

# The New Barn-Raising

## Lessons from south of the border on sustaining community and civic assets

A new, free toolkit outlines ways in which city governments, foundations, community groups, businesses, and unions can sustain community assets that have typically enjoyed high public support – things like parks, recreation centres, libraries, senior centres, museums, art galleries, and theatres. Published in May 2014 by a D.C.-based thinktank, *The New Barn-Raising*<sup>1</sup> draws on cases from across the United States, but focuses, in particular, upon Baltimore, Detroit, and the Twin Cities (Minneapolis–Saint Paul). The toolkit is divided into three key strands – money, volunteer help, and awareness.

### Raising Money

Although not immune from cuts and restraints, U.S. cities have a range of fiscal options used to sustain assets. In Detroit, for example, the city-owned, non-profit-run Detroit Institute of Arts is supported by a three-county, 10-year property tax voted on by the public; in Minnesota, the arts lobby and “great outdoors” groups collaborated to win a public vote for a 25-year sales tax. Such votes have provided money that is outside annual budget procedures.

Other taxes used to sustain assets include levies on commercial property, income, and sale of property. The range of taxes also makes it easier to spread the burden and to reduce the risk of over-reliance on any one tax. Votes on taxes can be held alongside other statutory elections, thus reducing administrative costs.

Cities can also make the tax take go further through various efficiency measures and by charging for equipment



Road signs in Motor City draw attention to city assets.

use and rental of space. Rents from Tin Fish restaurant in Minneapolis are, for example, a little goldmine for the park board, as well as adding to what is already a magical public asset (Lake Calhoun, alongside which the restaurant is located).

Numerous city assets are now leased to charities and social enterprises – cre-

ating potential for new sources of funding and greater freedoms for managers. In St Paul, for example, non-profit Joy



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<sup>1</sup> <[www.gmfus.org/archives/the-new-barn-raising](http://www.gmfus.org/archives/the-new-barn-raising)>.

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## Different funding sources bring greater scrutiny, innovation, and asset awareness – so a partnership approach has its advantages over outright municipalism or privatism.

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of the People has taken on a city recreation centre from which it runs an innovative soccer program – it secures grants and charges fees (balanced with bursaries) to sustain itself.

Some transfers, however, are rushed alternatives to closure – making external funds especially hard to come by, even with the U.S.’s big foundation scene. A preferable path is for local government to start contracting out management and programming – with other sources gradually replacing and (ideally) supplementing this revenue. In the county surrounding Baltimore, there is the best of both worlds – recreation centres are taxpayer funded, but management is contracted to a non-profit YMCA.

It does not have to be the municipality doing everything, either. Different funding sources bring greater scrutiny, innovation, and asset awareness – so a partnership approach has its advantages over outright municipalism or privatism. The challenge for Canadian municipalities is to understand all of these contributions and to try and pull them together through consultation and exhortations.

Local friends groups can secure grants from local foundations and businesses. They can use established crowd-resourcing sites such as *Kickstarter* and *IndieGoGo* as well as more innovative ones such as *Citizeninvestor*, *Neighbor.ly*, and *ioBy* that can co-fund civic projects – including ones that also have local government funding. Local groups can also fundraise through events or selling goods and services. This also has the added benefit of being very social.

Charitable foundations have proven a valuable source of funds for projects that are riskier and/or extend beyond the normal electoral cycle. Examples in-

clude support for: the consultancy work that led to the creation of the St. Paul Parks Conservancy; community groups to show summer movies in Baltimore parks; and physical links (cycleways and jogging paths) between assets, such as Detroit’s Greenways and River Walk.

Enlightened businesses see a connection between their success and asset quality. Motives such as these saw the Twin Cities’ corporate sector develop a club that allocates up to five percent of annual pre-tax profits to charitable causes. Note the word “*profit*” – companies only give when they are doing well (good local causes thus become a sort of shareholder or key investment).

### Raising Help

Local government can also “co-produce” assets with individuals, groups, and businesses. Volunteers bring something to the table beyond the specific tasks they perform – for example, local knowledge as asset users and contacts with other users. Volunteering can also increase a community’s sense of ownership over assets.

In Detroit, several dozen smaller city parks are now tended by local groups and businesses (a few even run programs such as yoga and sports). In Baltimore, the Power in Dirt initiative has seen over 700 vacant, city-owned lots taken on for use as small gardens and parks. Local non-profits also help with equipment. These are usually city- or metro-wide; although, in Baltimore’s case, the Community ToolBank is one of a growing number of affiliates of the national ToolBank USA organization.

Despite the similarities, Detroit’s Adopt-a-Park is filling in (supplanting) for cuts, whereas the Baltimore example involves doing things not previously done (supplementing). Although supplanting can be vital in some cases, it is

the less desirable form of volunteering. The ideal is clearly for volunteering to add to the asset offer.

Supplanting is, in any case, limited by two key factors. One is the scale of the task; some work is simply too large and the equipment required comes with liability issues (larger parks are a classic case in point). The other factor is the skill needs of many posts. Baltimore’s wonderful non-profit-run Village Learning Place – which grew out of a closed city library branch – has many volunteers, but still needs a professional librarian.

Supplementing is more about willingness than skill. It may involve: serving on user panels or as docents in museums; tenants co-managing recreation centres; coaching and refereeing in park sports leagues; helping with friends groups around fundraising or marketing; assisting with reading in local libraries; or helping the elderly at local senior centres to Skype relatives. If Canadian politicians want to encourage voluntarism with a view to enhancing services, they must focus on supplementing.

Most municipal government volunteerism needs managing – which takes money. Power in Dirt is overseen by a chief service officer who, aided by a small team, enlists support from key municipal departments on this and the other initiatives in Baltimore’s Cities of Service program (part of a national non-profit network that successfully champions mayor-led supplementary volunteering).

Businesses can best support assets by using their own goods, services, and core skills – which also serve as informal and cheap marketing. A library in metro Detroit, for example, benefited from a genial, award-winning campaign by a local marketing firm that joyfully

advocated a “book-burning” party if residents voted down a tax to support the library – locals were outraged. The campaign revealed itself belatedly – claiming a no-vote against was like a vote to burn books. Voters supported the tax overwhelmingly.

### Raising Awareness

Clearly, the primary aim is not to sustain assets for their own sake, but to get them used by more people. So, it is also important to let the public know what the asset offer is. Admittedly, much of the marketing effort around assets has come when taxes funding those assets are due for a public vote; but, the research also revealed numerous other instances of novel marketing being tried.

City-owned assets in Detroit have been especially innovative in marketing themselves. The city’s public library system has, for example, put up huge

ads on roadside billboards. The world-famous Detroit Institute of Art has a foundation-funded Inside|Out program that puts replicas of its great works on plinths in public places around the metro region.

Friends groups and non-profits have also come up with innovative marketing, such as real and virtual tours and apps/maps that highlight different assets (e.g., public markets and public art). Some methods were very cheap and cheerful – for example, buttons/badges and witty sandwich boards.

Innovation in the asset offer is also important here (as is marketing to inform people about that innovation). A good example is St. Paul, where the library and recreation departments have started Library after Dark one night per week in two public library branches, where the libraries open their space to teens for a few hours after they close to the general public.

Finally, the effectiveness of all of this needs to be monitored. Such monitoring would entail looking at user numbers over time, conducting research on user satisfaction, and looking at the effectiveness of marketing. Local universities – which the toolkit shows to be a major source of research help – might be enlisted here.

### Challenges for Canadian Towns and Cities

One starting point for Canadian communities would be to convene asset fora to share best practice around the issues discussed here, with a view to developing community-wide asset strategies. In particular, there would be sharing between asset types – i.e., museums and parks comparing notes. Nationally, the process would be even more powerful if there was a network between communities.

Over to you, Canada. *MW*

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