



# Neighbourhood Action Strategy | Hamilton, ON

*Based on two Tamarack Institute webinar presentations delivered by Sarah Wakefield, Suzanne Brown and Renee Wetselaar in 2015.*

Hamilton is one of many cities from across Canada experiencing a growing shift in communities and neighbourhoods that have been focused on stronger resident engagement and collaboration with local government to decide – and implement – important community projects.

## Hamilton NEIGHBOURHOOD ACTION STRATEGY

### **Hamilton Profile**

*The City of Hamilton lies on the Western shores of Lake Ontario. Long established as a centre of industrial activity, in recent years the city has undergone a renaissance and become increasingly known for its thriving artist community and as a centre for community-based change.*

**Incorporated:** June 9, 1846

**Population:** 520,000 (2011)

**Density:** 465.4/km<sup>2</sup>

**Motto:** “Together Aspire – Together Achieve”

**Website:** [www.Hamilton.ca](http://www.Hamilton.ca)

### **Neighbourhood Action Plan**

*The Neighbourhood Action Plan provides residents with a venue to talk about the issues most important to them. It is a chance to have discussions about what they see to be the “key assets” in their neighbourhoods. It provides an outlet to develop actions that can be worked towards alongside the city and other partners to improve their neighbourhoods and communities. This collaborative style of doing things helps to ensure that residents are engaged in the process and that their interests and desires are being met by the city. By working together, the city is able to achieve better results for all actors.*

### **Background of Project**

In 2010 a series of articles were published in the *Hamilton Spectator* that addressed a growing disparity in health between the city’s most affluent and least affluent neighbourhoods. The series of articles, which became known as the “Code Red” series of articles, sparked greater interest in addressing the health concerns identified.

In December of 2010 the City began to implement a Neighbourhood Action Strategy in order to address some of these problems. In September of 2012 the first four neighbourhoods presented Actions Plans to City Council and by February 2014 the project included ten neighbourhoods across the city of Hamilton.



## Overview of Strategy

Hamilton's Neighbourhood Action Strategy has four main components:

1. Building on existing community development work already taking place in neighbourhoods by providing residents with the assistance of professional community developers to support them in existing initiatives.
2. Assisting the residents to create a Neighbourhood Action Plan.
3. Ensuring Neighbourhood Action Plans have funding provided by both the city and community-based partners is necessary to support the activities identified in the plan.
4. Strong focus on Partnership. Although the city has taken a lead in developing the strategy, collaboration remains very important to the process. Bringing together diverse partners helps to bring unique assets at the table, especially from residents and other community-based partners.

## Evaluating the Strategy

There are two major parts of evaluating the strategy.

### 1. One focused on process: *"What is happening"*

- How are stakeholders interpreting the strategy?
- Extent to which they are facing challenges implementing the strategy.
- Understanding what is helping the strategy to be successful.

### 2. Other focused on outcome: *"What effect is it having on people's lives?"*

- Want to see that the strategies are actually having an impact on the neighbourhoods that have been targeted.
- Conducting qualitative in-depth interviews and focus groups with stakeholders involved in the planning process, as well as with people from the city, community organizations and with residents who are involved with implementing the Neighbourhood Action Plans.
- Continually keeping track of ongoing initiatives to see if progress is being made. In evaluation of the strategy, the City has used the *Hamilton Neighbourhoods Study* – Investigating both before and after the strategy has been implemented, to examine what has happened, and how things have changed.



Boundaries of Neighbourhoods targeted in the plan. Mostly in the downtown area and East end.



### Evaluation Quotes

*"...The fact that [City staff] are keeping us directly involved in a democratic process is really a thing to be admired."*

*-Resident*

### Overall Challenges

- The project is very large with many stakeholders, and many actions taking place simultaneously, which can make coordination difficult.
- What is most important to the community or individual neighbourhoods is constantly evolving. This requires a strategy that is dynamic in implementation. The Actors and stakeholders involved in the process tend to change over time. So, being flexible to these changes is very important.
- Difficulty in finding balance between operating as 'arms-length' evaluators, and being tightly connected with partners in the community throughout project.
- Building support for evaluation and initiatives amongst stakeholders, including residents, can pose challenges. It's also sometimes difficult to gain support from decision makers who may not see the same value in the evaluation as others.
- Moving forward, one of the biggest challenges is how to incorporate development strategies into the planning process.

### Key Learnings

- Data collection can be a mechanism for engagement. The process of talking with residents and collecting data from them became a way of involving them in the process and creating interest about projects within each neighbourhood.
- The act of evaluating serves as an impetus for action. When you start monitoring changes, you're more inclined to initiate actions that will help to deliver positive results.
- The city found it very important to communicate the results of the research in a way that is meaningful and accessible to residents and the broader public.
- How residents were portrayed throughout evaluation was somewhat controversial. Some residents felt like their communities were being stigmatized, or their neighbourhoods were being portrayed negatively as a result of the strategy.

### Further Guidance

- Make sure the purpose and goals of the strategy are very clearly articulated (in writing) at the outset, and make sure all partners share and sign onto these goals. This will help reduce confusion and conflict, and will help ensure what is being measured is what people want measured.
- Keep the focus on inclusion, equity, and meaningful participation. The work is only going to be effective if the perspectives of marginalized residents are front and centre.
- Prepare for the long term. Taking on this kind of



initiative requires a long-term commitment, because building trust and changing practice takes time.

- Set aside resources for evaluation (and/or find evaluation partners. Evaluating the program can be very expensive).
- Start thinking about, and doing, the evaluation as soon as possible, since having a baseline analysis is important for comparative purposes. Documenting the process right from the beginning can help in understanding challenges down the road.
- Do the best job you can with the resources you have available (e.g. don't do a survey at all unless the sample size can be large). This is where having academic partners can be helpful, to provide input on how to make the data gathering and analysis as rigorous as possible.
- Using indicators drawn from existing data, especially city data (e.g. number of property maintenance complaints) can be a cost-effective way to look at outcome.
- Action tracking is the most important component of the evaluation process. The city of Hamilton does a focus group once a year with residents to assess progress.

## Questions and Answers

*Courtesy of Suzanne Brown*

**Q: Many small groups are not "charitable" designated and need partnerships for depositing funding for a project. How can we partner with another organization without losing a percent of finding as a fee?**

### Evaluation Quotes

*"We're learning new ways of doing business..."*  
—City Staff

A: The SPRC is a key partner in the NAS. They manage all the community development work and also act as a flow through for our neighbourhood groups (none of which have charitable status). The funding SPRC receives from the Hamilton Community Foundation and the City of Hamilton covers their admin fees for flowing this money.

**Q: Do residents receive any type of compensation for being involved?**

A: No, residents are neighbours who volunteer their time to improve their neighbourhoods

**Q: How do you deal with political interference in your work?**

A: Diplomatically and with lots of communication.

**Q: What is covered in the leadership training?**

A: Week 1: Leadership & Self-Discovery  
Week 2: Team Dynamics  
Week 3: Community DNA – Part One  
Week 4: Research and Report Writing  
Week 5: Managing for Change  
Week 6: Communication for Change  
Week 7: Community DNA – Park Two



Week 8: Advocacy & Partnerships

Week 9: Managing Projects

Week 10: Active Leadership

**Q: How did you recruit people for the neighbourhood leadership institute?**

A: Through the 11 neighbourhood planning teams.

**Q: Can you clarify the funding model? How did all of the partners invest in the project; what is the total investment; what is the investment at the community level?**

A: Hamilton Community Foundation funds 4 community developers and admin fees for SPRC; fund the Neighbourhood Leadership Institute for 11 neighbourhoods. Best Start Network funds 1 community developer and half manager. City of Hamilton funds \$2 million to neighbourhood engagement and improvement projects in 11 neighbourhoods, Public Health funds the manager for the Neighbourhood Action Strategy, Community Services funds 2 neighbourhood developers, Ontario Works funds one project manager focused on job skill training opportunities, corporation funds 1 project manager. Project funding has been received from City of Hamilton Councilors, Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, Hamilton Community Foundation, People for Places, First Ontario.

**Q: What is the budget for the neighbourhood action strategy? How many staff are involved?**

A: The budget for neighbourhood improvement from the City of Hamilton is two Million, the SPRC employs six community developers and three community development assistants, over 100 City of Hamilton staff are involved with supporting projects in some way.

**Q: What are some of the non-traditional tools you used to engage residents, especially those that typically do not get involved in the neighbourhood?**

A: Building relationships face-to-face is most effective, getting residents talking to residents. Community newsletters, written, published and distributed by residents have been very effective. Community activities like BBQ's and festivals, especially ones that serve food, bring in 100s of people

**Q: Who sets the boundaries of a neighbourhood when you are developing your action plans?**

A: The residents set the original 8 HCF neighbourhoods, the City of Hamilton neighbourhoods are based on more traditional planning units, but residents still have the autonomy to decide what their neighbourhood boundaries are. This can be a point of conflict if two neighbourhoods view the same physical space as their own.

**Q: Can you elaborate on best practices for marketing and promotions? What works?**

A: Face to face relationships.

**Q: With the Inevitable gentrification of some of the downtown areas in Hamilton- how do you see that changing this model of community resident engagement?**

A: Yes, in the sense that existing groups will have to work harder in the future to ensure inclusion and that voices of residents who are marginalized can still be heard.





## Hamilton NEIGHBOURHOOD ACTION STRATEGY

*For more information on the Hamilton Neighbourhood Action Strategy, please listen to the full presentation by Suzanne Brown and Renee Wetselaar and access the resources [here](#).*

*For more information on the Hamilton Neighbourhood Strategy evaluation, please listen to the full presentation by Sarah Wakefield, PhD and access the resources [here](#).*