

Green Together: Lessons Learned

Project Summary and Reflections by the Green Together Management Team

Introduction

Launched in January of 2009, Green Together was an eighteen-month project conceived and carried out by members of Green Neighbours 21, a citizen-based environmental group in Toronto's Ward 21. The aim of the project was to test the idea that community-based social marketing could make a significant difference in persuading people to make their homes more energy efficient. While the project did not reach its stated goal of reducing GHG emissions by 2.2 tonnes per year for each of 200 local homes, it did meet with some success, and we found the process highly instructive. In what follows we briefly summarize our experience and present some reflections on what we learned.¹

The Project

The Green Together project was situated in Ward 21, a diverse community in mid-town Toronto that is home to a broad range of income groups. Homes in the area range from small semi-detached houses to larger and more expensive ones, as well as a number of apartment buildings. Most of the ward's housing stock was built around the time of World War I.

The project grew out of a simple assumption. Noting that most homeowners remained unmoved by a series of federal and provincial incentives for major home energy retrofits (furnace, hot water, insulation, new windows and doors), we speculated that one reason for the limited response was the complexity of this whole process, which required the homeowner to spend a good deal of time on their own researching the cost-effectiveness of various approaches and the relative merits of different products before seeking out a properly qualified contractor. We reasoned that supporting homeowners not only with a fund of reliable and practical knowledge as well as the social support of neighbours who had done similar work might remove a major barrier and increase the rate of work completed.

We recognized immediately that, given our focus on major retrofits (and the government rebates that made such work attractive), the ecoENERGY audit would be central to our work. Persuading homeowners to invest in the first audit could be taken as an early sign of success, while the number completing the second (post-retrofit) audit -- and the differences between first and second scores -- would provide more serious measures of what we had achieved. We noted that, over the life of these audits to the present, only 18% of those who completed a first audit went on to complete a second -- a useful baseline for our own results. Drawing on figures provided by the Toronto Atmospheric Fund, we set a goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 2.2 tonnes per year for each of 200 houses in our neighbourhood.

¹ For a more detailed account of the project and its results, see the Management Team's July, 2010 Final Report.

In order to reach this goal we planned to recruit and train a group of 20 volunteers, each of whom would work with ten local homeowners. The volunteers would guide the homeowners through the audit process and provide them with relevant information, including links to local contractors and to neighbours who had dealt with issues similar to theirs. A part-time Coordinator would organize the training sessions, provide ongoing support for volunteers, track ongoing progress and gather outcome data. The training sessions themselves were carried out with the help of five Partner organizations, each with a specific area of expertise. To cover the Coordinator's salary and other operating costs, we applied for and received two grants from the Province of Ontario (via the Ontario Trillium Foundation and the Community Go Green fund respectively) totaling \$58,000. An important asset for the project was our four-person Management Team, whose combined backgrounds included experience with grassroots movements, community development, alternative energy systems and project evaluation. This broad experience proved to be critical, not only in the early phases of planning and applying for funds, but also in responding creatively to issues arising over the project's eighteen-month span.

Results

The project succeeded in many respects. It began auspiciously with a well-attended launch event that generated considerable enthusiasm and the names of 65 interested persons. Building on this list, we recruited and successfully trained 19 volunteers, learning a good deal along the way about the recipe for an effective training process. Through a variety of methods (some more effective than others) we did succeed in finding 200 interested homeowners and linking them with our volunteers. We staged some very successful public events on home energy savings, most notably our "Eco-Energy Fair", which drew more than 300 attendees to the Wychwood Barns, where they had an opportunity to meet our volunteers and talk with vendors and installers of energy-saving products.

At the same time, viewing the project in the light of our initial goals, we find the results mixed at best. While we managed to reach 200 households as planned, only 76 of these had undertaken their first audit (and in most cases some energy upgrades) as the project drew to a close. Of these, by June 2010, only fourteen completed the second audit required for federal and provincial rebates. This puts our rate of first-audit homeowners completing a second audit at 18% -- no better than the background average noted above. We plan a final follow up assessment of the actual GHG emissions reduction for 25 homes in April 2011. Given that many of our homeowners made a late start, there is good reason to think that the number of second audits will have increased significantly by then. Nonetheless, given the amount of time and energy invested in all phases of this project, this is hardly the breakthrough we were seeking. In what follows we consider a number of lessons from our experience that suggest ways of being more effective. Some of these involve simple remedies for minor practical problems, while others involve more fundamental issues. We direct our recommendations, first to community groups attempting projects similar to ours, and secondly to government funding agencies and policy-makers. *We conclude that given the size of the challenge, we cannot rely on volunteer citizen groups like ourselves to carry out the required transformation. For this, we need a more centralized, better financed plan.*

Recommendations to Community Groups

Recruiting, training and supporting volunteers

Recruiting Volunteers

Projects like ours depend entirely on energetic and well-informed volunteers who have the skills needed to build rapport and inspire confidence in homeowners. We found that *one of the best ways to recruit such people is with a well-publicized “kick-off” event at the start of the project*. In addition to building a sense of group excitement, such an event can be a very effective way of drawing volunteers into a shared common vision right at the beginning. Signup sheets can then capture the names of those who want to learn more.

As we learned from our own experience, not all those who sign up for volunteer training are equally suited to the work that comes with this role. To some extent this is a matter of personality, energy and free time. However when we looked at our outcome data at the end of the project, we found another factor that stood out vividly: *the most effective volunteers were those most similar in overall situation to those they were assisting*. Volunteers who were homeowners were more successful than those who lived in apartments (even when the latter were very well-informed). *The most effective volunteers were those who had recently had first audits and were in the midst of their own energy retrofit process*. In this respect our experience validates the assumptions of Community-based Social Marketing, which emphasizes the importance of peer-to-peer links in supporting behavioural change.

The Training Process

Lessons drawn from training our first group of volunteers made the second round much more effective. What we learned can be summarized under the watchwords *commitment, clarity and focus*.

- *Commitment*: While it is tempting to be flexible about the training schedule and other volunteer obligations in the hope of drawing in better numbers, *we found that too much flexibility can undermine commitment. It is much better to present volunteers with the training schedule and ask that they decide whether to commit to the training and the project*. The result may be fewer volunteers at the outset, but they will be more willing to fit the project into their lives.

- *Clarity*: For much the same reason, *we found it essential to give prospective volunteers a clear and realistic picture of the training process, the nature of their role and the time it will take, and the importance of their contribution to the overall success of the project*. We found that volunteers are more likely to remain engaged if they understand clearly what they are agreeing to at the outset. To confirm this understanding, they can be asked to sign an informal “contract” attached to a written summary of these points.

- *Focus*: *Training should concentrate on the energy retrofit issues of greatest concern to homeowners*. Our initial round of training included briefings on reducing water use, planting trees and other worthy steps to a greener home, but this information proved to be of marginal interest to homeowners, who were mainly looking for help with the home retrofit process and the decisions they faced regarding work to be done. The second round of training was more effective in part because it concentrated on these issues. *The experience of our volunteers also pointed clearly to the importance of a solid training in the whole system of energy audits and government rebates, in the auditing process itself, and in having reliable energy experts on hand for specific energy retrofit decisions*.

Volunteer Support

The task of supporting our volunteers was one of the most challenging we faced, since they experienced frustrations in nearly every aspect of their work, which included recruiting and retaining homeowners, and then shepherding them through the process of getting an audit, interpreting the results, deciding on work to be done, finding a contractor and following through on plans. To some extent the very structure of our project, with its focus on the two audits and measurable results, contributed to these frustrations, especially among volunteers who were highly motivated to meet our goals. As many pointed out, this placed them in the uncomfortable position of feeling they were “selling” energy retrofits to householders and then pressuring them when the process seemed to stall. The Coordinator and Management Team were able to provide some elementary support for volunteers facing these problems, and volunteers themselves found discussion with their peers to be important in overcoming the sense of isolation, of “being on their own”, which many experienced at times. Bearing this point in mind, we believe that *projects like ours could be strengthened by organizing volunteers into small teams or “affinity groups” for mutual support*. Nonetheless, we fear that the problems faced by our volunteers may reflect a deeper flaw in the very assumptions behind our project. More on this below.

Working with Homeowners

We found the whole process of working with individual homeowners to be much more challenging than expected. *Recruitment* was the first challenge. Here we used a variety of outreach techniques, including door-to-door solicitation, presentations to church and school groups and mobilizing networks of friends. None of these methods was very effective, and we found the uptake from church and school presentations especially poor, perhaps because most of those attending were there for other reasons. By contrast, we attracted significant numbers of participants from each of the three special events we held on home energy savings, although none was aimed primarily at recruitment. We think the high rate of return can be explained by the fact that attendees were already interested in making their homes more energy efficient, so Green Together offered something they wanted. The events themselves were also lively community events that created a certain “buzz” – a sense that green retrofits were on everyone’s minds. The conclusions we draw are that *it is much easier to recruit homeowners by attraction than by persuasion, that the best prospects are those already interested in green retrofits, and that well-publicized home energy events are among the best ways to bring such natural candidates into the project*.

Similar lessons applied to the challenge of *retention* – keeping homeowners engaged and committed through what was often a long and difficult process. Frustrations arose from many sources, notably the first Eco-energy audit (which was often marred by unexpected delays and confusing results) as well as the cost/benefit uncertainties in planning work and negotiating with contractors. Faced with these obstacles, homeowners often allowed their plans to drift, leaving our volunteers in the awkward position of having to remind or prod them to take the next step. The result in some cases was an unfortunate gulf that developed between volunteers seeking positive results and homeowners who began to feel pressured. This troubling dynamic may well be built into projects like ours, which depend on volunteers working one-on-one to achieve specified goals.

About one-third of our homeowners did remain engaged throughout and credited the volunteers’ support as critical. *For this reason we think there is a case to be made for a very*

different form of community-based social marketing in promoting green energy retrofits. Rather than focusing on individual results, this approach might offer resources and a supportive community for persons interested in making their homes more energy efficient. Such an emphasis on support and sharing with like-minded others, (together with access to substantive information and individual mentors if desired) might be more readily sustainable and could well yield better results. The paradox is that such an approach doesn't lend itself to measurable outcomes and thus might well exclude external funding.

Lessons for Funding Bodies and Policy Makers

Project Funding and Retrofit Incentives

One set of obstacles we encountered in Green Together arose, paradoxically, from the very sources of funding that made our project possible. Our grants from Community Go Green and the Trillium Foundation were both locked into short completion and reporting cycles (one year and 18 months respectively). As a result we found ourselves pressing to spend the allotted funds and meet reporting deadlines at a time when our work had just begun to yield measurable results. For this reason *we recommend a more extended and flexible approach to granting time frames – ideally on the order of two to three years for projects of this type.* Beyond permitting more effective use of the funds granted, a longer time frame would permit more detailed and realistic measurement of results (including changes in heating bills) during the span of the project itself. We also found that our proposed budget needed some revision as the project unfolded. The fact that one of our funders would not accept changes placed limits on our scope for creative response. *For this reason we propose that granting agencies build some latitude into project budgets, enabling recipients to redeploy funds - with donor approval - in response to unexpected problems or opportunities.*

We also encountered some problems arising from inconsistencies, delays and occasional mistakes in the audit process as well as from ambiguities and changes in the rules regarding rebates from different levels of government. For this reason *we believe that any successor to the now-defunct Eco-ENERGY Program must include better and more rigorous training for auditors, including periodic recertification to assure that auditors all apply the same standards and are equally well-informed. Given that one of the auditor's tasks is to educate the homeowner, the training should emphasize effective communication as well as technical knowledge. By the same token, we recommend that rules and terms of energy rebates be harmonized across different levels of government to create a single, easily understandable regime of incentives for home energy saving. Incentives could be subject to review and revision every five years, but they should be guaranteed not to change in the meantime.*

Looking at the Bigger Picture: Do we need a Different Approach?

The lessons from our experience presented up to now all reflect an assumption that the current approach to home energy efficiency – the approach embodied in government incentives targeted at individual homeowners – is a sound one. Our recommendations have pointed to ways of supporting this approach more effectively through community action and some minor policy reforms. However our experience with Green Together has also led us to raise some serious questions about the validity of this whole approach. Is it workable even in principle?

Our conclusion is that the difficulties we faced in mobilizing homeowners to undertake major home energy retrofits did not arise simply from our own mistakes or from glitches in the current system. Rather they reflect an inherent problem in any approach that relies mainly on the initiative of individual homeowners to educate themselves, make the right decisions and then organize and pay for substantial work on their homes. Based on our experience, we calculate that it would take more than fifty years for an ongoing volunteer effort like ours to achieve the numbers of retrofitted homes needed to significantly reduce the GHG footprint in Ward 21. No doubt with the help of the lessons cited above we could do a bit better, but it is now painfully clear to us that, even with the help of community-based social marketing, a strategy based on incentives to individual homeowners will not bring about the massive and rapid gains in home energy efficiency needed to make a serious dent in urban GHG emissions over the near term. *We see more promise in a strategy that is centralized, simplified, and financed in such a way as to spare the homeowner any major upfront expenses.*

One such plan has been proposed by the Toronto Atmospheric Fund. The key to this idea would be a one-window service combining expert assessment of each home with a full retrofit plan linked to a team of certified contractors who would complete the work according to specifications. This strategy would also involve low-cost financing tied to the house rather than the owner and amortized over long periods, for example by means of a surcharge on heating bills (which would be reduced as a result of the retrofits). In 2007 Greensaver reported the results of a pilot project along these lines which took place in 126 single-family homes owned by the Toronto Community Housing Corporation. Greensaver, the audit contractor for the project, also coordinated all the retrofit work, thereby achieving major efficiencies in time and cost and generating a projected 42% average reduction in energy use for the homes involved. Building on these results, Toronto City Council has recently initiated a one-window energy-efficiency program for low income homeowners, to be delivered by Greensaver in partnership with the City of Toronto, Toronto Hydro and Enbridge. *While there are many details still to be worked out, we believe that an integrated approach of this kind offers a way around most of the obstacles that arise when the full burden of energy retrofit work falls on the individual homeowner. In order to further test and refine this idea, we believe the next step for the city should be an expanded pilot study applying a version of this approach to a sample of typical single-family homes across the city. Knowledge gained in this way could then be applied to a city-wide plan.*

If home energy retrofits were to be integrated and delivered by a single provider, we believe community-based organizations might still have an important role to play. However they would likely be less involved in marketing or “selling” energy-saving improvements than in providing support and advocacy for homeowners engaged in the process. Instead of feeling under pressure to persuade people, volunteers trained to advise homeowners would find themselves delivering a valued service. In the end this might be a more sustainable way of drawing on community-based methods to encourage more widespread home energy efficiency.

February 4, 2011

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