

Neighborhood glue is coming unstuck

By JONATHAN LOMAS

I live in a neighborhood. It's a well-established neighborhood, lots of 100-year-old houses. I bicycle to work. I've lived here for 10 years. We have one of the six active neighborhood associations in the city. Within five blocks are a small park, elementary and junior high schools, a shopping village, a community and recreation centre, a library and, oh yes, lots of neighbors.

Sounds idyllic, right? All the pieces seem to be there. Well, something's missing and a lot more is under threat.

Don't get me wrong, I like my neighborhood. It's just that after 10 years I feel I should really know my neighbors — I don't. I should be able to point to the neighborhood projects we worked on together — there aren't any. My children should feel just as welcome two blocks away as they do in our own backyard — they don't. The shopkeepers and I should know each other by name — mostly we don't.

Something's missing, and I think it's the glue that holds neighbors, buildings and institutions together as neighborhoods. We are not, in the words of Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam, a "civic community."

Can you guess what issue woke the neighborhood association from its slumbers? Not a positive plan, like building a playground or organizing a 125th birthday party for Canada or staffing a community kitchen for those in need. No, it was the threat of a condominium development on some of our vacant land. It was the defence of our neighborhood, not its advancement.

There are only three times in 10 years that I can remember standing shoulder-to-shoulder with my neighbors; each time it was to rebuff such a threat. We lost the condominium fight (between you and me, I didn't care much about that

one anyway), we lost the fight to keep Vi's corner post office (who wins against Canada Post anymore?), but we won when, under the name of rationalization, they tried to close the library (although the days and hours it's open are reduced and defy the logic of my memory).

Next, we'll be fighting Wal-Mart's entry, or a decision to close the park at night, or some other threat from outside. Where can we find the time to build our neighborhood, when we're always fighting to stop its disintegration?

We do have neighborhood fireworks, we've had Canada Day picnics and street parties, and the altruism of some of my neighbors places them alongside Mother Teresa in my mind. But all of this is despite what's going on around us, not because of it.

Take Jack down the road. Retired but not retiring — he always has a friendly word, takes your garbage cans in for you while you're at work, shovels your snow when you're too busy with the kids — he single-handedly maintained decrepit and single Bill in his home across the street for about two years longer than anyone could have believed possible. Bill's in a nursing home now, long past recognizing anyone, but Jack keeps him tied to the neighborhood and goes to visit every week.

We nominated Jack for an Ontario Medal for Good Citizenship last year, under the title of "The Neighborhood's Glue." He didn't win. What struck me, though, was that those who did win all held office on one volunteer board or another, working for some formal charity at the provincial or national level — where was the support for neighborhood?

By now you're probably wondering, "Well, what are you doing to make it better?" To be honest, not much. I want to, I really care about feeling like I belong in my neighborhood. I deliver flyers

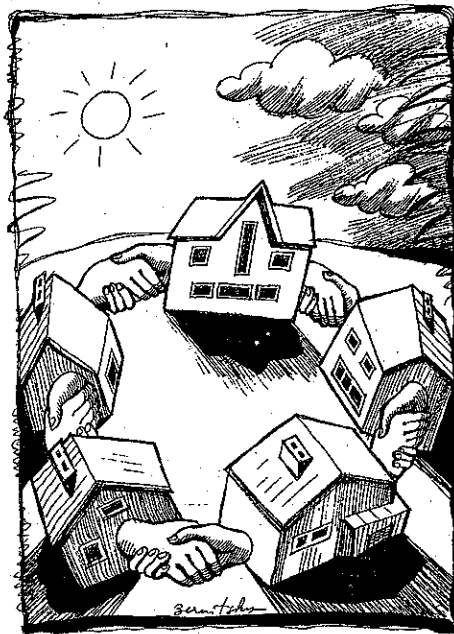


ILLUSTRATION BY LEON ZERNITSKY

for the neighborhood association, I coach soccer in the park, and I was the one who organized Jack's nomination for a medal. I'm really busy, though, honest I am; I'm out of town a lot with work, I want that quality time with my kids, and every contribution to the neighborhood seems to be such an uphill struggle.

I have become an obnoxious advocate for one thing — shop locally. We lost our hardware store. It went bankrupt and I felt guilty. I went there for tape, a dozen screws, weather-stripping and the other last-minute, gotta-have-'em-now items. The discount store across town, however, had a much better price on the hand drill I wanted or the 50 feet of fencing I needed.

I've been given a reprieve. A new hardware store has just opened in the

neighborhood. I missed the convenience. It was no fun to drive across town for a dozen screws. The new store already knows me by name. You can be sure Wal-Mart won't be getting my business.

We could go further, with a little support and help. How about a municipal subsidy to a neighbor who's willing to be a gatekeeper of street-owned power tools and garden equipment — we really don't all need to own one of each, and think of the environmental good we'd do. Why don't we increase the library's budget (while we've still got it) and use it as the local clearing-house for things like day care, baby-sitting, skills exchange, and visiting the stay-at-home elderly? We have some budding but struggling small businesses in the neighborhood that might thrive with some small investment that banks won't give. Can someone from the province come down and help us set up a community-loan fund?

We could all probably add ideas. The items on the list aren't as important, though, as the change in focus to the neighborhood, to mutual aid, and facilitated self-help. We need to see the social and economic impact of our own and our neighbors' actions on our neighborhood. It's the development of local "social capital" — the term that Putnam and his colleagues have coined to describe the essential ingredient of a well-performing democracy.

Even if we can't bring ourselves to support and nurture our local structures for altruistic reasons in support of a healthy democracy — "what's in it for me?" — we should be aware that not doing so is bad for our personal health. What's in it for me is a longer life.

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