indo-Canadian community and it’s important to get its leaders involved in ANC’s work. Though members of that community came out for the earlier cleanups, their leader’s commitment is what brings them out in numbers. It’s clear that everyone has something that they would like to get out of ANC. There is a definite tug-of-war between the established groups and the newcomers – everyone has their own ideas of what needs to get done. ANC has taken the baby steps to get everyone talking.”

Needs

British Columbia’s Ministry of Education uses the Early Development Instrument tool to measure a variety of indicators related to a child’s readiness for school and learning. In 2004,

Bridgeview's children rated at the extreme low end in all the testing areas. The neighbourhood's test results were very similar to children living in isolated northern communities where resources are limited. ANC had an early supporter and promoter in Bridgeview Elementary School Principal Michael Gordon. When it became clear in October that the Community Hall was too heavily used to continue providing space for ANC, Michael offered his school library as a project base.

Says Gill Redfern: "Originally, it was thought that the Community Hall would be the most suitable location for an ANC office, but it became clear that the school offered a more neutral and accessible environment, and allowed us to meet more of Bridgeview's children and their parents. We have most of our evening meetings in the school, and this has helped further the development of the school as an integral resource to the community. We continue to encourage strong ties with the Community Hall, and the increased turnout at their recent AGM was an encouraging sign that more people in the community want to become involved."

The National Film Board (NFB), as a national partner in the ANC project, wanted to give youth a means of expressing their voices through the use of digital storytelling. The school provided a natural location for this to take place and Michael has been very positive about the concept, with many ideas to further connect the children to creative means of expression and skill development.

Michael is very pleased that the NFB connection will put Bridgeview's children right on target with the local school board's plans to build digital media into its programs. Says Michael: "Linda and Gill have also been very supportive

of projects which will help children aged 0 to 5 to get ready for school. An April information session for parents and caregivers will get people talking and thinking of more ways to assist children in developing fine motor skills, appreciating literature and handling conflict. More community resources will soon be added to assist residents. Because the school's 190 children come from Bridgeview's many ethnic groups, ANC can use our facility to approach all of the groups whose voices are not currently being heard in the wider community."

Engagement

In October, Gill hosted a community meeting where 60 residents came to begin listing Bridgeview's assets and discussing ideas for change. The consistent message was that ANC is about assisting the community to make its own decisions about what is important – that it is up to the residents themselves to work together to make change happen by strengthening the resources that already exist and developing a collective vision and plan. Until this point, many in the neighbourhood saw ANC as yet another government program that would hand out money and "do projects."

Says Principal Michael Gordon: "People were skeptical of the idea of community engagement until they began using an asset-based approach. They came wanting to have things done for them, but they soon realized that the project was about them doing the work themselves on projects they'd chosen to do. The possibility of making things happen got people really excited. ANC encourages change using a ripple effect where people are the ripples. As individuals get inspired and talk to their families and neighbours, their energy and ideas move

outward. The ANC Steering Committee has shown the greatest growth in this regard.”

Seniors and ethnic group members with different language capabilities are often uncomfortable with large group or evening meetings, so particular effort and attention must focus on encouraging members of these groups to become involved in the life of the community. One of the strategies put into place to connect people who are currently excluded from Bridgeview’s community-building process is the Conversation Circle, of which Mandeep Sondhi is a member. ANC established several circles and the structure has demonstrated that there are many ways for people to be engaged, have their voices heard and be valued, contributing community members.

The Conversation Circles were also about training residents to take on leadership and facilitation roles, but it takes a lot of time for people to become familiar with this type of work. Conducting a survey or getting a group of strangers together to chat and feel comfortable requires skill and experience. The timelines of ANC do not reflect how long it takes for individuals to take on a leadership role and develop as experienced facilitators.

Behind the scenes, UWLM staff began meeting regularly with community agencies and government representatives that work with Surrey as a whole. They also met with a more Bridgeview-focused group to encourage the development of better program coordination and more awareness of the types of support Bridgeview residents needed.

In Bridgeview itself, an ANC Steering Committee was established in November and holds general meetings once a month. A core group of approximately 12 people meets every

Monday evening to help move the work forward as quickly as ANC’s short time line will allow. Members include new and long-term residents, two parents from the school’s Parent Advisory Council, two representatives of the Bridgeview Hall Community Association and members of the Indo-Canadian and Fijian communities.

To better reach Bridgeview’s teens and young adults, ANC hired a youth outreach worker from the Pacific Community Resources Society, a local nonprofit service provider. Rebecca Wykes met with young residents one-on-one and organized some casual get-togethers over pizza to discuss ANC and to ask about people’s interests, likes and concerns. Hiring a bus to transport youth to an evening hockey game outside of Bridgeview helped attract more attention to the project and provided another opportunity for youth to consider the type of activities they would like to see established in the neighbourhood. The hockey tickets were donated by Surrey Parks, Recreation and Culture – an example of the type of cross-agency collaboration fostered by ANC.

In December, ANC hired a public relations firm to prepare a communications plan for ANC and the United Way itself. Two workshops were designed specifically to equip the community with the skills and training they had requested on issues such as preparing messages for the media, gaining the support of the City and how to further engage their own community in activities and actions they wish to take.

In January, ANC hired resident Ron Thom as a business liaison. He is meeting with people from every business in Bridgeview to hear their ideas and concerns, and hopes to build a connection between the business community, the Steering Committee and the community in general. Says Ron: “If ANC can support businesses

in meeting their needs, they can help us to do the same. They can also be sources of employment, for example, for people in Bridgeview. So far, the biggest concern of local businesses is theft and vandalism. The fact that I live in the neighbourhood and really want to see things change gets people to start talking.” Besides his work liaising with business representatives, Ron has been an active member of the ANC Steering Committee, and the Conversation Circle and monthly street cleanup committees. A six-year resident of Bridgeview, he is pleased to see his name on his street’s recently-installed Adopt-a-Street sign.

One of the United Way of Lower Mainland’s guiding principles for ANC was to provide early support and training, and then allow residents to direct their own change process. In February, members of the ANC Steering Committee renamed themselves “Bridgeview in Motion.” A key understanding began to form that Bridgeview residents want to create a neighbourhood where everyone could feel safe, welcomed, comfortable and connected to their community. They want an environment in which people can move from being passive residents to active, vocal community members. They want to work more on projects that will help build this sense of community safety, including Neighbourhood Watch, the Adopt-a-Street initiative to tackle garbage problems and home improvement projects.

Working in new ways often brings old and new ideas into conflict. Community development workers are familiar with the many stages that must be worked through before a common vision can be agreed upon by the community as a whole. Bridgeview residents have experienced some discomfort with the tension between the tried-and-true operation of the Bridgeview Hall Community Association and the newer, grassroots approach that defines ANC.

Citizen action

Action for Neighbourhood Change has released \$80,000 in each site for community projects. The announcement of the funding and its tight timelines – monies had to be allocated for the end of March 2006 – heightened the tensions and divisions that exist in Bridgeview. Linda and Gill kept to the central ANC tenet of community involvement and set up a clearly articulated process in which agency and resident groups worked together to identify projects on which they could collaborate. Ten projects were selected, including the establishment of a food bank depot, a walking track and a youth lounge at the Bridgeview Hall.

The proposal to establish a youth lounge at the Hall was meant to signal clearly that the youth input had been heard and acted upon. The lounge will provide a location for young people to gather, relax and socialize, and may also allow opportunities for youth to connect with larger community concerns. While considering how they could accommodate the request for a youth gathering place, members of the Bridgeview Hall Community Association came to recognize the value of small group and one-on-one consultation as a way of connecting with members of the community whose voices have gone unheard.

Sahra-Lea is hopeful that the ANC process will take root. Says Sahra-Lea: “It takes time to build new relationships and address the problems with old, unproductive ones. Despite some people’s anxiety about new ways of doing things, the ANC project money offers some exciting opportunities to get work done using a new, collaborative and inclusive process.”

Mandeep Sondhi’s hope is that the sense of community pride she now feels will spread to

others. “My husband and I have done a lot to improve our property. It means so much to us to live in a neighbourhood where our children can run and play. When we lived in rental accommodation, they got into the habit of sitting and watching other children, but that has begun to change. Everyone here knows what we need to do to make improvements and I am so excited to begin.”

Adopt-a-Street organizer Mike Ryan is a little more cautious in his reading of Bridgeview’s future. Says Mike: “Realistically, it will take two or three years to get people over the hump of figuring out what is best for everyone. Right now, about two percent of Bridgeview residents are involved in ANC. If the project could continue another year, we’d have a better shot at reaching the other 98 percent to build a really effective group of 20 percent. We need experienced communicators, and newsletter and Internet tools to help them do the job.”

Principal Michael Gordon sees the tensions and conflict surrounding ANC’s work as a true opportunity. Says Michael: “Things may have to go through a phase of troubled waters. If the Bridgeview in Motion committee ruffles a few feathers and changes are made in the community association’s approach, conflict can become healthy and good ideas can come out of it. Once the water calms, people will be glad they participated and happy to see that what they wanted to have happen, happens.” An apt comparison for a neighbourhood named Bridgeview.

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