

Defining and Increasing Civic Engagement in Calgary

Caledon's 'community snapshots' present brief overviews of promising new initiatives founded by Vibrant Communities and other community-focused organizations.

Challenge

Vibrant Communities Calgary (VCC) heard from partners during its 2006 annual reflection session that the lack of political influence experienced by people living in poverty was seen as a direct result of their low voter participation rates. The 2004 Calgary municipal election attracted less than 20 percent of enumerated electors; one polling station in a low-income neighbourhood reported a participation rate of only two percent.

In addition to the issue of low voter participation by persons living in poverty, some VCC participants believe that Calgary's poor election turnout reflects fundamental changes in the city's character. The jobs created by the recent economic boom have attracted talented workers from all over Canada, many of whom buy, renovate and re-sell homes as part of their investment planning. Commitment to the immediate neighbourhood is thereby lessened. Low desire to learn about and contribute to civic life leads to a diminished sense of community and less social cohesion. Anecdotal information collected by VCC suggests that many of the non-voting population are also uninformed about the issues.

Voting habits, keeping up-to-date with local events and contributing to the life of the community are part of a larger set of behaviours known collectively as 'civic engagement.' While definitions of this term vary, most include a spectrum of activities which range from volunteering and letter writing to organizational involvement and political participation.

Strategy

Three areas of activity form the basis of VCC's civic engagement work plan, developed in April 2007:

- increasing social capital through formal and informal civic engagement
- enhancing democratic participation at the municipal, provincial and federal levels
- strengthening and empowering local communities, nonprofit organizations and institutions to influence public policy.

VCC brought together a number of organizations interested in these issues, including the *Calgary Herald*, Volunteer Calgary, Ipsos Reid, Canada West Foundation, First Calgary Savings, Epcor Centre for the Performing Arts, the Calgary Foundation and the Sheldon Chumir Ethics Foundation in Leadership.

Each participating organization had its own particular view of why the initiative was important. The *Calgary Herald*, for example, produced a series of stories on informal civic engagement. Through its neighbourhood level initiatives, Volunteer Calgary worked to identify natural leaders who could help bridge gaps between different ethnic and religious groups. First Calgary Savings, in partnership with the Calgary Foundation, launched a mini-grant program called "Stepping Stones" which encouraged people to engage in small, creative acts of neighbourliness. The Calgary Foundation, in partnership with Sustainable Calgary, led the work on Calgary's "Vital Signs" submission – an annual, national community report card on quality of life produced by Community Foundations of Canada. Another partner – the Canada West Foundation – continues to publish papers on the subject of formal democratic participation, informing discussions at VCC and elsewhere.

VCC decided to use the fall 2007 municipal elections as an opportunity to develop and test ideas for a discrete element of civic engagement – voting. This decision was driven by a Calgary City Council decision in March 2007 to establish new identification requirements for voters. It soon became evident to VCC members and partners that many low-income Calgarians would need to apply for the proper paperwork in order to participate in the October elections. They informed City Council of the problem and alerted more than 2,000 low-income residents to the new requirements. The Voter Identification Bylaw has yet to be overturned.

In an effort to improve voter turnout on October 15, VCC staff published a special edition newsletter, titled "Voting in Calgary's 2007 General Election." Some 2,250 copies were printed and 2,000 were distributed to each person who picked up a food hamper at the Calgary Food Bank between nomination and election days. The remaining 250 copies were sent to VCC partners for distribution to individual client populations and staff. An electronic copy of the newsletter was delivered to every organization that receives funding from the United Way of Calgary and Area.

Outcomes

Though it is difficult to assess the impact of disseminating voting requirements information on voter turnout, VCC staff members are confident that their efforts helped achieve the 65 percent improvement in reported voter turnout (from 20 to 33 percent).

VCC recently joined the steering committee of “Poverty Talks!” – a collaborative civic engagement project launched jointly by the Calgary and District Labour Congress and the Alberta College of Social Workers. The Calgary Scope Society, a nonprofit organization devoted to improving the lives of people with developmental disabilities, serves as the initiative’s fiscal agent. Poverty Talks! aims to give people who live in poverty the leadership skills and knowledge they need to become involved in the electoral process in order to raise public awareness of poverty issues. Poverty Talks! will offer workshops in at least three low-income neighbourhoods. Participants will learn to identify key concerns and develop action plans which will ensure that their issues receive attention during municipal, provincial and federal elections.

Work done by VCC to increase voter turnout – though important – left several of its original civic engagement goals for another day. VCC partners and city officials continue to discuss exactly what they each mean by the term civic engagement, preparing the way for future collaboration and action. In the meantime, VCC is following partner feedback from its 2007 Connections and Reflections event which directed VCC to continue empowering Calgarians to participate fully in provincial and federal elections, expected in as early as 2008.

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