A better connection

Ideas to help strengthen connection with
and engagement in community
Fall 2011

vancouver
foundation

Our goal is a metro Vancouver
where people have a deep and strong connection with
and engagement in their community.

Executive summary

In the summer of 2011, Vancouver Foundation conducted a public consultation to determine what one or two community issues we should focus additional efforts on over the next three to five years.

Our work in this new priority area would involve some granting but it would also include other activity, such as research, public awareness and engagement, convening, partnerships, policy development, and possible advocacy.

Our consultations involved one-on-one interviews with 106 community leaders from a broad range of sectors, an online survey of 276 non-profits, and six "community conversations" that grew from the *2010 Vital Signs* report.

We were intrigued by what people told us.

The issue people said concerned them the most was isolation and disconnection; the feeling that we increasingly live in silos, separated by race, language, income, age, and even geography. They said we are becoming less engaged with each other and in the life of our community.

People told us that they believed this lack of connection and engagement hurt them personally, and hurt their community. They were worried that we could not address the complex, larger issues such as homelessness and poverty without a connected and engaged citizenry.

They said that the best investment Vancouver Foundation could make would be to help create bridges between our various communities — between neighbours and neighbourhoods; between residents of different ages, cultures and backgrounds; between marginalized people and the larger community — with the goal of enabling residents of metro Vancouver to connect and engage for the greater good.

People were particularly concerned about youth, and wanted to find ways to spark engagement, caring and compassion in young people.

We reported our findings in the *Phase One* report, *Our Community,* to the Board in September 2011. That report had two recommendations:

1. That we investigate how Vancouver Foundation can help create the sustainable social networks that will spark civic engagement, rebuild bonds of trust, and harness the power of individuals and neighbourhoods in metro Vancouver to work together to improve their own lives and the lives of their communities.
2. That we explore how Vancouver Foundation can build on our current investment in youth to engage them in this change agenda, build leadership, and spark civic engagement and youth philanthropy.

Phase Two of our priority-setting initiative involved further research and interviews to answer the following questions:

- What are other organizations (for example, community foundations, other funders, governments, think tanks, etc.) doing in these two areas? Where is the innovation? What is working well?

- What other organizations are interested in working in these areas, and where are the opportunities for partnerships?

- What is Vancouver Foundation already doing in these areas, and where and how can that be strengthened?

Key findings

1. Vancouver Foundation is not alone in discovering that people worry about the individual and social consequences of a lack of connection and engagement. Other organizations are hearing this too, making now the right time for Vancouver Foundation to take a leadership role.

2. There are many lessons to be learned from U.S. community foundations, which have been active in this area for the past 10 years. Many of these foundations developed innovative project ideas and raised public awareness, and are ahead of most Canadian community foundations in proactive initiatives.

3. Knowing what to focus on in a community largely depends on strong data. That requires a survey, similar to the U.S. 2000 benchmark survey that allowed participating community foundations to craft projects to meet community-determined needs.

4. Measuring success in this area is a work in progress. It's relatively straightforward to measure how many homeless people are housed or how many immigrants take a language course. Measuring the impact of strengthened social connections and increased engagement is less direct.

5. Finding the right language to describe this issue and to say why people should care, is also a challenge. Many U.S. foundations still use the phrase 'social capital' and even after 10 years, find it does not resonate with donors or the public. Another phrase sometimes used, 'belonging and inclusion,' also has its limitations.

6. There are several organizations in metro Vancouver doing some aspect of this work. However, this work is not their principle priority.

7. Vancouver Foundation currently provides many fields of interest grants that build connections between people and community, and that support youth engagement and leadership. We also offer grants that build connections at the neighborhood level. Our FOI grants tend to be focused on helping people who are marginalized to more fully participate in the community at large.

8. There is considerable interest in metro Vancouver — among various governments and local organizations — to collaborate and create partnerships in an effort to deepen people's social connections and engagement in their community.

Craving connections

What community leaders told us in interviews in June and July 2011, was also being expressed elsewhere: at a sustainability conference, to a city planning commission, to a pollster, and on a campus the size of a small city.

Metro Vancouver's June 2011 **Sustainability Congress** was designed to tackle some of the big issues facing the region, including food, climate change, energy, and security.

The opening panelists were supposed to focus on those issues to set up the day's workshops. However, they had other ideas.

The question the panel wanted to discuss was this: How do we build bridges and bonds of trust between the many disparate groups in metro Vancouver that would allow people to work together to tackle the big issues?

The conclusion was that governments and institutions cannot solve all these problems alone. People have to do this together, as a community, or it simply will not work.

A month later, in July 2011, the **Vancouver City Planning Commission** reported on their public consultations on the City's Sustainable Neighbourhoods project.

The mandate of this project was to find the connections between what neighbourhoods need and the City's sustainability goals. However, those were not the connections people wanted to talk about.

It wasn't that they weren't interested in transit, recycling and bicycle paths. They were. It's just that sustainability was not the priority for neighbourhoods. They said their main concern is building caring connections between people; knowing your neighbour, people helping other people.

The Planning Commission concluded that the most important investments the City could make in neighbourhoods are those "that strengthen and extend connections among people and groups in ways that build trust."

Meanwhile, at the **University of British Columbia**, faculty, staff and students were complaining that UBC is a cold place. People said they feel isolated, and that it's hard to make friends and build professional relationships on campus.

The university is developing a strategy to bridge the silos. The focus is on intercultural understanding, but the goal is to create an environment that fosters trusting connections between all groups.

Even pollsters are finding this craving for connections. An **Angus Reid poll** released in November 2010 found that people in Vancouver are more addicted to social media than other Canadians.

They also found that people here are among the loneliest in the country. And, despite their online connections, people crave more face-to-face interaction, with 69 per cent saying they can only have meaningful relationships in person.

We are two million strong in metro Vancouver. We are close together — in neighbourhoods, on campus, online — yet we have never been further apart.

The value of connections

In July 2011, the **United Nations General Assembly** called on countries to examine how they can craft national policies to promote happiness in their societies.

This was an extraordinary development.

For decades, we have been single-mindedly focused on economic growth. Not that this should be denigrated, for when people do not have basic needs such as clean water, food, and health care, and when they cannot hope for meaningful employment or education, they suffer. But there is growing recognition that despite the world's total wealth, there is vast unrest, and unprecedented inequality and insecurity.

The pursuit of a robust Gross Domestic Product has not resulted in a happier, safer, more secure world.

Nations are beginning to ask how they can support economic growth and development in a broader context; one that promotes and fosters well-being, trust, compassion and community.

This is a question being asked around the world, as people come to question what it really means to be prosperous.

- It's being asked at the **World Health Organization**, which assesses the quality of life across several domains, including social relations, recognizing that the need to form bonds of trust is crucial to our individual and collective well-being.

- It's being asked by the **Organization for Economic Development**, which in June 2011, started to measure the well-being of its 34 member-nations in an effort to go beyond the Gross Domestic Product as a measure of prosperity.

- And it's being examined by major think tanks, including the **National Conference on Citizenship**, which issued a report in September 2011 that makes a link between civic engagement and lower unemployment.

    That report shows evidence that participation in civil society can help people develop the skills, confidence and habits that make them employable, and strengthen the networks that help them find jobs.

    The most valuable forms of civic engagement, according to the report, include volunteering, working with neighbours, group membership, meeting attendance, and registering to vote.

These connections and bonds have wide-ranging benefits, even though individuals do not set out to "forge social connections and build trust" or "increase their well-being quota."

They set out to build a community garden, or start a club for neighbourhood youth, or get new playground equipment for their local park. They realize they can better achieve their shared goals if they work together. And that often means crossing barriers such as language, culture, age, and income to build the trust required to get the job done.

Research shows that when people feel connected and engaged — when they trust one another and have a sense of belonging — neighbourhoods are safer, there is less crime, people bounce back faster after illness or other setbacks, and they are mentally and emotionally healthier, with less depression and suicide.

We are simply better off in many of the ways that matter.

It's important at the outset to acknowledge that there is a dark side of bonded communities.

A group that comes together to fight off, for example, a half-way house in their neighbourhood (the Not in My Backyard, or NIMBY phenomenon) is using their connections to reach a shared goal but it may not be one that benefits the entire community. No doubt the Ku Klux Klan feels connected and bonded. And the hockey riot in downtown Vancouver in the summer of 2011 was an example of people coming together for a joint purpose, but not a positive one.

The bridges we should help build are those that deepen people's connection and engagement in their community; connections that build a greater sense of belonging and trust, that strengthen relationships and enable disparate people, organizations, neighbourhoods, and entire communities to work together in ways that advance everyone's interests.

● Local example: The Frog Hollow Neighbourhood House Culinary Program

This program for pre-teens, funded in part by Vancouver Foundation, focuses on food. However, the cooking classes do more than just teach the youth how to make souvlaki, prepare a bouquet-garni for a soup stock, (and that grapes explode in the microwave). It also helps dissolve the cliques within the after-school program, which serves Chinese, Filipino, Vietnamese and other diverse groups.

Nothing breaks down barriers of difference quite like the shared goal of figuring out how to use a pasta-making machine, and then sitting down together to eat the results.

So while the pre-teens learn to cook, they also build trust with youth from other cultures, take that understanding home to their parents, and perhaps even build leadership skills for the future.

There are many lessons to be learned from what other community foundations have done, particularly in the United States where several foundations made this work a priority.

The origins of the U.S. movement

Community foundations in the U.S. became interested in the issue of social connections and engagement following the 1995 publication of a journal article by Harvard Professor Robert Putnam called *Bowling Alone*.

Putnam measured voting habits, membership in civic organizations, informal socializing, bowling in leagues, and other elements of what he called social capital, and concluded that civic engagement in the U.S. was in serious decline. He made the case that the downward trend was impinging on almost every aspect of social and personal well-being.

Putnam's work inspired Lewis Feldstein of the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation and Tom Sander of the Saguaro Seminar to propose the idea of a national survey to assess social capital in communities where there was an interested community foundation.

This led to a large-scale project: *The 2000 Social Capital Benchmark Survey*.

As previously noted, it's a relatively straightforward exercise to measure how many homeless people are housed, how many immigrants take a language course, or how many disabled people use a pro bono legal service.

It is more of a challenge to measure subjective factors such as social connections and engagement.

The 2000 survey was an attempt to measure these things. The 25-minute phone survey asked questions about who people trusted: neighbours, work colleagues, the media, police, and people from different races.

The survey asked what, if any, clubs and organizations people belonged to, how much time they spend watching TV or on their computers, and whether they voted or go to church.

People were asked how often they saw or spoke to their friends, whether they knew their neighbours or people from other races and religions. They were asked about volunteering, participation in sports, and whether they went to cultural events.

It was a comprehensive measurement of the social capital of 30,000 people in 41 communities across the country. It also allowed the 34 contributing community foundations to make decisions about where social capital was lacking and what they might do about it.

Some community foundations did nothing with the data. They did not incorporate building social capital into their strategic goals, or did not purposefully look for projects to address what the survey uncovered.

In some cases, it was a lack of commitment for the cause by foundation leadership; in others it was confusion about how to select a project or projects, or how to appeal to donors and the public.

Others however, seized on the data to adjust strategic priorities and develop projects. For example, the Rochester Area Community Foundation learned from the survey that racial minorities who lived in the city, with less education and lower incomes, were considerably less trusting than white, middle-class people living in the suburbs.

The Foundation began to fund a number of projects that tackled the race issue.

They then took part in the 2006 follow-up survey and found that more people had friends from different races than they reported in 2000.

The 2000 survey produced data on 11 distinct dimensions of social capital, including social trust, interracial trust, involvement in organizations, involvement in conventional politics, volunteerism, giving, and so on.

How U.S. foundations made 'social capital' a priority

The participating community foundations used the data to make choices about what to focus on in their communities.

Their work fell into three areas:

1. Grant making
2. Proactive initiatives
3. Public awareness and engagement

1. Building connections through grants

Some foundations simply incorporated this into their standard grants programs, while others went further and issued Requests for Proposals that specifically address the issue of building bridges between people and organizations.

Many foundations include an educational component to introduce the concept of social capital, and encourage non-profits to propose new projects. They use briefings, workshops, websites, and written materials to inspire and assist their grantees.

There are small neighbourhood grants and much larger projects, such as the one by the Chicago Community Trust in partnership with the One Nation Foundation.

● Example: One Chicago/One Nation

Anti-Muslim sentiment ran high after 9/11. People told pollsters that they would not like a Muslim as a neighbour, that they would be nervous to see a Muslim on their flight, and that they think American Muslims are not loyal to the United States.

Pollsters found that the only thing that seemed to shift anti-Muslim feelings was meeting and knowing a Muslim personally.

The Chicago Community Trust launched a program called *One Chicago/One Nation* in 2009 with the goal of tackling anti-Muslim sentiment.

It began with a film contest, which received over 150 short films about being Muslim in Chicago. Local organizations provided training and tools to help low-income residents create the films. The contest helped raise media awareness and the profile of the project.

After that, the Foundation selected, through an application process, 100 Community Ambassadors. These local volunteers were trained on how to facilitate community conversations to build bridges between people from different cultures.

Each Ambassador received a $5,000 to $10,000 grant to work with their community to develop projects to promote diversity. The only prerequisite was that the projects bring together people who had not worked together before.

Each community determined what they wanted to focus on. It might be an inter-faith organic garden, or a comedy show featuring Jewish, Muslim and Christian comics.

The *One Chicago/One Nation* project is currently calling for applications for another 50 Community Ambassadors; people who will become "servant leaders", inspiring leadership in others, who will lead wide-ranging, locally determined initiatives on youth homelessness, human trafficking, the environment, and so on.

2. Building connections through proactive initiatives

Traditionally, community foundations have not acted as proactive agents of change. But as Chris Gates, the Executive Director of PACE (Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement) said, "We are moving from *funding* civic engagement to *doing* civic engagement."

An example is an initiative of the Duluth-Superior Area Community Foundation.

● Example: Speak Your Peace: The Civility Project

By 2000, politics in the Duluth-Superior region of northeastern Minnesota and northwestern Wisconsin had become a blood sport. Meetings of city councils and county commissions in the region were shouting matches, where personal attacks took the place of reasoned debate.

This culture of disrespect was undermining the region's ability to make progress on a number of fronts. It was also turning qualified people away from public office, and was poisoning the general public's view of their elected officials.

The Foundation developed a campaign aimed at improving the civility of public discourse, with the goals of strengthening community decision-making, expanding civic engagement, and increasing residents' interest in civic politics.

The multi-media campaign ran from 2001 to 2003, and targeted four groups:

- elected officials
- active citizens, meaning civic groups, non-profits, etc.
- the general public
- children in Grades 6-8, for whom the Foundation developed a "Speak Your Peace in the Classroom" campaign

Subsequent studies show strong evidence that discourse has become much more civil among elected officials. There is limited evidence that members of the general public are also more civil when debating public issues.

3. Building connections through public awareness and engagement

Many of the U.S. community foundations used simple and straightforward strategies to introduce the concept and value of social connections and engagement.

● **Example: New Hampshire Charitable Foundation: 150 things you can do to build social capital.**

This pamphlet lists ways a person can build social capital, such as visiting a nursing home, organizing a yard sale, joining a club, or attending a public meeting.

It is online and has been duplicated or adapted by other community foundations across the United States as a simple tool to educate the public and local leaders about what social capital is, why it matters, and how to build it.

● **Example: Winston-Salem Community Foundation awards**

In 2006, the ECHO Council in Winston-Salem began giving awards to individuals and informal groups that were "caught in the act" of building social capital. Each ECHO Award winner receives a gift of $1,000 to donate to a charitable organization of their choice.

Other ways U.S. community foundations play a leadership role in building connections or social capital include:

1. Capacity building: Foundations offer training, coaching, and workshops for people and organizations. An example is the Rochester Area Community Foundation that sponsors a leadership-training course for Latino residents interested in running for political office.

2. Convening: Foundations use their reputations as neutral community leaders to bring often very disparate groups to the table. An example is the Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque, which convened a series of meetings to identify the top ten issues facing the city, and then created working groups to tackle each.

Lessons learned from the U.S. experience

The U.S. community foundations we talked to encouraged us to take this on, arguing that community foundations can be the most effective leaders in this area because we have:

- monetary resources
- discretion in the use of those resources
- a mission focused on the common good
- deep and broad knowledge of community issues and community resources
- widespread credibility
- personal relationships with leaders from almost every sector of the community

It is interesting to note that even after ten years, the words 'social capital' are still a problem. In our earlier report, we wrote about how this is not an easy concept to articulate. It is easier to talk to donors and the public about social ills such as homelessness or mental illness; much harder to explain why they should care about trusting other people, and the value of strong social connections and increased engagement.

A number of U.S. community foundations have not succeeded in finding language that resonates with people. Still, those who remain active in the area are happy to share their advice for success:

1. Stay in it for the long term. This is not a short-term project.

2. Passion and commitment at the top is critical – from the CEO and the Board.

3. Don't be distracted by other emerging priorities.

4. Don't rush. Allow for planning time between the idea and implementation.

5. 'Small' works. Do more granting at the neighborhood level.

6. Reconsider what success means. Measuring success in this area is difficult.

7. Don't get bogged down in process. Don't try to think through every step along the way.

Their advice was to simply take the first step, trust the results of the consultation process and the people who told us that building bridges between people, neighbourhoods, and organizations was what matters the most, and understand that this is a long-term project that is built one brick at a time.

Projects in metro Vancouver that build connections

There are currently several projects in metro Vancouver that are designed to build connections across differences. However, these seem to be ad hoc initiatives. Connections and engagement are not an organizational priority for any of the groups we talked to. Examples include:

Vancouver Dialogues

This 18-month, $400,000 project was convened by the City of Vancouver, and sponsored by the federal and provincial governments.

It invited small groups of First Nations, urban Aboriginals and newcomers to talk to one another about their past and present experiences with social inclusion, and about how they imagine their communities in the future. There were 27 facilitated conversations in which people told very personal stories about themselves and their experiences.

After those meetings, the project organized 12 cultural exchanges. Groups visited the Musqueam First Nation, a Jewish synagogue, the Ismaili Centre, Chinatown, and other sites, where they learned more about one another's religion and culture.

There was also a cross cultural youth and elders program that spoke to the wider community about the program's goals, with the aim of motivating community engagement on the issue of inclusion. That resulted in a photography exhibit at the Woodward's Centre.

The City is currently exploring ways to continue the program.

The Great Beginnings Program

This City of Vancouver project has been running since 2008. It allocated $10 million to celebrate the history, heritage and culture of Vancouver's first urban areas, which include Gastown, Chinatown, Japantown and Strathcona, collectively known as the Downtown Eastside.

A key element of the program is to instill pride in neighbourhoods as a way to revitalize communities and spark engagement. They are doing that by building connections between people and organizations; relationships they hope will last beyond the granting period and result in stronger, healthier communities.

The projects are wide-ranging — from art shows, to community murals, to window display contests, to graffiti removal, to pedestrian safety, to laneway improvement.

Compassionate Children, Caring Communities

The Dalai Lama Center for Peace and Education, in collaboration with Frog Hollow Neighbourhood House, launched this initiative in August 2011.

The program brings teenagers and adults together and asks: "What can people and communities do to encourage compassion, caring and confidence in children?"

The goal is that the stories people share will show young people that others do care about them, and that they will grow into compassionate, caring adults, engaged in the life of their community.

Vancouver Foundation grants

There are several ways we deepen connections and engagement through our own grant-making:

1. Grants that help connect and engage people in their neighbourhood.

2. Grants that help connect and engage people across differences such as age, language, culture, income, and so on.

3. Grants that help connect and engage people who are disadvantaged and as a result, unable to fully participate in the life of their community.

There is considerable expertise within the staff and volunteers who work in the Grants and Community Initiatives department, particularly about ways that marginalized people — new immigrants, people with disabilities, urban Aboriginals, seniors — can find their way into the life of the larger community. Granting in this area has included projects that:

• connect refugee youth with peer mentors

• help people with disabilities retrofit their homes

• help women who recently left prison integrate back into the community

• train people with mental illness to provide peer support

• provide education and job training for urban Aboriginals.

There is less granting that strengthens connections between disparate groups, bringing people together across barriers of difference. Some examples that do this are grants that:

- bring seniors and youth together in a variety of programs

- build bridges between Jewish, Muslim and Christian university students

- connect newcomers from disparate backgrounds.

Where Vancouver Foundation could bolster its work is in the area of building bridges between various communities, meaning across barriers of culture, age, language, income, even geography. These are the connections people told us they want strengthened.

Neighbourhood Small Grants

Vancouver Foundation launched the Neighbourhood Small Grants program in 1999. Since then, thousands of grants have been given to residents for everything from block parties to community gardens to skills workshops. Vancouver Foundation gave 415 Neighbourhood Small Grants in 2010 alone.

The grants range from $50 to $500. They are given through the 12 neighbourhood houses and three community centres Vancouver Foundation partners with.

It is the people in the neighbourhoods who decide what projects they want, and who make the granting decisions. Vancouver Foundation staff and its various advisory committees are not involved in those decisions.

During our interviews with community leaders for Phase One of this inquiry, Neighbourhood Small Grants often came up as a good example of grant-making that works. People who knew of the program enthusiastically supported it. People we informed about the program advised us to "do more."

The U.S. community foundations are also keen supporters of these smaller grants, and encouraged us "to get a Neighbourhood Small Grants program if you don't already have one."

The enthusiasm stems from the knowledge that these small projects are often the first step in strengthening social connections and engagement. A block party gets an isolated senior out of the house. A community garden is a place where people from different backgrounds can meet and get to know one another. A skills workshop can bridge barriers of difference such as language and age.

Putting ideas into action

When you're at the beginning, don't obsess about the middle, because the middle is going to look different once you get there. Just look for a strong beginning and a strong ending and get moving.
~ Chip Health & Dan Heath,
Switch: How to change things when change is hard

Our goal is to focus Vancouver Foundation's energy on initiatives that strengthen and deepen people's connection with and engagement in their community.

The long-term outcome we hope to achieve is a community where there is more compassion and caring, where people work together for the greater good, and where there is trust, well-being and a sense of belonging.

Actions for consideration

We understand that we need to map out a careful plan of how to achieve our goals. However, we do not have enough information right now to create that detailed road map. The important thing is to know what our strong beginning is, and to base our plans on strong community data. These are ways of "getting started" in 2012:

1. Commission our own metro Vancouver benchmark survey

We should consider undertaking a comprehensive metro Vancouver-wide survey of residents, in several languages, that investigates levels of social connections and engagement. While there have been other surveys that have included questions on happiness, and our own Vital Signs report, which asked about belonging and trust, there is no recent, comprehensive, neighbourhood-by-neighbourhood exploration of how residents think, feel and act. Such a survey would measure:

- Connections — how well do people know their neighbours, what are the levels of trust of different groups of people, how many close friends do people have . . .

- Engagement — do people belong to clubs or organizations, do they vote, volunteer, give, do favours for neighbours . . .

- Barriers to connection and engagement — how much time do people spend working, commuting, on the computer or watching TV, caring for children and aging parents . . .

2. Better integrate and capture this priority in our organizational granting

Grants and Community Initiatives has done a substantial amount of granting to projects that help marginalized communities address the systemic issues that prevent them from being more connected and engaged.

Also, as noted earlier, there have been a number of grants over the years that have helped build bridges and connect different types of communities with one another. However, we could do more to bolster this type of grant.

Staff should work with the various advisory committees to determine how best to overlay the new theme onto the existing priorities for that field. This new theme will not replace the existing priorities in a field of interest, but in a situation where two grants may have equal value, the grant that builds social connections across barriers of difference would be considered more favourably.

3. Strengthen and expand Neighbourhood Small Grants

The Neighbourhood Small Grants program is a powerful tool for connecting and engaging people where they live — often the easiest point of entry. The program encourages residents to come up with ideas to help their community, and offers them micro-grants to implement their projects.

We should explore ways to provide additional funding to allow neighbourhoods to award one or two slightly larger grants. This would allow residents to 'graduate' from the smaller to the larger grants, and continue to develop their community leadership skills. As well, in some cases it will enable residents to create more sustained opportunities for strengthening social connections and engagement, versus a one-off event.

We could also:

- Pilot a workshop and toolkit to train residents and citizen grant committees to do effective outreach and engagement so that more community members can participate in projects
- Expand the Neighbourhood Small Grants to two new communities that have requested support: New Westminster and Maple Ridge

4. Develop a broader public awareness plan to spark conversation and raise understanding of this issue in the community

The aim of a public awareness plan would be to:

- Increase people's awareness and understanding of why connections and engagement are important, not only to themselves as individuals but to the community at large
- Motivate people, through our communications work, to talk and learn about the issue and to become more engaged in their community

5. In 2012, seek out and identify for the Board's approval a key signature project or projects that Vancouver Foundation can support. We could especially consider projects that:

- Bring people together from different backgrounds, including religion, race, socio-economic backgrounds, age, etc.

- Engage youth participation and encourage youth leadership

6. Conduct further research to determine how Vancouver Foundation could support other models that build connections and engagement while also addressing community issues. For example:

- Looking at how we could support co-operatives

- Looking at other models in metro Vancouver that we could support as pilot projects

- Continue to work with a group of subject experts to provide feedback and ideas

7. Identify and convene key stakeholders

We could form an external committee of high-profile supporters to provide ideas and feedback, and to become Ambassadors in the larger community for the issue. This committee should include youth.

8. Create strategic opportunities for Board members to participate in existing and new projects

We know from the "community conversations" held in June 2011 that residents were delighted when a Vancouver Foundation Board member attended and facilitated a conversation.

- We could build on that, and explore affiliating each Board member with a neighbourhood where we provide Neighbourhood Small Grants.

- We could also investigate more opportunities for the Board to either hold some of its meetings in community locations, or invite grant recipients (organizations or individuals) to tell their success stories to the Board.

Conclusion

This report tells the story of our exploration of what others, including U.S. community foundations and organizations across metro Vancouver, are doing to strengthen connections and engagement. It also examines what Vancouver Foundation is already doing and suggests ways to build on and expand that work.

There are challenges, including:

- This concept is often difficult to articulate, and therefore not easy to raise money for without a specific project to point donors to

- There are difficulties measuring success

- t requires a follow-up survey to measure progress

- There is a risk of becoming distracted by other priorities

- It could result in many small donations that could overwhelm our capacity to steward

- It requires long-term passion and commitment from foundation leadership.

However, we think the benefits outweigh those challenges, because:

- It reflects the most important issue that community leaders said Vancouver Foundation should focus on

- It does not require a large fundraising effort to succeed

- It does not require us to cut the budgets of our fields of interest in order to transfer funds to the new priority

- The priority can easily be incorporated into Vancouver Foundation's standard grants programs

- There is significant potential to engage youth

- Donors have told us they are attracted to smaller projects that ask for smaller donations

- It yields inspiring stories that will help raise public awareness and engagement

We end where we began, remembering that people told us what they want — to become more connected and engaged, and to create a place where we welcome strangers, where neighbours know one another and look out for each other, a place where no matter who you are — young or old, rich or poor, able-bodied or challenged, newly arrived or a long-time Canadian — you feel a sense of belonging.

And because you feel you belong, you care – you have compassion for others, and you work with others to address our community's problems.

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vancouver
foundation

1200 - 555 West Hastings Street
Vancouver, BC V6B 4N6
604.688.2204