



community stories

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A Return to ANC in Spryfield: Fresh Ideas Spring into Action

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

When Action for Neighbourhood Change (ANC) was announced, the United Way of Halifax Region (UWHR) was in the early stages of looking at neighbourhood development as a focus for its work. Because ANC uses a community-centred approach, UWHR decided to present the program to its member communities and wait to see who was interested. Spryfield answered the call.

A core group of community activists and members of the Captain William Spry Community Centre Board of Directors saw the potential of the ANC model. Like the other four ANC neighbourhoods, many Spryfield residents were aware that their community was experiencing high levels of poverty, significant numbers of lone-parent families and rising school dropout rates. There was an unacknowledged divide growing between established residents who were well connected with one another through a rich net-



work of community organizations and newer residents living in low-income housing projects.

ANC Community Developer Marjorie Willison moved to Spryfield in the 1970s. “When we first reviewed what ANC offered – that it would give us a way to figure out what we wanted to do and then help us to do it – we felt that it would be exactly right for Spryfield.” ANC Project Manager Paul Shakotko agrees. Says Paul: “ANC provided the broad brushstrokes – community engagement, vision crafting and then action – but the most exciting developments have been serendipitous. The action phase, where an Action Grants Review Committee selected eight projects in February, has already resulted in some unexpected and rich new partnerships.”

Assets and Needs

To make the most of ANC’s first 14-month contract phase, Paul assembled a project team composed of local people – residents who knew Spryfield well, and could lead and provide input on the strengths and challenges facing their community. For example, Marjorie Willison is a high-profile community organizer, activist and creative thinker who has been the wellspring for many innovative undertakings in Spryfield. She has been involved in the operation of the Captain William Spry Community Centre (CWSCC) for 20 years, most recently serving on its Board of Directors from 2004 until February 2005, when she resigned to work as a Community Developer for ANC. She continues to work part time for the CWSCC board.

Realtor and resident David Sampson has worked with Marjorie on several community improvement projects over the years. Says David: “Spryfield has seen lots of studies and heard lots of promises. ANC brought a different piece to

community work by working at the grassroots level and letting the residents decide where they needed to put their efforts. Even though ANC had to spend a fair bit of time talking with people and bringing in residents who had never before been involved in community work, the turnaround to action happened very quickly.”

The “fair bit of time” was an intense six months. It began when ANC established an office in the CWSCC in late May and finished with an exercise in December where members of the ANC team distilled everything they had heard into seven themes.

“It was extremely difficult to reach people who are not normally engaged in community work,” says Marjorie. “We used a lot of one-on-one contacts to meet other people, we would attend meetings of community organizations and make connections with residents – whatever we could think of. Once we met people, we learned how important it was to follow up each contact with a phone call, e-mail or note.”

ANC team member Christina Carter was invaluable in gaining the interest and trust of her neighbours in the Greystone housing complex. Sitting atop the highest hill in Spryfield, Greystone seems worlds away from the buzzing hive of community activity ‘down the hill.’ Starting with front porch conversations, Christina has continued to encourage people to get involved and to believe that their fellow Spryfielders are truly interested in what they have to say.

“I live in Greystone, and I know how disconnected people can feel from the rest of Spryfield,” says Christina. “Working with ANC has shown me that others really do care. Communicating that belief takes time, and I’m conscious that people respect my opinion and that they find it hard to separate me, the person, from

my job. If I believe what I'm saying, I know that it comes through, and that carries a responsibility."

Fellow staffer Carole Chisholm recently moved back to Spryfield after several years in Alberta. A fifth team member, Peter Greechan, has worked in Spryfield for four years. His numerous community contacts provided ANC with an early entry to many local groups and organizations. Says Paul: "Hiring neighbourhood residents as part of the project team has become a central part of building social networks and capital. We were fortunate to have four people from different parts of Spryfield who could build networks of trust among different groups."

Engagement

In a community in which the same 40 or 50 people are continually volunteering to take on projects, ANC staff worked to broaden the appeal of the initiative by inviting the participation of Dalhousie University. Three students from the university's School of Planning gained community-based experience, designing workshops that built on community learning. Topics such as walking trails, crime audits and transportation attracted new people and several of them have joined ANC's work.

Provincial government contacts proved extremely helpful in the development of a community profile. They provided the demographic, economic, social and environmental information Spryfielders needed to get an accurate portrait of their neighbourhood. "The profile was meant to capture the collective experience and wisdom of the community," says Paul Shakotko. "The constant capturing of information is very important to a community. Knowledge can't rest only in the memories of certain key people. It needs to be easily accessible."

We are Spryfield is a 72-page legacy document which will be published in April. It is brightly designed and chock full of photographs, maps, charts, graphs and tables. In the words of one resident who saw a preliminary draft: "A lot of it is the blunt truth that isn't pretty to look at, but it's also well researched and uplifting."

Marjorie feels that the statistics bear out what the community suspected to be true. "There were many pleasant surprises. Most people are proud to call Spryfield home and there is a widespread appreciation of the neighbourhood's friendliness. I hadn't realized that we are more culturally diverse than much of the Halifax region, and I was shocked to learn that our children are not staying in school. For the first time, people really talked about the divide between older, homeownership Spryfield residents and newer people who live in low-rent or public housing. Rental accommodations account for 40 percent of dwellings – a much higher rate than in the surrounding area or the province."

Besides facts and figures, *We are Spryfield* contains the accumulated input of 500 residents (of a total population of 4,500) who were interviewed, surveyed and spoken with at every opportunity – at a Legion seniors' dance, the malls, tea gatherings, and large and small citizen meetings.

As December ended, seven community themes were identified. They are: the community network, education and literacy, recreation and leisure, image and culture, environment, housing, and income and employment. From then on, ANC staff began to work at handing over to the community responsibility for the formulation of a vision statement. At a meeting in early January, 50 participants discussed and approved the seven themes and selected the one that most interested them.

Says Marjorie: “When we began speaking with people last fall about possible themes, I was uncomfortable putting any forward. I wanted the residents to identify the issues. As it turned out, the data helped clarify what the themes could be, and the visioning meeting gave us the chance to ask if we’d gotten them right.”

Between February and the end of April, ANC staff will guide these newly formed Action Teams through the process of crafting a communications plan and vision. In late April, the seven groups will meet again with other residents and agencies to create a united vision. The hope is that a group of committed residents will come together to help lead and fulfill the vision.

Partnerships were the central focus of ANC activity in Spryfield during the first year of operation. Locally, ANC staff called upon community leaders on an informal basis throughout the project whenever they needed advice or specific information. The provincial government contacts made during the creation of the legacy document subsequently forged a relationship with United Way of Halifax Region. The two organizations will work to find neighbourhood indicators that will support a neighbourhood development strategy for Halifax – an excellent long-term outcome that resulted from ANC. The Halifax regional government expressed interest in *We are Spryfield* and is including ANC as a pilot project in community visioning following the adoption of the regional plan.

Citizen Action

Working with the National Film Board – an ANC national partner – four groups of Spryfield residents are currently producing videos on the themes of environment, education, diversity and

history. Local NFB producer Ariella Pahlke invited all would-be movie makers to a “Discover Spryfield” video workshop. Sixty people attended and 15 were selected. Ariella used an open space discussion model to gather key words and phrases that answered the question of what people would like to do with a film. The videos will be ready by the end of April and will pose four questions: “What happened to the rivers?” (environment), “Do schools make people or people make schools?” (education), “Who are the people of Spryfield?” (diversity) and “What can we leave behind?” (history). Three to five residents are working on each video. Groups have good gender balance and ages range from 13 to 60.

Toward the end of its first 14 months of operation, Action for Neighbourhood Change made available \$80,000 in grants to each of the five participating communities. Three ANC staff members and two residents formed the Spryfield Action Grant Review Committee and, in three weeks, they had designed and sent out a call for proposals, received and reviewed 16 applications, and approved eight projects for action grants. Successful submissions were judged to improve Spryfield as a whole and contain an element of innovation. They involve numerous residents and were designed to revitalize the neighbourhood. The following projects were awarded:

*1. Tannis Crosby and the YWCA Halifax: Developing a **Spryfield Multi-Service Center for Families and Children**.* The project will examine and plan for a service centre that will help families and children thrive, increase availability and accessibility of early learning and family programming (including literary, parent education, and youth development), link residents with stakeholders and agencies, and launch a new child care centre in Spryfield.

2. *Carolyn Mont and the Captain William Spry Community Center Board: **Spryfield Community and Business Website***. This project will develop a partnership with the Community Centre and the Business Commission to develop and launch a www.spryfield.ca website. The site will provide easy access to services and businesses in Spryfield, along with assistance in finding volunteers and advertising current events.

3. *The Spryfield Business Commission (Reg Horner) and a group of residents: **The Spryfield Business Directory***. The Directory will be crafted with the help of neighbourhood residents and businesses. It will encourage residents to shop locally and will entice other residents of the Halifax region to shop in Spryfield. The directory will be made available in hard copy and in searchable form on the www.spryfield.ca website.

4. *John Brazner and the McIntosh Run Association: **Community Aquatic Monitoring (and Educational) Program***. This community-led project will engage and educate at least 50 students, teachers and residents in the health and protection of McIntosh Run. The run is an important river that travels through most of Spryfield and is a natural habitat and recreation site.

5. *Kris Allinson and the Spryfield Residents Association (SRA): **A Spryfield Residents Association Website***. This website will be crafted in conjunction with the www.spryfield.ca site, but will have a different focus. The SRA website will provide residents with the opportunity to express their concerns and opinions on important issues and allow residents to share information – e.g., information on meetings, committees, historical photos, maps, places of interest in Spryfield and a message board.

6. *Martha Leary and the Chebucto West Community Health Board/Urban Farm Museum: **Greystones' Come Grow With Us***. In partnership with the Chebucto West Community Health Board, this project will work with residents of the Greystone housing complex to create a garden which will be established and maintained by the residents. Knowledge on food production and garden tending will be provided through a curriculum delivered by the Urban Farm Museum. The intent is to establish a local Garden Club, starting with Greystone residents.

7. *Betty Tiboo and the Urban Farm Museum: **Greystone Community Park***. This resident-driven project will utilize the expertise of the members of the Urban Farm Museum to create a local park in Greystone. The park will be built through consultation with residents and the Metro Regional Housing Authority. Trees will be planted, and archways and benches will be constructed in order to create a place of gathering and beauty.

8. *Darlene MacLean and the Boys and Girls Club of Spryfield: **Spryfield Youth Arts Program***. This project will establish new projects for youth in Spryfield, focusing on photography, crafts, arts and cooking. The Arts Program includes instruction from qualified teachers, access to studios and adequate supplies. A promotional component is included in which the students' work will be showcased at local events.

David Sampson worked on the grants committee and saw the pros and cons of having such a quick turnaround for proposal submission. "Because we were operating so quickly, some of the proposals were not quite as well developed as we might have hoped, but this gave us the chance

to put people together that might not have had a chance to otherwise work together. Having less time meant that people who got their ideas in quickly were not overshadowed by larger, more substantive project suggestions. Every one of the grants has been handed to organizations that really needed assistance to get important work done that they just didn't have the time or resources to do."

Reg Horner, editor and owner of *The Chebucto News* and Executive Director of the Spryfield and District Business Commission has already assigned a researcher to begin the task of locating home-based businesses to include in *The Spryfield Business Directory*. Says Reg: "The ANC process represents a new way of empowering people. It was a case of someone coming from outside the community – who hadn't already decided what the issues and solutions were – and allowing the community to identify its own issues and solutions. Not parachuted or preordained, it offered open access to funds and offered people the chance to make something work. The experts don't have all the answers, but if you empower people, there's plenty of energy and experience to be tapped into."

Marjorie believes that the whole ANC project did the same thing for all of Spryfield – it provided an opportunity to do work that was vital to mapping out future community-building efforts. It gave them the time to listen to people, visit schools, talk to children, complete surveys, study data and figure out what it all meant.

Says Marjorie: "The action grants are giving people a chance to experience early successes – to know that all of their talk last fall is being translated into something they can see. It's not as if they're creating anything new, it's more like things that we've talked about doing are now being done. ANC has accelerated and made possible what we couldn't have done before. It has really hit home that, though a community can have ideas and dreams, it needs resources to get everything started. Spryfield needs all three elements to thrive."

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