The role of neighbourhood groups in municipal governance: A case study of abandoned buildings in Windsor

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Abstract

Neighbourhood groups are a feature of municipal politics across Canada yet are understudied in mid-sized cities. They are often portrayed as a mechanism for allowing residents to be more engaged in decisions affecting their neighbourhoods and to improve municipal decisions by incorporating the lived experience of municipal residents into that decision-making. It is therefore important to examine the formation of neighbourhood groups, whether they influence municipal decisions, and whether they are representative of their neighbourhoods. This article examines these issues through a case study of four neighbourhood groups in Windsor, Ontario. Using interview data as well as analysis of primary and secondary sources, it examines the top-down and grassroots forces that shaped these groups and their involvement in council decisions relating to vacant buildings in the city. The conclusions reached are that there were clear limits to the influence that they exerted on municipal decision-making. These groups did represent the interests of their communities and, when provided with external resources to develop their institutional capacity, they did help promote municipal policy change. This was, however, incremental change at the margins of the policy process.

Keywords: neighbourhood groups, residents participation and municipal decision-making, Windsor (Ontario)

Résumé

Les groupes communautaires de quartier, qui sont partout au Canada, sont une caractéristique de la politique municipale Ils sont souvent décrits comme un mécanisme permettant aux résidents de s'impliquer davantage dans les décisions affectant leurs quartiers et d'améliorer les décisions municipales en intégrant l'expérience vécue des résidents dans cette prise de décision. Il est donc important d'examiner la formation des groupes communautaires de quartier, leur capacité à façonner les politiques municipales et la mesure dans laquelle ils sont représentatifs de leur quartier. Cet article examine ces questions par le biais d'une étude de cas de quatre groupes communautaires de quartier à Windsor (Ontario). À l'aide des données d'entrevues ainsi que de l'analyse de sources primaires et secondaires, l'on examine les forces descendantes, les mouvements de base qui ont façonné ces groupes, et leur implication dans les décisions du conseil relatives aux bâtiments vacants dans la ville. Les conclusions tirées montrent qu'il y avait des limites claires à l'influence qu'ils exerçaient sur la prise de décision municipale. Néanmoins, ces groupes ont représenté

les intérêts de leurs communautés et lorsqu'ils ont reçu des ressources pour développer leur capacité institutionnelle, ils ont contribué à promouvoir un changement de politique municipale bénéfique pour les quatre quartiers.

Mots-clés : groupes communautaires de quartier, implication des résidents et décisions municipale, Windsor (Ontario)

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Introduction

Neighbourhood groups are a feature of municipal politics in Canada. They exist in various forms in different cities, often with different names, different levels of institutional support, and different capacities. They are often promoted as a mechanism for including the knowledge and ideas of residents in municipal decision-making and allowing residents to gain—or regain—a degree of control over municipal decisions affecting their neighbourhoods. At the same time, so it is argued, they facilitate better municipal services because they offer a mechanism for decision-makers to learn from the lived experience of residents.

Three main empirical questions are prominent in analyses of neighbourhood groups. First, why and how do they form, exist and build capacity? Second, to what extent do they genuinely represent the neighbourhood in question? And third, to what extent do they influence municipal government policies? These are important questions that facilitate assessment of whether in fact neighbourhood groups do fulfil the beneficial functions ascribed to them. This article is one part of such an empirical examination. It is a case study of four neighbourhood groups in Windsor, Ontario and their involvement in council decisions relating to vacant buildings in the city in a roughly six-year period between 2014 and 2020. Using interview data as well as analysis of secondary sources and grey literature, the article examines the formation of these groups. It then assesses their engagement with the municipality with respect to the issue of vacant buildings. This includes examining the development of their preferred policy position, the strategies they used to advance this position, and the extent to which they were able to shape municipal council policies in this policy field. This study of the neighbourhood groups' formation, internal structures, and decision-making also allows conclusions to be drawn about the degree to which they represented their neighbourhoods.

Literature review: Neighbourhood groups and municipal governance

Research into the importance of neighbourhood groups touches on long-standing research questions concerning who has power, how decisions are made, and who is included in, or excluded from, decision-making at the municipal level (Dahl 2005; Hunter 1953; Stone 2005; 1988). Studies of neighbourhood groups touch on these issues in examining whether these groups can fundamentally change pre-existing power balances by securing a 'right to the city' for those excluded from seats of power. Or, in a more limited way, do neighbourhood groups represent a mechanism for enhancing local democracy and improving municipal decision-making by allowing it to be shaped by the lived-experiences of its residents? The following sections frame the current study within the growing literature on neighbourhood engagement within municipalities.

How do neighbourhood groups form, exist and build capacity?

In Canada, a range of different resident groups, citizen movements and local organizations exist that seek to represent distinct areas within a municipality and which impact upon municipal governance in the interests of that area. These include the community councils that exist in Toronto, Montreal, Hamilton, and other municipalities across Canada, ward associations, and Business Improvement Associations (Spicer 2012; 2016; Flynn 2017; 2019; Flynn and Spicer 2017). Neighbourhood associations or groups—variations of which include homeowners and ratepayers associations—are among the most prominent example of this type of body. Flynn, for example, identifies that almost 200 such groups operate in the City of Toronto alone (2019; see also Chaskin and Greenberg 2015; Fagotto and Fung 2006; Flynn 2019; Hannis and Brown 2012).

At their core these organizations are volunteer committees that rely on individuals willing to engage in networking activities to bring neighbourhood residents together for common purposes (Kim 2020; Flynn 2019). Such groups may emerge entirely from the grassroots level with residents mobilizing to pursue initiatives such as neighbourhood beautification campaigns, a community garden, or community events (see Saegert 2006 for an overview of the debate on consensus or confrontational processes). These groups also sometimes emerge out of opposition to proposed development projects or decisions affecting the neighbourhood (Sorensen and Sagaris 2010). In these cases, neighbourhood groups may be driven by NIMBY (not-in-my-backyard) pressures and mobilize to oppose municipal policies or decisions (see Poppe and Young 2015; Sancton 2021; Sutcliffe 2008). Neighbourhood groups have, for example, been created in many urban settings at different times to oppose the construction of new residences (such as apartment buildings in a community of single-family homes), the location of municipal facilities (such as needle-exchange facilities), or decisions they perceive as threatening the local environment (such as building in a former naturalized area).

The impulse to create a neighbourhood association, and their capacity to act, may originate with, or be supported by, other prominent local organizations. A non-profit organization, for example, may seek to mobilize a community group to help lobby the municipality for particular policy outcomes or increased funding. Nasca, Changfoot and Hill (2019), for example, provide a case-study of a non-profit organization—GreenUP—helping to build community organization in a low-income neighbourhood in Peterborough, Ontario in part by facilitating interactions between marginalized residents and professional planners. Similarly, Horak and Dantico identify the roles of the United Way and prominent business and community leaders in helping to develop strategies to support neighbourhoods in Toronto in part by building increased "neighbourhood cohesion and participation" (2014, 145).

Municipal governments themselves increasingly engage in activities to support the development and capacity of neighbourhood associations. Although groups are not a formal part of the municipal government decision-making apparatus, they are part of the municipal governance landscape, and many municipal governments provide grants, staff-support, or other resources to support their development. The City of London, Ontario for example, offers community grants and a community support team to assist in the formation of neighbourhood groups (City of London 2021). The City of Vancouver established a matching fund program in 2021 designed to help "community groups to build community and neighbourhood connections while enhancing parks or other public spaces" (City of Vancouver 2021). Similar support programs exist in cities across Canada (see Phillips and Conteh 2021). It is also the case that municipal councillors frequently meet with neighbourhood groups in their wards and use the leaders of a neighbourhood as link between themselves and their constituents (Chaskin and Greenberg 2015; Phillips and Conteh 2021).

Neighbourhood groups, therefore, are now present in many Canadian municipalities but with considerable variation in size, resources, permanence, and raison-d'être. This means that their capacity to act and influence municipal governance is contextual, may vary from municipality to municipality and from issue area to issue area, and thus requires empirical investigation.

Can neighbourhood groups influence municipal decisions?

Advocates of neighbourhood groups posit that they strengthen local democracy, and in so doing, influence municipal decisions, introduce local knowledge into the decision-making process, and improve the decisions taken (Berry, Portney and Thomson 1993; Chaskin 2001; Kretzmann and McKnight 1996). Giving citizens a voice, so it is argued, may also generate greater equity in municipal politics if community groups can mobilize and include the voices of those who may ordinarily be politically marginalized (Sorensen and Sagaris 2010; Blanchet-Cohen 2015; Nasca, Changfoot and Hill 2019). Arnstein succinctly articulated a spectrum of participation and argues that true citizen participation is synonymous with a redistribution of power to the "have-not citizens" in that they have the ability to be involved and control the political and economic processes that typically exclude them (1969, 216). At one level, then, the development of neighbourhood groups can precipitate a limited sharing of power with the groups having a role in municipal decision-making (Chaskin and Greenberg 2015; Pastor, Benner, and Matsuoka 2011; Sirianni 2009; Wolf-Powers 2014). A place-based understanding (such as a focus on particular neighbourhood and issues within that geographical context) can help us understand why individuals and groups engaged in activism choose certain discourses, narratives and positions within contentious political situations (Martin 2016).

Other analyses of neighbourhood group participation in municipal politics, however, are more critical. Fainstein, for example, argues that the "achievements of neighbourhood participatory bodies are limited to modifications of pre-existing development schemes, small-scale improvement programs, blocking funding cutbacks, and symbolic

recognition" (2010, 66). One possible reason for this is that municipal decision-makers are not particularly interested in modifying policies based on community group input and engage in consultation only because they have a legal obligation so to do. Municipal councillors are not always supportive of community groups and indeed may be actively opposed to such groups playing a significant role in municipal governance. They may see them as a rival authority that challenges city council's decision-making power or as forums that have the potential to elevate challengers for their seat on council (Spicer 2016). Additionally, Perrons and Skyers argue that due to power differences and structural economic inequalities, the power to "allocat[e] resources to urban areas and determin[e] overall priorities" is not given to local groups, but rather to municipal or higher authorities (2003, 265). In this context, it is, possible that neighbourhood groups are at best symbolic, giving the impression of activity without affecting meaningful change, and at worst organizations that are co-opted towards preserving existing power structures (Fursova 2016).

A related argument is that policy decisions are shaped by neoliberal forces within a Fordist global political-economy that are outside the control of the municipality and which limit the power of municipalities and their neighbourhood groups or individual citizens (Hackworth 2007; Harvey 2005). There is, however, a growing interest in a resurgence of the 'right to the city' movement, where groups at all scales have begun to mobilize in response to the negative effects of neoliberal urbanization (DeFilippis, Fisher and Shragge 2006; 2010; Harvey 2005; 2012; Brenner, Marcuse and Mayer 2012; Purcell 2002; 2008; 2013). These social movements and groups have been analyzed within North American and international urban contexts to understand their development, scale, approach, and impact on urban governance (Pastor, Benner and Matsuoka 2011, Wolf-Powers 2014; Martin 2016; Mayer 2016; Sorensen and Sagaris 2010). Central to these analyses are questions concerning capacity, unequal power dynamics, representativeness, and outcomes of engagement in urban governance. There is also an increasing focus on the neighbourhood scale, and its ability to promote justice and equity at the local level in urban contexts (see Sorensen and Sagaris 2010; Pastor, Benner and Matsuoka 2011; Mayer 2012).

There are, then, different interpretations of the importance of neighbourhood groups in municipal politics. Importantly, it is also the case that analyzes of this question will vary depending on the geographic location, timing, the institutional structures in place, and the type of issue in question. It may be, for example, that neighbourhood groups are consulted and allowed to play a part in issues that are not fundamental to other powerful economic interests in the municipality. In many municipal settings, for example, participatory budgeting is used as a mechanism for allowing residents a say over municipal spending decisions. In most cases, however, participatory budgeting is limited to small amounts of discretionary spending rather than the entirety of the municipal budget (Petite 2020; Wilkinson et al 2019). It is, therefore, important to undertake case studies of neighbourhood group engagement in decision-making that, overtime, will build a more comprehensive picture of the issue areas where neighbourhood group are and are not effective.

Are neighbourhood groups representative of their communities?

Whether neighbourhood groups can be important in municipal decision-making and capable of effecting genuine change at the municipal level is linked to the third main question studied in the literature: once formed, are these groups genuinely representative of the neighbourhood communities that they represent? Some scholars argues that neighbourhood groups can mobilize and include the voices of those who may ordinarily be marginalized in the policy process (Sorensen and Sagaris 2010; Nasca, Changfoot, and Hill 2019). Other research, however, suggests that existing societal inequalities and structural barriers can deter and prevent disenfranchised groups and individuals from active participation in municipal politics (Campbell and Fainstein 2012; Pothier 2016; Pothier et al. 2019). The demographic that typically does engage is often privileged—meaning they are more likely to be wealthy, male, and well educated—while groups and individuals from poorer communities with higher concentrations of visible minorities are less likely to participate (Callahan 2007; Casello et al. 2015). Wealthier neighbourhoods are more likely to have engaged groups and more likely to influence policy outcomes (Keil 2002; Sutcliffe 2008). In mixed-income neighbourhoods, even the middle-class will be in a more privileged position and can co-opt the discourse to exclude certain voices. The reasons for this unequal engagement are numerous. Individuals and groups may lack the financial means or time required to engage in policy making. Exclusion from social, economic, and political networks reduces access to knowledge, resources, and opportunities for involvement, leading to a deficiency in civics skills (Smith and Wales 2000; Verba and Nie 1972). Without these skills, excluded people and groups are not able to participate meaningfully, which results in an institutional structure that favours particular groups of people based on race and socioeconomic status and perpetuates pre-existing, unequal power dynamics (Holgersen and Haarstad 2009).

Assessing the importance of neighbourhood groups therefore requires examining not simply whether they exist and are active within a municipality but also whether they are able to affect decisions at the municipal level (and if so, which issues), and whether they are representative of their neighbourhoods. This article provides such a case study through an examination of four neighbourhood groups in Windsor, Ontario and their engagement in municipal decision-making concerning vacant buildings. It examines the formation and capacity of these groups, the strategies they used to influence municipal decision-making and whether they were able to influence municipal policy, and the extent to which they represented their neighbourhoods.

Windsor: Blight and the role of neighbourhood groups

Windsor, Ontario has a population of 217,188 residents (City of Windsor n.d.). After the amalgamations of several towns in the 1930s (Ford City, Sandwich, and Walkerville) and 1960s (Riverside, Ojibway, and parts of Sandwich), the city has been "driven by a surge of outward growth," or sprawl, meaning greenfield development of predominantly single family, detached housing in the ring of wards surrounding the city's core, as well as suburban municipalities surrounding the city (Fathers 2018; NBLC 2011).

Windsor has struggled with economic difficulties for the last decade or more and its unemployment and poverty rates are consistently among the highest in Ontario. The United Way Windsor-Essex (UWWE) published a report in 2014 indicating that the level of poverty found within Windsor, with 33% of the population living in low-income households, was the highest in Canada at that time (Prieur 2014; Fathers 2016). The pattern of residential development in Windsor combined with this higher concentration of poverty in certain neighbourhoods has resulted in many empty or abandoned retail spaces and properties in those neighbourhoods, which in turn have further discouraged investment in the affected neighbourhoods (Phipps 2020). Abandoned buildings are, of course, by no means limited to Windsor. Indeed, blight is a much-studied topic and its causes and appropriate solutions to its presence generate controversy (Carpenter and Ross 2009; Eisinger 2015; Shlay and Whitman 2006; Wolff and Intravia 2019). Despite these controversies, there is widespread agreement that abandoned buildings are a problem that requires a solution. In the case of Windsor, the municipal government has undertaken various studies and implemented several measures aimed at the problem of abandoned buildings and encouraging the redevelopment of these sites. This was, for example, a key part of three separate Community Improvement Plans in core city neighbourhoods—Sandwich Town (2012 and 2018), Downtown (2017), and Ford City (2018)—as well as a Brownfield Rehabilitation plan covering the whole city.

Neighbourhood group formation and capacity building

Over the past decade, neighbourhood groups in Windsor have also identified blight as a significant problem affecting their communities. Four groups particularly focused on this problem: the Ford City Neighbourhood Renewal (FCNR), the Our West End Neighbourhood Renewal (OWE); the Glengarry to Marentette Initiative (later renamed as the Initiative: Glengarry to Marentette, IGNR); and the Downtown Windsor Community Collaborative (DWCC). These groups were established in or around 2010 and were active in municipal politics over the subsequent decade.

Various factors explain the formation of these groups. First, there is a long of history of Windsor residents perceiving their neighbourhood as distinct and, as a result, organizing to engage with municipal decision-making to promote their neighbourhood's interests. In several cases, this perception of neighbourhood distinctiveness can be traced back to the formerly independent municipalities that were amalgamated to form modern-day Windsor. In the case of Walkerville, for example, residents have taken several initiatives designed to support the neighbourhood and its history. Sandwich Towne is also a neighbourhood that was an independent municipality prior to amalgamation. Residents in this part of the city have long been active individually and collectively engaging in the debate about the future of the Ambassador Bridge—the Canadian end of which lands in Sandwich—and the properties in Sandwich owned by the Ambassador Bridge company (Sutcliffe 2008).

The formation of neighbourhood groups has also been encouraged by the municipal government and by other actors within the city. While there is no formal city policy to create or maintain any neighbourhood groups within the formal structures of the municipality, the municipal government does facilitate neighbourhood engagement in municipal politics. The city and individual municipal councillors, for example, regularly host information sessions

and consultation exercises in particular neighbourhoods. In addition, as noted above, the municipal government has established community improvement plans that focus on specific neighbourhoods within the city (City of Windsor 2021).

In the case study examined here, the non-profit organization the United Way/Centraide Windsor-Essex County (UWWE) played a significant role in supporting the capacity of the neighbourhood groups through its Neighbourhood Engagement Strategy. Based on local data that show higher levels of poverty in certain geographic neighbourhoods of the city, UWWE advocated for the formation of neighbourhood groups as part of a plan to bring "strategically targeted, coordinated over-investment into these struggling neighbourhoods so we can kick start their renewal" (Fathers 2016, 4).

UWWE piloted this idea in the Ford City neighbourhood (see Figure 1). Initially this took the form of a three-month Ford City Renewal Project which was designed to "engage area residents, property owners and, community and business leaders in an asset and strengths-focused dialogue to develop a shared vision" (Morency, Nielsen and Lynn 2011, vi). From there the Ford City Redevelopment Committee, a group that formed in the mid 2000s with the assistance of the local business improvement association, the University of Windsor, community members, and non-profit experts, attempted to put this community development work into action (Morency, Nielsen and Lynn 2011, 24). This resulted in further United Way funding that led to the creation of the Ford City Neighbourhood Renewal group and allowed for the hiring of two full-time staff who worked together with residents to advance neighbourhood revitalization.

The United Way subsequently expanded its financial support to a further three Windsor neighbourhoods. In each case a neighbourhood group of some type existed prior to the provision of United Way money. Firstly, Our West End Neighbourhood Renewal (OWE) neighbourhood group started from a grassroots blog in January 2010, that led to a roundtable of residents in Ward 2 dedicated to renewing the west end. In 2014, the Glengarry to Marentette Initiative (later renamed as the Initiative: Glengarry to Marentette, IGNR) was formed through a Community-University Partnership Initiative, wherein social work students began to conduct research on social problems in the neighbourhood to the east of the casino in Ward 4. Lastly, the Downtown Windsor Community Collaborative (DWCC) was started in 2010 by a group of residents dedicated to organizing local residents in a program of
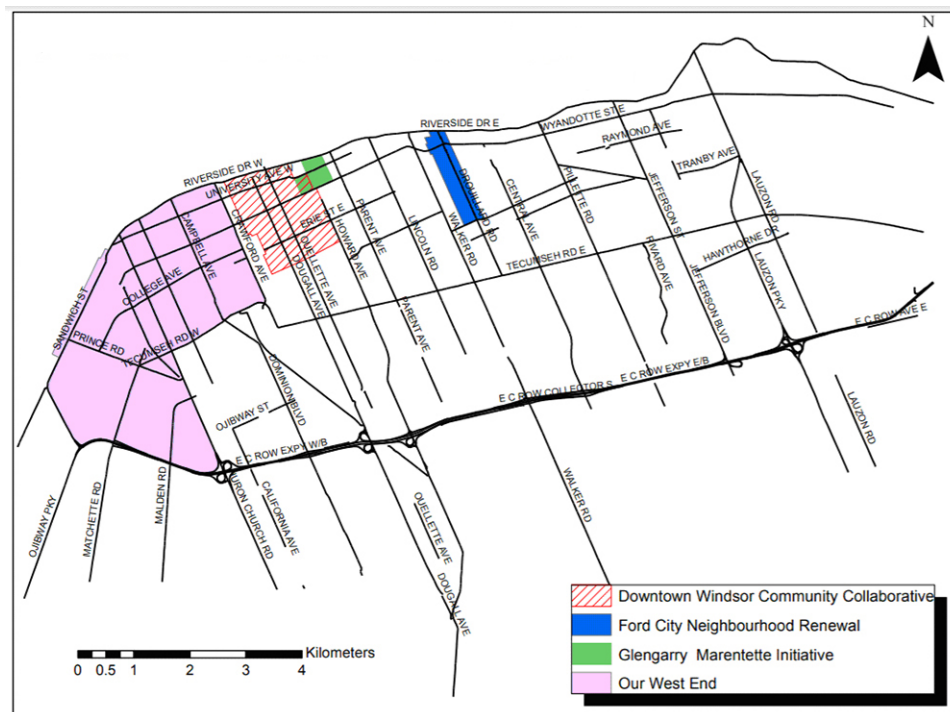

Figure 1
United Way funded neighbourhood engagement strategy catchment area, Windsor, Ontario
Courtesy of T. J. Auer

community revitalization. This group was different from the other three in that it had faith-based component to its community development work, and as a result was an incorporated non-profit and charitable organization.

Each of the four neighbourhood groups, therefore, developed in part from the grassroots level. The UWWE, however, played a major role in the groups' internal organization, capacity, and objectives. In 2015, all four of the neighbourhood groups came under the same UWWE five-year Neighbourhood Engagement Strategy funding stream (2015–2020). This funding allowed the groups to hire full and part-time staff, something which they had been unable to do prior to the receipt of funding. This significantly enhanced the capacity of each group to engage in the day-to-day work of connecting with residents and identifying issues of concern to these residents. At the same time, the parameters of this funding stipulated that each group had to create and report on a five-pillar work plan to tackle issues—such as crime prevention and neighbourhood beautification—identified by the United Way as essential to neighbourhood revitalization (Judge and Keam 2018). In sum, the United Way was central to developing the organizational strength of the neighbourhood organizations and in setting the groups' agendas.

Can neighbourhood groups influence municipal decisions? Addressing vacant buildings

To assess the second of the core empirical questions—were these neighbourhood groups able to influence municipal policy—it is necessary to examine their advocacy work in detail. Although the four neighbourhood groups used UWWE funding to work on several issues, vacant buildings quickly became central to each group. All four determined that the problem of vacant properties was more pronounced in the core of the city, where their catchment areas were situated.

The Ford City Neighbourhood Renewal staff led the way in pushing for action in this area. Early in 2015 they assessed their neighbourhood in order to understand the scope of the problem within their catchment area (Schmidt 2015). Led by T.J. Auer, a Community Planner at the FCNR, the group mapped all the vacant buildings within their catchment area in response to the City's Blight Mitigation Strategy. After collecting this data, Auer then applied a formula from Temple University and estimated that the City of Windsor was losing $6 million in lost tax revenue due to the decrease in surrounding property values (Schmidt 2015). In response to the work in FCNR, all four groups began to track and document buildings in their neighbourhoods via pictures and mapping. They also organized and encouraged residents using social media and public meetings to report vacant buildings to the city council (CBC 2017). By the end of 2015 all four neighbourhood renewal groups were united in the view that vacant buildings were a significant problem. In the words of one resident, "Let's get our core neighbourhoods back into shape…We must do something" (quoted in Cross 2017a). They further concluded that the City of Windsor lacked accurate information on the extent of the problem and that the municipality's existing approach to vacant buildings was inadequate.

The policy that the neighbourhood groups sought to address was the city's Blight Mitigation Strategy established under the terms of the property standards bylaw. This strategy was designed to address problem of vacant properties by demolishing properties that were past the point of repair (Loiselle 2017). Derelict buildings were deemed:

> 'vacant' if they are 'neither used nor occupied by the owner, for a period of more than 120 days', and they meet the definition of 'derelict', meaning 'a building which has been left vacant by the owners for a period of two years or more, or a building damaged by fire, storm or other catastrophic event where in the opinion of the Officer the building is beyond reasonable repair (City of Windsor 2019).

With this definition, the Blight Mitigation Strategy resulted in 80 buildings being demolished between 2011–2015 (City of Windsor, Clerks Office 2020).

The neighbourhood groups had a mixed response to this approach: while not having blighted structures littering their neighbourhoods is seemingly more advantageous than having them dilapidated and causing problems for the surrounding residents, there is a cost to having vacant lots particularly given the lack of investment in new structures due to the lack of market incentives for infill development. The groups therefore began to investigate proactive solutions to potentially save some of these buildings and mitigate against a high volume of demolitions in the core. Their chosen response was a vacant building registry (VBR) that included proactive inspections to ensure property standards compliance. In contrast to the municipal government's approach, the groups hoped that a VBR would catch the degradation of vacant buildings through proactive inspections. This legal enforcement mechanism would keep a building up to minimum standards with the goal of preventing it from posing a safety hazard and having to be

torn down. This contrasted with the City's Blight Mitigation Strategy, which was a complaint-driven system based on residents using the municipal hotline to report buildings that were noticeably not complying with the property standards by-law.

The groups proposed a cost-recovery model based on proactive enforcement by hiring more building inspectors who would be responsible for maintaining an up-to-date list of known vacant properties. Based on the model used in Hamilton, Ontario and others across North America, the proposed VBR consisted of:

- Registration of property: When a building is "vacant" (definition decided on by the city) for a certain period, the owner is required by the city to register the property.
- Registration Fee: The city will set a registration fee usually based on cost recovery.
- Inspection Fees: The city will inspect the building on a schedule and the cost of inspections are usually recovered by inspection fees paid by owner.
- Contact Information: The city would require owners to display some form of emergency contact information on the property in a visible location.

The groups argued that this model had three advantages. First, because vacancy often results in lost tax revenue for the city, the VBR would positively impact the city financially due to the recovered tax revenues. Secondly, there would be a social benefit, as these properties would stop being sites of disorder for the surrounding neighbourhoods. Crime, such as loitering, vandalism, trespassing, and graffiti often accompany vacant properties and can sometimes escalate into squatting, drug dealing, and arson (Kelling and Wilson 1982; Garvin et al. 2013). Lastly, by maintaining these properties and incentivising their (re)activation, the number of buildings deteriorating to the point of blight, and hence, in need of removal would be reduced. Tearing down a building is costly and environmentally damaging as it negatively impacts the surrounding air quality and soil. Additionally, it means that there is no longer housing where there once was, and the reuse of properties is generally better for the environment than building new.

In sum, because more buildings would be saved from demolition, the groups argued that there would be economic, social and environmental benefits to maintaining these buildings and incentivizing their reuse. The city's existing strategy had no formal tracking mechanism, and no staff specifically dedicated to routine, proactive inspections to ensure property standards were maintained. As a result, many of these properties were falling into states of disrepair.

Neighbourhood group structure and strategy

The staff of the four neighbourhood groups devised a flexible, multifaceted approach in their campaign to establish a vacant building registry. It was understood that "success depended on securing support from municipal council staff and ultimately securing the support of a majority on city council" (interview with authors). The groups' staff collaborated to build a case through fact finding, and independent analysis of the economic impact of vacant properties in the four neighbourhoods. The staff used this data as the basis for documentation delivered to council staff, individual councillors, and the council as a whole. The strategy had both an elite dimension – with the staff directly contacting city officials and councillors—and a grassroots dimension—with staff mobilizing neighbourhood residents to make the case for a VBR. Both strategies were intended to let councillors know the extent of the problem and its impact on residents.

The groups attempted to secure support on city council, starting with the councillors in their four wards, as well as generating support within the city administration. This began in January 2015 with staff from the Ford City Neighbourhood Renewal neighbourhood group presenting the idea of a vacant building registry to staff at the City of Windsor Planning and Building Department in order to plant the idea and generate support within the administration. The FCNR also made a strategic request to their councillor in Ward 5, Ed Sleiman, to ask a Council Question regarding the "viability of a Vacant Property Registry, including options to consider different fees or no fees …" in November 2015 (City of Windsor, Council Report 2017). This positioned him as the owner of this issue, and therefore more willing to act on it when a report came back to city council about options to address the problem. Other councillors had indicated their support of this initiative, and they met with the groups on a semi-regular basis to create public support and to seek the support of other members of council. This resulted in both NRG staff and residents engaging in further conversations with councillors across the city, particularly those they thought were open to supporting the initiative.

In addition to these direct efforts to influence city council, the groups' staff encouraged residents to be vocal in their support of a VBR. Staff from all four groups mobilized residents and encouraged them to contact their councillors to raise the issue of vacant buildings. They approached and prepared residents to be delegations to city council to speak to their experience of living alongside vacant properties in their neighbourhood. Staff facilitated the use of video logs by residents (published on YouTube), created a centralized blog (Small Change Windsor), and issued press releases that resulted in subsequent media stories on this issue (Cross 2017b).

Staff also encouraged residents to make calls to the municipal hotline on issues concerning property standards, to help build the case with the city. Encouraging residents to complain about vacant properties was intended to demonstrate the severity of the problem to council. Indeed, by the end of 2016 the outstanding complaints sat at around 1,200, with about 750 older than 30 days (meaning no investigation was initiated within 30 days) (Vani 2020).

Neighbourhood group influence?

The neighbourhood groups' campaign to influence municipal government policy ultimately met with limited success. Their advocacy of a vacant building registry was not supported by council administration or by the council.

On October 2, 2017, after almost two years of neighbourhood group lobbying, Windsor City Council received a report from the Building Department regarding a vacant building registry. The report recommended that a VBR not be implemented and instead recommended that "Enhanced Enforcement be brought forward for consideration as part of the 2018 budget" (City of Windsor, Council Report 2017, 284). The report concluded that a registry would likely not reduce demolition requests, and that, unlike Hamilton with higher land values and relatively quick redevelopment, land would potentially sit vacant for years (City of Windsor, Council Report 2017, 286). The report further concluded that, contrary to the neighbourhood groups' claim, there would be insufficient vacant properties to recover the costs of enforcing the registry. Finally, the report concluded that a VBR would create an additional administrative burden on a department that already has very limited resources. Instead, the administration proposed simply adding staff to deal with the backlog of complaints and to enhance enforcement on vacant properties.

The neighbourhood groups received the administration report approximately ten days prior to the October 2017 council meeting. The information presented forced them to reassess their objective. There was indication from certain previously supportive councillors that they were persuaded by the administrative report and would now not push for the full VBR. Upon receiving this information, the groups' leaders debated whether to alter their messaging and arguments their delegations would make to city council. Following internal discussions, the groups concluded that it "would be unwise to oppose councillors who had been supportive of a VBR but who now indicated that they would support the city staff recommendation" (interview with authors). Despite months spent lobbying for the creation of the VBR, the groups' staff decided to reverse course and encourage residents to support the administration's proposal. The neighbourhood delegations at the October 2017 council meeting reflected this change with the majority expressing their support of the enhanced enforcement suggested in the administration's report.

City Council unanimously approved an 'Enhanced Enforcement' pilot strategy, which meant an increase of two building by law officers and one additional clerk to undertake proactive enforcement of property bylaws (Cross 2017a). These positions were pre-approved and included in the 2018 municipal budget and renewed in 2019 following a July 2019 report from the Building Department on the effectiveness of the program's first year of operation. This report claimed that the Enhanced Enforcement Strategy was successful, as measured by the number of vacant buildings either brought into compliance with property standards or demolished, as well as a reduction in the city's response time to citizen complaints (City of Windsor, Council Report 2019, 2). Rob Vani, the Deputy Chief Building Official, noted via email correspondence that "[t]he most significant improvement… has been our ability to achieve response times that comply with our service delivery standard, resolve files with fewer orders issued and in a more timely manner" (Vani 2020). The Building Department's report noted, however, that the program was less successful in securing the occupation of abandoned buildings. It noted rather that the more common situation was that "owners have made minimal repairs in order to comply with the by-law to avoid prosecution in hopes their vacant buildings are reused or redeveloped in the future" (City of Windsor, Council Report 2019, 3). Despite this, the program was extended in 2019 and again 2021 (City of Windsor, Council Report 2021).

The four neighbourhood groups did not, therefore, secure the policy—a vacant building registry—or the result—increased occupation of formerly abandoned buildings—they set out to achieve. City councillors, including those who were supportive of the groups' initial proposal, ultimately were persuaded by city administrators that this type of registry was not necessary or financially viable. There are, then, clear limits to the influence the neighbourhood

groups exerted within the municipality. This conclusion does not, however, mean that the neighbourhood groups were irrelevant. Their staff collected data analysing the impact of vacant buildings and engaged in lobbying work that including building relationships with municipal councillors and staff. Rather than paint a critical picture that the city was not doing enough, or that elected officials did not care, the groups worked with city councillors. The goal was to demonstrate the economic, social, and environmental cost of vacant buildings to the whole city—rather than one that was only relevant to residents in the city centre—and to present a proactive and prudent solution to the problem of vacant buildings. The goal was to create a narrative that people in wards 2, 3, 4, and 5 could recognize, and those beyond could sympathize with. The groups' staff also developed links with the city's administration, particularly with the Planning and Building Department, to discuss the idea of a vacant building registry prior to the proposal being raised publicly.

The groups' lobbying helped to bring the issue of vacant buildings to the forefront and move the debate beyond the existing council blight mitigation strategy. Interviews with municipal staff support the conclusion that the administration's 2017 report on vacant buildings was prepared in response to the groups' mobilization of residents and their work with city councillors. Had the groups not been present, working with councillors, collecting data, analyzing the impact of the issue, nor doing the day-to-day work of reaching out and organizing residents in the individual neighbourhoods, this issue likely would not have been brought to council. The work of the neighbourhood groups was highlighted in July 2018 when officials from the Planning and Building Department met with the neighbourhood residents to update them on the status of the new hires and the city's plan of action. This was not a mandated meeting but occurred as a courtesy due to the relationship that had been built with the four neighbourhood groups.

A final important question concerning the outcome is whether the neighbourhood groups failed to get their desired policy outcome because powerful economic interests were arrayed against them. This does not appear to be the situation in this case study. Property developers and representatives of the Business Improvement Associations did not appear to be interested in this issue and did not engage in public lobbying against the idea of a VBR or speak out against it at council meetings. Representatives of the neighbourhood groups interviewed for this study were not aware of counter-lobbying by developers or business owners. In itself, of course, this does not prove that they were not engaged and influential in this case; influence can be exercised in different ways outside of the public eye (Lukes 2021). Had developers and other powerful interests been opposed to a Vacant Building Registry, however, it is likely that they would also have opposed the Enhanced Enforcement that was ultimately put in place by the city council.

Were the neighbourhood groups representative of their communities?

The third question is whether the groups genuinely represented the neighbourhoods they served. The answer to this question defies a simple answer. Statistical data that compares the groups' leadership and active participants to the demographic character of the neighbourhoods are unavailable. Examination of other data, however, does indicate that the groups were broadly representative of the neighbourhoods they represented. First, in each case—as noted above—each group had some form of grassroots organization created by neighbourhood residents prior to the United Way's involvement. Many of the individuals who originally established the neighbourhood organizations continued to play a leadership role after the permanent staff were hired (interview with authors). In addition, the permanent staff hired by each of the groups when the United Way funding had been secured were residents of the neighbourhoods or were residents of the city. They were not hired from outside the city and were therefore familiar with the needs of the neighbourhoods where they worked.

Second, the idea of pushing for a vacant building registry was an idea developed by the staff with the knowledge that it would fit with the priorities established by the United Way in making its funding decision. This said, the proposal was not one developed in a top-down manner and imposed on the neighbourhoods. Residents had identified the problem of blight in each of the neighbourhoods prior to the hiring of permanent staff. Residents, moreover, were a central part of the VBR campaign. As identified above, residents – working with staff – were active in mapping vacant buildings in their neighbourhood, contacting the municipal councillors and staff directly, making video blogs, and attending council meetings. This grassroots dimension to the strategy could not have been possible in the absence of resident support for the initiative. In short, although the staff directed the campaign, helped mobilize the community, and brought the four neighbourhoods together by emphasizing that the problem of vacant buildings was a shared problem, residents were active in supporting the campaign.

Not all residents agreed with all the decisions taken by the groups' leaders. This was particularly evident in opposition to the decision to accept the enhanced oversight offered by the city rather than continue to press for

the VBR. At the July 2019 City Council meeting, when the effectiveness of the pilot was revisited, the call for an official vacant building registry was raised again—this time by a new councillor representing Ward 2, Fabio Costante, a founding member of OWE. Although support for an official registry at this time primarily came from residents in Ward 2—where the effects of vacant buildings were felt more acutely due to the concentration of derelict homes owned by the Canadian Transit Company (Sutcliffe 2008)—there was some support across all four neighbourhoods (Viau 2019). Although there were fewer resident delegations at this meeting than at the 2017 meeting, some of those present called for further action. They acknowledged that the problem had been ameliorated by enhanced oversight but argued that a registry could incentivize property owners to redevelop these vacant buildings, by increasing fines for the owners of such buildings (Viau 2019). To this extent, these residents did not perceive that the neighbourhood groups' decision to settle for the enhanced enforcement option adequately represented them.

The existence of this opposition to the decision to accept the modified proposal on vacant buildings rather than push for the full registry nevertheless demonstrates that the issue of vacant and derelict buildings was important for residents and was not imposed by the groups' leaders or the United Way on unwilling neighbourhood residents. There were grassroots demands for action on this issue. The staff and leaders in each group worked hard at building trust with neighbourhood residents, many of whom were typically excluded from the political system and had no prior experience with Windsor politics. This groundwork took years of meetings and involved helping residents communicate with municipal government. Mobilizing the community in this way depended on the willingness of residents to engage, which in turn depended on their recognition of the importance of this issue. Residents were aware that vacant properties were economically and socially damaging to their neighbourhood even if they were not aware that a vacant building registry provided a potential solution to these problems prior to the United Way's engagement with this issue and the work of the groups' full-time staff.

Conclusion

This case study of neighbourhood groups addresses the three empirical questions posited at the outset. The groups in this study were established in part because of grassroots action. There were neighbourhood groups in existence in each of these four communities prior to the United Way's involvement. It was, however, United Way funding that allowed the groups to develop greater institutional capacity that included full and part-time staff and provided the resources to engage actively in municipal decision-making. This capacity did not exist prior to the UWWE's involvement, and the groups were forced to reorganize following the UWWE's decision to stop their funding as of March 2020. The loss of funding meant that each group could no longer afford permanent staff or office space and, in the case of the Initiative: Glengarry to Marentette, meant that the group disappeared entirely. Although the groups did not exist only because of decisions taken by other municipal actors – three of the neighbourhood groups continue to exist albeit in a more limited way following the lost funding – the case study does emphasize the importance of external support for neighbourhood groups. While it can be argued that this external support for neighbourhood organizations can constrain their capacity and objectives, this case study demonstrates that this support was also beneficial given that there were poorer neighbourhoods with limited resources.

The groups, and the agenda they advanced, were broadly representative of their neighbourhoods. Neighbourhood residents played a role in the groups' leadership and the permanent staff, while not in each case neighbourhood residents, were city residents. The groups were able to mobilize residents and engage them in the campaign to create a vacant building registry. This would not have occurred had residents not felt that the issue of vacant buildings was relevant in their community.

Finally, even with the resources that came with the funding, there are clear limits to the influence that neighbourhood groups exert on municipal decision-making. They did not achieve, and indeed were not seeking, a fundamental transformation of municipal decision-making structures and existing municipal policy. Instead, they worked within the existing municipal decision-making structures to effect policy change. This was evident in their efforts to secure the support of municipal councillors and municipal staff in the planning department. The groups' staff did not set out to criticize the council or to mobilize the community against the mayor, councillors, or other community interests. Instead, the groups' strategy was to work within the existing power structures in the municipality and they ultimately revised their initial policy goals and accepted the municipal staff and councillors' decision to settle for incremental change to the status quo. While there is no way to know if a more radical or aggressive approach would have changed

the outcomes (positively or negatively), it appears that the consensual and strategic approach did help facilitate incremental change.

Ultimately, the neighbourhood groups did not get the vacant building registry that they initially advocated for, with the city adopting a different approach to the problem. A key question is why they failed. In this case, there is limited evidence to suggest that the groups' failure was the result of opposition from developers and other powerful economic actors in the city. The Business Improvement Associations were not affected by residential property vacancies and did not publicly comment on the issue, nor did any land developers or property owners attend the council meetings to speak publicly against a registry or enhanced enforcement. Cost to the municipality, and the uncertainty regarding whether a registry would be effective in compelling property owners to rehabilitate their properties, appeared to be the central reasons the groups failed to get their desired outcome. Council staff and ultimately councillors argued that enhanced enforcement was a cheaper method of achieving similar results.

The groups were not, therefore, central to municipal decision-making in a way that would suggest they had agency in this policy area. But neither was their participation purely symbolic. Instead, their activity in this case fell somewhere between these two points. Their work was successful in setting the council agenda by raising awareness of the problem of vacant and derelict buildings. In so doing they played a role in securing incremental change the to municipal policies dealing with an issue that plagued their immediate neighbourhoods. Given the limited institutional power of neighbourhood groups, and particularly those from poorer communities, we conclude that this incremental change is indicative of success, and the most that could be realistically expected.

Acknowledgments

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