
Delta Communities in Action

Phase III Final Report

Prepared by Donald King
DCIA Phase III Coordinator

“The solutions are within the community. Neither governments, nor business, nor the voluntary sector, or individual community members can do it on their own. We all need to work together and pool our resources to make an impact.”

Delta community resident

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Part One:

Acknowledgments

The author expresses a sincere "thank you" to the Phase Three DCIA Steering Committee who generously gave of their time, knowledge, and resources to promote the principles associated with advancing community development practices and fostering community capacity building opportunities throughout the course of this project. The valuable outcomes linked to this project most certainly could not have been achieved without their considerable dedication, patience, and support.

The DCIA Phase Three Steering Committee included; Sandra Gebhardt, Lynn Spence, Glenn Kirkwood, Maddie Addison, Mark Ward-Hall, Doug Sabourin, and Julie Halfnights. A special thank you must also go out to Sandra Gebhardt, who as the Executive Director of the Boys and Girls Club Community Services of Delta/Richmond graciously provided administrative support from her organization to meet the day-to-day operational requirements of the project. An additional thank you to Sandra Gebhardt for providing the funds necessary to complete the Phase Three final report, and special thank you to Doug Sabourin (Deltassist) for providing both funds and staff resources towards to the completion of the DCIA Community Development Webpage Tool Kit.

Further, appreciation and acknowledgement must also go to all the local Delta organizations that formally supported DCIA's initiatives including; The United Way of the Lower Mainland, Delta Chamber of Commerce, Charity Tsawwassen Business Association, Boys and Girls Club Community Services of Delta/Richmond, Delassist, Delta Home Support, BC Ministry for Children and Family Development, Delta School District, Delta Hospice, Delta Earthwise Society, All Saints Church, Community Lions, and The Corporation of Delta Community Advisory Committee.

Background

The Delta Communities in Action project is a community development initiative funded by the United Way of the Lower Mainland. This grassroots project was driven by the desire to bring together a wide range of partners to identify local issues, and establish goals and targets in order to improve the quality of neighbourhood life and take action to bring about positive community change.

The embryonic beginnings of the DCIA came out of a commitment by the Delta Child and Youth Committee who took on the initial commitment to initiate a Delta Communities in Action project in concert with the United Way of the Lower Mainland. Members from this group went on to network with other community leaders to establish a founding Steering Committee to direct Phase One of the project.

DCIA Phase One

The Delta Communities in Action project got under way in 2003 by initiating a 10 month study designed to highlight a host of measurable community indicators in order gather information about social, economic, environmental, and health conditions in an attempt to provide a “snapshot”, of the community’s livability and quality of life.

A sample of indicators studied in Phase One include; Population growth, family income, business starts, health indicators, crime rates and crime prevention, seniors well-being, children and youth care, post-secondary education, housing starts, vacancy rates, participation, volunteerism, and poverty,

The community snapshot proved to be an invaluable tool to help raise public awareness, prompt dialogue about future directions, and assist in the framing of community goals and priorities for the future. Please know too, that this report proved to be an extremely popular resource with leaders across Delta, as everyone realized the practical value that the comprehensive study lent towards understanding present and future needs in Delta.

In fact, the Phase One Snapshot was routinely referred to as the logical framework for which to develop a Delta municipal social plan. And as such, much time was spent at every Phase Three function handing out abridged additions of the snapshot, and informing participants of the particulars relative to Delta’s present social needs and future growth trends.

DCIA Phase Two

Following the completion of the community snapshot, the Delta Communities in Action initiative undertook a rigorous process through 2004 to engage the community in local “round table discussions”, in an attempt to foster opportunities for Delta residents to exchange ideas, express opinions, and promote open and honest community dialogue.

These Community in Action “round table discussions”, provided important forums for local citizens from all walks of life to voice their needs and concerns, and contribute to framing a comprehensive list of recommendations to help promote positive social change for Delta’s future

DCIA Phase Three

The final phase of the DCIA initiative was to leave a network in place that would provide the community with a viable process for community action.

Description of Delta

Like other municipalities that have evolved into commuter communities, Delta’s built environment has been greatly influenced by the constraints of transportation and land use. Oblong-shaped Delta is most densely populated at its northern, central and southern ends, with

a central belt of agricultural and industry buffeting each community. The city has three municipal centers', (Tsawwassen, Ladner, and North Delta) none of which is recognized as a community 'heart', creating what local residents commonly refer to as a sense of community isolation and fragmentation.

Part Two:

Initiating Phase Three

In September of 2006 the Delta Communities in Action Steering Committee comprised of Deltassist, Boys and Girls Club Community Services of Delta/Richmond, Delta Earthwise Society, Delta Parks Recreations and Culture, local residents and Delta Home Support for Seniors, hired a consultant to act as a coordinator to work under the direction of the steering committee to facilitate the completion of the DCIA Phase Three initiative. Through out the process the committee met regularly in concert with the consultant/coordinator to establish direction and oversee progress.

One of the basic challenges for any community based collaboration is to forge a shared understanding among all partners about the nature of the work at hand. This is particularly the case for initiatives that bring together a broad range of participants to tackle complex issues such as neighbourhood community development initiatives and capacity building. In the case of the DCIA, partners entered the process with a base of common ideas generated from Phase Two about the challenges to be addressed and possible approaches to be pursued. Despite this solid beginning, considerable time was required for partners to consider future directions for Phase Three of the DCIA project

Initially, the steering committee had planned to use the information generated in Phase Two to focus on a Youth Initiative that brought together various segments of the community. In reviewing this proposal, members of the steering committee were concerned that the Initiative might be too narrow in scope and directed the consultant to conduct a series of community conversations throughout Delta in order to establish the degree to which the community was familiar about Delta Communities in Action and to what extent they were willing to support it.

The outcomes of the aforementioned series of conversations with local community leaders produced the following talking points:

- The community expressed limited knowledge regarding ongoing DCIA initiatives.
- Community volunteers/animators, activists, and agency leaders expressed a very real willingness to participate in DCIA driven processes.
- A common theme evolved identifying a geographical disconnect between communities and a perceptual disconnect between community residents and municipal governance as Delta does not have a Social Planning Committee or a Social Planner to foster community dialogue and/or resident participation.

- There was a lack of opportunities for community engagement to discuss and act upon social issues that are not necessarily crisis driven.
- There was a need to provide a vehicle for networking, discussion and also tools for engagement that would assist the community to mobilize and act when necessary.

Further, these community conversations also produced a number of interesting shared perceptions with regards to the basic features of what community capacity building means to local residents as outlined in the following;

- pursue some combination of community empowerment, ownership, participation, leadership and community based action.
- pursue broad, multiple goals.
- promote multisectoral collaboration.
- combine an array of strategies to enhance each other's effectiveness
- seek changes in a number of spheres (e.g., transportation, access to community services,) and levels of action.
- are intentionally flexible, developmental and responsive to changing local conditions
- recognize the long-term nature of fundamental community change and employ relatively long-term time frames.

Lastly, community conversations also generated a list of shared community concerns as outlined in the following;

- Access to efficient public transportation to navigate within the community and access points outside the community.
- Access to healthcare. Anything other than routine health care needs must be met by services located outside the community.
- Access to education. Delta has no post secondary training or education centers within its boundaries.
- Access to affordable housing. Delta has little social housing, low-income housing, or affordable entry level housing stock for young singles, families, parenting teens, and seniors.
- Access to services for low-income and economically marginalized citizens.
- Access to influencing community services and local programming.

Reflection and Action

While reviewing the community information gathered from Phase Two, it became evident that issues associated with 'access', (as noted above), crossed all boundaries as it impacted on Seniors, Youth and families in all of the three geographic communities of North Delta, Ladner and Tsawwassen. Members of the Committee concurred that this topic was broad enough in scope to be relevant to the majority of residents and would be an excellent rallying point for creating community networks for future mobilization, community action, and capacity building. It also addressed the Committee's original concern of "just focusing on youth".

Adjusting Direction and Objectives

Despite DCIA's solid beginning in Phase One and Two, considerable time was required for the Steering Committee to share their respective understanding of the work required in Phase Three, and create together a more complete and integrated set of ideas for guiding the initiative.

Following considerable deliberations, the Committee agreed that extensive community development takes time to develop. There was a shared realization that even when there is substantial shared understanding about the work at hand, weaving the practical elements of the work together in a streamlined and mutually supportive way can be difficult, as it often takes several iterations, and then considerable ongoing effort, to align the various aspects of such initiatives. And as such, project time lines did not permit for Phase Three to take on specific community development building projects.

With this realization as a backdrop, the Committee collectively set a course to direct their DCIA Phase Three efforts towards following up on the communities interest towards building organizational capacity to address issues associated with Delta's growing sense of isolation and disempowerment.

To those ends, the DCIA coordinator in concert with the Steering Committee set a very rigorous course of action to get out into the community and schedule 'round table discussions', 'mini forums', and 'group conversations', with as wide a range of community residents, businesses, government agencies, public organizations, and community resources as possible utilizing the following three strategies;

Strategy One:

- Develop a DCIA Phase Three brochure highlighting project intentions and initiatives in order to promote program profile
- Develop a DCIA Phase Three Power Point presentation to assist in efforts to inform and educate Delta stakeholders to DCIA initiatives.
- Develop community development teaching tools and 'how to kit', to share with local animators to enhance their ability to be more effective
- Utilize local media to enhance DCIA profile and give voice to resident involvement

Strategy Two:

Engage the community in the following activities/initiatives;

- Find authentic ways to engage the community in developing common visions and action plans through exploring community engagement strategies.
- Strengthen community capacity by connecting individuals and groups to support joint planning and visioning.
- Engage the community in identifying key priorities and shared vision for addressing issues associated 'access'.

Demonstrate the power of inviting people to tables where their voices are heard.

- Broker the use of existing community assets to fashion new ways of engagement.

Strategy Three:

- Develop a working relationship with Delta Municipal Council in order to establish a dialogue on DCIA initiatives and community capacity building.
- Schedule a DCIA presentation to Delta Municipal Council

Strategy Four:

- Host a community wide forum to conduct a debriefing exercise that will assist community animators/leaders to craft a strategic vision for the future and identify the organizational vehicle(s) that can sustain and advance community capacity building initiatives identified through DCIA processes.

Strategy Five:

- Develop and maintain a DCIA web site and/or linkages that identify community resources, advocacy information, community development 'tool kits', and information relative to DCIA outcomes and future directives.

Part Three:

DCIA Phase Three Outcomes

Underlying the initiative was the recognition that community development is a do-it-yourself process. If you don't do it yourself, development doesn't happen. Active involvement of neighbourhood residents is required. At the same time, 'do-it-yourself,' does not mean 'do-it-alone.' Rather, it means community members organizing themselves across neighbourhood boundaries to collectively share resources, skill-sets, and ideas.

Moreover, the DCIA initiative understood that healthy communities are those that are able to sustain their development over time. Ultimately, this sustainability is achieved by building a stockpile of assets that can be used to generate innovative response to changing circumstances. More than just physical, such assets are both cultural (ways of thinking and acting) and social (connections with others). By developing a critical mass of assets in these different areas, neighbourhoods are able to meet their needs and aspirations on an ongoing basis

Efforts regarding networking with the community towards advancing community capacity building initiatives culminated in scheduling 37 conversations with groups identified from the following list; Local community groups/recreation associations, school parent councils, police, government agencies, non-profit service organizations, rotary clubs, the financial community, business, union locals, public schools, port authorities, farming representatives, immigrant services, chamber of commerce and business associations, First Nations, senior groups, youth groups, churches, municipal representatives, and cultural groups.

A list of shared lessons emerged from the breadth and depth of discussions identified the following principles of capacity building. These principles were shared with local stakeholders throughout the community conversation process;

- **Organizational moderation:** Building relationships with and among residents was considered to be the foundation for community capacity building efforts. As suggested by the adage, “Alone we go fast, together we go far,” benefits from this investment will be felt long after the completion of Phase Three. Moreover, by being transparent about the open-ended nature of the initiative and its reliance on direction from the neighbourhood itself, residents were given the space to gradually take ownership of planning and visioning processes.
- **Work through locals:** Resident participants brought with them an established knowledge of the community and existing relationships that went a long ways towards building connections across neighbourhoods and shaping future organizing efforts.
- **Invest in capacity building throughout:** Involving residents as organizers, and animators enhances broader efforts to support neighbourhood capacity building
- **Build capacity of local organizations to engage in community development:** Not all community agencies have a community development orientation or personnel with appropriate skills. Structures such as the DCIA initiatives strengthened the neighbourhood process by helping local agencies to build capacity in this area.
- **Inclusiveness:** Local community residents recognized the need to be inclusive in their engagement process and to make special efforts to hear the voices of young people, elders and various cultural and language groups that are not usually heard. Hence, community actions/initiatives should be a staged process to gradually reach a wider and wider set of neighbourhood residents.
- **Value informal connections:** Local community residents emphasized the value of informal relationships and conversations in addition to formal meetings and processes. In part, informal connections involve more personal exchanges that build relationships of trust. In part, these connections facilitate involvement of people who may be uncomfortable with more formal events or procedures. In addition, informal connections can be helpful for exploring arrangements that may involve adjustments in the roles of, or relations among, more formal structures.
- **Anticipate disorder along the way:** Change is stressful. It can open up issues and relationships around which residents have different perspectives. It may also expose differences in approaches among the various agencies working to address neighbourhood concerns. While difficult and challenging, such strains are often a positive indication that important issues are being addressed. The point is not to avoid tensions but to find productive ways of responding to them when they do arise. Conflict may, in fact, be a source of innovation.

Delta Municipal Council:

While DCIA's information meetings, advocacy training, and education work on the ground in neighbourhoods represented the core of its development process, there was always the realization that neighbourhoods do not possess all of the levers or resources needed to realize their goals. In addition to the support that is required from local organizations and institutions, it is particularly advantageous to garner support and interest from elected civic officials at city hall as well.

As with most sustained grassroots initiatives, there exist inevitable lost opportunities and strategic shortcomings. Although the DCIA laid the underpinnings for strengthening Delta's community voice and enhanced collaboration between private, voluntary and public sectors, it was unable to successfully foster a working relationship with Delta's Municipal Council.

Despite this shortcoming or more aptly because of it, the absent voice of Delta's elected civic officials generated considerable discussion and opinion. The common talking points that emerged from this discussion was the sense that the long-term success of any community development undertaking was dependent upon the participation and support from local government. Similarly, the role of civic government was not to engage neighbourhoods as service providers, but as partners and co-learners.

At the same time, there were concerns voiced by local participants from the outset of the DCIA Phase Three initiative about the mismatch between the short term nature of community development projects, and the long-term needs of neighbourhoods. More specifically noting the bridging that is required to support building the capacity of local organizations to engage in community development processes, relative to the institutional capacity of local government to formulate policy and operate outside the 'silos' of its respective governance.

It was felt that municipal governments have dual roles as both public service providers and local democracies, and that this has implications for creating inclusive communities. As a public service provider, the municipality must ensure equity in its policy and practice. As a local democracy, it must ensure that all community members have access to the decision-making process on civic affairs. It is important that good municipal governance not just be limited to structures and processes for executive level decision-making, but that it also 'open-up' access to the planning and policy-making process.

While the significance of public policy for neighbourhood revitalization was recognized, community leaders and local participants identified challenges around how to incorporate policy issues into the community development process. At the same time, the 'messiness' of trying to do so was regarded positively as a sign that work in this area involves operating 'outside the box.' It represents an opportunity to break new ground – creating new structures and processes for strengthening resident familiarity with policy issues and the policy making process, making local government more flexible and responsive to neighbourhood concerns and establishing mechanisms that support this collaborative approach to governance.

To these ends, the plethora of business owners, service providers, school officials, rotary club members, recreation sport team leaders, and volunteers from elders to youth, came to agree that they would make every opportunity in future meetings with elected civic officials to encourage them to rethink their relationship with local neighbourhoods, policy making, and community engagement.

The following 'Talking Points' were identified by DCIA participants to carry forward for discussion purposes at future meetings with Delta's elected civic representatives.

1. At some point, issues of concern to communities tend to run into a 'policy wall.'
Appropriate shifts in public policy are inevitably needed before progress can be made.
2. Residents do have a stake and a role to play in helping to direct public funds to the most appropriate purposes in their neighbourhoods. Moreover, there are often insights and innovations at the community level that should inform the design of public policy. Only through some form of dialogue between community members and policy makers can local knowledge contribute to policy development.
3. Input from residents is important for building support from government for neighbourhood revitalization. Politicians, in particular, need to hear the views of citizens in addition to the policy analysis provided by civil servants and other policy experts.
4. Municipal governments in the greater Vancouver district are currently in the process of a broad shift from a relatively top down to a more participatory mode of governance. Residents have an interest in this participatory approach to government although it will take significant effort to help create it. The case continues to be made across the Lower Mainland for the value of participatory governance, including quantitative measures of its efficiency and effectiveness.
5. It was also observed that the significance of policy tends to be overlooked simply because there is relatively little opportunity for citizens to consider how public policies affect their lives. Active engagement of policy issues is needed to restore appreciation for the practical importance of public policy.

DCIA Community Tool Kit Website:

The DCIA Community Tool Kit website is intended to provide Delta with a comprehensive array of community development resources to support ongoing local initiatives, build community capacity, tackle important social problems, and promote change. The Tool Kit can be accessed from an adjoining link posted on the Deltassist website. <http://www.deltassist.com/>

Special acknowledgement must be made recognizing Doug Sabourin's contribution towards the realization of the DCIA Tool Kit, as Doug generously provided both funds and staff resources towards nurturing the Tool Kit website to fruition.

“Never doubt that a small group of people can change the world. It is the only thing that ever has.”

Margaret Mead