



Throughout this report we talk about the pressing issues facing our region and the need to deal with these in a coordinated way. But, at its heart, our region is also one of unique neighbourhoods and communities where people engage first-hand with these larger issues. Healthy neighbourhoods are the foundation of resilient individuals and communities, which in turn underpin a region's ability to compete globally. While the Greater Toronto region is celebrated for its vibrant neighbourhoods, recent evidence suggests that the health and vitality of many neighbourhoods is at a dangerous tipping point, threatening our social and economic fabric.⁵⁶ To reverse this trend, we need to tend to the grassroots as well as the grassstops.

Challenges

Over the last three decades, the Greater Toronto region has become increasingly geographically segregated along socio-economic and ethno-cultural lines.⁵⁷ In 2005, more than one in every four City of Toronto families lived in low-income conditions⁵⁸ and, in 2006, 46% of low-income families lived in higher poverty neighbourhoods in Toronto (in particular in high-rise housing), up from 18% two decades earlier.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, residents are increasingly disengaged from planning their communities. The Province's *Places to Grow*, a powerful and unique growth plan that promises to focus vibrant growth in existing municipalities, involves complex planning processes that present challenges to engagement at the neighbourhood level.⁶⁰ Without action to reverse the poverty trend and reduce planning complexity, the social and economic future of our region may be compromised.

Strengths

The Strong Neighbourhoods Task Force, Toronto's Regent Park redevelopment and Peel Region's resident engagement efforts are all reminders of the power of an engaged civil society. We must continue to find ways to bring key stakeholders together to create a good mix of jobs, economic activity and appropriate and accessible social and physical infrastructure. These are, of course, big issues that require strategic, coordinated, region-wide action as we have called for throughout this report, but at the same time a local lens is needed to address specific challenges in specific neighbourhoods. Bringing multi-level, multi-partner perspectives to the challenges and potential opportunities of a particular geographic area⁶¹ – known as a place-based approach – results in solutions that from the outset are engrained in the community (so more sustainable), and fosters stronger resident engagement and social networks.

OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS

1. Create more opportunities and places for residents to meet and engage in community development.

Endorsing a place-based approach to neighbourhood revitalization, the Summit suggested that community building start with resident voices. In general, community life is greatly enhanced when residents have places to interact with each other in casual encounters and formal programs. However, many neighbourhoods, especially high-rise communities, lack social and recreational spaces or have facilities that are in such disrepair that they cannot be used.



Several recent initiatives are paving the way to expand community spaces and conversations. The Intergovernmental Committee on Economic Development has mapped growth in the creation of community spaces in the City of Toronto that serve as spaces to promote interactions, including community hubs and extended schools.⁶² New United Way Toronto research suggests developing positive relationships between tenants and with landlords into collaborations with governments, agencies and business to improve community economic and social life, as it is doing in high-rise communities through its Action for Neighbourhood Change initiative. Peel Region and United Way of Peel Region are also embarking on a similar project to map assets and support resident leaders in high need communities. Similar partnerships can be launched in other neighbourhoods and high-rise communities where social and recreational spaces either do not exist, are inadequate, or where social disorder is pronounced.

2. Develop innovative opportunities for private sector investment in under-invested neighbourhoods.

The private sector has an important role to play in neighbourhood renewal, not just as a funder, but as a partner and investor in local economic development. Small and medium sized businesses can support neighbourhood revitalization through local economic development by providing goods and services and creating new jobs. Larger businesses can help them develop through things like mentorship to improve capacity and investment partnerships to provide access to capital. Innovation hubs or centres can also help to spur development and support for entrepreneurs and social enterprises.

Private sector investment and a partnership in Regent Park involving the Daniels Corporation, RBC, Tim Hortons, Sobeys and Toronto Community Housing offers an excellent model, albeit one of larger scale private sector investment than most communities could attract. This experience will help build an evidence-based business case that can be replicated on a different scale in other parts of the region. Models to create sustainable partnerships such as these need further exploration and

piloting, and would complement the development of regional industry and horizontal clusters recommended in the economy section of this report.

Businesses and communities cannot do it alone. Governments at all levels must create the conditions to enable business investment in community development. As the source of most planning policy, the Province can further demystify the planning process with language that will be more easily understood and used, and create policy statements supporting community development that will lead municipal regimes to follow suit. Creating new, affordable spaces for small-scale economic development and commercial activities, for example, will require amendments to municipal zoning regulations to permit diversified land use in residential areas and tax or other incentives to promote private sector investment. Governments can also help to develop and test new tools, such as capital release and micro lending, social hiring and the innovative application of Section 37⁶³ funding for the development of commercial hubs.

3. Develop and maintain a comprehensive neighbourhood revitalization and community building best practice case book and a virtual community to facilitate knowledge exchange.

Neighbourhoods, local and region-wide actors, community-based researchers, academic research centres, planners, funders, investors and governments are all generating valuable information, knowledge and learning that could be leveraged widely if effectively shared. While attempts to do this were made in the past, a lack of resources and collaboration prevented a sustained effort. There are many organizations with mandates to facilitate knowledge exchange – Social Planning Toronto, the Centre for City Ecology, the Cities Centre and the United Ways across the region, to name a few – and which could instigate a renewed effort to develop, maintain and disseminate a comprehensive best practices interface.

See the related background, *Every Place Matters: Investing in Complete Neighbourhoods and Communities*, prepared for the Greater Toronto Summit 2011 at: www.civicaaction.ca/publications

