Can residents’ associations formally collaborate to solve big issues?

**BY PERRY KING**

When the city issued a stop order to cease alterations to 7 Austin Terrace, Robert Levy of the Casa Loma Residents’ Association (CLRA) breathed a sigh of relief.

Much of the success behind making sure the old Maclean’s residence didn’t perish was because the CLRA reached out to the Annex Residents’ Association (ARA), who have a good bit of experience with heritage preservation.

It is this interchange of expertise that compelled Levy to propose an ad hoc coalition of residents’ associations to the ARA. “We have a number of residents’ associations that are very close to their particular local issues, but there’s a lot of commonality and experience around some issues that actually transcend any individual areas,” said Levy.

Area residents’ associations have been part of formal coalitions in the past, though disagreements came up over disagreements on housing intensification issues. Local association representatives said at the time that the confederation had become dominated by people from North Toronto, and that CORRA wanted to launch a “blanket appeal” on development, whether or not they were supported by the local community.

What Levy is proposing is a far less formal process, and the ARA is on board with the idea. Andrew Baines of the ARA said that in addition to the two residents’ associations, the coalition could also include the Harbord Village Residents’ Association (HVRA) and some of the local Business Improvement Areas (BIAs). “But it’s only very tentative at this point,” he said.

The goal of forming a coalition would be to share best practices and ideas about heritage preservation, development, business improvement, and safety issues between the local groups.

Focusing his efforts on central Toronto makes sense to Levy because this part of city receives similar “intensification pressures” that require a formal plan and forum that local people can rely on. “Basically, we want just a sense of a co-ordinated plan. It seems like the city’s resources are really stretched these days and the pressure for development is enormous,” said Levy.

For the CLRA president, an important aspect of this coalition would be manpower. “What happens on an informal basis could happen on a little more of a structured basis so that the groups realize there are resources,” said Levy.

“It’s hard. These are volunteer organizations with people who are very busy, and very complex issues come up.” According to Baines, there are two ways to go about forming a coalition. “You could make it much more formal, as FoNTRA is in North Toronto, or you can have it simply an unofficial, rather loose organization which means people are in communication, we’re exchanging minutes, and that’s an experience that can be applied at the city level where the city basically needs to find ways to do more with less,” Tindal said.

None of them are new to politics. Both Gapka and Wooskey ran in the 2006 Toronto municipal election. Wooskey ran in Ward 18 and Gapka ran in Ward 27. Tindal has experience running for federal parliament as a Green Party candidate. He ran in the Toronto Centre riding in the 2006 federal election and the 2008 by-election.

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Tindal currently works as a media professional for Metro News, designing websites and mobile applications. He has also been involved with policy development and political activism on issues of sustainable development and democratic transparency and accountability.

“Working in interactive departments, I’m used to pressures to achieve impossibly ambitious targets with almost no resources. I’ve done that successfully and I think that’s an experience that can be applied at the city level where the city basically needs to find ways to do more with less,” Tindal said.

Wooskey currently works for the family business, Seniority Investments Ltd., working to implement green technologies in heritage properties. He sits on the urban design committee of the Bloor-Yorkville BIA and works with the city’s education network to provide resources and materials to teach civics in high schools.

An oak tree that once stood on-street lags has been reduced to firewood in the backyard of the Phi Delta Theta Fraternity (165 St. George St.). Neighboor Clare Barclay contacted Urban Forestry Services and said she learned that the tree was cut down without a permit. Barclay described the arbor as perfectly healthy and said she was devastated. “We have to protect the trees we have left in the Annex.”
Last month, Annex residents said goodbye to neighbourhood bar, The Tap (517 Bloor St. W.). Amid the squeaky-clean health food stores and cut-rate sushi shops that dominate the strip of Bloor Street West between Spadina Avenue and Bathurst Street, The Tap was a genuine local—whether for a pint after work, or cheap nachos and cocktails before a concert at Lee’s Palace (529 Bloor St. W.). Dark and scruffy from the outside and cozy and friendly on the inside, it was the kind of place where staff—when they got to know you—would fix your drink when they saw you walk in. Some regulars even started to work there. One of them is DJ Moe Berg. Berg had been a Tap customer since the mid-’90s and started a regular Saturday night gig as a DJ there in 2004.

“The Tap was the best of both worlds. It felt very comfortable but it was grungy enough to keep away the uber hipsters,” said Berg, who first went there with a friend who had a crush on one of the bartenders. “They ended up getting married,” he said.

Berg, a member of 80s pop/rock band, The Pursuit of Happiness and a record producer for the band The Clicks, said that not only was The Tap a locals’ hangout but it was also a real musician’s den. “You would see people like John Crichtley (of 13 Engines) and Dan Roberts of Crash Test Dummies in there on any given night.”

On closing night patrons cleared The Tap of all its possessions. “The Tap was the best of both worlds. It felt like a real musician’s den. ‘You would see people like John Crichtley (of 13 Engines) and Dan Roberts of Crash Test Dummies in there on any given night.”

Like Berg, customers were drawn to the bar’s authenticity and unpretentious vibe. He fondly remembers how customers put a lot of effort into costumes for special events like the annual Halloween “scareoke” party and the bar’s rocking Christmas parties. He modestly noted that he also had a legion of followers who would come to hear him play a mellow set of CHUM FM-inspired ’70s music. Reasons for The Tap’s closing are uncertain, but Berg said that it “had been in the air” for a while, so when it happened, it didn’t come as a surprise. The employees at the video game store next door had no idea it was closing until it had closed.

When the Gleaner went to visit the abandoned storefront, two separate people tried to get in for a pint and met with a locked door and papered-up windows. Disappointed, they went in search of something that Berg says lacks in the area. “It was the only real neighbourhood bar. There isn’t anything else like it in the Annex.”
YOUR NEIGHBOURHOOD
Older Annex gets physical

By Brendan Hair

An inspiring new program is being exercised for the Annex's older adult community.

From April 7 to 9, the Miles Nadal Jewish Community Centre (MNJCC, 750 Spadina Ave.) will launch free demonstration classes for their new club called Active 55 Plus.

A unique program in the area, Active 55 Plus is designed for adults aged 55 and up to support their goals of being active and staying fit.

The program focuses on classes involving balance, flexibility, mobility, and movement. Active 55 Plus fitness coordinator Colin Blaney says members shouldn't worry about this program being too physically demanding.

"They're still going to get a really good workout but it's not as intense," said Blaney.

Blaney has worked as a senior adult fitness specialist for three years and says he can't remember being busier. According to Blaney, roughly 40 per cent of the population will be over the age of 50 in about 15 years.

"We want to get them active and really give them a direction to go with their fitness."

—Colin Blaney, fitness coordinator

"Our population is aging, so a lot of fitness programming is moving towards the older adult population."

The program also enables seniors to receive new fitness goals through a series of physical fitness assessments.

"We're not just trying to get people in—we want them active and really give them a direction to go with their fitness."

A program membership includes exercise and aqua fit classes, weight training, and cardiovascular equipment.

Also available are facilities that include a salt-water swimming pool, running track, and gymnasium.

Non-members are also eligible for free demonstration classes, and can take regular classes and register for any specialty programs or personal training sessions.

Also critical to the program is the cooperation of the facility's floor staff. The staff are not only supervising workouts, but making sure members aren't lost should they require instruction with any equipment.

Regular member Seymour Wilder says this supervision is imperative because many members require personal assistance while participating in physical activity.

"They want to be monitored in all these exercises, that's the most important thing," said Wilder.

For further details, check out MNJCC's website or consult the Annex 55 Plus fitness schedule on the main page.

From left to right are Chris Tindal, Susan Gapka, and Simon Wookey.

Gapka expressed concern that even when consulted, the public's input does not always have an opportunity to affect development. "I'm very concerned about the Ontario Municipal Board overturning democratic decisions. I think a lot of people are unhappy about that. I'm about development with a conscience."

She wants to focus on creating and enhancing public space for our residents.

She mentioned certain design decisions that are made for the ward's public spaces—the lack of public benches in parks and the newer, less comfortable seats for the benches that are available, as examples of attempts to deter littering, which serve at cross purposes to their intent. They make public space less accommodating and therefore more often vacant and available for the types of activities the amenities were designed to discourage.

Gapka helped secure some of the funding that has been allocated for capital repairs on current Toronto Community Housing properties and wants to ensure that money gets to its intended targets.

She also wants to improve communication between the diverse sections of the ward.

Tindal said he wants to make sure, "every single development answers the questions, 'How will this development give back to the community?' and 'Is this development making use of all of the best and most efficient technologies today so that it's well suited for tomorrow?'"

He wants to ensure that we implement new technologies in our buildings that conserve energy and water, and that have long term financial dividends as well as environmental benefits.

Tindal wants to focus on creating, what he calls, "complete streets."

He said bike lanes need to be implemented comprehensively, rather than piecemeal, across the entire city, and at the same time public transit and pedestrian access need to be improved so that our citizens will voluntarily choose to switch to alternative modes of transport.

This is only a small selection of these candidates' ideas.

We hope these short profiles in contrast will pique your interest and you will contact them, and other candidates, to find out more.

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