

Vibrant Surrey: Bridging the Gaps and Consolidating Strengths

How do comprehensive, multisectoral initiatives contribute to poverty reduction? The Trail Builders in Vibrant Communities are experimenting with a variety of approaches. This series documents their experiences. For each Trail Builder, an initial story will present the key ideas guiding its work: how local partners understand poverty, the role they can play in reducing poverty, their goals and the core strategies to achieve results. Subsequent stories will provide annual updates on progress, challenges, lessons and adjustments. Vibrant Communities is a pan-Canadian initiative in which representatives from 15 urban centres have come together to explore local solutions to poverty. Trail Builders will provide insights that fuel the learning within Vibrant Communities and with others interested in the role that collaborations can play in tackling poverty.

A suburb no more

Thanks to low rents and the availability of affordable housing, the City of Surrey, BC. is one of Canada's fastest-growing municipalities. Its population is currently estimated at 388,000 [www.surrey.ca] and it is shortly expected to overtake Vancouver as the largest city in the province. Over the past decade, the number of residents has grown by more than 25 percent and that rate of growth, though slowing somewhat, is expected to remain high for the next 20 years.

Like other municipalities that have evolved into commuter communities, Surrey's built environment has been greatly influenced by the constraints of transportation and land use. Rectangle-shaped Surrey is most densely populated at its northern and southern ends, with a central belt of agricultural and forest lands. The City has six municipal centres, none of which is recognized as a community 'heart.'

Surrey is experiencing the growing pains common among Canadian cities – decaying affordable housing stock, high poverty rates and high levels of unemployment and poverty among recent immigrants, youth and Aboriginals. Women are also represented disproportionately in Surrey’s low-income population. In addition, its social capital is weak. Despite a population similar to Vancouver, its nearest urban neighbour, Surrey is estimated to have one-eighth the social services, government infrastructure and networks.

Covering 371 square kilometers, Surrey’s economic base is a mix of manufacturing, high tech, agriculture and commercial services. The majority of employers in Surrey own small businesses and cannot pay their employees sufficiently well for them to afford the cost of living in the Lower Mainland, with the result that many residents commute to other parts of the region for work.

Slightly more than 18 percent of Surrey residents lived below the low-income cut off (LICO) in 2001 and just under one-quarter of families were led by a lone parent. More than one-third of residents were born outside of Canada. Surrey is estimated by the local Aboriginal Cultural Society to now have the highest urban Aboriginal population in the province. Statistics indicate that this population, visible minorities, recent immigrants, lone-parent families, persons with disabilities and women experience higher average levels of poverty [Vibrant Surrey 2006].

Despite its high growth forecasts, Surrey’s stock of affordable housing is deteriorating at a fast rate and being replaced by high-cost new developments. Alongside these changes, property values have increased substantially over the last five years, as they have across much of the province. Though there are some areas of

the city with concentrations of decaying housing stock and higher crime rates, people living on low incomes are spread throughout the six major areas of Surrey. Transportation presents another barrier to prosperity – the current system does not provide adequate access across neighbourhoods and city centres, and is too costly for households on fixed incomes.

The need for a convening organization

There is no social planning council or other community-based organization or structure in Surrey through which to conduct multisectoral community planning. For a comprehensive community initiative like Vibrant Communities, institutional capacity is what drives strategic intervention. Strengthening that capacity in Surrey is the top priority.

Over the last few years, shifts in government policy and funding delivery systems have created an increasingly competitive environment for nonprofit and community organizations in BC. Beginning in 1999 when United Way of the Lower Mainland, Surrey Social Futures Society and a local task force developed a Community Impact Profile (CIP), it was clear that there was a role for an organization that could build collaborative efforts – but that would not compete for funds.

In 2001, Community Solutions – a United Way initiative led by Surrey Social Futures – set up a task force on poverty and another on housing and homelessness. Shortly after, North Fraser Community Futures Corporation submitted a funding proposal which was based on the Surrey CIP and neighbourhood profiles. Community Innovations – a for-profit organization which supports entrepreneurs – was created. As a result of these efforts, community

organizers were invited to explore the possibilities offered by Vibrant Communities for community development and poverty reduction. By June 2003, seven organizations had joined a Vibrant Surrey coalition. Over the next few years, the coalition focused on engaging key individuals and organizations in supporting the development of a community vision for poverty reduction.

In 2006, with a membership of more than 20 organizations and still growing, Vibrant Surrey was ready to apply for Phase II Trail Builder funding and began to formulate a three-year Strategic Plan. It is currently exploring a new governance model, including the possibility of creating a legal entity that would retain the benefits of working as a coalition.

A 13-member Operations Committee acts as Vibrant Surrey's primary decision-making body. They are:

- Deanna Bhandar, Coast Capital Savings
- Steve Dooley, Kwantlen University College
- Ray Hudson, Surrey Board of Trade
- Sanjeev Nand, Surrey/Delta Immigrant Services Society
- Sonya Boyce, Surrey Women's Centre
- Wendy Rogers, Vancity Community Foundation
- Gill Eston, Service Canada (*ex officio* member)
- Sean Markey, Simon Fraser University, Surrey Campus
- Bill Beatty, Sustainable Employment Network Inc. (SENI)
- Linda Western, United Way of Lower Mainland

- Klaus B. Werner, North Fraser Community Futures Development Corporation
- Michel Pouliot, Pacific Community Resources Society
- Louise Hara, Coordinator, Vibrant Surrey

Carving out a role for Vibrant Surrey will involve identifying the grey areas in community development where no one organization has assumed responsibility for addressing an issue, or where a concern is considered under-served. Vibrant Surrey organizers see the initiative as a project incubator and facilitator – a builder of social and institutional capacity. Rather than deliver programs, staff will establish mechanisms to hear input from residents and service providers about what needs to be done in the community, clarify how those needs will be addressed and broker the start-up of initiatives. Says Vibrant Surrey Coordinator Louise Hara: “We want to extend networks, build knowledge, encourage community economic development initiatives, and enhance the potential for all other sectors to work in a more closely integrated manner.”

Organizers want to make sure they work collaboratively and fully understand the views, capacity and support requirements of the community. Once strategies are under way, Vibrant Surrey will track development and key learnings, always with a view to enlarging and expanding successful efforts.

A change in municipal government in 2005 has brought fresh energy to the work of creating change in Surrey. Mayor Diane Watts is prepared to do what is necessary to establish collaborative relationships at the provincial and federal levels that will lead to innovation and a focus of resources for greatest impact.

From poverty to prosperity

While recognizing the serious challenges to Surrey’s prosperity, Vibrant Surrey organizers plan to build on recent interest and success with the city’s newly-established social purchasing portal¹ and a home-locating and job placement program for homeless residents called Project Comeback. Both of these initiatives were undertaken by Vibrant Surrey member organizations. Surrey’s rich multicultural mix, the space it has to offer for development, housing and recreational ventures, and the involvement of more than 20 organizations in Vibrant Surrey’s work to date – including members of the business community – are key assets upon which organizers hope to build.

Vibrant Surrey is also working to develop a GIS mapping tool that will help provide a clearer picture of the community by breaking information down to the street level. Called the Economic Security Mapping Project and operating within strict privacy parameters, it will allow Vibrant Surrey and other organizations to reference and cross-reference numerous elements – e.g., the location of child care services and providers, libraries and schools can be combined with existing demographic and anecdotal information. This project and newer statistical data drawn from the latest Census will furnish rich data for identifying and understanding issues at the neighbourhood level.

Figure 1: Key Interventions for Poverty Reduction			
<p>Meeting Basic Needs</p> <p>Physical Security Food Housing & utilities Clothing Clean water & sanitation Protection from violence & abuse</p> <p>Health/Mental Health Health care services Early childhood development Self esteem & support Counselling & mental health services Substance abuse services Assistance with daily needs</p>	<p>Removing Barriers</p> <p>Child care Work-related costs Health-related costs Disability-related barriers Skills accreditation Access to transportation Legal services Racism Gender Analysis</p>	<p>Building Skills</p> <p>Life skills Language training Literacy & numeracy Job search Academic upgrading/ job training</p>	<p>Promoting Economic Development</p> <p>Job creation & retention Self-employment Access to capital Technical assistance Working poor/ Living wage</p>
Building Community Capacity			
Public education	Advocacy Multisectoral involvement	Research Fostering support systems	Networks and collaboration

This diagram is based on a framework developed by Sherri Torjman in a 1998 paper entitled “Community-Based Framework Reduction.”

Vibrant Surrey bases its work on a multi-dimensional understanding of poverty. Beyond living on a low income, it can also mean not having access to safe and affordable housing, not having much hope for the future and being unable to participate in the community or to build assets. Factors that can put people at risk of experiencing poverty include age, gender, ethnicity, migration, health, and physical and developmental disability. Vibrant Surrey is based on the principle that strategic interventions can assist people in their movement out of poverty (see Figure 1).

Goals and targets

Vibrant Surrey’s mission is to facilitate collaborative efforts in order to reduce poverty. Says Coordinator Louise Hara: “Vibrant Surrey’s mission, values and goals reflect the organization’s strong commitment to bridging difference and promoting inclusion. Its aim is to create a legacy of best practice and robust infrastructure which can deal with whatever challenges the community faces.”

The core work of the initiative is composed of three interwoven components by which it hopes to strengthen Surrey’s social infrastructure. These components are woven into specific strategies.

Component 1: Vibrant Surrey will strengthen capacity and increase social capital by: dedicating staff and resources to connecting individuals, groups and tables; supporting joint planning and visioning; brokering the use of existing assets to leverage new engagement and strengthen successful efforts; and bridging differences, where possible.

This work involves the creation of opportunities for people to come together and

connect around the problem of poverty. It includes building bridges and encouraging a community economic development (CED) agenda. While specific interventions around poverty may emerge from this work over time – each with possible impact on the quality of life – the more immediate, tangible outcomes will be in the areas of social capital and institutional capacity.

Vibrant Surrey defines CED as a way for communities to act together to decide what changes are needed to make Surrey a better, healthier place to work and live, and then to make those changes happen. Demonstrating the benefits of working in a collaborative fashion will increase stakeholders’ confidence in using this asset-based approach to address issues that have been divisive in the past.

Says Louise Hara: “Our experience with the Surrey social purchasing portal – while it effectively brought many business and employers in contact with potential new sources of goods and employees – taught us that there is far more to CED than building a tool and letting it run. Connections and synergies result from direct contact between people – the relationships we forge one person at a time. The personal, hands-on community building that accompanies CED will make it possible for residents to engage in the local economy. It will have the effect of overcoming the social exclusion that we believe is a root cause of poverty.”

The choice of CED as an approach to change was also influenced by the political climate at the time Vibrant Surrey was forming. Local government had embraced a ‘trickle down’ approach which assumed that social issues would be positively affected by increased economic development. Vibrant Surrey members felt that CED, which they defined as “increasing every

resident’s ability to engage in the local economy,” would pay double dividends. CED would make it more possible for local decision-makers to engage in the initiative, while allowing Vibrant Surrey to advance social exclusion as a root cause of poverty. Coast Capital Savings and Community Innovations – two founding members of Vibrant Surrey – were active in the field of CED, and could provide access to knowledge, skills and resources that would support long-term working relationships.

Organizers believe that there is a great appetite for change in Surrey, and that corporate citizens and others are keen to find effective solutions. However, business owners and residents in some parts of Surrey have taken to protecting their properties with steel fences and barbed wire. Historically, business and social service programs that support people on low incomes have not been well funded or even welcomed in these neighborhoods, but there are indications that these attitudes may be changing. Advancing the concept of CED and demonstrating its capacity to improve the economic outlook of neighbourhoods, while providing additional income to those living in poverty, would increase the potential for engaging stakeholders in solutions that work for everyone.

Component 2: Vibrant Surrey will incubate new ideas by providing access to seed or development money and funders, technical assistance and the engagement of champions.

VC Surrey hopes to play a catalytic role through brokering, facilitating, networking and developing resources and by engaging other community players. Rather than directly creating and managing initiatives, Vibrant Surrey hopes to remove barriers to action and connect people and ideas. A phrase coined by Opportunities

Niagara of “connecting the dots and untying the knots” describes the role Vibrant Surrey wishes to fulfill.

In addition, organizers are intent on developing a more strategic response for “moving the needle” in several priority areas: youth, immigration, Aboriginals and women. The specific strategies and outcomes for these focus areas will be determined over time. The financial services sector is one area in which promising strategies are being developed. A Vibrant Surrey strategy team is exploring the impact of aggressive marketing to people with multiple barriers to employment – e.g., pay day loan institutions and professional college and certification programs. (This second group offers courses which are expensive and of questionable value. The industry is self-regulated and ‘helps’ students secure bank loans of up to \$20,000 for two-year programs that result in no marketable skills or useable diploma.)

The ‘value added’ Vibrant Surrey brings is illustrated through the role it played in helping to launch the Surrey social purchasing portal and Project Comeback – an initiative that attaches homeless day labourers to market housing and sustained employment. A project to assist women working in the local sex trade is also under way. As these initiatives and the community project mapping work progress, Vibrant Surrey will seek to become more strategic and focused in its efforts.

Component 3: Vibrant Surrey will facilitate knowledge-sharing through comprehensive communication, evaluation and learning plans.

A learning agenda will be woven throughout all of Vibrant Surrey’s efforts. Ongoing

Vibrant Surrey's strategies for change

Strategy i: Increase understanding of poverty and poverty reduction best practices through research and evaluation

- establish an evaluation structure for Vibrant Surrey practices, projects and activities
- social capital and institutional capacity work
- in concert with those affected by poverty, establish a learning structure to be used in all activities and practices
- create links to established poverty reduction and CED tools and practices
- design and implement a strategy for sharing progress and learning across the initiative using community forums, web-based tools and print media.

Strategy ii: Demonstrate the benefits of working within a CED framework

- increase knowledge and access to resources
- using CED approaches, strengthen linkages and capacity within the community
- support existing initiatives and incubate innovative strategies that address barriers to successful participation in the local economy.

Strategy iii: Increase economic security through income and asset building

- support current projects, including support programs for the working homeless
- create a strategy for meeting the needs of sexually exploited women and youth
- create a strategy for addressing barriers to economic security for immigrants, youth, women and Aboriginals – identify service gaps, identify solutions, support initiatives which address the gaps
- improve access to and understanding of banking and other financial resources – e.g., increase financial literacy through education and outreach; create local solutions to accessing financial institutions.

Strategy iv: Develop and implement a community learning plan

- provide community access to national learning opportunities and strategies (e.g., Vibrant Communities' Pan Canadian Learning Community tele-learning sessions; web links to tools)
- develop a community learning strategy based on priorities identified in other strategic areas
- work with Vibrant Communities to support local learning
- establish links to elementary, secondary, postsecondary institutions and information networks to share learning opportunities and resources.

evaluation, feedback and change will shape the project's capacity-building and economic security components.

Vibrant Surrey will work to create learning opportunities for all those who engage in the initiative: members, stakeholders and the general public. Organizers believe that learning both results from action and informs action. It will be targeted to individuals, organizations and

institutions that are in a position to create change. Dissemination of lessons may be of a general nature for the community at large or specific to Vibrant Surrey's activities and outcomes, and will include a focus on unintended results. The intent is to set a context for change through shared learning, to inform those working in the initiative's activity areas, and to engage those who can most influence the kind of deep and durable systems change required to move people out of poverty.

Stretch targets

One way to conceptualize the size and scope of the work to be done by Vibrant Communities is to establish broad numeric targets. Referred to as "stretch targets," they provide organizers with the opportunity to establish a long-term vision of the work and what it could accomplish. Stretch targets provide motivation and generate excitement around the initiative, allowing all involved to 'think big.'

Vibrant Surrey organizers have set a target up to 2010 of supporting 1,000 households as they move from surviving to thriving. In addition to creating significant change in the lives of so many families, Vibrant Surrey hopes that some 10,000 people will be living in improved circumstances by that date, representing about 16 percent of Surrey residents who now fall below the low-income cutoff (LICO). The 10,000 figure will include 5,000 women, 4,000 immigrants, 1,700 youth and 400 Aboriginals. The members of each group are not mutually exclusive; the purpose in creating these targets is to pay special attention to vulnerable groups when designing strategies for improved economic well-being. In addition, Vibrant Surrey hopes that 500 new jobs that pay a sustainable income will be created through CED initiatives. (For the purposes of Vibrant Surrey, sustainable income goes beyond meeting immediate needs and allows households to thrive and build a future.)

As a measure of how well it engages new members and strengthens existing networks, Vibrant Surrey plans to engage numerous individuals and organization in its work, including:

- 60 nonprofit organizations
- 30 government representatives
- 100 individuals experiencing poverty
- 50 community representatives
- 25 business organizations.

Work to be done, questions to be answered

For the first year, Vibrant Surrey will focus on strengthening capacity and social capital. It will continue to support projects that are under way, while establishing an evaluation strategy through which members will reach out to the community in a systematic way. Says Coordinator Louise Hara: “The evaluation framework will help determine how well projects and practices match up with our visions and values. Each effort will be judged on its success and usefulness, whether it treats people respectfully, whether all the necessary players are engaged, and whether the initiative reflects and responds to the diversity of community needs. We are working to develop a series of lenses that we can use to understand the experiences of specific groups – women and immigrants, for example – to determine the most effective responses.”

As Surrey’s capacity to respond to all its citizens’ needs is strengthened and expanded, members of Vibrant Surrey hope to become more deeply involved with all sectors to identify the best tools for the work and to agree on priorities. Vibrant Surrey will continue to link with other initiatives and networks around poverty-related issues, such as homelessness. Members believe that they need to prepare themselves for such collaborative work by setting priorities within Surrey. This will mean offering assistance in a way which respects the history and processes of community work already begun.

The central question Vibrant Surrey seeks to answer is whether its efforts to bridge gaps and consolidate strengths will help build a better quality of life for all who call Surrey home.

Anne Makhoul

Endnote

1. A social purchasing portal (SPP) is an online gateway which allows businesses in a particular geographic area to make purchases on the basis of price, quality and social value. Blending corporate social responsibility with community economic development, SPPs match business suppliers with local purchasers, creating economic and employment activity. They can also help build community awareness and social cohesion. Several SPPs have been established across Canada.

References

Surrey website. www.surrey.ca

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1390 Prince of Wales Drive, Suite 401
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
K2C 3N6

Phone: (613) 729-3340

Fax: (613) 729-3896

E-mail: caledon@caledoninst.org

Website: www.caledoninst.org