

## ***Hamilton's McQuesten Neighbourhood: What a Difference 90 Days Can Make***

*This story describes a community-based initiative designed by members and groups affiliated with the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction (HRPR), a Vibrant Communities convener organization. There are more than 150 such initiatives linked to the Roundtable. HRPR is a cross-sectoral community problem-solving table with a strategic focus on poverty and the aspiration of "making Hamilton the best place to raise a child."*

### ***Challenge***

The 240 townhouse units grouped around Hamilton's Oriole Crescent comprise the City's largest social housing development. Split into two complexes, 1 and 2 Oriole Crescent were built in the 1960s. 1 Oriole, smaller in size, went through a city-funded refurbishment in 2006. Walkway lighting was redone, backyards and retaining walls were improved and public areas were landscaped. KaBOOM!, an internationally-renowned play space design firm, helped residents plan and build a popular play structure. Families in 2 Oriole – larger, labyrinthine and poorly lit – were waiting for the completion of similar improvements and were disappointed that planning for their complex had progressed more slowly.

In late 2007, Oriole Crescent was brought to the attention of members of Hamilton's Affordable Housing Flagship. This group had formed in 2002 with senior leadership from the City of Hamilton, the private sector, and community agencies and volunteers. Though it includes City employee members, it functions separately from the municipality. This arrangement allows greater flexibility on both sides of the relationship: When the City approached the Flagship with concerns about its affordable housing stock in Oriole Crescent, members were pleased by the opportunity to get more actively involved in the work of community development.

Oriole Crescent is part of the McQuesten neighbourhood, an area of the City that began to grow after World War II. When members of the Flagship started meeting with resident groups on Oriole

Crescent, they soon learned that a community planning body had been operating in McQuesten as a result of neighbourhood development initiatives begun by the Hamilton Community Foundation in 2002. The McQuesten Community Planning Team (MCPT) had slowly built its capacity to take on small neighbourhood improvement projects and had arrived at a successful problem-solving model for larger initiatives with multiple partner involvement.

Members of the MCPT joined with the Flagship and with tenants and landlords from Oriole Crescent at the Flagship's second community meeting. Says Theresa Phair, resident and chair of the McQuesten Planning Team: "Over the last six years, the neighbourhood has evolved an approach where we review programs and people as they come in, and we ask them to introduce themselves to residents at our monthly meetings. For some agencies, this can be uncomfortable – they're used to delivering a service, not entering into a relationship with residents. The Flagship members were open to our way of working and our desire to keep the needs of the whole neighbourhood – including Oriole Crescent – in view."

For their part, Flagship members appreciated having an established and active community organization in place. Having participants who were interested and willing in engaging in a neighbourhood improvement process considerably shortened the time usually required to build relationships, identify issues and locate community leaders.

The combined group quickly selected ten issues that needed immediate attention. Newly-appointed Director of Housing Chris Murray realized that the group was ripe for action and came up with a radical notion: How far could they get with these issues in 90 days? What commitments were people willing to make?

Says Flagship member Jeff Wingard, Senior Social Planner with the Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton: "Fortunately, the McQuesten Community Planning Team had six years of experience in community development work and had achieved many successes. Our combined approach was to create a 90-day plan which focused attention on Oriole Crescent but which also acknowledged longer-term issues and other ongoing projects."

### *Accomplishments*

The first McQuesten 90-day plan operated from mid-December 2007 to late March 2008. A second 90-day project went from mid-April to August 31, 2008. Participants worked on 15 projects, summarized below.

#### *completed projects:*

- signage for Oriole Crescent: Because of the housing development's complicated layout, residents asked that the City erect maps at all entrances to Oriole 1 and 2; requested in February, the signs were posted by April 1

- a community profile was completed by the McMaster School of Nursing with City Housing Hamilton providing an up-to-date overview of the neighbourhood
- submission made to the Hamilton Community Foundation’s “Tackling Poverty Together Phase 2: Building Strong Communities” initiative that detailed service providers’ responses to community-identified needs (grants of \$120,000 have since been awarded for neighbourhood projects)
- lighting changes at 2 Oriole – audit completed, lighting installed
- grocery store shuttle bus – residents secured a donated van (including gas and insurance) which runs every two weeks; residents also arrange scheduling, driving and child care
- Lowe’s home improvement store – manager of this large, US-based chain store was introduced to the neighbourhood initiative
- positive neighbourhood marketing strategy developed – service “crawl” event in June introduced people to local agencies and services, 700 attended a community barbecue and plans are in the works for a hockey tournament
- ensured the continuation of neighbourhood workers and tenant organizations.

*continuing projects:*

- Oriole redevelopment plan, including tenant consultations and considering mixing tenant types and making neighbourhood buildings available for services
- playground and community gardens for McQuesten – 13 family gardens established, playground sub-committee formed
- employment strategy – by August, it was agreed that Ontario Works and Best Start will use the next 90-day period to consult and develop a recommendation for service at 2 Oriole and the surrounding neighbourhood – also exploring social enterprise models for tasks such as lawn maintenance and groundskeeping
- police services and public safety/security – locally-assigned officer recently returned from parental leave, volunteers are to meet with him to begin a process
- public transportation – issue identified that McQuesten and Oriole are isolated from community amenities and that transit service is inadequate
- an Ontario Works manager may be invited to locate in the neighbourhood. Residents will participate in a large group discussion to determine whether this plan would be seen as a desirable option.

Not all of the projects were completed within the two 90-day planning blocks and some of the issues – employability in particular – defy easy solutions. Nonetheless, the 90-day plans demonstrated that long-term issues can be moved forward significantly by short-term initiatives. For the time being, the Flagship and McQuesten Community Planning Team will continue developing 90-day action plans.

Says Community Development Worker David Derbyshire: “We had two essential success ingredients: a capable resident planning body that grew from the Hamilton Community Foundation’s early work on neighbourhoods, and an effective, people-oriented Director of Housing who accurately read the community’s desire for action.”

## *Lessons*

The 90-day model provides targets and deliverables that will help McQuesten planners orient longer-term work. Affordable Housing Flagship members are also interested in how their resource- and labour-intensive 90-day experiences can translate to other Hamilton neighbourhoods. Says Jeff Wingard: “It’s a balance between putting a lot of time and resources into one area, while remembering the other high needs neighbourhoods that also need assistance. The 90-day process was helpful at the micro level, but an important question is how to scale up the response and apply the lessons we’ve learned across the city.”

Jeff continues: “We’re still waiting to see what we can do about some of the deep poverty issues that this work has brought into clearer light. The neighbourhood lens is small enough that interventions are easier to put in place than if you have to work on a city-wide basis. You also get to hear the personal stories that put a real face on policy issues. For example, one Oriole Crescent resident has done all the right things to build herself a better life. She took some career retraining, secured a good job with a decent salary but then saw her rent jump from \$300 to \$1,100 a month in her rent-geared-to-income apartment. Will we be able to turn experiences like these into better policy?”

Meanwhile, Theresa Phair’s life has been transformed by her volunteer work in the McQuesten neighbourhood. This fall, she will begin a two-year course of study to become a community development worker. Her dream is to teach people across Canada and the US the lessons she has learned about making neighbourhoods the best places they can be. Says Theresa: “I’ve found my life’s work and I’ve found other people who are as excited by community development as I am.” Her energy and vision demonstrate a deep understanding of the McQuesten Planning Team’s motto: “Not about us without us.” Policy makers take note.

*Anne Makhoul*

Copyright © 2008 by The Caledon Institute of Social Policy  
1390 Prince of Wales Drive, Suite 401, Ottawa, ON K2C 3N6 CANADA  
Phone: (613) 729-3340 Fax: (613) 729-3896  
E-mail: [caledon@caledoninst.org](mailto:caledon@caledoninst.org) Website: [www.caledoninst.org](http://www.caledoninst.org)