HAMILTON CAPC SYSTEMS NAVIGATION PROGRAM

A REVIEW OF HAMILTON CAPC COUNCIL: STRENGTHENING RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND ADVOCACY

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THE ISSUE

Residents of Riverdale face challenges accessing public transportation due to unsafe and sometimes dangerous conditions of sidewalks and pedestrian crossings. Unshoveled and icy sidewalks are hailed as a major concern for residents of Riverdale, as well as limited designated pedestrian street crossings on the major road which they need to cross in order to access transit. It becomes more challenging for seniors, for those with accessibility needs and for caregivers with more than one child and at least one child in a stroller.

Residents rely on public transit to participate in work. Some Riverdale residents shared that there is a lack of employment opportunity in the neighbourhood and thus rely on public transit to get to work. Residents also rely on public transit to attend school, medical appointments, to connect with their social groups, and all other aspects of life participation. Residents will often miss many of these important functions because of the multiple challenges of getting to the bus at the Eastgate Transit Terminal, which can be a 15-minute walk.

Community resources, such as the Dominic Agostino Riverdale Community Centre (DARCC) and St. Charles Adult and Continuing Education Centre attract seniors, newcomers and families with children to visit this neighborhood as well. These visitors experience similar challenges due to the unsafe conditions of sidewalks and pedestrian crossings and because of the walk itself. The distance from the Eastgate bus terminal to major community resources is identified as a barrier.

Hamilton CAPC Council (HCC) members, who live in Riverdale, offer a solution to these challenges: bringing public transit into the neighbourhood.
ABOUT RIVERDALE

Riverdale West has a population of 6,550 (in 2016) and is one of Hamilton’s largest “Arrival Cities” where about half of the residents were born outside of Canada (46%).

80% of Riverdale West have Canadian citizenship, meaning 80% of Riverdale West can vote in federal, provincial, and municipal elections, compared to the city of Hamilton at 94%.

43% of residents identify with a visible minority group, making Riverdale one of three Hamilton neighborhoods with the highest concentration of visible minorities.

23% of the Riverdale West population is under 20 years old and 15% of residents are 65 years of age and older, comparable to Hamilton.

60% of families with children are married, compared to Hamilton as a whole at 68%. 21% of the parent population is female lone parents, compared Hamilton at 15%.

84% of Riverdale West’s residents are renters, which is more than five times the city of Hamilton at 16%, and live in high rise apartments.

13% of those who commute to work use public transit, compared to Hamilton at 11%.

34% of Riverdale West’s population lives in poverty, which is more than double the rate of Hamilton as a whole. 52% of children under six live on incomes below the poverty line and 24% of adults 65 and older experience poverty [data based on low-income measure, after tax (LIM-AT)].

84% of Riverdale residents are renters, which is more than five times the city of Hamilton.

13% of those who commute to work use public transit, compared to the city of Hamilton at 11%.
WHAT IS CAPC?

The Community Action Program for Children (CAPC), funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada, is a national project aimed at promoting child health and wellbeing through early, preventative interventions with children 6 years of age and under and their families. The Hamilton CAPC project provides services and supports to families with children 6 years of age and under in East Hamilton, focusing on families with lower incomes or who are experiencing social or geographic isolation, since 1993. The Hamilton CAPC catchment area is East Hamilton and Stoney Creek with the area boundaries of Lake Ontario (north), 50 Road (east), the Niagara escarpment (south) and Strathearn Road (west). The Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton (SPRC) serves as the sponsoring agency for the project.

In 2012, the Hamilton CAPC project developed and launched the CAPC Systems Navigation Program. The objective of the program is to increase service system access for parents of children newborn to six years of age in east Hamilton. Activities to achieve this objective include one-on-one support and educational opportunities targeted toward increased connection to various child and family systems. The CAPC Systems Support Worker facilitates these activities and provides service to the Riverdale community and within the Hamilton CAPC project office in the Dominic Agostino Riverdale Community Centre. The focus is on supporting newcomer parents to navigate systems that contribute to the overall health and well-being of families.

Map of the Hamilton CAPC catchment area

The CAPC Systems Navigation program priority areas:

- **Mental Health Promotion:** social isolation, parent or child self-esteem, parent-child attachment, positive parenting, father involvement, parent leadership development and community participation

- **Injury Prevention:** child safety

- **Healthy Weights:** food security assistance, collective food preparation and/or purchasing and nutrition education
The Hamilton CAPC Council (HCC) is a group of 15 committed community members who live in the CAPC catchment area and engage in consultation, community connection and program promotion for the overarching Hamilton CAPC project.

The HCC meets monthly at the Dominic Agostino Riverdale Community Centre with the CAPC Systems Support Worker. HCC members support their meetings by facilitating team building and confidence building activities, including presenting informative short speeches.

Members volunteer in various capacities within the Hamilton CAPC project, such as promoting the “Free Sale” clothing drive and the “Family Portrait Session” events which CAPC held in partnership with Baby Depo.

13 of 15 current HCC members were surveyed for this report. The following is demographic information of the members.

- 69% identified as female and 31% as male.
- 61% have been on the HCC for less than 3 years. 31% have been on the HCC for 3-6 years and 8% for more than 6 years.
- The majority of members heard about the HCC through the CAPC Systems Navigation program or friends and family.
- 85% increased their social support network by being part of the HCC.
- 39% have Canadian citizenship.
- 54% have lived in Hamilton for less than 5 years. 23% have lived in Hamilton for 2-5 years and 23% for more than 8 years.
- 76% don’t plan to move or are unsure that they will move out of Riverdale in the next 2-5 years. 23% plan to move due to work-related reasons or substandard neighbourhood conditions.
The HCC has monthly meetings with the CAPC Systems Support Worker to engage in informative discussions on what’s happening in the CAPC catchment area, to engage in professional development and participate in team building exercises. During the April 2015 meeting, the HCC participated in an icebreaker activity led by one of the members. The question asked of the HCC was “if you were the mayor of Hamilton, what would you do to improve the city?” This activity resulted in a robust dialogue about issues and challenges faced by Riverdale residents.

The HCC settled on seven prominent community issues that they could take on as projects. The HCC invited the SPRC Executive Director to guide their efforts in community engagement and advocacy work. With support of the E.D., the HCC began to narrow their efforts by focusing on one main issue. They voted on snow removal as it was a crucial neighbourhood-wide issue. However, because there was minimal snow that winter, the HCC later unanimously decided to move forward with the second most prominent neighbourhood issue: access to public transportation. All members of the HCC faced challenges with accessing public transportation and also knew that this challenge was faced by many others living in the neighborhood. HCC members decided that within their capacity the best way to support their neighbourhood is to advocate for access to public transit.
The Petition
To gain support from the community, the HCC worked with the Systems Support Worker to create a neighborhood petition. The HCC decided to work together to connect with the community to collect as many signatures as possible.

At the 2016 annual Riverdale Fallfest the HCC set up a table to collect signatures from residents who wanted a bus in the neighborhood and from those who did not. HCC members felt it was easy to collect signatures at this event because festival goers recognized the need for a bus in the neighbourhood. They noted that setting up beside Hamilton CAPC’s table was effective as CAPC is an established and trusted community organization that attracted residents. HCC members found that being next to CAPC’s table brought credibility to their petition which allowed the HCC to focus more on sharing the concerns about accessibility with the community and less focus on introducing themselves as a community council. HCC members also enjoyed attending Riverdale Fallfest to connect with and gain the support of their community. At this event, they gained 109 more signatures.

The HCC knew that the lack of accessible transit was a prominent issue in the community and knew that they would easily gain community support. However, HCC members were not confident in accomplishing their goal. As immigrants, HCC members felt that they were invisible and voiceless to people in positions of power and authority. This is further discussed later in this report.

After the festival, petition forms were distributed to HCC members to collect signatures on their own. They contacted friends, family, neighbours, churches, mosques and other community partners. By February of 2017, they collected a total of 325 signatures. Ninety more signatures were collected at the Canada 150/Eid event in July of 2017 that took place in Riverdale. Letters of support were received by the Immigrants Working Centre (IWC) and Lightway Church, strengthening the community support for increased HSR service in Riverdale.
Community Partners: Environment Hamilton and the ATU

After having gained community support, the HCC started moving on to next steps by connecting with community partners. In February of 2017, Environment Hamilton was contacted to support the initiative. Environment Hamilton was running a similar campaign in the broader community of Hamilton called *Fix the HSR*. The organization also has a reputation for supporting advocacy initiatives in Hamilton, which is why they were invited to collaborate. Environment Hamilton was supportive of the HCC’s goal and efforts and were eager to offer additional support to increase capacity. Environment Hamilton facilitated a community information session at the IWC. Community members who attended shared their challenges with accessing public transit and offered more insight on the issue.

The HCC created a Riverdale Transit Subcommittee (RTS) to work on the HSR advocacy initiative. The Subcommittee was supported by the Hamilton CAPC Community Outreach and Program Administration staff person. The Subcommittee, which is also open to other local residents, worked alongside Environment Hamilton on the HSR advocacy initiative and designed possible bus route options. An HSR union representative who attended the meetings drove an HSR bus through one of the possible routes along with HSR management staff to offer an HSR drivers’ perspective on the feasibility of the route options. Findings from the experience were discussed at the next subcommittee meeting. This HSR union representative is from the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), the labor union that represents transit workers in Canada.

Proposed HSR Route Options

- Route that the RTS thought would be easiest to get approved
- Ideal route proposed by the RTS
- Variation of the ideal route proposed by the RTS
City Councillor

The Riverdale Transit Subcommittee wanted to advocate on the need for bus service to the City Councillor, Chad Collins. Environment Hamilton arranged for a meeting between an HCC member and Councillor Chad Collins.

Before attending the meeting, the HCC member was skeptical about the Councillor’s response to the initiative. She was skeptical because she did not believe that someone in a position of power would listen to the concerns of an immigrant community. Instead, the Councillor showed strong support to the initiative by working with the RTS and Environment Hamilton to find a solution.

The Councillor’s response had an unintended positive impact on HCC members. The member who met with the Councillor was so ecstatic to have his support that she said, “When I left I was flushed. I was not walking. I was just flying over the floor”. As an immigrant who often feels ignored and invisible, the support of the Councillor validated her existence, experiences and needs. She was hopeful about achieving her and the community’s goal.

The HCC continued to collect petition signatures at the next annual Riverdale Fallfest held in 2017 even after receiving support from the local Councillor. One hundred and one more signatures were collected, making the total count of signatures to be 556 as of October 2017.

As an immigrant who often feels ignored and invisible, the support of the Councillor validated [the HCC member’s] existence, experiences and needs. She was now hopeful about achieving her and the community’s goal.
CHALLENGES

Political Power of Newcomers
HCC members noted how newcomer and immigrant voices are often felt to be devalued and ignored. Twenty percent of Riverdale West’s residents cannot vote in municipal elections as they do not have citizenship, compared to 6% of Hamilton as a whole. HCC members feel that because many residents cannot vote, their voices are ignored by those with political power. One HCC member said, "[Riverdale’s City Councillor] ‘isn’t interested with us. Because who is living here? It’s immigrants. They are not voting for him and at that time he isn’t in need of them, because they [don’t] have [a] voice’.

HCC members generally find that politicians pay more attention to the voices and needs of those who have political power (citizenship) along with those who would further their political platform, versus those who do not have citizenship and therefore cannot vote. Because of this, HCC members were hesitant to raise the barriers that impacted their daily living, barriers that the local Councillor could address. While collecting petition signatures, HCC members observed other residents showing similar hesitation and skepticism that the Canadian political system would support them in their needs.

Environment Hamilton identified that larger systemic issues might contribute to this skepticism. It was discussed that Hamilton might have to work harder to cultivate an environment where newcomers and immigrants feel their voices and identities are welcomed, appreciated and valued. The Hamilton for All campaign is a great start. The campaign is led by Hamilton Centre for Civic Inclusion (HCCI) with support from the Hamilton Immigration Partnership Council (HIPC) and the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI). The campaign aims to support the unlearning of assumptions and to promote the inclusion of marginalized bodies in Hamilton.

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Perceived Influence of Different Voices

Despite their achievements on this initiative, such as gaining community support and collecting 556 petition signatures, the HCC minimized their role and contributions to the initiative. The HCC simultaneously overemphasized the work of Environment Hamilton and the CAPC Systems Support Worker. One HCC member explained that Environment Hamilton’s role was more important because “people hear them” since they are a well-established and respected organization. The HCC might perceive their contributions to be not as substantial as other community partners perhaps due to their lack of perceived power as immigrants.

Despite HCC’s underestimation of their role, Environment Hamilton and the CAPC Systems Support Worker highlighted how imperative the work of the HCC was for the success of the initiative. Although Environment Hamilton provided the knowledge and experience that structured the initiative, the HCC laid the groundwork that allowed the initiative to flourish.

“One HCC member asked, “why would they listen to us?” and another member said, “I think if one of those people who [has] authority [were to] live with us, and [...] has no car, then [they] will request the [recommended] bus [route] for sure, because it’s not an easy life [without it].”
Community Engagement
As an outsider organization with little ties to the community, Environment Hamilton faced difficulties engaging with the Riverdale community. To overcome this and establish trust, Environment Hamilton connected with the community by attending events such as Riverdale Fallfest and facilitating a community information session at the IWC. Language barriers were initially a challenge but Environment Hamilton worked through this by bringing interpreters to events, a simple tool for engaging a community that is often left out of the conversation.

Time
The one challenge that the HCC easily identified was how slow this process was. Having to go through many steps, follow the right channels and connect with stakeholders was necessary but also time consuming, especially with the involvement of the City Councillor. This was a challenge for the HCC as they were anxious to reduce the barriers to settlement and social participation as soon as possible. Ideally, they would have liked to have the proposed bus route implemented before the winter of 2017, to minimize the barriers residents face when accessing public transportation in winter weather conditions such as icy and snow-covered sidewalks, along with the lack of designated pedestrian street crossings.

One HCC member said, "My idea was to go to [...] parliament [about bringing the bus into Riverdale][...]. It [was CAPC staff] who told [us] 'we have to do it in a particular way'. [...]The process starts with collecting signatures then talk to somebody who has power [...] and let them be on our side [...]. I believed [...] that it was a waste of time. I did not believe it until I [met with Councillor] Chad Collins. [CAPC] knew the way; they guide[d] us through the way. Without them, I would [have gone] to [...] parliament."
Connections

a) With other HCC members

The HCC strengthened their relationships with one another while working towards the common good for their community. HCC members described “each [person] helping the other. It wasn’t anybody’s project; it was all of us... Like one hand”. Members described the HCC as feeling like “family” because of the support they received from each other and the positive relationships they created. The CAPC Systems Support Worker observed this as well, as members communicated and supported each other more while working on this initiative. The CAPC Systems Support Worker created an environment where the HCC felt safe to identify community issues and work towards achieving change. The CAPC Systems Support Worker helped HCC members build community engagement skills to connect with residents and community partners. HCC members felt that being on the HCC and working with the CAPC Systems Support Worker greatly benefitted their settlement and helped develop their sense of Canadian identity.

b) With the Riverdale neighborhood

The HCC established connections with the community of Riverdale as they engaged with residents to increase their awareness of community needs. This allowed the HCC to establish trust, gain the support of the community and advocate the community’s needs to the City.
Connections

**c) With community organizations**

The HCC’s HSR advocacy initiative aligned with Environment Hamilton’s broader *Fix the HSR* campaign that is dedicated to identifying and addressing local transit issues in Hamilton. Having the support of this organization increased the confidence of the HCC members as they started to believe in themselves and their initiative. This partnership helped progress the initiative and led to the development of a framework for community organizing that can be used in the future.

HCC members established a new relationship with the HSR Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), as a union representative sat on the Riverdale Transit Subcommittee. The HSR ATU has been supportive of making transit more accessible to the needs of Riverdale residents. HCC members’ confidence and credibility had been strengthened by having the support of the HSR ATU when advocating to the City on HSR bus service.

The HCC also strengthened their relationship with the IWC. They helped collect petition signatures by having a petition form at their front desk, they provided a letter of support, and they offered meeting space when needed. The connection between the HCC and the IWC provided community resources necessary for community organizing and engagement.
SUCCESSES

Increased capacity

a) Learning opportunities
Many HCC members spoke about learning how to work as a community, the importance of working synergistically as a team when working towards a goal for the common good and how to navigate proper channels of community organizing.

b) Increased confidence
Some HCC members feel that the encouragement from the CAPC Systems Support Worker helped build their confidence and awareness of resources in their community. One member said that the HCC and the CAPC Systems Support Worker helped her become “more confident by getting more information” and another said she learned “that we can and should stand like this against these issues and work on them”. Reflecting on the work they did, members said they were proud and felt “like we are something” which represents an increase of self-worth. The CAPC Systems Support Worker observed HCC members working through their hesitance and insecurities as they reached a point where they realized they have a right to advocate for increased bus service and seek change in their community. They went from “I thought I couldn’t speak and ask for this”, as said by an HCC member, to “I have the right for whatever I am asking for...I have the right to have the bus”. Reaching this point of realization demonstrates increased self-confidence where HCC members were only then eager to take action on other community issues.

c) The right to ask for change
After participating in this initiative and interacting with the community, the HCC began to realize that they have a right to raise their concerns and ask for change. In a conversation about immigrants and newcomers, one HCC member said, “open the way for them, let them go out and work and find their place in Canada”. In reference to her community, the same member said “they need it and deserve it. We aren’t asking for something big. It is simple. Do you know how much it will bring, this bus to this area? It’s not only for us and for people; it’s also for honour. The HCC believes that bringing the bus to Riverdale will do more than instrumentally benefit residents by allowing their participation in society; it can potentially exemplify to this community that they are recognized and respected as newcomers and immigrants to Hamilton.
Commitment to CAPC priority areas

Overall, HCC's work on the HSR advocacy initiative meets the Mental Health Promotion priority area of the CAPC Systems Navigation Program. In particular, the relationships the HCC established within their community represents reduced social isolation and community participation. The increased capacity of HCC members represents the promotion of parent self-esteem, positive parenting and parent leadership development. In general, the HCC’s initiative on advocating for accessible transit attempts to reduce barriers that Riverdale residents face when trying to access community resources, such as those that aid the settlement process.

Where the HCC is right now on the HSR advocacy initiative

As of April 2018, the Riverdale Transit Subcommittee continues to meet on their own, as well as with the Councillor and HSR Management, to work on achieving their goal.

Where to go from here

Hamilton’s transit network is in the process of a systematic review. Hamilton City Council approved the 10 Year Local Transit Strategy in March 2015, which partly focuses on refining the customer experience and addressing system deficiencies. HSR will be reviewing the design of their transit network to ensure it is serving the needs of their customers. Within their 10 year plan, the HSR is currently in the “benchmarking” phase where they are assessing the level of quality perceived by transit users. HSR’s plan is to engage with the community through online surveys and “planned community outreach events”.

The HCC has already engaged with Riverdale residents through numerous community outreach events and has received feedback from 556 residents who find that the current transit network in Riverdale does not serve their needs and ask for a more accessible transit route. The HCC has mobilized and has been advocating for more user-friendly transit service which directly falls in line with the HSR’s new re-envisioning of their transit network. It is recommended that this report be shared with the HSR, the ATU, the City Councillor, and other community partners who can support the HCC with their goal of accessible transit.

Beyond the HSR advocacy initiative

The HCC has shown immense growth in confidence, motivation and capacity and have established positive relationships with the community and community partners. It is recommended that they continue to identify and prioritize issues for community change that will benefit families with young children, and that the SPRC, Environment Hamilton, IWC, City Councillor, and other community partners continue to offer support to increase community members’ sense of belonging and civic engagement.

HCC members and CAPC staff at Volunteer Appreciation Day celebration, 2018