

Neighbourhood Associations and the Municipality: Supporting citizen engagement in the city

INTRODUCTION

Local communities increasingly serve as the frontlines of civic engagement with residents tackling the challenges of poverty, crime, environmental degradation, social inequality, exclusion, and urban decay through their neighbourhoods. Neighborhood associations have emerged as popular vehicles by which residents undertake these grassroots initiatives to address common problems and advance the collective good of their community. The ongoing global coronavirus crisis has only brought into sharper focus the role of neighbourhoods as critical sites of crisis management, community resilience and sustainability. Principally, neighborhood associations manifest some of the key properties of resilient and adaptive communities that are successful in tackling the otherwise complex issues of breakneck socioeconomic and ecological change.

Several questions are worth exploring as the role of the neighbourhood emerges as a conduit for community and civic engagement: Under what circumstances do groups of residents bind together to advance the welfare of their communities and what roles do they play? Are they always driven by community volunteers or can they be initiated by government? Can they be purposive instruments of public policy? What role can local governments play in initiating or supporting such grassroots visions of community progress on issues ranging from neighborhood safety to residential beautification activities championed by residents? Is it best for neighbourhood associations to maintain complete autonomy from government or are there instances where they can enter functional partnerships with their local or regional government?

In this working paper, we attempt to address these questions with the aim of shedding light on how neighborhood associations are formed, under what circumstances they are sustained and what kinds of initiatives they pursue. The discussion highlights some of the policy levers that residents and governments can use as they think about grassroots instruments for advancing the resilience and adaptability of their local communities.

Neighbourhood associations are forming across Niagara, ranging from well-established groups with formal decision-making structures to a handful of caring families organizing street parties. Their activities include informative websites or Facebook pages, poverty reduction initiatives, beautification projects, community improvement projects such as outdoor ice rinks and community gardens, and events ranging from Easter egg hunts to garage sales and park clean-ups. But supports from local governments are minimal.

The Niagara Community Observatory was part of an outreach initiative of the City of St. Catharines to hold a neighbourhood forum, originally scheduled for March 28, 2020 at the Russell Community Centre. The goal was to provide a space for people to network, but to also gain feedback on how the City could better support these groups. Niagara Region provided funding for a facilitator as part of a community wellbeing project. Response was so overwhelming that registration had to be shut down weeks in advance. Unfortunately, the event was cancelled due to the COVID-19 lockdown.

But the work is more important than ever, especially with the central role of the neighbourhood as a space for belonging and engagement in our lives during pandemic lockdown and travel restrictions.

With this in mind, the analysis is structured as follows: First, we briefly review the research on neighbourhood associations, highlighting the importance of strong neighbourhoods, especially with regards to issues of civic engagement, inclusion, and health equity. Second, we turn our focus to what some standout municipalities are doing in Southern Ontario regarding the support of their local neighbourhood associations, drawing attention to the formation of their strategies, mandate, and sustenance. Third, we discuss the local landscape, reviewing some of the features and challenges of neighbourhood associations in Niagara. Fourth, we propose recommendations on the strategies that municipalities might take in Niagara to better support neighbourhood associations and engaged residents. Finally, the brief concludes with a discussion of the questions posed above. We can answer some but can also identify those that remain unanswered and could thus provide the basis for future studies aimed at generating more nuanced recommendations to guide neighbourhood association initiatives.



WHAT IS A NEIGHBOURHOOD ASSOCIATION?

A neighbourhood association is generally known as a non-profit or volunteer organization focused on improving the quality of life in a geographically specific residential area (Logan & Rabrenovic, 1990). The group comprises members who live in that area, whether homeowners or renters. It can play the role of advocate—acting as an intermediary between the residents and the city to represent the neighbourhood concerns—or the role of a service provider by creating community gardens, running food banks, hosting events, seeking grants for the improvement of playgrounds, etc. (Kim, 2020; Chaskin & Greenberg, 2015). Research literature from the past 30 years tells us that neighbourhood associations are most likely to form from the grassroots over one specific issue—usually a land-use conflict—and then expand its interests over the long term.

The more interactions between neighbours, the stronger the association as it becomes a vehicle for sharing information and building collective interest (Kim, 2020). Not insignificantly, this greater social cohesion in a neighbourhood is also seen to have positive impacts on physical and mental health (Perez et al., 2020). Neighbourhood associations are a vehicle for citizen engagement in their community and in their democratic institutions. As such, they can become a vital tool in building a healthy inclusive community

for all a municipality's citizens including its most vulnerable—from newly arrived immigrant and refugee populations to those living in poverty (Alarcon de Morris & Leistner, 2009; Chaskin et al, 2015; Kim, 2020).

It is in this capacity that it becomes important to acknowledge the challenges that have been identified as neighbourhood associations become greater participants in service provision and municipal decision-making. Studies have shown these associations exist predominantly in wealthier parts of a city with few visible minorities. As they are self-governing groups, they have lacked accountability, transparency and accessibility and can be overly focussed on land issues (Flynn, 2019). While these tend to be grassroots groups, municipalities can create strategies specifically around encouraging these associations to be more inclusive of its vulnerable populations, including funding for communications and outreach programs, and the hiring of community organizers (Alarcon deMorris & Leistner, 2009).

We will now look at some strategies that our municipal neighbours—Hamilton, Waterloo, and Kitchener—have implemented in order to inspire some ideas on how local governments can encourage and support resident engagement at the neighbourhood level.

WHAT ARE OUR MUNICIPAL NEIGHBOURS DOING? SOME INSPIRATION

The original question from St. Catharines City Council was how it could better support the neighbourhood associations that were springing up in the community. One way to do this is to see what other municipalities are doing. Here, we did an environmental scan of strategies being used in some comparable municipalities in Southern Ontario. Hamilton, Waterloo, and Kitchener have structures and policies in place that serve as a formal liaison between city bureaucracy and active neighbourhood groups. Supports in place range from communications to financing and coordination. The success of these strategies and how they may or may not fit into a Niagara narrative would be the subject of further research and discussion.

Hamilton

In 2011, the city created the Neighbourhood Action Strategy with the goal of creating healthier communities in 11 neighbourhoods. It was funded with \$2 million from the City and another \$1 million per year from the Hamilton Community Foundation (HCF). The program, which identified 11 “community planning teams” (neighbourhood associations), supports resident initiatives and is “focussed on helping neighbourhoods across the city be great places to live, work, play, and learn.” The strategy evolved in 2019 to Neighbourhood Development, part of the Children’s Services and Neighbourhood Development Division of the Healthy & Safe Communities Dept., where the resident support expanded city-wide.

The City of Hamilton Strategic Plan identified “Healthy & Safe Communities” as a priority. The 2018 document, “Re-Imaging the Neighbourhood Action Strategy,” called for: 1. Grants, 2. An enhanced role for community developers, 3. Neighbourhood action plans and planning teams, 4. Projects and events, and 5. Service providers. But there were no clear recommendations on governance. A “resident-centred” approach was recommended versus resident-led, as experience had shown that people didn’t always have that much time to volunteer.

The Neighbourhood Development office has six on staff with another six on a sub-team focusing on youth. A million-dollar annual budget is funded primarily through the City, but some staff funding comes through Ontario Works. Grants come out of the program costs which is part of the overall budget. The HCF often partners with the department to support programs including contributions to community engagement grants.

The current City website has a dedicated page to Neighbourhood Development (www.hamilton.ca/city-initiatives/strategies-actions/neighbourhood-development) that includes descriptions and links to various initiatives: the youth engagement program Xperience Annex, McQuesten Urban Farm and how to start a community garden, a risk management tool kit for hosting community events, a list and links to each neighbourhood group, city documents, contacts with emails and phone numbers. The City website hosts a Hamilton neighbourhoods map with each neighbourhood clearly delineated and named—quite easy with the city’s grid-like streets. And Tourism Hamilton devotes a page to a neighbourhood guide, highlighting destinations such as Locke Street South, Ottawa Street North, and Concession Street among others.

Waterloo

The City of Waterloo’s 2018 Neighbourhood Strategy was the culmination of two years of staff consultations with more than 1,700 community members through resident panels, street teams, online surveys, focus groups and open houses. It had three goals: 1. To encourage neighbourhood interactions, 2. To empower neighbours to lead, and 3. To commit to developing a corporate city culture that supported neighbourhood-led initiatives. There were 18 specific actions, ranging from streamlining protocols for hosting events and implementing projects, improving access to indoor spaces, and training volunteers; to establishing a new micro-grant program for projects. The strategy was to be implemented over five years.

The City had long been supporting neighbourhood community-building through formal neighbourhood associations prior to development of the neighbourhood strategy. Historically, it had provided formal neighbourhood associations with “foundational operating grants” ranging from \$500 to \$1,500 per group, per year, as well as other supports such as facility rental discounts and in-kind support such as printing and staff liaison. Prior to the strategy, one person was delegated to neighbourhood association support. A second person was added during the strategy’s implementation. Both are part of the Community and Neighbourhood Services team, staff focused on community development through neighbourhoods, sports, and community outreach.

Staff support a volunteer-led outdoor rink program (approximately 30 rinks annually) and a community garden program (currently five community gardens in City parks). The City provides infrastructure funding for these programs.

Funding through the City, the Kitchener-Waterloo Community Foundation, and the United Way Waterloo Region Communities includes matching grants of up to \$7,500 and mini grants from the City of up to \$300 per project. This fund pre-dates the strategy and has an annual budget of \$30,000 from the City plus partner contributions.

Other City grants programs include mini grants for a neighbours program (\$5,000 annually) and the Community Cash Grants program with an annual budget of \$100,000 to fund community groups in the areas of sports and recreation, arts and culture, festivals and events, and neighbourhoods.

A Community Grants Advisory Committee is appointed by City Council to make allocation decisions for the matching funds and Community Cash grants program. Staff make allocation decisions for the mini grants.

There has been a general broadening of the support from one focused on formal, affiliated neighbourhood associations to also support more informal neighbourhood-led projects and opportunities.

The city currently has a “Neighbourhoods” webpage, found via Community Services (www.waterloo.ca/en/living/neighbourhoods.aspx), where you can apply for a matching grant, find a neighbourhood association via a list with links and a map, and read the neighbourhood strategy.

Kitchener

“Love My Hood: Kitchener’s Guide to Great Neighbourhoods,” was published in 2017. LoveMyHood is both the City of Kitchener’s first neighbourhood strategy, and a movement led by residents. The strategy was the result of 18 months of meetings with 5,651 community members who were approached not just through existing neighbourhood associations, but also in public areas such as parks, pools, and shopping centres. The vision for LoveMyHood is that residents lead projects, with the city supporting them along the way. It was rooted in a Kitchener-Waterloo Community Foundation document called “Vital Signs”. This report was written for the Region and found there were residents who felt they did not “belong” in the community. This led to isolation and loneliness and meant they were less likely to participate in the community. The Foundation believed that strong neighbourhoods were key to encouraging this feeling of belonging.



The report suggested three areas of focus:

1. Creating interesting outdoor spaces
2. Creating ways for people to meet and get connected
3. Encouraging cooperation and collaboration between residents and the City

The initiative’s website, www.lovemyhood.ca, offers ideas for neighbourhood projects as well as how-to’s, toolkits, a list of existing facilities for use, and a list of 28 neighbourhood associations with links. The website also encourages residents to connect with the Neighbourhood Development Office, which houses nine staff members, so that a single point of contact can work with them to lead positive change in their neighbourhood.

The Neighbourhood Development Office also operates the LoveMyHood Matching Grant, which launched in January 2020. With \$150,000 in funding available annually, residents can request up to \$30,000 per project during quarterly intake periods. Another \$10,000 was added in 2020 via the Kitchener-Waterloo Community Foundation, for COVID-19 relief initiatives. Projects funded through the LoveMyHood Matching Grant include community gardens, placemaking projects, neighbourhood events, community murals and other large capital projects.

Successful grant projects are selected by a LoveMyHood Matching Grant Steering Committee consisting of six Kitchener resident volunteers and four City of Kitchener staff. Through the LoveMyHood process, the Neighbourhood Development Office coordinates City support for resident-led projects by enabling staff to work behind the scenes. This process requires that staff work together to identify any requirements or conditions early on in a proposed project so that residents know what to expect. Over 15 internal departments and divisions participate in the LoveMyHood process and responses are received from all divisions within five business days.

LESSONS FROM THE 'HOOD: WHAT'S HAPPENING IN NIAGARA?

In July 2019, delegates from the Queenston Neighbours group approached St. Catharines City Council about the possibilities for municipal support, including the hosting of a forum for neighbourhood associations where they could network and discuss ideas. Council approved the idea of hosting a forum citing the city's Strategic Plan which "supports connecting people, places and neighbourhoods to enhance accessibility, inclusion and civic pride" (St. Catharines, 2019). Council directed staff to work with the Mayor's Office to plan an event and to report back on strategies and best practices to support neighbourhood associations. As we know, it was cancelled due to COVID-19 lockdown.

But the initiative was indicative of what is happening across Niagara in terms of community engagement through neighbourhood associations. Queenston Neighbours, together with the Fitzgerald Neighbours association also in St. Catharines, are at the vanguard of a grassroots effort to build inclusive and empowered communities. Together, they represent examples of the evolutionary types of neighbourhood associations, grassroots (Fitzgerald) and those springing from initial local government initiatives (Queenston). In both cases, their success is based on neighbourhood engagement. The Queenston group grew from a City intervention into the challenged neighbourhood in 2016. Community members and stakeholders were called in for a "Visioning Session" in 2017 to discuss how to create a healthier and safer place for residents. That engagement initiative set the foundation for community members to organize. Queenston Neighbours (queenstonneighbours.weebly.com) now holds monthly roundtable meetings with community members, produces a website and blog, oversees projects such as the Centennial Park gardens and events such as Coffee Outside. Queenston Neighbours has been built on an "asset-based community development model" that uses existing amenities and focuses on a neighbourhood's strengths.

This is the same principle on which "The Fitz" operates. The group was founded by friends in the neighbourhood who decided to organize an Easter egg hunt back in 2017. Then came garage sales and outdoor coffee meetings. It now has a leadership team with co-chairs, secretary, treasurer, and positions in charge of certain activities. The website (fitzgeraldneighbours.ca) is a colourful hub of information, including a guiding statement and links to other neighbourhood groups in the city whatever the size and stage of development. Activities include merchandise, monthly meet-ups (usually at a local restaurant but held

virtually during the pandemic) a community gardens and the operation of one of three outdoor rinks as part of a City pilot project that provides the space for a rink while the neighbourhood is responsible for its operation. Old Glenridge Community Association and Port Dalhousie Neighbours are the other groups with rinks under the pilot.

The Welland Neighbourhood Project (wnponline.weebly.com) is an example of an issue-based group that developed when it saw a gap in needed services to a community. This poverty reduction initiative on the city's east side began eight years ago. Its team is built from community leaders and stakeholders with a mandate to empower people to improve themselves and their community. Events and activities include a neighbourhood festival, monthly trips, a children's reading program, and a free dental program in partnership with Niagara College.

These three groups are just the tip of the proverbial iceberg in terms of Niagara residents organizing at a community level. The Queenston Neighbours vision when it approached city hall in 2019 was to bring together neighbourhood groups large and small, as well as individuals aspiring to build something similar in their community, so that they could connect with their ideas and their enthusiasm. The vision was also to share some of the strategies being used in surrounding municipalities, such as Hamilton, Kitchener, and Waterloo, to St. Catharines and other Niagara municipalities where neighbourhood associations were burgeoning. The fact that registration for the initial neighbourhood forum had to be closed early due to overwhelming demand should be enough indication that there is a need for such supports.



We return to the questions posed in the introduction and attempt to provide a synthesized review of the answers based on the case studies above. First, we asked, “Under what circumstances do groups of residents bind together to advance the welfare of their communities and what roles do they play?” The common practices in the available literature indicate that neighbourhood associations tend to emerge from the grassroots over one specific issue. However, we also see instances of their formation as a strategic initiative by local governments to address specific social issues, which answers our second question of whether successful neighbourhood associations can be initiated by government. Even in such instances where governments take the first step, the success of the initiative fundamentally rests on the presence of residents willing to champion the daily grind of grassroots networking and project organization. Indeed, the intrinsically communitarian nature of such initiatives makes grassroots champions an indispensable pillar of success.

This raises profound implication for the third question about whether neighbourhood associations can be purposive instruments of public policy. The three municipal cases all share one common feature that provide the answer to this question—the development of a “strategy” to guide the actions of government and support its community partners in achieving certain policy goals. In each case, neighbourhood associations were already forming from the grassroots when the city became formally involved. A strategic plan often serves as blueprint to guide funding decisions, governance structure, outreach measures and like. The policy intentionality of such strategic blueprints holds the greatest promise for neighborhood associations as potential vehicles by which residents can be deployed and resourced to address common problems and advance the collective good of their community. In a nutshell, local governments can play a proactive role in initiating or supporting grassroots visions of community progress on issues ranging from neighborhood safety to residential beautification activities.

Finally, is it best for neighbourhood associations to maintain complete autonomy from government or are there instances where the former can enter functional partnerships with their local or regional government? As the cases indicate, complete autonomy is not a necessary feature of successful neighbourhood associations. In fact, local governments provided a dedicated staff person and office to act as a liaison between neighbourhood groups and municipal bureaucracy.

However, some degree of operational autonomy is critical with respect to allowing residents the space to build their local networks. Operational autonomy could also mean governments allowing residents to identify the issues that matter most to them and establishing transparent mechanisms for adjudicating funding decisions with demonstrable arm-length distance from the municipal council and the bureaucracy. Such operational autonomy not only enhances the legitimacy of government-initiated visions of neighbourhood associations but also foster a sense of community empowerment, agency, and civic engagement.

This working paper, however, raises several questions worth exploring in future research on neighbourhood associations. First, to what extent does the level of pre-existing interactions between neighbours determine the strength of the associations, especially in instances where they may be initiated and funded by local governments? The extent of the correlation between social cohesion in a neighbourhood and the success of neighbour associations would raise significant implications about how governments design their policy instruments for a more sustainable venture. Second, what are the differences between associations that exist in wealthier parts of a city and those in marginalized enclaves? Answering this question could provide insights into how governments and grassroots groups can create strategies aimed at encouraging and ensuring neighbourhood association initiatives are tailored to, and more inclusive of, vulnerable and marginalized enclaves within municipalities. Third, what role can the Regional Municipality of Niagara play? The two-tier system can make the achievement of desired policy outcomes more complex.

It is our hope that a proposed neighbourhood forum would provide the space and impetus to address these questions as well as invite others. Such a forum could bring together practitioners from Niagara and neighbouring municipalities to not only share best practices but also identify differences among associations and the kinds of challenges and issues they encounter. It would be a chance to have honest conversations about what has worked in other jurisdictions, and what hasn't. It would also provide an opportunity for neighbourhood organizers to gain useful information, such as whether incorporation makes a difference in access to funding and general sustainability. These conversations and deliberations could feed into a report that informs future policy design and practice in municipalities across Niagara, Ontario, and Canada.

NEXT STEPS: SOME RECOMMENDATIONS

Our recommendations stem from the strategies taken in Hamilton, Kitchener, and Waterloo—three municipalities considered standouts in their support for neighbourhood associations. But it is also vital that local stakeholders meet to discuss and learn what is wanted, what is required, what will work and what won't.

1. The first action takes minimal funds. Building a central online warehouse of information—a webpage, attached to the municipal website (there is such a page with limited information on the welland.ca website, for example) can highlight the existing neighbourhood groups with links to their respective webpages or Facebook sites and contact information. The page can list funding opportunities that already exist in the municipality and link to the pages that provide eligibility and application details. It might provide a city contact(s) if a neighbourhood has a specific project or activity in mind—other than the local councillor—who can help navigate the system. And that brings us to the next action, which will need the political will to find space in the municipal budget.
2. Providing a dedicated staff person and office to act as a liaison between neighbourhood groups and municipal bureaucracy simplifies the efforts of residents to improve their communities and, thus, empowers them and encourages civic engagement. If an individual or group

has an idea, they know there is a specific person to contact who can help them see their idea into fruition, or at least point them in the right direction. Our case studies show these offices are typically rooted in the community health and community services departments.

3. Substantial funding, in the form of grants with transparent methods of awarding monies, should be available on an ongoing basis. Lessons from the three case studies show us that the funding programs can include contributions from non-governmental organizations such as the community foundation, or a matching-grant set-up encouraging neighbourhood fundraising.
4. Ultimately, this working paper recommends that Niagara municipalities and their engaged citizens pick up where they left off in the days before the pandemic. We propose the neighbourhood forum planned for March 2020 go ahead in 2022 once in-person meetings can safely resume. It promises to be a great way to kickstart initiatives and empower residents into community action region wide. Until then, this paper challenges municipalities to review the formal and informal neighbourhood action groups that have formed in their communities and begin discussions about how to better support them through clear communication channels, funding, and access to facilities and amenities.



Fitzgerald Neighbours, Easter 2018

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Websites

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Kitchener: www.lovelyhood.ca

Waterloo: www.waterloo.ca/en/living/neighbourhoods.aspx

Fitzgerald Neighbours: fitzgeraldneighbours.ca

Queenston Neighbours: queenstonneighbours.weebly.com

Welland Neighbourhood Project: wnponline.weebly.com