

Engaging, Strengthening and Supporting Neighbourhoods of Lethbridge

Report and Recommendations

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Introduction

From research we know that connected communities thrive. In the early months of 2014 a community initiative focused on citizen engagement and building welcoming and inclusive communities was being created. By mid February, an initiative known as *Beyond Your Front Door* (BYFD) began a demonstration process of supporting the neighbourhoods of Lethbridge to be engaged in a continuous process of discovering “all” the people and places around them, and committing to action toward a welcoming and inclusive community. Two neighbourhoods, Westminster and London Road, were identified as the focus of the demonstration and the local neighbourhood groups of these communities were invited to partner in the BYFD initiative.

As BYFD proceeded through the initial demonstration phases, it was identified that all Lethbridge neighbourhoods were requiring expanded efforts as most were not yet engaged and participating in neighbourhood life to any degree. BYFD turned to engaging and building relationships with as many neighbourhoods as it could reach. Of the 43 residential neighbourhoods in Lethbridge, 24 are currently engaged at some level, with 5 hosting Neighbourhood Associations and 8 in the process of establishing a formal association.

Through the term of the BYFD demonstration (January to September 2014), there had been great success and learning; although it was recognized that there was more to be accomplished. The *Beyond Your Front Door Demonstration Report* was published describing the process of the

initiative, illustrating its successes and identifying its learning's. However, significant information had been revealed during the process and it was felt that releasing the learning's of BYFD would provide key information moving forward. This particular report was published to illustrate the importance of continuing the momentum of the work being done in our neighbourhoods, considering next steps for the BYFD neighbourhood initiative.

Thoughts from the Community

Three neighbourhoods have been involved with the BYFD demonstration, consisting of a partnership and collaboration with four neighbourhood groups: London Road Neighbourhood Association (LRNA), Westminster Neighbourhood Association (WNA), Westminster Village Committee (WVC) and Senator Buchanan Neighbourhood Association (SeBuNA). These groups were asked to provide feedback on BYFD and recommendations for future supports and services. The comments were encouraging:

London Road Neighbourhood Association (LRNA)

There has been great value in the BYFD initiative, bringing neighbours together and providing a collection of amazing ideas, from the Community Idea Share, to create a more inclusive and engaged community.

“Great value in the BYFD initiative”

The newly elected chair of LRNA, Kim Siever, believes that it is important to continue a partnership between the City of Lethbridge and the various neighbourhoods that make up the greater community. It is crucial to create a strong sense of community, and “as neighbourhoods develop a sense of community, the city as a whole will as well,” says Siever.

An effective way to build community as a city is through collaborative, neighbourhood-focused, grassroots approaches. Siever believes that “getting people to become advocates and supporters of their own neighbourhoods will ultimately make them advocates and supporters of the city.” This is supported by research (more on page 7).

Siever recommends that “having [a] support person at the City of Lethbridge to help community associations organize and to provide support for administration, grant proposals [and] advocacy, would be a huge asset to all our community organizations, and would go a long way to building great communities in our city.”

Currently, with support from BYFD, Siever has begun the process of establishing an umbrella committee of all formally organized neighbourhood groups in Lethbridge. Other than the four groups involved with the BYFD demonstration there is one other informal group, the Tudor

Estates Neighbourhood Association, and many other emerging neighbourhoods (see map in appendix A). This coalition of neighbourhood groups is informally known as the *Council of Lethbridge Neighbourhoods* (CLAN). Their primary mandate is to seek and support other neighbourhood groups wanting to organize. With other emerging neighbourhoods increasing, BYFD and Siever are in the process of supporting these groups to formally organize into registered associations.

Westminster Neighbourhood Association (WNA)

The process with BYFD has been a positive learning experience. There is the ability to network with other community minded individuals, although it has proven difficult to make these connections within the neighbourhood of Westminster. George Duncan, chair of the WNA, notes that “unfortunately, most of the people that are trying to promote, assist, and carry the neighbourhood are not from the neighbourhood,” with Duncan himself being a resident of the Uplands community.

“A positive learning experience”

Westminster Neighbourhood

The Westminster neighbourhood has two community groups supporting their neighbourhood.

The WNA has been long established, but their focus has shifted to primarily running the pool and community centre, and have non-neighbourhood residence on the board. As such, the WVC evolved in the past couple years to focus on development issues in the neighbourhood and to provide a resident voice.

Duncan recognizes the importance of engaging the neighbourhood residents and believes that “with the assistance of BYFD we may be able to increase the awareness of the members of the neighbourhood.” For such an active association, running the outdoor pool and a Community Centre, more people power is essential to continued success. The current “volunteer board [is] being stretched very thin and not able to be as involved as we need to be in [the neighbourhood],” states Duncan.

Westminster Village Committee (WVC)

As a newly created neighbourhood group, BYFD has been a significant asset to WVC providing some direction in the establishment of the committee. This initiative has also provided WVC with opportunities that would otherwise not be available. One such opportunity being the recent celebration of the Westminster neighbourhood during the first ever Westminster Village Fair, with support from BYFD.

“A wonderful asset to communities”

When responding to further city support, Kaillash Kailash, a director on the WVC board, acknowledges the importance of a city support person; “the Community Coordinator [would be] very helpful for facilitating, promoting and ensuring community planning and development and negotiating and monitoring community empowerment and transfer initiatives in order to secure and monitor opportunities for community development.”

Senator Buchanan Neighbourhood Association (SeBuNA)

Kathy Kurze, chair of SeBuNA, declares that “BYFD has been a godsend to our community. Prior to being involved with this initiative “our community was stumbling about trying to find help for our issues,” says Kurze. BYFD provided the information and support needed to move forward, in weeks rather than months, into accomplishing results. This has kept the residents engaged and has reduced frustrations. With the support of BYFD, SeBuNA has formally organized themselves as a neighbourhood association, creating opportunities for further community development.

“A godsend to our community”

Kurze notes that “by organizing the community it allows the citizens more engagement and collectiveness, where we feel we have more control over our environment.” She also describes the benefit of a neighbourhood association working with the City: “by working with the various departments within the City more appropriately, there is less frustrations on both sides, the issues are addressed in a timely manner, thereby reducing the cost and burdens on the City’s departments, producing cost savings and improved job and community satisfaction.”

Other Municipal Experiences

There are several municipalities across Canada which support their neighbourhoods in various ways. This report provides three case examples of community organizations located in the Prairie Provinces: Calgary, Edmonton and Regina. By analyzing these other community efforts we gain insight into what we as an urban center can do to support *our* neighbourhoods.

Calgary: Federation of Calgary Communities

The Federation exists to provide support to its members (including community associations) and to provide an informed and respected voice on issues important to building, supporting,

and maintaining community life in Calgary. The Federation is also dedicated to *improving neighbourhood life in Calgary by providing services and programs that create, support, and enhance vital and representative community based associations*; offering five different and unique services to member organizations: financial services, bookkeeping, urban planning, member services, celebrating communities and building safe communities. The federation operates with commitment, integrity and leadership, recognizing community, diversity and volunteerism.

More information at: www.calgarycommunities.com

Edmonton: Edmonton Federation of Community Leagues

The Federation is an umbrella group which is the liaison between the City of Edmonton and neighbourhood groups. The role of the Federation is to speak on behalf of and lobby for all community leagues. It also assists and supports the work of community leagues through promotion of the community league movement, program development and delivery, workshops, regular communications, advice on issues and opportunities, joint purchase of supplies, and attraction of sponsorships. The Federation even secures Community League funding and support and ensures City of Edmonton decisions and plans reflect the interests of the members. The federation focuses its work on: issues that have a city-wide implication for community leagues, issues that may affect a majority of community leagues either directly or indirectly and issues that will affect future community leagues where there is currently none to represent their long-term interests.

More information at: www.efcl.org

History of Edmonton and Calgary Federations

Both federations started while the cities were young and growing. Edmonton, in 1907, earned the distinction of being the first city in Canada to adopt the concept of community-based organizations. *The Edmonton Federation of Community Leagues was founded in 1921, with a municipal population of 58,821*, on the recommendation of the leagues who wanted a stronger voice with City Council and other orders of government. In Calgary the earliest community associations were formed during the 1920s to provide Calgarians with formal recreational programs and facilities. By the 1950's, with a municipal population around 132,000, communities started to face common concerns, prompting the necessity of one united voice to coordinate and liase with community services. The Federation of Calgary Communities was formally incorporated in 1961.

NOTE: neither Federation has jurisdiction over the community (neighbourhood) groups. Each group is a separate organization, incorporated as a not-for-profit entity under the *Societies Act* of Alberta. Each operated by a volunteer board of directors elected by members who live in the community. Every community group has its own bylaws, policies and procedures, and offers programs in the community to the best of the abilities of the group's volunteers.

City of Regina

The City of Regina functions a little different from Calgary and Edmonton. Neighbourhood services are facilitated through the Recreation Department of the City, with a primary focus on recreation but also providing a wide range of other programs and services for community service development (i.e., community gardens, celebrations and subsidy programs). The city is divided into 5 Zone Boards and 28 Community Associations. The Zone Boards provide zone-wide programming to their residents and act as umbrella organizations which liaise between the city and the neighbourhood groups. The Community Associations are made up entirely of volunteers who: provide community recreation programs; provide outdoor rink supervision; organize; coach and instruct sport opportunities for families; organize community events; and represents the community's concern on civic affairs, community development issues, urban planning and development, and parks and facility planning and development.

More information at: www.regina.ca/residents/recreation/zones-community-asscoiation/

Research and Supporting City Documents

Research

There is plenty of research that supports the importance of social connection and investment in our communities. This same research is what guides BYFD, as well as supporting the statements made by the four neighbourhood groups.

Primarily, research emphasizes the importance of social engagement and social connection, specifically within one's own neighbourhood. In *Promoting Community Change*, Parada et al. declare that "the quality of our lives is affected by the conditions that exist in the area captured by the view from our front door." In other words, what occurs in our neighbourhoods will have an effect on us, positively or negatively.

Research indicates that people are increasingly isolating themselves from community, having negative effects on wellbeing and safety. A 2014 article in Maclean's magazine, *The End of Neighbours*, reports that more than 30 percent of Canadians now say they feel disconnected from their neighbours. The article continues to cite research affirming this phenomenon of community isolation as "poisoning our politics and, quite literally, killing us."

Susan Pinker's, author of *The Village Effect*, argues that humans, as a social species, need face-to-face contact as they need air and water – we have evolved for it. Author of *The Vanishing Neighbour*, Marc Dunkelman, notes disconnection from our neighbours leads to increasingly polarized politics and a steady decline in political and community involvement.

Importantly there are significant benefits to promoting a strong sense of community, as stated by the FCSS Neighbourhood Development Overview (2012):

- ✓ Having strong support networks and relationships has a positive impact on our health
- ✓ Connected neighbours lead to individual and community well-being: feeling safe; being engaged; and having an overall sense of belonging
- ✓ Opportunities to socialize helps create emotional bonds between people and their community
- ✓ Connected neighbourhoods are the vehicle for social change
- ✓ Community is the core to happiness

City Support

The City of Lethbridge has been taking an active role in providing a strong social infrastructure for its citizens by developing a social policy with a focused framework, *Towards a Brighter Future*, and an *Integrated Community Sustainability Plan/Municipal Development Plan* (ICSP/MDP). Within these documents the city has also declared its intentions to work with neighbourhoods towards greater and stronger community development.

“The City of Lethbridge envisions a city in which all individuals, families and communities have opportunities for healthy development leading to social well-being.”

In the City of Lethbridge Social Policy the long term community outcome is “strong, healthy families and a safe, viable community.” The policy lists various ways to achieve this outcome, all of which can occur at the neighbourhood level. In particular, “shared responsibility,” connotes the involvement of such groups as neighbourhood associations being partially responsible for the well-being of their neighbours. The guiding principles of the policy support this when mentioning “partnerships and collaboration between people, associations, institutions and government are fundamental to creating the momentum required for social change.” And, “volunteerism is linked to positive outcomes for individuals and the community.”

The ICSP/MDP was developed to provide City Council and the community with a framework that will guide development within Lethbridge over the next 40 years. This document highlights the importance of neighbourhood associations and the collaboration between them and the City toward greater community development. In section 5, *Plan Your City*, a related principle states that “Lethbridge is a community that values *open dialogue* on all aspects of its public life, encouraging *citizen engagement* and *grassroots leadership*, and celebrating the contribution of our numerous *volunteers*.” This describes well the importance of neighbourhood associations and the partnership between them and the City. Further, the goals of Plan Your City include actively engaging residents in all facets of governance and community life.

In the ICSP/MDP the City also recognizes the importance of a healthy and diverse city. The City will support opportunities for residents to meet, build relationships, stay active, and undertake activities that foster a sense of belonging in Lethbridge. In this light, the document notes that an example action is to “collaborate with neighbourhood associations.”

From the ICSP/MDP framework, the current City Council has developed their Strategic Plan for the next few years. Listed in the values of this document is the encouragement of citizen participation and leadership. In Strategic Goal #1 City Council embraces its role in leadership by strengthening the process of governance. As such, City Council encourages and enhances citizen engagement by: encouraging citizens to get involved in opportunities that make a better community, and identify and engage stakeholders in the decisions of City Council, and encourage active participation. These are aspects which neighbourhood associations are fundamental.

In Strategic Goal# 3, City Council stewards Lethbridge toward a well-designed city by ensuring quality urban design, is a great initiative to have neighbourhood associations continuously involved. Some neighbourhood groups are already involved in this process, with many more excited to be engaged. With the City “establish[ing] a strategic approach to neighbourhood renewal that balances neighbourhood vision with infrastructure renewal,” who better to be involved than the residents of those neighbourhoods? An area that has been identified as important to the neighbourhoods, as they develop their sense of community and connections, are community spaces. These specific community spaces, however, would be focused on and localized in the neighbourhoods, as community hubs that encourage engagement and connection among neighbours.

“The City will... collaborate with neighbourhood associations... [to] support opportunities for residents to meet, build relationships, stay active, and undertake activities that foster a sense of belonging within Lethbridge.”

Importantly, Strategic Goal #4 is in direct relation to BYFD, as a CMARD initiative, which has been working with various neighbourhood groups since early this year. This goal commits City Council to foster a safe, healthy and vibrant community through inclusive policies, recreational and cultural opportunities and collaboration. Example areas where neighbourhood groups can be a great asset are: developing strategies to increase opportunities for less structured active recreation in all seasons, and encourage the ongoing efforts of community organizations in the delivery of festivals and events. The recently held Neighbour Day is a great example of what neighbourhoods can do in their respective communities, with various events occurring across Lethbridge celebrating community connection and neighborliness. Refer to the Neighbour Day YQL (2015) report to learn more about the exciting events.

The above mentioned only scratches the surface of how neighbourhood groups, through collaboration with all other neighbourhoods, can be involved in the development of a healthy and sustainable city. These documents also significantly demonstrate the commitment already made by the City to support neighbourhoods, recognizing the importance of collaboration with neighbourhood groups toward achieving City goals.

With the Strategic Plan being a “living document that may incorporate emerging issues or initiatives,” now is the time to act! The language of commitment from the City is there, and citizen engagement in working with the City is increasingly emerging; now further *action* needs to happen. The next section provides recommendations of such action to support our neighbourhoods to a greater capacity through the development and support of organized neighbourhood groups.

Recommendations

In this report we heard the voices of our existing neighbourhood associations providing feedback of the importance of engaging and supporting our neighbourhoods, and their recommendations for future supports and services. There were case examples of how other municipalities are currently providing such supports and services to their communities. As well, the report highlights some of the research and City documents promoting neighbourhood (social) development.

This report is designed to illustrate the importance of engaging, strengthening and supporting the neighbourhoods of Lethbridge. But the primary intention of the report is to make immediate action to support our neighbourhoods through the following recommendations.

Recommendation: Council of Lethbridge Neighbourhoods

Lethbridge currently has 43 neighbourhoods, with only five of them organized into Neighbourhood Associations, one neighbourhood having two associations. Currently there are efforts to support the other 39 neighbourhoods to organize, with eight in the process and twelve more engaged to some degree.

It is believed that through the formal organization of neighbourhoods brings greater success for the communities of Lethbridge. This is accomplished through a unified voice for citizen concerns from a neighbourhood perspective. It also facilitates an everyday social dynamic to support the individuals and families of the neighbourhood.

In their Strategic Plan (2012-2015), the Federation of Calgary Communities notes the importance of neighbourhood organization:

“[Neighbourhood] Associations have the potential to be on the front lines, at the neighbourhood level of important social, cultural, environmental and community issues. They can respond in countless ways to the needs of their residents; fostering and

supporting them to fully and actively engage in community and civic life.... [Neighbourhood] Associations have the potential to mobilize citizens and local resources to make a vital contribution to community life – enriching the quality of life and well being of their communities. Overall, [Neighbourhood] Associations can provide a shared sense of citizenship and inclusion.”

Neighbourhood Associations can be the anchor for community life but they need support to effectively operate in today’s competitive not-for-profit world. They need a resource that will help link common issues and concerns across communities. They need a support that understands their needs, assists their work and can work on their behalf. The Council of Lethbridge Neighbourhoods is that support.

Currently, the five official neighbourhood groups and the other informal neighbourhood groups in Lethbridge are organizing into an umbrella coalition, known as the Council of Lethbridge Neighbourhoods (CLAN). They are an enthusiastic group. Being in their infancy, however, support and encouragement to grow and strengthen as a sustainable coalition is important. This supportive role is what the BYFD initiative has been providing in its limited capacity.

There are hopes and intentions to strengthen CLAN as a legitimate and official organization. As CLAN is a new formation, there has been little discussion about what the organization will be, but there have been conversations about what it can be. Within 5-8 years the direction of CLAN is a prospective registered not-for-profit organization with developed services and programs. It will support a proposed mission to improve neighbourhood life in Lethbridge by providing services and programs that create, support, and enhance vital and representative community based associations.

There is opportunity for the City to take an active role in supporting and funding this umbrella organization, much like the other municipalities noted in this report.

Recommendation: City Position – Neighbourhood Support Coordinator

The BYFD initiative has been supported by a term position employee as the Project Coordinator. This position was established from funding allocated to Building Friendly, Welcoming and Inclusive Neighbourhood as a Social Policy Priority; making it possible to create opportunities and support the recent neighbourhood association development and community initiatives. This report recognizes the importance and benefits of establishing a permanent, full-time position which focuses on supporting neighbourhood groups, partnered with CLAN, and acting as the liaison between the City and the neighbourhood groups.

This Neighbourhood Support Coordinator position will offer many benefits, much of them resembling that of the case example municipalities and reflecting the commitments made by our City, as illustrated in this report. Such services and supports could be: assisting community groups in organizing and to provide support for community engagement, administration, funding support (grant proposals), and advocacy. This coordination position can also provide support with development and other neighbourhood issues.

Specifically, there should be a focus on the socioeconomic component of community, with a general scope on the physical infrastructure and development factors and how they interact with the socioeconomic dynamics. This would enhance existing City departments focused on physical infrastructure and development, while acknowledging the importance of a strong social infrastructure for greater community success.

“It is becoming increasingly evident that strong social infrastructure is also critical to ensuring citizen well-being, sound economic development and healthy, sustainable cities.”

Towards a Brighter Future

The socioeconomic aspect is essential at this stage of development to engage emerging neighbourhoods and support developing neighbourhood groups. As found in the research, it is social disconnection that has co-lead to the current challenges in our neighbourhoods, and it is social programs and initiatives that can support the shift toward healthier and stronger communities.

It is further suggested that with the establishment of this Neighbourhood Support Coordinator position that the BYFD initiative remain as a program, as it has already created a significant impact on our neighbourhoods and has been a catalyst to engaging our communities. BYFD would be one of multiple programs developed to support our communities. Upon the creation of the Neighbourhood Support Coordinator position, of the first tasks will be to develop evidence-based programs as well as necessary services that will effectively support our neighbourhoods.

By providing these essential supports to our neighbourhoods we will meet with success in the development of healthy, vibrant and strong communities.



Appendix A: Neighbourhood Association Map

