

Community Based Development in Rideau Heights: The Case for a Community-Driven Storefront Initiative



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Executive Summary

Rideau Heights is a neighbourhood situated in northern Kingston (see Chapter 3, Figure 3-1, pg. 15) that experiences significantly lower incomes, educational attainment, and employment rates as compared to other neighbourhoods in the city (City of Kingston, 2014). Community members express concern with deteriorating housing conditions, low incomes, criminal activity in the neighbourhood, geographic inaccessibility of services, and the negative stigmas associated with the name “Rideau Heights”. On the other hand, residents also identify the quantity of support services available as well as the strong social networks between community members as valuable assets to the neighbourhood (Melles & Cleary, 2010; Meagher, 2007). Furthermore, a reinvestment of infrastructure and public amenities to the neighbourhood is currently underway as part of the Rideau Heights Regeneration project. The objective is to upgrade aging housing stock, introduce a social mix, and implement effective land-use planning principles to the neighbourhood. (City of Kingston Housing Department, 2012).

This research will explore three approaches to community development that may be collectively considered in addressing community challenges in Rideau Heights: asset-based community development (ABCD), Collective Impact, and resident-led development. ABCD is a strengths-based strategy that focuses on the existing assets of a community and encourages citizens to take ownership of their own development (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). Collective Impact is a method that encourages various services to work as one entity under a centralized infrastructure and shared vision (Kania & Kramer, 2011). Resident-led community development focuses on the value of informal initiatives and empowering individual community members to develop their own solutions to community challenges.

One particular model, the Storefront model, can be used to leverage the existing assets and resident engagement to fuel community-driven development. Based on the East Scarborough Storefront (ESS), a storefront can be described as a physical space within the neighbourhood that is accessible for all members of the community. It is shared between storefront administrative individuals and numerous social service agencies. This allows for better coordination amongst service delivery to provide comprehensive and flexible support for clients in a one-stop hub (The East Scarborough Storefront, 2010). Beyond this, a storefront has a unique governance structure in that decision-making boards include 50% representation by community members, allowing the empowerment of community residents in leading the direction of service delivery and ultimately, their own community development in partnership with key service providers (Roche & Roberts, 2007).

A group visioning workshop was held with 12 residents of Rideau Heights, most of whom were members of the Tenant Advisory Group (TAG) for Kingston Frontenac Housing Corporation and living within the public housing community. The workshop looked to obtain perspectives on existing community and individual assets, solutions to neighbourhood challenges, and tactical actions that community members may take on as part of these solutions. Additionally, interviews were conducted with four service providers in Rideau Heights, including representatives from Kingston Frontenac Housing Corporation, Community Response to Neighbourhood Concerns, Kingston Community Health Centres, and KFL&A United Way. These semi-structured interviews helped to identify how challenges in the neighbourhood were being addressed, how collaboration was structured amongst the organizations, and what kinds of community-driven development took place in the neighbourhood.

Findings

The interviews and workshop together identified the most significant lived challenges in the neighbourhood. Many of these were reflected from the background reports, including issues with negative stigma, prevalence of crime, and lack of community involvement. Together, these challenges are cycled within the neighbourhood time and again due to the inability to find sustainable solutions to address root issues. Residents and agencies also pointed to an abundance of assets, including individual skill sets, the quantity of support services available, the quality of social cohesion, and the reinvestment from the City of Kingston through the Rideau Heights Regeneration plan. Areas for improvement were identified as the lack of effective outreach by agencies as well as social divisions amongst residents within the community. Workshop participants thoroughly discussed a number of initiatives that may be implemented by residents in addressing community issues including a neighbourhood watch program and community organized recreational programming. Agencies recognized the value of resident driven initiatives, but indicated the need for funding sources as well as a formal structure to coordinate and sustain such initiatives.

Recommended actions

As a means to address many of the community's challenges, a storefront initiative may bring to light all of the potential that exists in Rideau Heights for asset-based development, collective action, and resident-driven development. As a structure, a storefront initiative may begin as an advisory group that represents the community desires and inform decisions made by external agencies and institutions that affect the community. The group would also work to take on initiatives of their own, using community assets to respond to community needs and desires.

With the evolution of a successful advisory group, establishing a physical location would ensure the accessibility of resident-driven development to all residents of the neighbourhood. The advisory group may begin to partner with community service agencies that can support various initiatives being run out of the storefront.

Regardless of structure, having a paid facilitator present is essential as community-driven development begins to evolve. The facilitator would coordinate resident initiatives and organize collective action between agencies towards a larger, common goal. This ensures accountability and administrative support for storefront initiatives while community members and service agencies can focus on running their operations.

Two physical locations were identified as a potential space for such an initiative. A storefront may be successful as part of the new community centre or as part of the re-establishment of the Kingston Frontenac Housing Corporation (KFHC) satellite office. Both locations are central to the neighbourhood and incorporate anchor amenities that draw community members to the site.

The following are a set of recommended actions for initiating a storefront initiative in Rideau Heights organized between actions for residents, and actions for agencies and public institutions:

Residents

1. **Don't ask for permission, ask for support.** Community members can become accustomed to rely on programs and agencies to lead community initiatives, acting as consumers of programs rather than citizens of their own community (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003). Rather than waiting for agencies to develop an initiative,

residents should take the lead to organize and develop projects themselves, asking agencies for financial and resource support.

2. **Think bigger.** The Tenant Advisory Group (TAG) is a good starting point for a community advisory group, but should look to start growing and include diverse members of the community. Further initiatives need to begin to look beyond the support that is provided by KFHC and encompass more than just concerns relating to tenants and public housing.
3. **Establish a structure.** It is vital to establish a governance structure to determine the nature of the group and how it will function. Formalizing a decision-making process is important, either through an appointed body of members, or as a group-wide voting process. An established, structured group holds accountability for initiatives suggested by residents. This lends credibility, momentum, and the human capital support required to sustain a project to its successful implementation.
4. **Connect with other residents.** Creating connections as a member of an established group will further legitimize the cause, create awareness of initiatives, and expand the pool of social and human capital. It is important that any engagement involve a diversity of residents, including youth, seniors, single parents and private renters/homeowners.
5. **Connect with more agencies.** Creating collaborative partnerships and coalitions with service agencies is vital in receiving supportive resources as well as creating respectful relationships that garner the recognition of legitimacy as a community group.

Agencies

1. **Reconsider funding structures.** Storefront initiatives are unconventional in nature and can be informal, unstructured, or sometimes one-off with no tangible or

measurable results. This makes it difficult to secure traditional funding. If funding agencies and public institutions recognize the value behind informal community-driven initiatives, a separate stream of funding could be made available for such initiatives.

- 2. Consider resident-ownership of programs.** Agencies in Rideau Heights as well as the Rideau Heights Regeneration team should identify different opportunities where community residents may be able to provide some level of governance or even adopt and take responsibility for some initiatives (e.g. KFHC's spring community clean-up). With the Regeneration plan creating and re-configuring community space, this is an opportunity to introduce some level of resident decision-making into the plans for the neighbourhood.
- 3. Continue outreach and provide support, not enforcement.** Big picture decision-making for storefront initiatives should be in the hands of community members with advice and support from external bodies if necessary. This will require ongoing communication between all involved parties (including residents, agencies, and the City), which would encourage relationship building over time. Eventually, building that bridge will benefit overall outreach to a wider population for many agencies.
- 4. Go beyond collaboration and work towards a Collective Impact.** Agencies in Rideau Heights are collaborating well, however, a concerted Collective Impact effort can improve the effectiveness of programs as a whole for community members. Through the storefront, a Collective Impact may be achieved if service agencies are flexible and commit the time and resources required. Some modifications to programming may be necessary to mutually reinforce the activities and goals of the Collective Impact.

Considerations and next steps towards a storefront

A recurring lesson from this research is the need to start small and have patience for any community-driven development initiative. Recognizing that the process may take longer than expected and focusing on one initiative at a time can better ensure that there is follow through with successful results. Starting small with few resources will require utilizing existing individual as well as community assets. Looking within the community can enhance the community ownership of the initiative and require fewer resources to operate.

Finally, now is the time to act. With the Rideau Heights Regeneration plan underway, changes to the neighbourhood can create space for resident initiatives as part of the new structure, such as a storefront space, more recreation space, or more natural surveillance. The neighbourhood for the first time has the attention of key players that recognize the value of resident input and are interested to support community development. Having this spotlight creates a prime opportunity to both advocate for external support and finally create positive associations with the neighbourhood.

The following provides three examples of proposed resident-led initiatives that provide a good first step towards a storefront initiative:

- **Informal recreation league for neighbourhood youth and adults.** Whether it is sports or hobbies (softball, fishing, etc.), the informal structure can be flexible around resident schedules and build informal youth mentorship to strengthen the community.
- **Clean up the community campaign.** In addition to community clean up days, residents can also collaborate to decorate community-owned garbage bins in areas of high litter to establish community ownership and identity.

- **Neighbourhood watch program.** Residents may meet to discuss ongoing or one-off suspicious activities they observe in their complexes and establish a relationship with the Kingston Police.

All in all, the community of Rideau Heights is now at a tipping point for more effective, community-driven development. The pieces are all in place to establish a storefront initiative that may bring together the immense potential that exists in Rideau Heights to move towards a well-connected, hospitable community that residents are proud to call home.