

Shaping a Civic Future

Executive Summary, April 2002

Issue Statement

Toronto Neighbourhood Centres believes that we urgently need to develop strategies and policies that lead to the mobilization of increased public resources and community capacity to halt and reverse the growth in poverty and inequality throughout our city.

Our experiences with the last municipal budgets have demonstrated that our city does not have the capacity to implement proactive and strategic social policy responses. The TNC and other community organizations have had to use scarce resources to mobilize community voices to slow the erosion of services that are needed for a livable city. The reality is that policy and resources in all of these areas are woefully inadequate to support the dynamic and diverse communities of Toronto as we enter the 21st century.

In this regard establishing new financial arrangements with other levels of government is paramount for Toronto, especially with regard to regaining a capacity to address the worsening social conditions in our city.

Goals and Activities

Toronto Neighbourhood Centres and Toronto CAN! (Civic Action Network) initiated the Shaping a Civic Future Education Project in the Fall of 2001, with funding provided by the Maytree Foundation, as part of our response to the realities of declining social well being in our communities and inadequate government social policy.

The goals of this five-month initiative were to engage community members in debate about creating and sustaining a livable city, and build increased public awareness of the need for new government policies to achieve this goal. Further we wished to enhance community confidence and capacity to advocate with their provincial and federal elected political representatives for a new urban agenda to effectively support community well-being.

The Shaping a Civic Future initiative used popular education materials to support discussions with concerned residents and neighbourhood agency volunteer board members. These discussions highlighted the reality that current financial relationships between our governments do not enable our city to even begin to address the social development needs of our communities. Further we suggested that the reliance upon property taxes alone to fund social programs is neither sustainable nor desirable.

During the period September 2001 – January 2002, seven community meetings were held with almost 150 concerned citizens participating. Further presentations were made to four Boards of Directors of community agencies with approximately forty-five community members and volunteers participating.

A concluding meeting of interested volunteers from communities across the city was held at the Maytree Foundation on February 27, 2002. This reference group reviewed the project report and provided feedback and recommendations, highlighting the need for clearer messages to be developed regarding communities' social development goals, and

further work required to engage the broader public in these issues.

Observations

The issue of how three levels of government need to collaborate to support local communities is broad and somewhat imposing. The most receptive audience for the information we presented was Board members of community agencies. These members have already demonstrated a commitment to civic engagement through the time they have invested in their local organizations. Many of them are well aware of the difficulty of sustaining a social infrastructure in the City of Toronto and the revenue challenges facing the City.

The capacity of concerned citizens to follow up on initial community meetings with next steps consisting of discussing their concerns with local MPs and MPPs varied greatly, and was often determined by whether or not they had staff support from community agencies or from the coordinator hired for the Shaping a Civic Future initiative.

Suggestions for Further Activity

Possible next steps identified by project participants included:

- working more closely with the media, particular the Toronto Star, to broaden the new deal policy debate by profiling community stories and concerns
- working with the United Way to develop leadership for a “community sector” voice in the new deal for cities debate
- developing a communications strategy that would translate social infrastructure policy demands into more accessible and popularized language
- continued support for community members who wish to take messages of concern forward to elected representatives (particularly MPs and MPPs)

Detailed policy recommendations with regard to the role of each level of government in supporting the social infrastructure of urban communities are presented in the final report. These suggestions should be further refined and developed to create a more cohesive statement of social policy demands that would address community needs.

Conclusion

The TNC remains committed to further work with local community members, voluntary sector organizations and other concerned individuals to urge all levels of government to share responsibility for shaping strong, equitable and vibrant communities.

Further community debate and mobilization should clearly be encouraged to build a stronger profile regarding social infrastructure issues, and they must become established as explicit policy priorities if any new deal for our City is to result in improved social well being for all of our citizens.

However, our work with the Shaping a Civic Future Community Education Initiative has underscored the fact that without dedicated staff or institutional support for leading and coordinating citizen activity in these areas, such efforts may remain fragmented and lose any capacity to gain the momentum that would be needed to effectively influence the public policy process.