

Neighbourhood Action: What Works Locally
ICE Network Meeting, May 26, 2006
St. Lawrence Hall, Toronto

Neighbourhood Action in Toronto: Why Now?
Remarks by Sue Corke, Deputy City Manager, City of Toronto

Thank you for inviting me today – it is a great pleasure to be here. A question has been posed – let me answer the second part first – why now? And then I want to talk about what city of Toronto's perspective is on neighbourhood action – what has been accomplished, and what our future hopes and plans are. We need to recognise of course that the city is only one spoke in the wheel.

Why Now? Four Really Good Reasons

First, the situation is urgent: in 2005 in Toronto there were more than 50 gun homicides – mostly related to gang activity. We called it the summer of the gun.

There is a shocking correlation between neighbourhoods where this violence occurred, and neighbourhoods identified as being at risk in recent work done by the United Way and other partners including the City. What does at risk mean – poor demographic and income indicators and very low investment in social, community and economic infrastructure.

Second, knowledge and experience: gun violence has spiked before – prompting the Mayor to initiate his community safety plan in 2003 focussing on three high risk neighbourhoods – Malvern, Jamestown and Kingston-Galloway.

As a result of work galvanised by the Panel and the Secretariat with many community partners from labour, from the education sector, from voluntary agencies, from grass roots organisations, from the faith community and from other orders of government – there have been many successes. You will hear about some of these as we proceed through the day.

Although limited geographically, and certainly on a shoe string budget, nevertheless this work has blazed a trail and given us confidence that communities do in fact know collectively what kinds of things need to be done. And there have been some funding commitments made to allow bits this work to continue. In addition there have been concerted local efforts in Regent Park which have also taught us the things that work.

Third, the crafting of a social consensus on going forward. This consensus consists of three prongs and prevails generally among the partners with whom we need to work. It is a consensus that crosses boundaries – private/public, labour/business, left/right, federal/provincial/municipal governments.

The first part of the consensus is that social intervention is a legitimate strategy to combat crime and violence in the longer term – not the only strategy, but a legitimate one. It posits that the phenomenon is a social issue and therefore amenable to a social intervention.

The second part of the consensus is that there are thirteen neighbourhoods where we really need to focus attention and resources in an integrated fashion.

The third part of the consensus is that the interventions should be focussed on the needs of youth.

A final reason for why now has to do with an emerging paradigm which knits together individual program and policy threads and enables an approach to service delivery which is connected and community-centric or place based – remember this term, place based – it is the solution to the future.

Lots of us experience frustration with what we have come to call siloed government. This is government which is organisation-centric – in which programs and policies are invented without due regard for their impacts on the ground, the need for nimbleness and agility when life does not imitate art, and results in disempowered civil servants whose hands are tied.

The emerging paradigm which has the potential to enable connectedness of thinking, planning and delivering between and among programs and policies is as follows. There is a relationship between economic competitiveness and social cohesion. In order to be competitive, a community must be able to take advantage of all of its diversity and social richness. In order for a society to be cohesive and inclusive, there must be economic opportunities for all which will be enabled the more competitive the economy is. Note that I have carefully chosen the term paradigm for this thought because I don't really want to have an argument about whether this is a theory or not. And whether we have scientifically and objectively validated it.

Anyway this paradigm allows many, many programs and policies to be brought to bear on the issue of neighbourhood need. For example, economic vitality policies and programs; social development policies and programs; social services policies and programs; labour force readiness policies and programs; settlement policies and programs, best start for children policies and programs; etc. You get the gist. So just off the top of my head there are four really good reasons about “why now.”

So let's talk about neighbourhood action – or place based strategies – and how Toronto conceives of its role in these.

What is Neighbourhood Action – City of Toronto Perspective

I want to talk about this again in the context of the thirteen neighbourhoods. The fully rounded vision expressed in the Strong Neighbourhoods Task Force report last June is that in each of these neighbourhoods there will be neighbourhood action partnerships consisting of those who have an interest in the well being of the neighbourhood – from all sectors of the community.

Together they will understand what gaps exist in the social, economic and community infrastructure; and propose a plan to remedy this. A neighbourhood investment board will coordinate funding from different orders of government, private and non profit sources. In an ideal world this is new, incremental, place based and flexible funding – capable of customised responsiveness.

Because we are not yet at this point of maturity, and because the way forward is not exactly clear yet, and is more likely to be organic than planned, the city bureaucracy is using this interim moment to prepare itself to be the best partner it can be; and to do whatever it can to advance the cause. The city is employing four strategies to ready itself.

Firstly, building capacity to act on the ground in the thirteen neighbourhoods. We have Community Development Officers on the ground in nine of these neighbourhoods – shortly to be all. We have a director champion identified in each neighbourhood to provide leadership, problem solving, and linkage to the corporate table. The motto – think strategically, act locally. We are developing a gap analysis of relevant services in that neighbourhood. We are identifying pragmatic opportunities to make some progress pulling in partners as we can.

Secondly, developing focussed action-based relationships with federal and provincial partners both strategically and on the ground in those neighbourhoods. We have a tri-level committee which meets regularly and reports to the City Manager, Secretary of Cabinet and Privy Council office. We have developed a funding gaps checklist which we are making joint progress on. We have worked on a policy framework, service maps, performance indicators and benchmarks. We have some early successes which I will defer to my colleagues to highlight.

Thirdly, at the City we are aligning the budget and financial planning process to the vision of strong neighbourhoods. Until now we have directed some funds from general programs, e.g. CPIP. But now for the first time in 2006 we have a neighbourhoods budget line. There's not much in it but it's there.

We can take a neighbourhood lens when mitigating fiscal constraints; we can foster integrated projects – e.g. after four programs; daycare and housing; housing and libraries; in general physical and social infrastructure planning. We hope to produce a report card on progress. We can embed the policy and the action plan in the mechanics of government.

And fourthly, we are advocating for system and structural change – through the Toronto Social Services Action Plan on welfare reform; advocating for place-based funding wherever we can; advocating for funding for wrap-around gang intervention strategies, safety audits; advocating for the reform of the safe schools act. And so on.

We have in place now the bones of the structures of collaboration in most of the neighbourhoods. It is still shoestring stuff but it is at least base funding. We have a wonderful interdepartmental senior team which meets monthly on the priority neighbourhoods – it includes the family of like programs – many of which report through my cluster, but many of which come out of the goodness of their hearts and their passion to see results – e.g. Toronto Community Housing

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Corporation; libraries; police; public health; school boards; we have even engaged the zoo from time to time.

The next steps – in partnership with our colleagues at the United Way and others is to move to engage the community , building capacity where necessary, working with existing structures where we can. And to try to make some progress on the funding side. In this, we are utterly dependent on federal and provincial cooperation for major progress.

This is slow and patient work and there will be many setbacks – but we need to avoid the kind of civil unrest that results when members of society are excluded from the mainstream – as we witnessed in Paris last year.

To conclude: I hope I have answered your question in the time allotted. There is so much depth and richness to this work that I really cannot do it justice – so many partners are involved. But I hope I have given you a flavour of our work.

Thank you.