



Connecting Lakeside: York Region, ON | A Local Deepening Community Initiative

*Presented by the Tamarack
Institute*

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What is a Local Deepening Community Initiative?

In an attempt to gain a better understanding of how to build deeper and stronger communities, in 2012 Tamarack Institute launched a campaign to host **1,000 conversations** in communities across Canada. Emerging from these conversations were incredible stories of the power of ordinary people coming together to support one another and accomplish ambitious plans in times of need and opportunity. These conversations also revealed common themes about the role of community to: foster a **sense of belonging**; enable the **leveraging of community assets**; and, how **creating a shared vision** for community can be a powerful exercise that inspires people to **work together to create a better world**.





Five years later, these conversations are continuing via our **Local Deepening Community Initiatives**. These partnerships between Tamarack and local community champions create opportunities to host community conversations that: **connect neighbours** to one another; build consensus on shared aspirations; and **identify projects** that residents can work on together to bring their desired future closer to reality. At its heart, these **initiatives create opportunities** for residents and local organizations to think and act differently together: recognizing that no one sector, working alone, can effectively address complex community issues.

The Local Deepening Community Initiative in a Social Housing Context

In the spring of 2016, The Regional Municipality of York partnered with Tamarack Institute to begin planning a Local Deepening Community Initiative at the Lakeside Residences, which is a social housing building in South Keswick. Initiating this project was both highly aspirational and very practical. The **Connecting Lakeside Initiative** is now part of Tamarack's national project to deepen community across Canada.

The conversations hosted as part of the **Connecting Lakeside Initiative** helped neighbours get to know one another; discover their shared hopes for the building that they call home; and, discover the gifts, knowledge and talents they each have to share. This project also created an opportunity for the Regional Municipality of York staff and the community of partners to get to know the residents of

Lakeside. Building on these connections, the Lakeside residents and the broader community have worked together to support resident-led projects that make the building a better place to live. The **Connecting Lakeside Initiative** in York Region demonstrated a recognition that complex community issues are often **best addressed locally** and do benefit when different sectors work together.



Lakeside Building: Constructed in 2012
Population: 97 Units, mixed use
Location: South Keswick, Georgina, York Region

While the impact of the **Connecting Lakeside Initiative** continues to unfold, it was already evident during the first four months of the Connecting Lakeside Initiative, that the goals and impact of this project had already met and exceeded expectations.

The goals of this project were to:

- Increase resident engagement
- Improve resident safety/perception of safety
- Create connections between residents and their community (as defined by the resident)



A Profile of the Lakeside Residences

Working in partnership with Tamarack Institute, The Regional Municipality of York launched its **Connecting Lakeside Initiative** in late summer 2016 by hosting a series of conversations with different individuals and residents. These conversations explored: the *meaning of community; community gifts & assets; challenges, future hopes; and, priorities for shared action.*

Who Have We Engaged?

Since the project got underway more than **60 percent of Lakeside residents have been engaged**. There were 4 community conversations hosted that each impacted the residents and spurred the community in to action. To raise awareness of the initiative, the team also went door-to-door and reached out to residents individually. As involvement in the initiative gained momentum, the staff distributed community conversation feedback cards, engaged in one-on-one conversations and participated in resident-led engagement events.

The successful impact of the **Connecting Lakeside Initiative** activities are spreading. The residents reached beyond the Lakeside Building itself and have already forged connections with members of the broader community.

This has included:

- Engaging 1 local business owner
- Engaging 1 member of Georgina council
- Facilitating 4 new partnerships with different departments within the Region

Lakeside Project Timeline

January

- The idea for the project is pitched

February

- A local Leadership team is created
- An initial meeting led by Sylvia Cheuy of Tamarack engages potential community partners and clarifies project goals

March

- Erinn Jay takes on leading project full time and creates project work plan

April

- First official "Leadership Team" meeting held

June

- Tenant survey results for Lakeside received

July

- Planning for Community Conversations begins

August

- 4 Community Conversations held

September

- Master Chef Competition at Lakeside
- Presentation about project to local non-profit community of practice, Linking Georgina
- Presentation about project for staff at Housing York Inc.

October

- Presentation about project to Regional Planning Commissioners of Ontario (RPCO)
- SWAP table event in partnership with Environmental Services

November

- Educational session for residents facilitated by York Region Transit
- Two Community Celebrations held

December

- Food Handler training provide in partnership with Public Health
- Project wind down in process-securing baseline data, compiling all materials, creating report.

January 2017

- Residents held 1st communication meeting with 18 attendees who have a plan to move forward
- Residents have formed an **Enhancing Accessibility Group**. The 1st meeting attracted 26 people, some from neighboring buildings. Future plans include meetings with municipal council and BIA.



- Facilitating 1 presentation to the Regional Planning Commissioners of Ontario on Affordable Housing
- Facilitating 1 presentation to a non-profit community of practice, Linking Georgina

The project has also resulted in the creation of a mapping tool of local services (both online and print versions) and also included a Master Chef resident engagement event and community dinner.

What Did We Learn?

Each conversation began by inviting participants to remember a time when they really felt a strong sense of community and to share those stories with one another. Common themes were generated from all these experiences and used to help define community in the following ways:

What is the Purpose of Community?

- **A Physical Space:** Beyond the building itself, residents highlighted outdoor spaces like the Lakeside garden project and natural features such as the lake. These spaces are valued because they help create a sense of community and well-being. The importance of physical spaces being *accessible, safe* and *secure* was also emphasized.
- **A Gathering of People:** “You know everyone” (Family, friends, neighbours, a common voice or identity). One resident shared: “It feels friendly and safe when we know each other and share values and experiences.” Community events (i.e. BBQs, potlucks, clubs and activities) and the opportunity to share resources and care for each other makes a difference and is valued by our community.

- **A Sense of Accomplishment:** Community is about working together, getting things done, volunteering, caring for each other, having fun and having a sense of pride about where we live.
- **A Describing Word:** Community is the feeling of sharing, safety, belonging, feeling supported, caring and being cared for, respecting diversity and providing **acceptance**. It is also **multi-generational**.

What are the Benefits of Community?

Community can be important in times of crisis or identified when help is needed. The response to the Sutton fire and the Kinsmen’s focus on helping with accessibility support were specifically mentioned by residents in several of the community conversations. Importantly, community is also a source of traditions and celebrations.

- **Reciprocity:** Giving and receiving from others; “helping each other in times of difficulty and when in need”



Lakeside neighbours share a conversation.



- **A Sense of Trust:** Friendship and support; knowing neighbours...and who needs help; watching out for each other.
- **The Whole is Greater:** Together we are stronger and can do more; infrastructure; public services etc.
- **Working Towards Common Goals:** Working together towards mutual aims and goals.
- **Health and Wellbeing:** Community can make you happy and healthy and combat loneliness and isolation.

What are the Challenges of Community?

Communities sometimes have their challenges and conflicts. The residents identified some of these key points so as to highlight awareness for their own community and be able to work together to overcome them:

- **Differences create Divides:** demographics, life-experiences, geography, backgrounds (faith, politics and beliefs) as well as different abilities (physical limitations and impairments) contribute to exclusion and lack of empathy
- **Negative members:** Rumours, assumptions and negativity in some members of the community creates a lack of trust and a critical atmosphere; this erodes personal confidence and contributes to a fear of others
- **Too Few Engaged:** How do we get more people involved to improve the situation?

- **Lack of Empathy/Loyalty:** Being willing/able to think beyond your own experiences

Overall Challenges

Trust-Building Versus Project Timelines

Initially residents had to learn to trust the staff leading this process for the **Connecting Lakeside Initiative** to proceed. While ultimately, the results of the project were extremely positive, this invested approach generated significant tension for staff and facilitators. While staff are held to deadlines, effective relationship-building still takes time; establishing trust doesn't always unfold according to institutional timelines and deliverables.

Staff Leadership Versus Resident Ownership

The staff of Housing York and the project leadership team recognized that, to be sustainable, the engagement and connection between residents must come from the residents themselves. Although the staff can act as catalysts to help residents meet and connect, it is imperative that the space is created for the residents to assume responsibility for generating their own events and activities.

Measuring Project Impact

Another challenge that the staff confronted was the inconsistency of data collection. While the ultimate purpose of the project was to deepen community and not "collect data", we did recognize that capturing information and details to demonstrate impact is important.



Although, the surveys received from residents were insightful, ultimately it was the qualitative changes that were felt by all – the informal and warm conversations with neighbours and the significant increase in resident-led activities – that strengthened relationships.

Nurturing Connection & Understanding Through Conversations

Residents who participated in the community conversations held as part of the **Connecting Lakeside Initiative** were surveyed before and immediately after their participation. The results demonstrate the immediate impact this engagement had on participants after just one conversation.

Survey Questions (surveyed both pre & post a community conversation)	Percentage Change
How friendly do you feel with the people in the building?	+28.25%
How aware are you of different experiences and opinions of people in the building?	+25%
How interested are you in working together to make the community stronger?	+15.7%

This data suggests that, after just one conversation together, participants felt more connected to each other which contributes to decreasing social isolation and enhancing feelings of security. The increased awareness of one another also enhances empathy and one’s sense of security. And, finally an increase in people’s desire to work together contributes positively to community health and resilience.

Challenges with the Lakeside Building

In several conversations, it was clear that the design of the Lakeside housing building was a source of accessibility issues for some. Although it was unfortunate that these issues limited some activity and inclusion, it truly helped residents unite around a common experience. Some of the specific problems that were vocalized were:

- “Our lounge isn’t well-designed for community events that include more than a 2-3 people with wheelchairs or walkers”
- There are no bathrooms accessible to the public on the main floor which creates problems for community events
- Community garden tables are not high enough for folks to fit under to sit in wheelchairs

These challenges are now identified and we are hopeful that the residents will be able to seek improvements by working together.



Shared Hopes for Lakeside's Future

When asked to envision their ideal community of the future, the participants identified:

- **Increased Safety and Trust: Emergency preparedness education, creating a buddy system** between residents, have an “away system” for safety and awareness, approachable staff and increased respect between community members

Participant Quotes

“A neighbour gave me a hug – she may not have known it but I needed it and it made a huge difference.”

“People should drop by, our door is always open, you should always go to people to help.”

- **A Sense of Pride:** Curb appeal and being proud of where we live. Start a community garden with raised beds that we can tend together
- **Continue to Grow and Be Welcoming:** More people, more young families, have a welcome package to give to new people. Work to create a peaceful atmosphere of mutual respect.
- **Have More Recreational & Leisure Opportunities:** trails, bike paths, more shopping access, nearby deli, coffee shops and free Wi-Fi (we are proud to say the free Wi-Fi is now available at this location in the lounge!)

- **Improve Public Transportation:** Within the community while considering accessibility and limitations (senior, weight, mobility issues). A community bus route designated for local shopping. Residents reviewed a map of the area and identified key areas of priorities for accessibility enhancements on a map.
- **Improved Communication and Access to Services:** A farmers’ market, a monthly newsletter, more mental health supports, accessibility to senior services and stores, knowledge of programs and services available, single point of access to find services (e.g. a community hub, central meeting spaces)



A Lakeside Master Chef Contestant

Opportunities for Shared Action: THE HOW

- **Improve Communication:** How can we keep members of Lakeside Housing informed and involved in projects and opportunities?
- **Enhance Community Connection:** How do we value and support formal and informal opportunities for resident to connect with each other?



- **Increase Citizen Engagement/Leadership:** How can residents participate and contribute to creating our shared vision of the positivity for our community?
- **Greater Collaboration:** How can we learn to work together on shared community opportunities despite our differences?



Enjoying the tenant-led Halloween Spaghetti Night Potluck

Outcomes of Connecting Lakeside

It is inspiring to reflect on the many benefits that this local deepening community initiative has sparked for the residents of the Lakeside building.

First and foremost, the initiative has **given the community a voice**; residents have been able to come together over issues that matter. United residents have begun to mobilize and provide leadership to address significant mobility and accessibility concerns that affect many

members of their community together. They have also invited residents from other neighbouring buildings to join them.

Proactive Problem-Solving by Residents

Now that residents are more connected, they are realizing that they can also problem-solve smaller issues that arise within the building itself. There have been several recent examples where residents have come together to problem-solve unexpected crises.

One example of this occurred when the building's common area freezers stopped working. Rather than panic, the residents spontaneously organized and hosted a "cooking party potluck" so the food wasn't spoiled. By working together, they avoided inevitable waste and turned an unexpected negative situation into a community celebration. This proactive, self-sufficient community of residents ultimately saved staffing and resource costs to Housing York.

Celebrating Citizen Leadership

The residents have contributed their own leadership to host a number of events at Lakeside. At the same time, there has been a significant increase in participation at Housing York led meetings as well, which offers evidence of the increased level of trust between the buildings residents and Housing York that this project has fostered.

Since the community conversations began in August 2016 the resident population have been more engaged with activities.



An **unexpected and very positive outcome** over the last few months, has been the emergence of **more resident-led events** with leadership coming from several key members that live at the building. One shining example of what residents are doing to promote a healthy community in the building is the creation of a monthly breakfast club that is FREE for everyone. This club started in September shortly after the Community Conversations period. The breakfasts now occur regularly on the last Friday of every month and some donations have been gathered and donated to charity.



Tenants of the building Helen, Tammy, Carol, Aggie, Adrian & Brittany, Youth Outreach & Education Support Worker from the Salvation Army Youth Centre accepts the donation

In fact, the residents are pleased to announce that money raised through these, and other events, \$500 was donated to the local Sutton Youth Shelter.

The community was so inspired by Lakeside's generosity that there was an article in the January edition of [Snap'd Georgina](#) (photo above by Stephanie Frisch, Snap'd Georgina).

Not only are the resident-led events significantly reducing social isolation on site, they are instilling *a sense of place* and *belonging* which residents will feel the ripple effects from for months and years to come.

Gifts and Connecting

Lakeside has seen a lot of positive change in a few short months. Here is a list of the resident-led activities, events and contributions that did not exist before the **Connecting Lakeside initiative** started:

- Labour Day Potluck after the garden was completed
- Jays Games Wing Night
- Celebratory Potluck
- Oktoberfest BBQ
- Spaghetti Dinner
- BBQ day
- Grey Cup party
- One resident offered their communication skill to develop promotional posters for a Master Chef competition
- Santa Claus meet and greet
- New Year's party

Two residents contributed the gift cards they won at the Master Chef competition to provide a free Thanksgiving Dinner open to all residents. A total of 31 residents – including 5 new faces – attended this event overall the response from the conversations has been a constructive series of engagement.



The SWAP

SWAP is a waste reduction campaign currently being promoted within the Environmental Services Department at York Region

22 tenants attended a SWAP event organized in partnership with York Region Environmental Services. Our residents were able to divert 44.7 kg of waste from landfills by reusing and other people's items!

There were other events organized by the leadership team, related to the **Connecting Lakeside Initiative** and well-attended by residents:

- 2 community celebrations
- Food handler programming
- York Region transit information session and;
- An environmental services SWAP day

Engagement at Lakeside

Engagement Activity Records	2015	2016
Tenant-Led Activities	50	65
Partner Agency Led Activities	32	40
Community Partnership & Support Services (CPSS) Unit Led Activities	0	10
Private Lounge Bookings	12	16
Total Activities	94	131

Overall the trend of gathering together went up significantly. The most interesting indicator of success was that the resident-led activities (those that were hosted for the entire building) increased by 30% during the **Connecting Lakeside Initiative**.

As shown in the table in the previous column, we were fortunate to have access to last year's resident engagement records that served as a baseline for us to compare and track the impact of this year's initiative on resident engagement.

Connecting Lakeside Benefits for Housing York

By initiating this project and connecting the residents of the Lakeside building in a positive way, residents are also demonstrated an increased sense of ownership for their building and neighbours; become proactive on issues of shared concern; and invested in community celebrations. It is clear that Lakeside's deepened sense of community is certainly beneficial to residents.

The activities at Lakeside are also generating tangible benefits to Housing York. Since the **Connecting Lakeside Initiative** began, Housing York has experienced:

- Reduced call time in units
- A reduction in neighbour-to-neighbour complaints
- Empowered residents who are willing to support action on shared community issues (e.g. transit and accessibility)
- An increase of trust between residents and Housing York which has enhanced communication



- Leadership with building initiatives have relieved housing staff of this responsibility and resulted in cost and resource savings

Lessons Learned

The **Connecting Lakeside Initiative** has effectively demonstrated how positive changes can occur in a short period of time by investing in meaningful community engagement and the creation of partnerships between organizations and citizens.

Specifically, applying Tamarack’s Local Deepening Community framework in this community setting has not only **generated huge rewards for the residents** at Lakeside but also demonstrated **direct benefits to housing management** as well. By catalyzing resident leadership, the community has the foundation to be more self-sufficient and united in crisis and more proactive in creating a sense of community for their neighbours.

It is important not to under-estimate the value of having a dedicated staff role focused on community engagement. This **staff leadership is essential** in acting as a catalyst: helping to establish trust and provide initial leadership to the project. Once the momentum has been established, the community engagement leader leaves a **thriving, independent community** having established a relationship of trust on behalf of the region.

What’s Next?

Resident-led Action Groups

Residents at Lakeside have established two working groups to address important issues identified through the community conversations.

These working groups have identified as the, “Accessibility Action Group” and the “Lakeside Resident Communication Group”:

Accessibility Action Group

Residents of Lakeside will be inviting residents from two other social housing buildings to take part in the accessibility working group. Once established, the group will bring leadership to make the neighbourhood more accessible and safe by initially focusing **on four short-term goals**:

1. Organize and invite members of Council’s Accessibility Committee to hear and learn from the group;
2. Consider the possibility of challenging councilors to “spend the day in a wheelchair” to raise awareness;
3. Research Affordable Accessibility Solutions for Businesses – this might include identifying foundations and/or service clubs to help fund accessible longer-term solutions and also hosting an information session for area businesses possibly in partnership with the local BIA;
4. Create a “*Be a Good Neighbour*” Awareness-Building Campaign - Recognizing that some accessibility solutions are longer-term and/or need costly fixes, there interest in creating some low-cost solutions and awareness for local residents and business-owners.

The first meeting hosted by this newly formed group, in January 2017, was a tremendous success. More than 26 people attended, including representatives from 3 neighboring buildings. In the near future this group will



make presentations to the Uptown Keswick Business Improvement meeting with Mayor and local councilor, the town's Accessibility Committee and the local BIA to brainstorm opportunities for shared action.

Lakeside Resident Communication Group

This group has identified some ideas for welcoming new neighbours and keeping residents safe and informed. These ideas include:

- Designating 1-2 people for every floor who are "greeters" to welcome & orient new residents
- Drafting a Neighbours "welcome letter" which includes information and a calendar of events that residents can participate in (e.g. the food bank, breakfast together last Friday of every month)
- Develop strategies "In Case of Emergency" (i.e. *The Door Hanger Buddy System* and "In Case of Emergency Form")



A sample "door hanger" for a buddy system that assists neighbours with looking out for each other

This group's first meeting in January 2017 attracted 18 participants and plans are underway to put some of the group's ideas into action.

Continued Opportunities to Collaborate with Housing York

The relationship of trust that this project formed between the residents of Lakeside and Housing York will continue to be fostered through several educational events that Housing York will bring to Lakeside over the coming year.

Continued Partnership with the Tamarack Institute

Staff from the Tamarack Institute will be returning to Lakeside early in 2017 to work with Lakeside residents on a video storytelling project about the **Connecting Lakeside Initiative**.

We hope to share this video far and wide to recognize the important strides that have been made in this unique community, and to inspire other communities to enhance strong citizen-municipal and community partnerships.

Ripple Effect: Let's Keep This Going

There is a real opportunity to use and adapt this the local deepening community initiative model that was implemented at Lakeside in other social housing buildings. With the hope that this might become a reality, below we have shared some key learnings generated in a conversation between Tamarack Institute and the **Connecting Lakeside Initiative** leadership team.



- Resident-focused communication is the key in structuring community conversations and getting the residents to become engaged and onboard early
- Staff must keep the initiative accessible and be prepared for those with barriers so as to include everyone from the beginning
- A strong relationship of trust must exist between the property manager and the project leader
- The property manager must value an intentional investment in resident relationships
- It is recommended that a single lead “champion” staff person be assigned to drive forward the initiative.

Thank you!

Our sincerest thanks to the residents of the Lakeside building who participated in these conversations, shared their thoughts and ideas and helped us reconnect them to the power and possibility of community. Our heartfelt thanks also to Erinn Jay whose generosity and leadership was integral to the success of this initiative.

