



Study Circles Pilot Project (About Affordable Housing)

Final Report

Compiled by:

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Acknowledgements

This Study Circles pilot project was made possible by a wide range of people and organizations interested in civic engagement and the issue of affordable housing in Richmond.

Our special thanks go to Coast Capital Savings and the City of Richmond for their funding support of the project. Civic Education Society (CES), with which the Richmond Civic Engagement Network (RCEN) is affiliated, submitted the original funding proposals and administered the funds after the proposals became successful.

The Project Steering Committee (see list of committee members in Structure and Staffing) guided the project and made an early commitment to support study circles as an effective civic dialogue mechanism. In addition to contributing their ideas and perspectives, committee members worked with the Project Coordinator closely and engaged politicians and other interested parties in the community.

25 citizens spent 2 weekends to be trained as Study Circles Facilitators under the guidance of Facilitator Trainer Mumtaz Patel and RCEN Co-Convenor Michael Yue . The facilitators became enthusiastic supporters of Study Circles and will continue to be a valuable resource for dialogue in the City of Richmond.

Support and endorsement of the project also came from the Richmond Community Services Advisory Committee (RCSAC) and the Richmond Poverty Response Committee. The Project Steering Committee had representation from both organizations.

The project, of course, could not have been possible without the enthusiastic participation of citizens from Richmond and other municipalities. They come to the Study Circles and Action Forum to voice their opinions about affordable housing in Richmond in a civil and mutually respectful manner. Their involvement reflected the value of a civic dialogue in helping people to understand differences and work together to achieve consensus.

We would also like to thank the CES Board of Directors and RCEN Executives Committee for their commitment in this project. Implementing a brand new project has its many challenges, and we are grateful to the full trust and support from the two executive groups.

Final Budget Statement

Staffing

Coordinator	\$3,600.00
Trainer	\$1,540.00
Facilitators	\$1,160.00

Marketing

Ads	\$3,395.71
Brochures	\$756.74
Websites	\$788.60

Supplies

Food, training materials, etc.	\$1,440.12
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Space Rental

Richmond Cultural Centre	\$328.00
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Miscellaneous

Administration	\$900.00
Transportation	\$150.00

Total Expenses	\$14,059.17
Coast Capital Funding	\$15,000.00
City of Richmond Funding	\$2,000.00
REMAINING FUND	\$2,940.83

Introduction

Healthy communities create and sustain public dialogue and problem solving processes. Public dialogue can form the cornerstone of a vibrant democracy.

In this kind of community, everyone's voice has an opportunity to be heard, equally and respectfully:

- People of different backgrounds and views routinely work together to solve public problems;
- Elected officials have many opportunities to hear from and respond to people;
- People have ways not only to inform government officials as they create and carry out public policy, but also work with officeholders to solve public problems.

An effective tool of creating public dialogue and active citizenship is the Study Circles, a mechanism that offers opportunities for citizens to engage in deliberative discussions on important community issues.

In March 2008, Civic Education Society (CES), on behalf of their affiliated group the Richmond Civic Engagement Network (RCEN), submitted an application to Coast Capital Savings Credit Union to request funding support for the development of Study Circles in the City of Richmond. In October of the same year, CES also submitted an application to the City of Richmond for funding support of the project. Both proposals were successful, and the project began in 2009.

Project Objective

The objective of this project was to engage people in the City of Richmond in a civil dialogue. Many groups and organizations remain unheard when it comes to civic engagement. This project was aimed at engaging people with various backgrounds, especially marginalized groups such as youth, women, people with disabilities, and visible minorities.

This project offered an opportunity for Richmond residents to express their concerns about the development of the City and generate new ideas for action in a neutral and non-threatening environment. They were given an opportunity for the open exchange of ideas, relationship building, information sharing, action planning and change making.

This project was designed to have three phases:

- Infrastructure development: building the foundation of the project (community support, publicity, facilitator training, etc.)
- Pilot implementation: conducting the study circles and engaging the community
- Action Forum and project evaluation: consolidating the outcomes of the study circles

Planned Outcomes

Our planned project outcomes included:

- New learning and an ability to see the “whole” picture
- Building of new relationships and a breakdown of barriers
- New ownership of the issue
- New processes for community problem solving

Each study circle was composed of 8 – 10 participants and a neutral facilitator (or two), allowing people who would not speak in a larger forum to express their ideas and opinions. During the infrastructure development phase, we aimed to train 15 – 20 facilitators to lead a corresponding number of Study Circles discussions in the pilot phase. Therefore, we planned to create a foundation that could engage up to 200 citizens in this project.

Structure and Staffing

Civic Education Society (CES)
President: Mabel Tung

Richmond Civic Engagement Network (RCEN)
Co-Convenor: Michael Yue
Project Coordinator: Judy Peterson
Facilitator Trainer: Mumtaz Patel

Steering Committee:
Brenda Plante (Turning Point Recovery Society)
David Reay (Poverty Response Committee)
Lynda Brummitt (Poverty Response Committee)
Jennifer Larson (Richmond Services Advisory Committee)

Susan Rachel (Vancouver Coastal Health)
Belinda Boyd (Vancouver Coastal Health)
De Whalen (Richmond Women's Resource Centre)

Discussion Theme

The discussion theme in the project had to meet four criteria:

1. Does the issue have broad appeal in the community?
2. Is the topic compelling for many different kinds of people?
3. Would dialogue help?
4. Can we define success?

The Project Coordinator worked closely with the RCEN Co-Convenors to connect with various community groups and organizations in Richmond, in an effort to identify a discussion theme for the pilot project. After a presentation was made at the Richmond Community Services Advisory Committee (RCSAC) about Study Circles, several organizations that have been working on the issue of “affordable housing” in Richmond became interested in using study circles to engage the local residents and facilitate constructive dialogue about this issue.

A Steering Committee was later formed to provide guidance to the project. The committee organized a focus group meeting (involving approximately 35 community members, mostly from Richmond-based organizations) to identify and frame the discussion theme. A decision was unanimously reached to frame the study circles question in the form of an Issue Statement (in question format).

“What can we do, as a community, to address the affordable housing issue in the City of Richmond, support the current initiatives, and make appropriate recommendations in an effort to achieve housing for all?”

Issue Guide

With the help of the Steering Committee, an Issue Guide was developed and made available online for the public, who is encouraged to review the Guide before participating in the Study Circles. The Guide was written to provide a balanced presentation about the affordable housing issue in Richmond, containing facts and figures, viewpoints, and stories. The Issue Guide and related information can be found on the [project wiki](#).

Facilitator Training

At the core of a Study Circles project is a team of facilitators who are interested in engaging the community in dialogue. Using our own community networks, we recruited a group of active citizens with varying professional, cultural and community backgrounds to be trained as circle facilitators. The training was held over two weekends and the facilitators were introduced to the theoretical foundation of study circles, scope of the pilot project, and skills needed to facilitate circles. After the training, the facilitators all felt ready to go into action.

Study Circles and Action Forum

Thanks to the support of community centres in Richmond, we were able to organize the circles in different neighbourhoods and make it convenient for participants to attend. Each circle was guided by 2 facilitators, who took on the roles of the facilitator and note taker respectively,

Facilitators submitted reports of the circle discussions based on a prescribed format, and the discussions were later summarized into a guiding document that was used for the final Action Forum, when the circle participants came together to share their ideas in a large group and prioritize future actions to be taken by the circle participants themselves. Here are the key action ideas that came out of the Study Circles (grouped into 4 action themes):

1. Educating the Public

- writing to the newspaper
- demonstration
- publicize resources and services about affordable housing
- change attitudes about affordable housing
- organize events to let those in need voice their own voices

2. Lobbying the Government

- City of Richmond to use its \$10 million housing fund
- tax policy to favour low-income people
- control housing prices

- writing to politicians
- financial support for new immigrants
- non-profit organizations to connect those in need with the government
- reduce civil servants' salaries to free up resources
- tax breaks

3. Building Community Alliance

- join non-profit organizations and groups that are concerned with affordable housing
- non-profits to speak up for those in need
- faith community to offer non-monetary services (mental health, food, hygiene)
- bridge language barriers among immigrants

4. Designing Affordable Housing Models

- relocate homeless back to their home towns
- extend residency in co-ops
- provide more co-op housing and smaller units to have density effect
- more government subsidies
- locate affordable housing in city “hub” (near supportive services), but not creating ghettos
- research other countries for best practices (such as Sweden, Hong Kong, Britain)
- mixed housing with multiple services
- balance affordable housing with for-profit housing
- government be the landlord to rent low-cost housing
- find appropriate lands for development, e.g. unproductive Richmond farmlands, Garden City Land, etc.

Action Forum Summary

The Study Circles Action Forum was attended by *45 Richmond citizens*. They included citizens who participated in the study circles held on May 2, 7 and 9, 2009 at different locations in Richmond, representatives of groups and organizations in Richmond that advocate for affordable housing, citizens who are interested in the affordable housing issues (but did not participate in the circles), circle facilitators, and 1 City Councillor (who did not stay for the whole event).



Based on the 4 action themes that came out of the study circles, the forum participants proceeded to identify the priority action items and commit themselves to working on these action items together.

1. Educating the Public

- Learn more about the issue by:
 - signing up to volunteering at Homeless Connect events

- asking City Councillors who have done inspected abandoned houses to share their observations at a Council Meeting that is televised
- Write letters to newspapers, use Twitter or Facebook to publicize about housing issues in Richmond
- Develop a booklet on housing options in Richmond (in various languages)

2. Lobbying the Government

- Coordinate efforts to exert pressure on all 3 levels of governments (e.g. final report of this project should be distributed to all Richmond City Councillors, MLAs, and MPs)
- Pressure government to provide tax support for developers if they are interested in affordable housing projects
- Pressure the City government to commit to purchasing land for affordable housing (the City Garden Land has huge potential, and the City has a \$10 million fund sitting)

3. Building Community Alliance

- Form an inclusive Affordable Housing Committee out of the Action Forum participants and to include representation from seniors, mental health, immigrants, people in transition, homeless, single parents, etc.
- Tasks of the Committee:
 - educating the public
 - lobbying the government
 - designing affordable housing models

4. Designing Affordable Housing Models

- Developing a centralized, coordinated housing strategy
- Finding non-governmental funding resources, such as private corporations, foundations, fundraising, etc.
- Research existing models in other countries



Summary of Overall Project Outcomes

Objective	Outcome
Engage as many people as possible in dialogue, especially marginalized groups, by way of conducting Study Circles	Over 200 individuals, many from visible minorities, participated in different stages of the Study Circle process – as facilitators, supporters, participants, volunteers, etc.
Qualitative Outcomes to include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New Process for Community Problem Solving • New Learning • New Relationships and Networks • New Ownership of the Issues • New Community Leadership • New Policies 	All qualitative outcomes were met with the exception of new policies. Study Circles were introduced to Richmond. New people were introduced to and educated about the realities of affordable housing. New relationships were formed with existing networks. Individuals originally not involved with this issue have become active and formed action groups. New policies may evolve

	over time. The Steering Committee defined success as raising the awareness of affordable housing to the citizens of Richmond, and they agreed that this outcome had been met.
Create a Sponsoring Committee	<p>Formed a Steering Committee:</p> <p>Brenda Plant (Turning Point Recovery Society)</p> <p>David Reay (Poverty Response Committee)</p> <p>Lynda Brummitt (Poverty Response Committee)</p> <p>Jennifer Larson (Richmond Services Advisory Committee)</p> <p>Susan Rachel (Vancouver Coastal Health)</p> <p>Belinda Boyd (Vancouver Coastal Health)</p> <p>De Whalen (Richmond Women's Resource Centre)</p>
Clarify the issue	<p>Issue statement decided at a focus group meeting on February 3rd, the Caring Place. Attended by about 35 representatives from Richmond-based organizations.</p> <p>Issue Statement:</p> <p><i>What can we do, as a community, to address the affordable housing issue in the city of Richmond, support the current initiatives, and make appropriate recommendations in an effort to achieve homes for all?</i></p>
Develop project website	<p>We developed a wiki site to facilitate project coordination and use it for promoting the project:</p> <p>http://studycircles.wikispaces.com</p>
Plan kick-off event	Launch Event on March 3 rd at Richmond Cultural Centre
Create a publicity and recruitment plan	Media plan was designed with media materials. In addition to the advertizing products created there were two major articles written by journalists from the Richmond Review and Richmond News newspapers.

Create discussion materials. Develop training manual for facilitators.	An Issue Guide was developed. A Training Manual was developed.
Train 15 -20 Facilitators	24 facilitators were trained over two days on April 4 th and 11 th . A debriefing session was conducted on May 23 rd after the Study Circles were conducted. The facilitators expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the training and process. They hoped that there would be future opportunities to use their new skills.
Conduct Study Circles	A total of 6 circles were held on May 2 nd , 7 th and May 9 th . Over 55 citizens participated. 1 Study Circle was specially conducted in Mandarin and 1 in Cantonese, while the others were conducted in English.
Organize an Action Forum	The Action Forum was held on June 11 th at the Richmond Cultural Centre, and was attended by many Study Circles participants and other community members.
Work within the budget	The project was successfully completed within budget.

Conclusion

Study Circles are not meant to solve the issue of affordable housing; however, this project is an important step in gaining a better understanding of the problem we need to solve and the end result is a strengthened democracy and a building of stronger and more inclusive communities. After engaging themselves in constructive dialogue, the participants in this project committed themselves to taking action for the further development of affordable housing in Richmond. A good lesson learned!

Appendix: Promotional Poster



Study Circles on Affordable Housing in Richmond

“Everything is possible when communities commit to change”

“What can we do, as a community, to address the affordable housing issue in the City of Richmond, support the current initiatives, and make appropriate recommendations in an effort to achieve housing for all?”

Be part of a unique experience in an OPEN and RESPECTFUL dialogue.

Saturday May 2nd @ 2-5 pm

Thursday May 7nd @ 6-9 pm

Saturday May 9th @ 2-5 pm

Choose date/location@ <http://studycircles.wikispaces.com/registration>

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