

Alberta Municipalities Encouraging Neighbours to Get Know Each Other

Image



Several jurisdictions have started initiatives to help create communities where people have clear paths for connecting

When Karen Wilk learned that fellow Edmonton resident, Howard Lawrence, had connected with city government and that the municipality had agreed to support a pilot project based on the principles found in the book, *Abundant Community*, she was “in.” “In,” as in she wanted to find a way to actively support this refreshing, new initiative.

Karen had already been looking for ways to connect her neighbours with a view to making her community “an even better place to live for all,” as she describes it.

“I had begun to realize the significance and value of neighbourhoods for both personal and social well-being,” the Edmonton resident tells Axiom News.

She was encouraged to hear [what had happened in Howard’s neighbourhood](#) after just six months — how, by just walking around, knocking on doors and talking to people, Howard had identified about 50 people who wanted to become what he calls “neighbourhood or block connectors.” These people were now dedicated to finding ways to meet their neighbours and extend hospitality.

“We don’t have to call a service to take care of our pet, our home, our yard when we’re away or sick or unable; our neighbours will (step in).”

“This approach made sense to me as I reflected,” Karen says. “I realized that, of course, the Spirit already had people in every neighbourhood who were natural connectors. Of course, the neighbourhood would embrace an initiative that called out their gifts and brought them together.

“I was eager to try it (where I live) and to get on board with developing it in other neighbourhoods too.”

Today, Karen is a connector for her block, Laurier Heights. She also holds the role of neighbourhood connector for the whole neighbourhood. This entails recruiting, training, supporting, encouraging and inspiring other block connectors.

She has noticed an increasing number of people choosing to participate in neighbourhood activities. Karen also describes feeling “a growing sense of belonging and ownership” among her neighbours.

The colour she would give to what’s happening now in her neighbourhood is green, Karen says. For her, green represents “new life, growth freshness.”

“As more and more ‘nutrients’ are being plowed and planted into our neighbourhood, more plants are thriving, sprouting, spreading, and bearing fruit — the fruit of a caring, vibrant and abundant community.”

Asked what’s possible now that wasn’t possible before, Karen offers the following list:

- discovering and nurturing more groups, more participation, more connections;
- more local interdependence and care which has led to less reliance on social services;
- more sharing and thus stewardship of resources;
- more recognition of the many gifts, talents, abilities right where we live.

“We don’t have to go across the city to take a class. There are people right down the street who can teach us,” Karen goes on to note. “We don’t have to call a service to take care of our pet, our home, our yard when we’re away or sick or unable; our neighbours will (step in).”

The Edmonton city department of community services has assigned a staff member to help co-ordinate what is now called the Abundant Community Edmonton (ACE) initiative. Howard fills the role of full-time facilitator. Howard and the ACE city staff member come alongside people in neighbourhoods who want to do something about connecting the people where they live. A “neighbourhood connector” — someone like Karen — receives support in specific areas, from finding ways to cultivate a neighbourhood identity and pride through shared ownership and responsibility to facilitating local recreation opportunities and lots more in-between. The idea is that Howard and the city staff, after an initial time of support, let the neighbourhood take things where they will.

Abundant Community Edmonton has inspired efforts in other parts of the province. Block or neighbourhood connectors are being recruited across Red Deer, Red Deer County, Bowden, Delburne, Elnora and Penhold. The City of St. Albert, Town of Canmore and Town of Devon have also began offering supports to enable neighbourhood building.

In the recently released second edition of his book, *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, author Peter Block includes an introduction that speaks powerfully to the importance of belonging, and how to make it happen.

Image



A Laurier Heights block party.

“Belonging is best created when we join with other people in producing something that makes a place better,” Peter writes, adding that “to belong is to know, even in the middle of the night, that I am among friends.”

Peter goes on to note that building community is a precondition for the kinds of things to happen that so many of us say we want to happen, from filling empty storefronts to raising our children well to “engaging those wandering on the sidewalks during the day.”

To read his full write-up, click [here](#).

To learn more about Abundant Community Edmonton, click [here](#).

Axiom News is interested in stories of people finding ways to connect their neighbourhoods.

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