

CONVERSATIONS WITH THE COMMUNITY: PERSPECTIVES ON THE ENVIRONMENT

A Report from the
Community Knowledge Forum
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Overview of the Foundation

The Community Foundation of Mississauga is part of one of the fastest growing charitable movements in Canada. The Foundation is a registered charitable public foundation that was launched in spring 2001. Since that time, it has grown rapidly and has over \$20 million in endowed assets (at December 2013) and cumulative grants of over \$5 million. Community foundations across Canada share three fundamental roles:

One: endowment building/personalized service. The Foundation builds endowed and other funds to provide lasting support for local priorities. It makes giving easy and effective, accepting a wide variety of gifts and providing donors with a number of charitable options. Donors can contribute cash, stocks, property and other assets. Donors may establish a fund in their name or in the name of a loved one. In most cases, a gift qualifies for maximum tax advantage under federal law.

Two: local grantmaking expertise. The Foundation's staff and volunteers have an in-depth understanding of the issues, opportunities, and resources that shape our community. It evaluates all aspects of community well being — including social services, education, the environment, health care, youth, seniors and the arts and make grants to support the broadest range of community needs. It can help donors learn more about local organizations and programs that make a difference in areas they care about most.

Three: community leadership. Because community foundations support all kinds of charities, it is well positioned to bring people and organizations together, convening diverse voices to address local issues and opportunities. The Foundation's business is building community.

Capturing Community Knowledge

Bridging the needs of the community with philanthropy is at the heart of the Community Foundation of Mississauga. Part of that means building a base of knowledge about the issues affecting the community. Bringing together the people who live and work in the city to hear what they have to say, connecting the organizations which serve the community, identifying gaps as well as opportunities

and sharing information can be part of the solution to addressing community needs. Collaborating is one of the ways a community foundation stays connected to the purpose we serve. It helps keep vital knowledge and communication flowing.

Trends and Statistics

Along with the rest of the world, Mississauga is facing environmental challenges which require building partnerships for change. There are clear warning signs of potential threats to our environment and wellbeing; soaring greenhouse gasses, increasing waste generation, water and energy use. Climate change is already having an impact through droughts, floods and invasive species. Some of these trends could eventually result in poorer health, a weaker economy, lower standard of living, and diminished quality of life. Mississauga is at a critical moment in its development; the majority (95%) of its lands are built out, much of its infrastructure is developed and the city can't expand its boundaries.

Mississauga has many natural areas to be preserved, there are more than 522 parks, 225 km of trails and woodlands, the Credit Valley Watershed, the Etobicoke Creek and 13 k of shoreline. In 2011 83% of Peel residents used personal vehicles to travel to work. Only 13.6% used public transit and just 3.4% walked or cycled. There are many green initiatives going on in Mississauga like the expansion of public transit and Green Building "Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design" (LEED) certification, but there is more to be done.

One of the unintended consequences of past urban expansion has been a loss of natural areas and an increasingly degraded natural environment. In addition our urban areas are subject to broader environmental problems such as global climate change.

Protection, preservation, restoration and expansion of natural areas are fundamental to present day quality of life. They are integral to clean air, land and water, support vital ecological functions and contribute to the health and spiritual well-being of Mississauga's residents. Where Mississauga was once farmland and orchards were able to absorb water, today much of Mississauga is covered in hard surfaces that create high volumes of surface run-off increasing pollutants and pressure on stormwater infrastructure (flooding).

There have been three "100 year storms" in the last three years in this region. Storms such as the one in July 2013 which caused flooding in Mississauga, will become more commonplace. Studies have

shown design standards (infrastructure) are not adequate to deal with storm water or to protect our natural systems.

Through its Living Green Master Plan, the City of Mississauga (the City) is making efforts to respond on a local level to the global challenge of Climate change.

Mississauga is on the front line of the sustainability challenge because it is at the community level where the effects of climate change (such as compromised air and water quality, heat alert days and strained natural resources) will be experienced. It is also at this level that the greatest opportunities exist for both mitigating and adapting our neighbourhoods, natural systems and built infrastructure to anticipated impacts.

Mississauga's goal is to become a Green City. A Green City is a healthy, sustainable, liveable city with a healthy natural environment, healthy people and a thriving economy. By engaging the community and implementing practices that ensure environmental sustainability we can collectively continue to create a liveable and healthy community.

Sharing Knowledge and Expertise

The Community Foundation of Mississauga conducted interviews with members of the community from September to December 2013 in preparation for a three hour Forum on the Environment held on January 28th 2014 at The Riverwood Conservancy.

In examining environmental issues in Mississauga, a focus developed on how to cultivate connections to the environment and strengthen capacity to reach and engage the community. We know that citizen engagement has a collective impact, can mobilize a community to action and promote advocacy in support of environmental initiatives at all levels. This can make a big difference towards living more sustainably. The forum looked at environmental priorities which frame community actions, shared knowledge and experiences around successful community engagement, best practices and future directions.

We heard from more than thirty stakeholders representing over twenty environmental organizations and community based groups. This was a diverse (in size, scope and structure) group of knowledgeable environmental advocates framing regional and municipal priorities, conservation and stewardship activities, educational initiatives and programs, to volunteer driven community based groups involved in program delivery, advocacy and community activation. Each spoke from a

specific perspective related to their experiences with environmental initiatives at the community level.

Carol Chaput, Supervisor of Environmental Education at the Region of Peel (the Region) identified the Region's environmental priorities and outlined their approach to engage community partners.

Brenda Osborne, Director of Environment and Mary Bracken, Environmental Specialist from the City spoke to the process of creating a liveable city. They highlighted the strategic framework and direction for the city through the City's Strategic Plan and implementation of the Living Green Master Plan; the action plan to deliver environmental initiatives.

Dave Beaton, Manager of Outreach at the Credit Valley Conservation (CVC) outlined stewardship initiatives as the scientific leaders in watershed management and highlighted climate change as the dominant theme and driver for what needs to happen in Mississauga.

All three are partners in Peel's Climate Change Strategy.

Tracy Appleton, Ecoschools program leader at the Peel District School Board (PDSB) and Vicky An from Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA)/Education Program Services Dufferin Peel Catholic District School Board (DPDSB) addressed community engagement on a large scale through programming in the school boards. The promotion of environmental education and environmentally responsible practices were outlined. Examples of how the program develops the knowledge, skills, perspectives and practices student's need to be active, environmentally responsible citizens, were shared.

A number of community based environmental groups highlighted their efforts in the practical implementation of big picture strategies to local scale. (A list of participating groups can be found in Appendix A.) Community engagement and activation through programming were a focus of this discussion. The necessity of collaboration at all levels in support of grassroots organizations to broaden the reach of environmental initiatives into the community was addressed.

The Community Foundation of Mississauga is grateful for the contribution of all the participants. Their valuable input is the basis of this report.

Key Findings

Education and Awareness

The session highlighted that ongoing public education and awareness of environmental concerns are critical elements of knowledge transfer and behavioural change at the community level. Raising public awareness, educating residents to give them information on how to live green, requires involvement from everyone. The Region has highlighted the environment as a priority with a focus on working to protect, enhance and restore the environment. The City has developed a Living Green Master Plan, an action plan to deliver environmental initiatives. The Region and the City along with the conservation authorities are part of the Peel climate change strategy. Climate change is the dominant theme and driver for what needs to happen in Mississauga. CVC builds data sets to define the problems and the science is critical to understanding issues and solutions. Both school boards highlighted programming that cultivates connections to the environment and it is clear that the school system has a tremendous reach and capacity to connect with a large and diverse population. For example the Region and the City's connection with the Eco-schools program, as one community point of contact, demonstrates a school's ability to advance campaigns and the potential for further outreach into the whole community, including newcomers. Finding ways to implement big picture strategies to local scale is necessary to fulfill the mandate of protect, enhance and restore the environment. Building partnerships and collaborations are key to connecting the dots for individuals to understand and become actively involved in environmentally responsible practices.

Green Initiatives

The discussion illuminated that while there are many existing environmental initiatives, increased community participation is critical to their success and effectiveness. Many residents have indicated that the environment is an overwhelming issue and they don't know what practical steps they can take themselves to make a difference. Environmental engagement, education, accessibility and action are necessary to further green initiatives. The Region's focus on behavior change and knowledge transfer comes from evidence based decision making around energy use, water and waste management, air quality and transportation initiatives. This approach requires them to engage community partners, such as CVC, Ecosource and the Community Environment Alliance (CEA). The City has outlined three approaches in their Living Green Master Plan; set an example, encourage others, compel others. Doors Open Mississauga (Urban design awards), as part of Culture Days, highlights environmentally friendly features of buildings not normally open to the public. "Let Your Green Show" encourages citizens to

take simple actions (like a top 10 of what one can do to reduce their impact on the environment) and provides rewards for actions taken. In encouraging others innovative approaches to engagement are necessary, including collaboration with the broader public sector including community based groups that can build partnerships for change. A community development approach for undertaking environmental initiatives would be asset-based and include diverse voices. Environmental issues are very complex and need to be distilled down to action on a daily basis; broken down into simple steps, both hands-on and practical. Individuals need to relate to environmental issues and be made aware of connections between the environment and health, environment and food and social development. Intentional engagement can address needs of often marginalized groups, recognize needs of a specific community and allow grass roots agencies to be a conduit for policy development and lay the foundations for next steps.

Sustainable Programming

Within the environmental community there are many and varied opportunities for engagement. This variety of approaches allows for action to take place where an individual's or community's needs intersect with environmental concerns. Environmental programming needs to nurture inclusion and cultivate connections between people. It can be site-based, stewardship oriented, specific to issues, or community needs, inclusive and accessible both physically and culturally, as well as educational, skill development and leadership oriented. Using integrated and holistic approaches to program design and letting communities name their needs and interests supports sustainable programming.

Examples include;

- Greening Sacred Spaces (GSS) builds connections and understanding across diverse cultural and faith groups.
- Sustainable Neighbourhood retrofit Action Plan (SNAP) in collaboration with local partners brings together residents, businesses, community groups, government agencies and conservation authorities to develop an action plan for change that fits the needs of a particular neighbourhood.
- Stewardship programs through the Sierra Club and Conservation Authorities provide experiential learning in nature and can build bridges within communities around shared interests.

Local sites such as Riverwood, provide accessibility for special needs such as programming in their enabling garden, ErinoaksKids program, stroke recovery programming and heart healthy discovery walks, all recognizing the health benefits of being in nature. This is just one aspect of their work.

CEA in collaboration with community health has tracked health improvements where local food has been provided to disadvantaged families and has used eco-therapy to enhance cognitive health in dementia patients. Many studies demonstrate that having access to nature, benefits our physical, social and mental health.

Inclusion of diverse communities is seen within the community gardens where relationship building occurs as diverse cultures, as well as youth and adult partnerships, develop connections to the environment. These hubs of environmental focus also promote spontaneous intergenerational connections. Ecosource has a goal of having a garden accessible to every neighbourhood. Community gardens are a good way to connect with communities and different cultures. The community gardens show the growing interest/awareness from all levels, where people can come together with community members to eat healthy and connect with other residents. The gardens are an easy story to tell about how things come together through the interconnected nature of environmental programming.

Youth want to be involved in environmental initiatives. They want to be taken seriously and have a voice. There is recognition of the importance of engaging youth but there are not always easy outlets for this. The Peel Environmental Youth Alliance (PEYA) is a youth-initiated organization and a catalyst for youth participation in environmental initiatives. The Amazing Green Race, a PEYA event, has small groups competing in different challenges related to sustainability. They race across the city to hotspots with activities and workshops where they receive information on issues and partnerships. The race uses sustainable transportation – walking, bikes, buses. Youth learn about sustainable transportation and about different environmental groups and partners. The Amazing Green Race is fun and engaging and it is not overwhelming since it is a one day event. Along the way, youth learn about various opportunities they can get involved in now and in the future.

Despite the City being a leader of best practices and strategic investment in building lasting engagement, there are still significant differences in interest and participation across the city. There are variations in participation levels among the various wards. They want to expand outreach and proactively connect with all wards. Connections are critical to reaching out to less engaged areas.

As over 40% of Mississauga residents have English as a second language, the environment has been identified as something that can bring people together and be a stepping stone for people to venture further into natural areas. Concern for community and the wellbeing of future generations is cross-cultural. Participation in environmental initiatives that include skill development, storytelling and mentorship engages people in experiential activities that cultivate connections to the environment and

community.

A collaboration between CVC and the Centre for Education and Training (CET) uses language instruction around natural heritage, including trips to conservation areas. CEA has developed environmentally oriented language curriculum materials now used in Language Instruction for Newcomers (LINC) programming.

Many environmental initiatives are project based. There is a cost to project management and this must be recognized in funding to support environmental initiatives at the community level. Project based programming is difficult to sustain. While volunteers are critical to environmental projects, the impression is that costs (expenses) are low. This doesn't reflect the true cost of programming. In breaking down actual costs of running a program, Ecosource noted that a minimum of 10% of program funding was required to cover overhead. Time and resources to collect local research need to be tied into financial support. Qualitative stories are very important and motivating and must be recognized by funders as well as quantitative information.

Using nature as a catalyst for change requires addressing basic needs through grass roots connections. Experiences need to be relevant, active, hands-on, practical and applied, and incorporate experiential learning. Developing compelling stories for all audiences should address differing values, economic, social and environmental within the context that individual and community wellbeing is linked to the environment.

Environmental initiatives can't be discreet, they must show interconnections. This integrative approach supports more sustained engagement and systemic change.

Community Engagement

The focus of discussion was the need to empower citizens to become actively engaged in relevant and practical environmental initiatives. Making the connection between the environment and other issues can initiate a broader spectrum discussion. Empowering environmental organizations to make further (more varied) connections within the community by working towards common goals can break down barriers. Collaboration to increase public awareness can build capacity.

Engaging at the school level can extend the reach of environmental initiatives beyond the school to parents and community at large. Regional and municipal programs can be implemented within schools. More structured programs can create templates, quick and easy resources that can be used to sustain programming in a more informal setting. Providing opportunities to get out into and

experience nature develops personal knowledge which encourages people to take ownership of issues. Getting connected and being supported are key factors in sustainable environmental initiatives. Making connections personal from the top down and bottom up is essential. Community based grassroots support can then further extend that personal experience.

Successful mechanisms of engagement include; using events as learning opportunities, ‘wake up’ to issues that are already taking place (flooding), as well as including an environmental component in social events or making stewardship events more social. Family-oriented programs can increase inclusion - both newcomers and seniors are more likely to participate with family. Drawing on everyday things that will serve multiple purposes, such as tap water promotion (importance of tap water) and active transportation/cycling/walking/no idling, gardening and food production make environmental action relevant.

Many community organizations have worked together on various initiatives. For example the TRCA, the City and the Region collaborated on the formation of a cycling event to highlight both health and environmental benefits of active transportation. Some of the most strategic partnerships are those with local governance, where municipal affairs and policies are very important in addressing environmental concerns. The power of collaboration at the local level allows for a whole systems approach. It facilitates sharing of information, research, expertise, staff capacity and networks.

Community engagement involves programming to inspire the community. Whether it is volunteer based, site based, stewardship, recreation, informal or formal education, it all enhances the credibility of environmental action. There is a need to make people feel connected to the environment . For example the CVC stewardship forum demonstrates how individual projects fit into the bigger picture of watershed management, using demonstration sites like Unitarian Congregation in Mississauga (UCM), Lakeside Park, Riverwood and Rattray Marsh. Other community engagement programs provide direction for local action – 10 things individuals can do or simple critical steps (rain barrels, water tolerant gardens).

Natural heritage and stewardship links the health of the environment to the health of people. It is tangible, practical, hands-on, and activity based. Life skills and leadership development using the environment as a medium, highlights the intersection of environmental development and community development.

Future Watch’s Natural Connections program uses the environment to engage newcomers through recreational and stewardship opportunities. This can further identify needs of community members

and what they are looking for, like local food sources, language training, health issues. It's an opportunity to get people's attention and make it more relatable to them. Through knowledge of local features, communities take ownership and can initiate their own programs.

The CVC Multicultural Program is an education strategy that builds capacity on the environment by collaborating with language instructors, social service agencies and community health agencies. These outdoor experiences provide connections to the environment and an opportunity to reflect, which is a key driver critical for people to see why the environment is important.

Community-based environmental organizations help to cement learning so the community becomes an agent of change and enhances their capacity for impact. Environmental issues need to converge with broader social issues to further engage people.

Conclusions

The common ground found at this forum revealed the benefits of living in a community with a healthy natural environment. In order to accomplish this, it is necessary to find ways to implement big picture strategies to local scale.

The need for community-based groups to further the reach of policies and directives at the grass roots level was clearly demonstrated. We know that people have the power to enact positive change.

Providing a continuum of services/programs to engage the population at a variety of levels where their interests intersect around environmental issues allows people to make choices and take action relevant to their circumstances. Change happens when capacity is built at a grass roots level where people are given choices and can develop a personal narrative.

Many understand that the environment frames the foundation of community health and quality of life. The diversity of environmental groups (approaches), knowledge, expertise and perspectives, plays a critical role in enlightening and engaging the community around environmental issues, making them tangible and inspiring the community to action.

Many community groups are demonstrating sound practices of community engagement around environmental sustainability. There is a recognition that environmental sustainability, quality of life and economic prosperity are related features of the most successful communities. By engaging the community and implementing practices that ensure environmental sustainability we can collectively continue to create a liveable and healthy community.

Thank you to the participating organizations who have helped generate information about how the

community is developing around environmental issues.

References

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City of Mississauga: Living Green Master Plan, January 2012. www.mississauga.ca

Sierra Club Canada: Peel Region Group: Mississauga's Natural Capital: The foundation of Our Health and Well Being, 2013. ontario.sierraclub.ca

Credit Valley Conservation: Green Cities Programs and Projects, pamphlet 2010.
www.creditvalleyca.ca

Earth Day Canada: Diversity Research Report, July 2012

Appendix A - Participant List

Region of Peel - Environmental Education, Operations Support, Public Works

City of Mississauga – Environment Division, Community Services

Credit Valley Conservation

Peel District School Board, Ecoschools Program and Curriculum Support Services

Dufferin Peel Catholic District School Board

Toronto and Region Conservation Authority – Education Program Services/Sustainable Neighbourhood Retrofit Action Plan

Eco-Source

Peel Environmental Youth Alliance

Community Environment Alliance

The Riverwood Conservancy

Greening Sacred Spaces

Halton Environmental Network

Association for Canadian Environmental Resources

Sierra Club Peel



Unitarian Congregation in Mississauga – UCM Greening Initiative

David Suzuki Foundation

Future Watch EDEP

Tutored by Nature

Evergreen

Credit River Anglers Association

Creditview Wetland Stewardship Committee