



ARTICLE | CITIZENS TAKE THE LEAD IN VANCOUVER'S KITSILANO NEIGHBOURHOOD

KSENIA STEPKINA AND DAN RITCHIE

In Deepening Community, we are often engaging those working within institutions, municipalities and associations to help shift their mindsets towards empowering community members. While leaders attempt to navigate building on what is strong within an institution, we are also committed to supporting residents making the case to their municipalities.

At the beginning of 2021, Deepening Community offered a membership for an initiative led by Ksenia Stepkina, based in Vancouver's Kitsilano Neighbourhood. Ksenia is helping to develop a neighbourhood strategy and block connector program that is truly centered on residents and connecting their gifts.

COMING TO CANADA

Ksenia Stepkina came to Canada from a small town in Russia with a strong sense of community, which felt like a stark contrast to the individualistic culture that appeared to be prevalent in the big cities. Through her university studies and work in the non-profit sector, she realized the importance of social capital and the power of people coming together for the common good, which sparked her interest in community development. "If we cannot get along with our neighbours," she explains, "what hope do we have for solving large scale problems?"

Three years ago, Ksenia moved to Vancouver's Kitsilano neighbourhood, which has a strong legacy of community and collective action. Despite its reputation of being an affluent neighbourhood, there are challenges around social isolation, poverty and lack of affordability. As part of her journey to address these challenges by building a stronger neighbourhood, Ksenia started with the following question: "How might we build a connected, caring and civically engaged community in Kitsilano?"

A VISION FOR KITSILANO

By bringing neighbours together and mobilizing local networks, Ksenia is aspiring to help develop a **Kitsilano neighbourhood strategy** – whereby residents come together to form a vision for their neighbourhood and, with the support of the government, work collaboratively towards realizing it.

The goal of the strategy is to strengthen social connectedness and to build a culture of care and citizenship. This is done by creating a platform for residents to meaningfully connect, provide mutual support and contribute to the well-being of the community. Creating a neighbourhood strategy is aimed at making Kitsilano “the most connected, caring and civically engaged neighbourhood in Vancouver: where people from diverse backgrounds and experiences feel a sense of community and belonging, civic responsibility and agency. For change can only happen when people come together and start a conversation on what they care about.”

BUILDING THE CASE FOR A CITY-WIDE STRATEGY

Ksenia is hoping that establishing a resident-led neighbourhood strategy in her community can help build the case for adopting a city-wide, bottom-up approach to community development. A crucial element of such a strategy is that citizens lead and the government follows when it comes to realizing each neighbourhood’s unique community vision.

With a plan in place, Kitsilano can serve as an example for developing resident-led community strategies in neighbourhoods throughout Vancouver.

NEIGHBOURHOOD LEADERSHIP TEAM

The plan requires developing and convening a **neighbourhood leadership team**. This core group is responsible for supporting different components of the strategy which involve the following:

- The **Block Connector Program**, which is built around residents who volunteer to take initiative to connect with other households on their block or in their apartment building. They foster connections with and among neighbours, facilitate conversations and help uncover and connect neighbours’ gifts and passions.



A promotional flyer for the Block Connector Program tucked into someone’s door.

- **Community Action Groups** are formed around core community functions and issues of concern identified by residents. Community Action Groups work collaboratively towards addressing community issues and taking meaningful actions for positive change for the well-being of the neighbourhood.
- A **Neighbourhood Resource Hub** provides neighbourhood updates, resources and the ways to get involved in the neighbourhood.
- The Neighbourhood Leadership Team also serves as a **Neighbourhood Liaison**, establishing a direct line of ongoing two-way communication with the City Hall.



A community event in Kitsilano.

Residents in Kitsilano have been a part of building the case for a city-wide strategy that starts at the block level. Having a Block Connector Program is the foundation for building trust and momentum for community action; residents have an opportunity to come together, share their gifts and discover common interests and areas of concern.

WHY TAKE A GRASSROOTS-LED APPROACH?

A grassroots approach has the advantages of being flexible, nimble and innovative. Moving from an institution-centered approach to a community-led approach brings humanity and care into focus. In the words of Cormac Russell: “Institutions don’t care – people do.”

While there are many benefits, there are also a range of challenges to having a resident-led strategy that takes a grassroots approach:

- As with any strategy built on trust, it can’t be rushed
- Relying on the capacity of volunteers – who themselves have other competing commitments – means that progress is slow.
- Having access to the necessary time, energy and resources can be difficult when you are not directly connected to an organization or municipality.
- With established organizations, their reputation and recognition are valuable assets. Having a resident-led initiative requires slowly building recognition, where institutions often have an established presence in the community.

Despite its challenges, as long as Kitsilano residents are joining together as a community and collectively taking action, they will be able to overcome the most pressing issues facing our neighbourhoods and create the city they want to live in.

JOIN US

Are you a passionate and dedicated citizen? Are you looking for ways to develop a game plan with your community and connect the gifts of residents? The Deepening Community Membership is a national movement of communities investing in the social well-being of their citizens and working on developing neighbourhood plans to strengthen a sense of belonging, connection and citizenship.

Have you seen examples of grassroots movements that have been aimed at building off the strength of residents? We would love to hear your stories, feel free to reach out to Dan at dan@tamarackcommunity.ca.

FURTHER LEARNING

- Follow [Good Neighbour Kitsilano on Facebook](#)
- Watch Ksenia's [presentation on communicating with municipalities](#)
- Read [Building your Case for a Neighbourhood Strategy](#)