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BORN IN BEASLEY: A HISTORY OF THE HAMILTON COMMUNITY LAND TRUST, PART 3

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I

“This is definitely our greatest achievement to date,” Hamilton Community Land Trust Board of Directors Chair Mike Borrelli wrote me in an email interview conducted with him this past February. “But it is just the beginning of a lot of hard work.”¹

Borrelli was referring in the interview to the motion approved by Hamilton City Council’s planning committee this past January 17th to transfer one of the City’s Landsdale Neighbourhood properties, 278 Wilson Street - declared a surplus property in 2008, but vacant for much longer - to the Hamilton Community Land Trust (HCLT). Adjacent to Beasley Neighbourhood, Landsdale has faced and continues to face many of the same issues and development patterns as Beasley Neighbourhood.

Enjoying the critical support of Ward 3 Councillor Matthew Green, whom Borrelli described as the motion’s “driving force,” City Council as a whole went on to ratify the motion, the property being earmarked for affordable ownership townhomes, to be developed through a memorandum of understanding negotiated by the HCLT, the Hamilton chapter of Habitat for Humanity, and other community partners.² “Councillor Green went into the January 17th meeting only to give notice of motion,” Borrelli explained, “but support was strong enough to waive the rules and have the issue dealt with immediately as a walk-on.”

¹ Email interview with Mike Borrelli, February 10, 2017.

² Benjamin Zarate, “HCLT to acquire its first property!” HCLT Website, January 18, 2017:
<http://www.hamiltonclt.org/2017/01/18/getting-first-property/>

Locking in affordability through land ownership, the project consists of building a two unit, multi-dwelling property, suitable for family use, and will benefit the HCLT, Habitat for Humanity, local families and the larger community.³ Undoubtedly the motion and memorandum were facilitated by the new partnership struck between the HCLT and the Social Planning and Research Council (SPRC) last October, which enables the SPRC to accept charitable donations, issue donor tax receipts, and accept donations of unused land, on behalf of the HCLT.⁴ Conceived as a pilot project, the development offers the HCLT a unique opportunity to learn while tangibly moving forward.

II

The land donation would come just under three years after the HCLT was initially launched at LIUNA Station in Hamilton in early April 2014, an event that had been attended by over a hundred engaged Hamiltonians. The launch was followed by a series of volunteer meetings focused on building five HCLT Working Groups. Governance and By-Laws, which met that May and again that July, began formalizing the purpose and structure of the organization with a goal of incorporating that fall. Composed of seasoned volunteers, Fundraising applied for grants to cover costs connected with community engagement work but also to make it possible to hire a staff person and to conduct a professional feasibility study. Affordable Housing and Community Gardens initiated the search for available parcels of land and for partners who could support the launching of an immediate land trust pilot project. Communications and Community Engagement, meanwhile, began building public support while also seeking to raise funds for a staff person by giving presentations to interested individuals and groups.⁵ By July, HCLT volunteer Allison Chewter would report, the HCLT had secured the support of seven Hamilton community associations.⁶

That September, *The Hamilton Spectator* published the neighbourhood profile “Everyone in Beasley ‘hood is valued” in conjunction with a series of profiles of other Hamilton neighbourhoods like Gibson-Landsdale.⁷ A coalition of “socially active groups” was still striving to save Beasley neighbourhood, it

³ Benjamin Zarate, “HCLT to acquire its first property!” HCLT Website, January 18, 2017: [\[http://www.hamiltonclt.org/2017/01/18/getting-first-property/\]](http://www.hamiltonclt.org/2017/01/18/getting-first-property/)

⁴ Benjamin Zarate, “SPRC Partnership, Donations,” HCLT Website, October 26, 2016: [\[http://www.hamiltonclt.org/2016/10/26/sprc-partnership/\]](http://www.hamiltonclt.org/2016/10/26/sprc-partnership/)

⁵ Allison Chewter, “Hamilton Community Land Trust Summer 2014 Update,” HCLT Website, July 9, 2014: [\[http://www.hamiltonclt.org/2014/07/09/hamilton-community-land-trust-summer-2014-update/\]](http://www.hamiltonclt.org/2014/07/09/hamilton-community-land-trust-summer-2014-update/). HCLT would also apply for consideration by the province’s Social Impact Bonds process for an affordable housing project, so this may be a funding opportunity long-term. See also: Allison Maxted, “Thank You: HCLT Launch,” HCLT Website, April 7, 2014: <http://www.hamiltonclt.org/2014/04/07/thank-hclt-launch/>

⁶ These were: the Ainslie Wood/Westdale Community Association, the Durand Neighbourhood Association, the Jamesville Hub, the Central Neighbourhood Association, OPIRG McMaster, North End Neighbours and the Beasley Neighbourhood Association. See Allison Chewter, “Hamilton Community Land Trust Summer 2014 Update,” HCLT Website, July 9, 2014: <http://www.hamiltonclt.org/2014/07/09/hamilton-community-land-trust-summer-2014-update/>

⁷ *Hamilton Spectator*, “Gibson-Landsdale,” September 14, 2014: <http://www.thespec.com/news-story/4862151-gibson-landsdale-change-is-happening-fast-in-north-end-neighbourhood/>

See also, *Hamilton Spectator*, “Keith: More Than Just Houses,” September 17, 2014: <http://www.thespec.com/news-story/4863755-keith-more-than-just-houses/>

reported, the overriding sentiment being that Beasley was “transforming into a vibrant community.” The Beasley Community Centre kitchen had recently been upgraded, while the neighbourhood’s notorious ‘Listerine Alley’ had been cleaned up after serving several years as an outdoor washroom and space for prostitution, drug use and alcohol consumption. McLaren Park, it added, had been upgraded through the installation of better lighting and a stronger police presence and was then being used for soccer and family movie nights.⁸ Indeed, then HCLT Board Member Charlie Mattina recalls the reclamation of McLaren Park as an example of “good chaotic.” Arriving unannounced with collapsible tables, a car battery powered projector, and popcorn, he and other volunteer remember watched the local drug dealers arrive at their usual evening time, only to stop, gaze about, exchange glances, and walk away - never to return. It was “the moment we decided to stand up,” he concludes.⁹

That December, as Toronto’s Parkdale Neighbourhood Land Trust incorporated and began seeking charitable status, the HCLT applied to the provincial government to incorporate as a nonprofit, based on having organized a Board of Directors, having obtained funding from the Hamilton Community Foundation, and having secured the support of the SPRC.¹⁰ By this time the HCLT was also in discussions with Evergreen and several other organizations to develop a land use proposal for an underused City of Hamilton property.¹¹ By this time as well a sense of urgency was increasingly pervasive, project coordinator Allison Maxted declaring in an HCLT blog post at the time: “unless we act proactively, we will be forced to watch from the sidelines during our city’s renewal as speculators and outside developers make important decisions about our neighbourhoods.”¹²

III

In March 2015 Maxted announced through the HCLT’s winter newsletter that the provincial government had granted the HCLT non-profit status and that the Trust had been awarded a \$75,000 Ontario Trillium Foundation (OTF) grant.¹³ Nearing the first anniversary of its LIUNA launch and having achieved this

See also *Hamilton Spectator*, “McQuesten: No Grocery Store? No Problem,” September 18, 2014:

<http://www.thespec.com/news-story/4865478-mcquesten-no-grocery-store-no-problem/>

See also *Hamilton Spectator*, “Sherman: Neighbourhood Full of Ghosts,” September 19, 2014:

<http://www.thespec.com/news-story/4866694-sherman-neighbourhood-full-of-ghosts/>

See also *Hamilton Spectator*, “Stinson’s Diverse Voice,” September 20, 2014:

<http://www.thespec.com/news-story/4871437-stinson-s-diverse-voice/>

See also *Hamilton Spectator*, “Big Dreams, Big Changes in Jamesville,” September 22, 2014:

<http://www.thespec.com/news-story/4873023-big-dreams-big-changes-in-jamesville/>

And see also *Hamilton Spectator*, “Renaissance in Crown Point,” September 24, 2014:

<http://www.thespec.com/news-story/4876146-renaissance-in-crown-point/>

⁸ Carmela Fragomini, “Everyone in Beasley ‘Hood is Valued,” *Hamilton Spectator*, September 25, 2014:

<http://www.thespec.com/news-story/4878277-everyone-in-beasley-hood-is-valued/>

⁹ Interview with Charlie Mattina, February 21, 2016.

¹⁰ HCLT Backgrounder, November 5, 2015.

¹¹ Krist Hayes, “Hamilton Community Land Trust Fall 2014 Update,” December 5, 2014:

<http://www.hamiltonclt.org/2014/12/05/hamilton-community-land-trust-fall-2014-update/>

The HCLT was also in discussions at the time with A Rocha Canada (Hamilton Chapter), the Hamilton Victory Gardens, as well as other partners.

¹² Allison Maxted, HCLT Website, January 9, 2015: <http://www.hamiltonclt.org/2015/01/09/clt-community/>

¹³ Allison, Maxted, “Hamilton Community Land Trust Winter 2015 Update,” HCLT Website, March 5, 2015:

milestone, Maxted explained, the Trust planned next to publish its first Annual Report and to assemble its first three-year Strategic Plan, the latter focused on how it would acquire land and achieve financial sustainability.¹⁴ The Trillium funding, meanwhile, would be used to hire a Project Director, to hold community meetings and workshops, to host a day long community conference, to identify neighbourhood land-use priorities, to pursue land acquisition opportunities, and to establish real estate based development partnerships to meet community needs.¹⁵

Notably, the SPRC would release a new report that same month, *Profile of North Hamilton*, which, among other things, found Beasley building owners were working to actively eliminate affordable housing units in their buildings by offering tenants payment to leave.¹⁶ At the same time, *The Hamilton Spectator* would report, Hamilton rents were on the rise and city rental vacancies dropping. The situation, it warned “threatens to make the city’s social housing wait-list longer and put more people on the street.”¹⁷ Two months later, in June 2015, *CBC Hamilton* would remark that the cost of renting in Hamilton was increasingly more than anywhere else in the province. The problem, it noted, was compounded by the recent surge in Hamilton home prices, which compelled many to rent rather than buy.¹⁸ By mid-summer that year, Maxted would report that the local real estate market had “hit a tipping point” characterized by “bidding wars, apartments being cleared of low-income residents, and low-income neighbourhoods struggling to survive the housing boom.” Acknowledging that Community Land Trust processes are “lengthy and difficult but worthwhile,” she would rally:

Property by property we will work to remove land from the real estate market, making sure that it is used to meet community needs like high-quality affordable housing. Most importantly, we

[<http://www.hamiltonclt.org/2015/03/05/hamilton-community-land-trust-winter-2015-update/>] See also: Allison Maxted, “Hamilton Community Land Trust Awarded Ontario Trillium Foundation Grant,” HCLT Website, April 15, 2015: <http://www.hamiltonclt.org/2015/04/15/hamilton-community-land-trust-awarded-ontario-trillium-foundation-grant/>

¹⁴ Allison, Maxted, “Hamilton Community Land Trust Winter 2015 Update,” HCLT Website, March 5, 2015: <http://www.hamiltonclt.org/2015/03/05/hamilton-community-land-trust-winter-2015-update/> Other areas the Plan flagged for development include: strengthening its evolving governance, increasing the Trust’s public presence, involving more people, establishing formal partnerships, utilizing a full set of communication tools to reach the community, achieving long-term sustainability, acquiring land.

¹⁵ Allison Maxted, “Hamilton Community Land Trust Awarded Ontario Trillium Foundation Grant,” HCLT Website, April 15, 2015: <http://www.hamiltonclt.org/2015/04/15/hamilton-community-land-trust-awarded-ontario-trillium-foundation-grant/>

¹⁶ The study was commissioned by the North Hamilton Community Health Centre and Hughson Street Baptist Church and authored by Sara Mayo. Tenants were typically being offered \$2,000.00 to move out. The situation was by then already in effect at 181 John Street North and at 192 Hughson Street North. Notably, Mayo would add, these situations had only been made public because a large number of tenants had been impacted. See Sara Mayo, *Profile of North Hamilton*, April 2015: http://www.sprc.hamilton.on.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Profile_of_North_Hamilton.pdf

¹⁷ Solutions to the problem, it added, might include “‘density bonusing’,” which lets “developers raise the density of their project if they provided [affordable housing units].” See Teviah Moro, “Rents spiking, vacancies dropping in Hamilton,” *Hamilton Spectator*, April 14, 2015, A3.

¹⁸ Based on City of Hamilton policy, a two-year moratorium was then in place on conversion of apartment to for-sale condominium units. See Adam Carter, “Hamilton’s rise in rents the sharpest in Ontario, vacancies down,” *CBC Hamilton*, June 15, 2015: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/hamilton/news/hamilton-s-rise-in-rents-the-sharpest-in-ontario-vacancies-down-1.3113786>

are committed to keeping that land in community ownership generation after generation, no matter what happens to the market. Hamilton's story of change is still being written, and this is not a community that will stand by and let it be written for us.¹⁹

In early August, however, the quest for a tangible first project would continue.²⁰

IV

That October, *The Hamilton Spectator* published another profile on Beasley Neighbourhood. Qualifying that it was difficult to quantify how Beasley had changed over the previous decade, it nevertheless claimed "people were beginning to take pride in the neighbourhood." A self-conscious community of leaders and doers were still pushing, it noted, for a stronger, healthier and more prosperous neighbourhood. At the same time, it would add, "the neighbourhood has become a destination for young couples and Torontonians seeking affordable urban living," a trend then pushing up rents and setting "the inner city housing market on fire." As a consequence, house prices in Beasley had on average increased twenty per cent in only one year.²¹

The following month the HCLT expanded its Board of Directors, adding Nick But, Benjamin Zarate, and Ron Collier, establishing at the same time a new expert Advisory Council that was to meet once a year to offer advice to the Trust's Board and staff.²² Following a series of public consultations held in January 2016, the first Advisory Council would meet at Hamilton's Perkins Centre that March.²³ Billed as a half-day Land Trust Action Conference, it would be attended by over thirty key community partners and

¹⁹ In late July 2015, local tenants rallied at McLaren Park against "displacement, one of the grave yet unintended consequences of the grassroots re-investment." There was a sense at the time, Maxted added, that it might be too late to secure land in Beasley, but she was also by no means willing to give up. "We can celebrate re-investment while demanding more than just an inflow of capital into the city," she would argue: "and demand healthy and inclusive neighbourhoods that are sustainable and affordable. Better yet, we can build them ourselves. That is the Hamilton way." See Allison Maxted, "Writing Our Own Story of Change with a Community Land Trust," HCLT Website, July 29, 2015: <http://www.hamiltonclt.org/2015/07/29/writing-our-own-story-of-change-with-a-community-land-trust/>

²⁰ Allison Maxted, "Towards a project on community owned land," HCLT Website, August 6, 2015: <http://www.hamiltonclt.org/2015/08/06/towards-a-project-on-community-owned-land/>

²¹ Teri Pecoskie, "Beasley Neighbourhood in Transition – Then and Now," *Hamilton Spectator*, October 29, 2015: <http://www.thespec.com/news-story/6060384-poverty-project-beasley-neighbourhood-in-transition-then-and-now/>

²² <http://www.hamiltonclt.org/2016/01/04/january-newsletter-2015-review-january-workshops/>

²³ In December, HCLT announced that it would be hosting a series of public Community-Owned Land workshops in Hamilton in five different locations the following January. They would be used to establish priorities, brainstorm projects for the land trust, gather in-put n priorities for the next five years, create a vision for inclusive change in Hamilton, and find out what people think should be built or preserved on community-owned land. See Allison Maxted, "Land Trust Visioning Workshops," HCLT Website, December 10, 2015:

<http://www.hamiltonclt.org/2015/12/10/land-trust-visioning-workshops/>. They were understood as the last major consultation with the community before the Trust moved into its Operational Phase. Attended by sixty persons, the results would be used to develop strategic priorities. See Allison Maxted, "Public Visioning Workshops," HCLT Website, March 20, 2016:

<http://www.hamiltonclt.org/2016/03/20/publicvisioningworkshops/>

facilitate a discussion about how the Community Land Trust model might provide creative solutions for developing and preserving affordable housing and other community assets. The idea lay, Maxted would blog at the time, in “bring[ing] together those with the necessary resources, expertise and formal authority to help us develop and implement a plan of action to move the land trust forward.” Above all, the goal lay in identifying a ‘real-world property’ the Trust was positioned to acquire.²⁴

V

By early June 2016, weeks ahead of its first official Annual General Meeting, the HCLT was ready to release its first Five Year Plan, which would focus on five interconnected elements: land acquisition, marketing and communications, membership and resource development, policy development, and a housing-based pilot project.²⁵

“What we’ve tried to do this year,” Maxted would explain over coffee that month:

was figure out the whole business model for the Land Trust and put it all in a plan, but in doing so we realized it wasn’t possible because certain things can’t be determined ahead of time. But we figured out enough. Affordable housing is now our top priority. We’re focusing on the lower city; gentrification poses the biggest threat to the downtown but it’s also still the part of Hamilton that has the greatest potential for a Land Trust. There are still many viable properties.

Asked about the long-term financial stability of the emerging Trust she would explain:

We have yet to build the HCLT into a member driven organization, though we hope to move toward that goal by June 2017, if not sooner. We’re exploring a range of funding options though, some of which will only be realized in a couple of years, such as a potential real estate trust or a rolling fund where revenue from development projects can be fed back into the Land Trust. Grants will continue to be important. And member fees can ultimately help, as well as grassroots funding. But, it’s a struggle, because a lot of funding is project rather than core based. This makes it hard to fund a staff person to run the organization.

Asked whether it might have been easier to start the Land Trust a decade earlier, she would note:

²⁴ Allison Maxted, “Land Trust Action Conference,” HCLT Website, March 20, 2016:

[<http://www.hamiltonclt.org/2016/03/20/land-trust-action-conference/>]. The participants would include: Anne Tennier Consulting, City of Hamilton, CivicPlan, Community Forward Fund, Environment Hamilton, Evergreen CityWorks, Indwell, Hamilton Community Garden Network, Hamilton Community Legal Clinic, Hamilton Victory Gardens, HARRRP, Kiwanis Homes, Neighbourhood Action Strategy, Parkdale Neighbourhood Land Trust (Toronto), REALTORS Association of Hamilton-Burlington, Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton, Tim Welch Consulting, w5th Equity Management, Victoria Park Non-Profit Homes, and YWCA Hamilton.

²⁵ Allison Maxted, “Five Year Plan,” HCLT Website, August 26, 2016: [

<http://www.hamiltonclt.org/2016/08/26/five-year-plan/>] At the June AGM, two new people would join the HCLT Board: Anne Tennier, a registered professional engineer already actively involved with the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction, the Hamilton Conservation Foundation, the Hamilton Philharmonic Orchestra (and others), and Lyna Saad, then a Community Developer with the SPRC with a Masters in Urban Planning and a specialization in affordable housing and sustainable development.

It would have been tougher then to convince people it was needed, especially at the political level. I think the timing is right, *right now*.

I do wish the process could be faster, though; it's frustrating to see changes happening, while we're still getting organized and putting our pieces in place. Timelines are still difficult; one little thing can change everything.

But things have improved. With our new plan we're now able to look ahead with a general idea of what things might look like five years from now.

Asked what it has been like to operate the Trust, she would offer:

In the technical sense, it's been a mixture of research, writing, social media, event planning and meetings. I spent time in the office and time in the field and met with people with lot. Sometimes the work was lonely, but I've been able to build a lot of supportive relationships in the process. If you're doing something in Hamilton, you get support, not competition. The affordable housing sector works well together, for instance; its members come to our events and meet with me. Hopefully we'll be able to help them too, but they're also just nice people.

Asked how her thinking on planning has changed as a result of working with the HCLT, she would reflect:

I regret not having talked at the beginning to more people who've done this; I felt like I had to rebuild the wheel in some cases. At the same time, I've learned a lot more about the importance of politics, really - and relationships. I didn't realize how much of my time was going to be spent building relationships.

The biggest challenge in community organizing is it requires more time. You can have a lot of people, with a lot of passion, but not necessarily a lot of time or resources to put in. That's been a struggle for us. So grassroots organizing can be challenging – but they're also refreshing! In fact, I think the grassroots grit behind the birth of the Land Trust is what has carried us through challenging times. Moving things forward ultimately involves getting the support of the right people and the right organizations.

Sometimes you do have to downsize your expectations, but that can also mean figuring out what's most important. That's partly what we've done with the Five Year Plan: we've identified housing as our top priority. Or, think of it this way: you have a big dream and you pick out a piece of it, knowing you can still do the rest down the line, just not now. While we need to exist in the real world, it seems to me that when there seems no way to do something important, you can't give up. Figure out another way to do it. Don't take no for an answer.

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