BUILDING COMMUNITY TOGETHER

Grassroots Planning in West Centretown

SOMERSET WEST COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTRE

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> **Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody.**
>
> Jane Jacobs

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invested for good

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The last 5 years have seen significant shifts in Ottawa's West Centretown community. Long time residents have been forced to move, rooming houses have been shut down and resold, and many new, large construction projects are now geared to upper income homeowners and condo owners. Many long-time residents can no longer afford to live in the community and those who remain may feel they no longer belong.

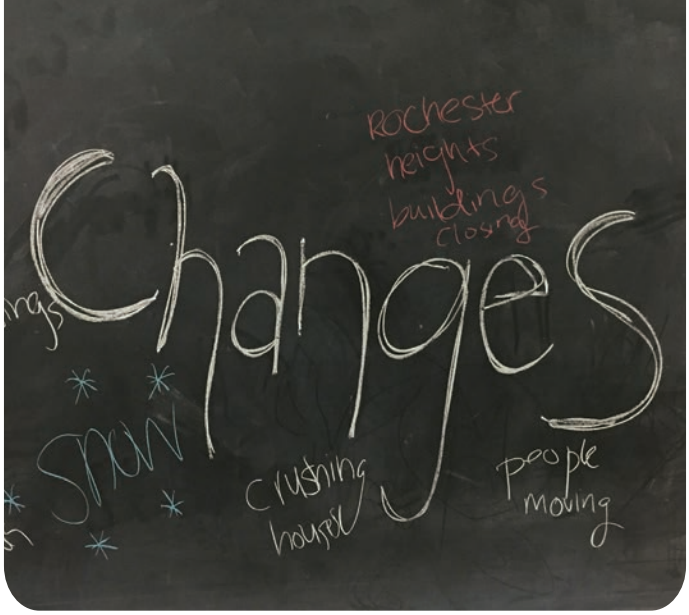
The Building Community Together (BCT) project was initiated in 2017 to respond to these trends. Community members were concerned that these trends, also referred to as gentrification, were placing the community's affordability and diversity at risk.

This project aims to create a long-term vision informed by residents themselves. We strive to address the growing inequality and decreasing affordability and diversity of the community. Our ultimate goal is to maintain a healthy, affordable, and diverse community where everyone has a right to stay and shape their neighbourhood.

This report represents the community's vision – the priorities residents have identified to guide new construction development and community planning. The report summarizes the findings of our engagement and research efforts through six themes. Each theme includes our vision, the needs and assets, and areas for action. The vision for each theme is summarized below.

Affordable and liveable housing & equitable development

- Affordable and appropriate housing is part of new housing construction projects.
- Deeply affordable housing for people on low-modest income is part of construction projects on public land.
- Affordable housing that already exists is improved and maintained.



Protect and expand public services

- Accessible health and social services help all residents feel valued and socially connected.
- The community has the health, community and social services available to meet the needs of residents and the growing population.
- Schools and services for children and youth are maintained.

Facilitate social connections and increase public space

- The diversity of the community can connect, gather, and engage in free, accessible and productive spaces available throughout the community.
- Businesses that serve low-modest income clientele and businesses that serve ethno-cultural communities are retained and thrive.

Increase access to recreation and leisure

- Affordable recreation opportunities are available to West Centretown residents in their own community.
- Free and low-cost recreational opportunities are designed to facilitate social connections among community members.

Ensure equitable access to healthy food

- Affordable and equitable access to nutritious and culturally-appropriate food is available for all community members.

Affordable and reliable transit and active forms of transportation

- Affordable transportation is available to everyone in the community.
- Movability within our city is a priority including sidewalk maintenance, bike infrastructure and safety.

This report was completed a few months into the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 has revealed critical flaws in our social support system. Yet the pandemic response has also shown that governments can act fast to create new programs and adapt policies. The full impacts of the pandemic on community members who face the most barriers to health and wellbeing and plans for an equitable recovery are still to be seen.

The challenges in West Centretown are complex and systemic. But there are many opportunities to build on the neighbourhood's strengths. A strong non-profit sector, cultural diversity, an existing social housing stock, and new public transit are all assets to be leveraged. Most of all, the community itself is invested in building a neighbourhood where those who experience marginalization can feel welcomed and thrive.

COMMUNITY MAP

Map design by Trish Roy

This map summarizes input from residents on how they move around the neighbourhood, the spaces they value, and reasons they need to leave the neighbourhood to meet their needs.

For more information on this engagement strategy, read our Promising Practices Report & Toolkit at swchc.on.ca/programs/building-community-together.

> **I think more change is coming. But I hope that it's led by people who love it here already.**
>
> Resident

INTRODUCTION

Neighbourhood history

Somerset West Community Health Centre's (SWCHC) mission is to support people and communities to achieve the best possible health and wellbeing.

We do this by providing primary health care and social services, and promoting access to the social conditions that influence health, such as housing, transit, food security, employment and civic engagement. We serve the area of west-central Ottawa including the neighbourhoods of Chinatown, Little Italy, LeBreton Flats, Hintonburg and Mechanicsville.

West Centretown is on the traditional territory of the Algonquin people. Archeological information shows that the Algonquin people lived in the Ottawa area 8000 years before Europeans arrived. There has never been a land-sharing treaty for this area.

Colonization of the Ottawa area brought waves of newcomers. Little Italy began to form as thousands of Italian immigrants arrived in Ottawa and settled around the newly established St. Anthony's Church on Booth Street in the early 1900s.

The early forms of Chinatown began in the late 1800s, but grew with the arrival of Vietnamese refugees in 1975 and the increase in immigration from China through the late 1970s.

In the 1960s, the area saw large displacement of working class residents. LeBreton Flats was demolished and 1100 households were displaced in Little Italy as part of the City's Urban Renewal Project.

In the early 1970s, a large part of the community was scheduled for demolition. Office and commercial development and apartments were going to replace residential housing. Thousands of residents were at risk of displacement.

The Centretown Citizens Planning Committee formed in 1973 to stop the demolition and develop a plan. Around 50 people including renters, roomers, home-owners and businesses organized. The group's purpose was to collect and provide input to the City of Ottawa for the creation and approval of the Centretown Plan. A neighbourhood office was set up. The City provided technical support and community organizers coordinated the work.

The result was one of Canada's most radical and socially progressive community plans for its time. Despite opposition from the development industry, the plan was approved in 1976.

The Centretown Plan aimed to maintain the neighbourhood as a welcoming place for people of all ages, incomes, origins, and family types. The plan prioritized affordable housing and improving existing housing. Demolition halted and the residential community was maintained for decades. It also led to the formation of the Centretown Citizens of Ottawa Corporation (CCOC), now the second-largest affordable housing provider in Ottawa. The plan also advocated for expanded social, recreational, cultural, and health services.

The plan has since become more pro-development and less focused on equity. Residents engaged in the original Centretown Plan shared lessons learned. Primarily, that strategies are needed to prevent gentrification and create a community monitoring process for development.

The Centretown Plan is a critical part of the neighbourhood's history. It is a testament to the strong engagement and sense of belonging that continues today. It also highlights the importance of community mobilization in the development process. Fears of displacement and uncontrolled development are emerging once again.

The last 5 years have seen significant shifts in the population. Long time residents have been forced to move, rooming houses have been shut down and resold, and many new, large construction projects are now geared to upper income homeowners and condo owners. Many long-time residents can no longer afford to live in the community and those who remain may feel they no longer belong.

Purpose of the Community Plan

The Building Community Together (BCT) project was initiated in 2017 to respond to these trends. Community members were concerned that these trends, also referred to as gentrification, were placing the community's affordability and diversity at risk.

This project aims to create a long-term vision informed by the community itself. We strive to address the growing inequality and decreasing affordability and diversity of the community. Our ultimate goal is to maintain a healthy, affordable, and diverse community where everyone has a right to stay and shape their neighbourhood.

This report represents the community's vision – the priorities community members themselves have identified to guide new construction development and community planning. The report summarizes the findings of our engagement and research efforts through six themes. Each theme includes our vision, needs and assets, and areas for action.

The COVID-19 context

The research and community engagement for this report took place before COVID-19. It is still unknown how COVID-19 will impact our community long-term. But we do know the pandemic has further revealed inequality in the community. People who are racialized, low-income, and homeless have higher rates of COVID-19. Inadequate housing and inability to practice physical distancing are factors driving COVID-19 rates[1].

Our community has been a historic receiving area to newcomers, particularly from China, Vietnam, and Cambodia. Chinese and Vietnamese businesses are a significant part of the community, and form Ottawa's Chinatown. COVID-19 has intensified racism and xenophobia against Asian Canadians across Canada[2]. Ottawa has been no exception[3]. As a community health centre serving Asian communities, we know anxiety has increased among these populations.

COVID-19 has also further revealed the weaknesses in our housing system[4]. Stay at home orders have solidified the essential role of housing to our health. Yet, Ottawa is struggling with increasing homelessness and a lack of affordable housing. West-central Ottawa has the largest number of rooming houses. Residents in inadequate housing such as rooming houses, or who are homeless are unable to stay home, practice handwashing, and physical distancing. Evidence suggests these populations are "more likely to contract COVID-19 and experience worse health outcomes, including death"[5].

Our public spaces have become even more critical during COVID-19. Municipal facilities have hosted COVID-19 testing, overflow homeless shelters, and daytime respite space. As gatherings have been restricted, people who are homeless struggle to access supports and connect with others.

COVID-19 has also revealed the importance of outdoor recreation space. West Centretown has the least green space per capita in Ottawa. New construction projects and increased population will limit greenspace further.

Engaging marginalized voices in guiding how the community grows and changes has been central to this project. Many in the community lack access to technology and in-person engagement risks COVID-19 transmission. These restrictions have greatly affected our ability to engage people often marginalized from the planning process.

[1] Skolnik, (2020); Venkatapuram, (2020)
[2] Liew, (2020)
[3] Helmer, (2020)
[4, 5] Farha, and Schwan,(2020)

Gentrification, displacement, and equitable development

Gentrification and displacement

Gentrification is the process of a low and modest income, working class area transitioning to a middle-upper income neighbourhood[6]. Developers, real estate investors, and new, middle-upper income homeowners and renters influence affordability. The desires of new and more affluent residents are prioritized over the needs low-modest income residents[7].

New development near transit makes the neighbourhood more desirable, particularly to developers who receive a height/density bonus[8] for new developments. This leads to an increase in property values and contributes to decreasing affordability[9].

Low-modest income residents leave when they have fewer affordable options for housing and basic needs[10]. Culturally-appropriate goods and services and public spaces also become more difficult to access. Public schools are at risk of closing due to the loss of families in the area.

Marginalized groups struggle for access to the spaces where they felt a sense of belonging for years[11]. This impacts cohesion, social networks and sense of place.

Yet, there can be positive elements to gentrification. Increased development can bring increased investment into the community. If planning occurs in a way that is equitable, the diversity of the community can benefit. Even a minor investment of an intersection repair leads to improved happiness and health for nearby residents[12].

Equitable development

Equitable development can help mitigate the negative impacts of gentrification. Strategies for equitable development include:

- Creating neighbourhood housing strategies to preserve, maintain and add affordable housing[13].
- Maintaining culturally-appropriate social services and increasing them as the population grows[14].
- Increasing supportive housing for people with mental illness and/or experiencing homelessness[15].
- Engaging residents and stakeholders in decision-making so that residents have control of local development and can increase tenant protection[16].
- Assessing new development through the lens of public health impacts[17].

Data collection and community engagement process

As with any complex issue, we did not have a clear roadmap at the outset of our project. As a first step, we gathered allies, partners, and stakeholders to form a group named the Steward's Table. This group provides guidance and insight on activities and advocacy opportunities. Our shared goal is to maintain a healthy, affordable, and diverse community where everyone has a right to stay and shape how their neighbourhood changes.

Over the last three years, we have collected input from more than 500 residents. We asked about the impacts of community change, their vision for the community, and what they need in the community to be happy and healthy. We also conducted research on community demographics and policy and advocacy tools to support and guide more equitable development. We have also collaborated with local and city-wide partners to advocate for affordable housing.

[6] Anguelovski et al., (2019); Ghaffari, Klein, and Baudin (2018); Mehdipanah, Marra, Melis, and Gelormino (2017); Twigge-Molecey, (2014)
[7] August (2014); Freeman, (2005); Ghaffari et al., (2018); Leccis, (2019); Parkdale Neighbourhood Land Trust [PNLT], (2017)
[8] Note: Automatic permission for the developer to add more units than would otherwise be allowed
[9] Bardaka, Delgado and Florax, (2018); Padeiro, Louro, and da Costa, (2019)
[10] PNLT, (2017); Leccis, (2019)
[11] Ghaffari et al., (2018); Twigge-Molecey, (2014); Grier and Perry (2018); Shaw and Hagemans (2015); Bélanger, (2012)
[12] Montgomery, (2013)
[13] PNLT, (2017)
[14] Komakech and Jackson, (2016); Toronto Central Local Health Integration Network (2015)
[15] Aubrey et al., (2015;) Patterson et al., (2013)
[16] Ghaffari et al., (2018)
[17] Vasquez-Vera et al., (2017)

We sought broad community input, but focused our engagement with those most harmed by development and community change and with limited access to the planning process. For more information on our engagement strategies, read our Promising Practices Report and Toolkit at www.swchc.on.ca/programs/building-community-together. The table below lists research completed to support our project.

Data Sources

Data source	Description
Community-based research on impacts of gentrification/ development (2017/18)	Research by Carleton University Master's of Social Work students on impacts of gentrification and community-based strategies. Includes literature review and interviews with 10 residents.
Local Housing Forum (2018)	More than 60 residents attended a local community forum to build understanding of affordable housing policy. Summary report includes notes from small group discussions, and political asks that were formed as a result of the input from the forum.
Rooming house feasibility study (2017)	Feasibility study on non-profit rooming house development.
Rooming house research (2016)	Research by Carleton University Master's of Social Work students including literature review and interviews with 10 rooming house tenants.
Rooming house research (2017)	Research by Carleton University Master's of Social Work students including literature review and analysis of more than 40 surveys of rooming house tenants to better understand demographics and experiences in rooming houses.
Housing Primer (2018)	SWCHC resource to define several terms used when discussing affordable housing.
West Centretown Rental Housing Strategy (2018)	Research by McGill University urban planning students that provides analysis of changing community demographics, projections of development and population growth, and recommendations for increasing affordable rental housing.
Community map (2020)	More than 200 community members were engaged in a community mapping exercise where community members and groups indicated how they navigated the community, and community assets.
Workshop series (2019)	More than 150 community members participated in a workshop series to collect input in developing community indicators, creating community logos, mapping places of importance in the community, and creating community-led indicators for health and wellbeing.
Neighbourhood history timeline (2019)	Local neighbourhood histories compiled by Algonquin College students.
Community-based research on impacts on businesses in gentrifying areas of West Centretown/ Dalhousie (2019/2020)	Research by Carleton University Master's of Social Work students on the experiences of businesses in gentrifying areas including a literature review and in-depth interviews with businesses in Chinatown and Little Italy.
Inventory of development (2017-2020)	Inventory of all new developments in the area between 2017 and 2020, including planned development.

OUR COMMUNITY

This project focused on West Centretown in Ottawa, a population estimated at just under 13,000 residents[18]. The neighbourhood boundaries are Albert Street on its northern end, Carling Avenue on the south, Bronson Avenue on the east, and the O-Train line on the west and includes Chinatown and Little Italy which hosts many Asian and Italian businesses. The area is the former Dalhousie Ward with the local community association and community centre still bearing that name. Over time, real estate speculators re-branded the area as West Centretown, which is also utilized by the Ottawa Neighbourhood Study.

West Centretown has a diverse population. The neighbourhood is composed of 32.7% racialized residents, 32.1% are first-generation immigrants, and 8.2% are refugees[19]. But, the area has experienced a decline in immigrant populations at a more pronounced rate than the Ottawa average[20].

There are fewer families, children and youth in the community. The population under 19 decreased between 2006 and 2016 while its population between 20-40 years old and over 60 years old experienced growth[21].

Based on after-tax measures, West Centretown has the largest proportion of low-income residents in Ottawa[22]. In West Centretown, 44% of households earn less than $40,000 before taxes. This is a much larger proportion than the 20% of households earning the same amount at the city level.

West Centretown also has a lower percentage of income earners over $100,000 when compared to the city as a whole. In the City of Ottawa, 42% of households earn more than $100,000 while in West Centretown 22% of households fall in this bracket[23].

However, the median household income in West Centretown has increased at a higher rate than other neighbourhoods in Ottawa over the last 10 years[24]. This demonstrates the movement of higher income earners into the neighbourhood - a key feature of gentrification.

The combination of both high numbers of lower-income households and the influx of higher earning households is contributing to a growing income inequality[25].

A large proportion of residents currently spend more than 30% of their income on housing[26]. As the cost of housing increases, low-modest income earners will be pushed out of the neighbourhood. The limited availability of housing and the influx of middle-upper income residents also drives up the cost of housing. This is demonstrated by a higher increase in rental prices compared to the rest of Ottawa[27]. There is also a trend towards home ownership at rates higher than any other communities in Ottawa[28]. These factors all limit the units available to residents with lower budgets.

West Centretown also has a higher proportion of houses in need of major repair when compared to the City of Ottawa. Units in need of major repair present opportunities for housing renovation or redevelopment. However, between the years of 2006 and 2016, units in need of major repair decreased from 13% to 7% in West Centretown[29].

> **The rate at which median household income has increased in West Centretown over the past decade is much higher, ranging from 30% to 40%+, than in other central city neighbourhoods in Ottawa.**
>
> The Planning Collective

[18, 19] Ottawa Neighbourhood Study, (2020)
[20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29] The Planning Collective, (2018)

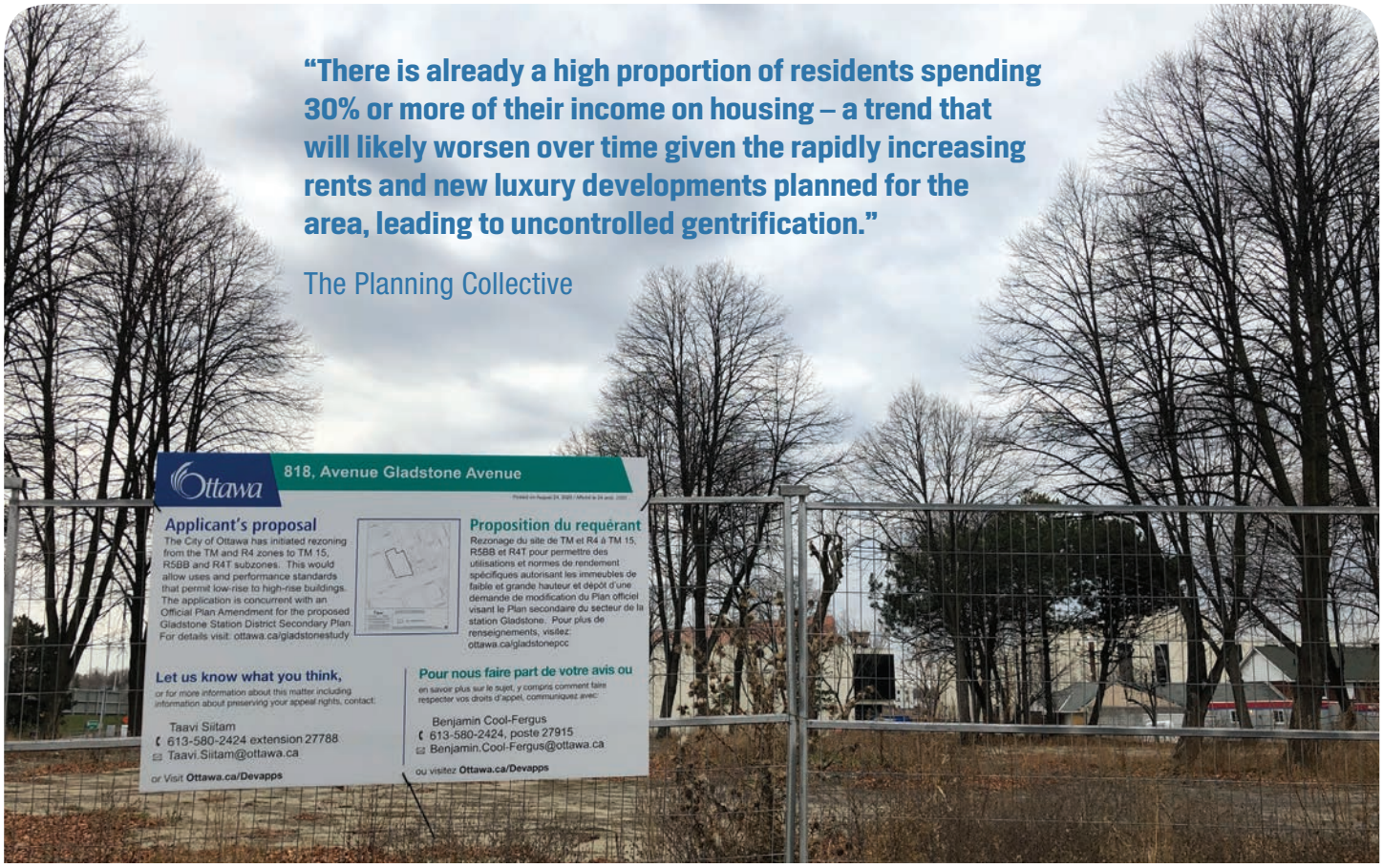
This likely represents an increase in new or renovated housing units outside of the budget of low-modest income residents.

The recent installation of an O-Train stop also has the potential to increase housing prices[30]. Low-modest income earners rely on transit but it also tends to attract middle and upper-income earners to the neighbourhood. Developers also receive incentives to build near rapid transit, yet there are no incentives for these new developments to include affordable housing.

Chinatown and Little Italy are home to many longstanding small-scale businesses. Smaller-scale ethnic businesses are often the first to close within gentrifying areas[31]. This occurs as neighbourhood demographics change and new residents seek different products. Stores and restaurants catering to middle and upper-income earners often replace small-scale businesses[32]. Businesses in the area are now experiencing tight margins due to the impacts of both gentrification and COVID-19[33].

> **If left unchecked, [these trends] could lead to rapid, uncontrolled gentrification that will further displace existing residents, many of whom are low-income with limited options for relocation, and also create high levels of inequality within the neighbourhood.**
>
> The Planning Collective

[30] Thompson, Madore, Noble, Reed, & Hogan, (2018).
[31] Komakech and Jackson, (2016); Grier and Parry, (2018)
[32] Shaw and Hagemans, (2015)
[33] Abdullahi, Graham, Tilokani, Valladares, and Woodside, (2020)



COMMUNITY VISION FOR WEST CENTRETOWN

> **It's not enough to nudge the market toward equity. Governments must step in with subsidized social housing, rental controls, initiatives for housing cooperatives, or other policy measures.**
>
> Charles Montgomery

AFFORDABLE AND LIVEABLE HOUSING & EQUITABLE DEVELOPMENT

Context

The biggest force of gentrification is pressure on the housing market for those with low-modest incomes[34]. The availability of housing in West Centretown is already limited. New middle-income residents with more buying power puts even more pressure on the housing market[35]. There are already clear signs of increasing housing inequality due to COVID-19 impacts[36].

The Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) defines affordable housing as costing less than 30% of a household's before-tax income[37]. Deeply affordable housing is a term often used to describe housing that is affordable to those whose income is well below the average. Deep affordability is provided when rent is geared to one's income. This is counter to the current Below Market Rent (BMR) Program that is more widely available. Rents in BMR units "are not geared to income, but are a fixed rate of up to 80% of the average market rent as posted by CMHC"[38].

Many low-modest income residents in West Centretown spend more than 30% of monthly income on rent[39]. These residents will not be able to afford increasing rents. Also, much of the affordable housing stock is in need of major repair. This puts many properties at risk of redevelopment. These redeveloped properties would likely be more expensive and displace current residents[40].

[34] Thompson et al., (2018)
[35, 40] The Planning Collective, (2018)
[36] Farha and Schwann, (2020)
[37] Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation, (2018)
[38] The Social Housing Registry of Ottawa, (2020)
[39] Bremner, Kozak, Kwan, and Laflèche, (2017); The Planning Collective, (2018)

West Centretown also has the highest concentration of rooming houses in Ottawa[41]. Rooming houses are the most affordable housing in the neighbourhood. But they are also some of the dwellings in most need major repairs. Residents report many rooming houses are unsafe, have infestations, lack privacy, and are not well maintained[42]. Yet residents have told us that rooming houses are their only housing option. Due to fear and lack of options, tenants often do not report unsafe living conditions. This and other factors result in properties falling into disrepair[43].

How we design housing is also important in building healthy communities. More and more people will live in multi-unit buildings. We must consider how shared spaces can build connections and provide programming and services. Mixed-income and mixed-age buildings will also be important in building community cohesion[44].

The ways in which the City of Ottawa approves housing developments is also critical to healthy communities. Residents self-report improved health outcomes when they have a say in how their neighbourhood changes[45]. Yet there is minimal resident engagement in Ottawa's planning process. Engagement often happens as plans are in their final stages. Strategies such as open houses are often utilized to engage the community, which does not lend itself to critical dialogue.

Despite these pressures, West Centretown has several opportunities for future affordable housing projects. The area has a large amount of public land owned by all levels of government. Approximately 30% of the land base is available for development. This is on top of privately-owned land.[46]

There are more than 1400 existing social housing units in West Centretown[47]. These units are with housing providers who have an affordability mandate. This allows many households to stay in the area as their unit's affordability is protected. Ottawa Community Housing (OCH) is redeveloping Rochester Heights and has purchased a large parcel of land to build Gladstone Village. Both will triple affordable housing units in the area. The National Capital Commission (NCC) is also redeveloping LeBreton Flats, a 29-hectare site. The first parcel of land, the Library Parcel, will be a mixed-use development with commitment of 30% affordable housing units.

Vision

- Affordable and appropriate housing is part of new housing construction projects.
- Deeply affordable housing for people on low-modest income is part of construction projects on public land.
- Affordable housing that already exists is improved and maintained.

Needs

- Quality and affordable housing, including rental properties.
- Proper maintenance and upkeep of rooming houses.

Assets

- While the quality of some rooming houses is poor, the availability of rooming houses in West Centretown is an asset to community members requiring this housing option.
- More than 1400 existing social housing units where affordability is protected.
- One third of land in West Centretown is public land. This presents an opportunity for more affordable housing and community benefits.

Areas for Action

1. Rooming houses
    - 1.1. SWCHC will continue work with partners to explore the feasibility of rooming house developments in a non-profit model.
    - 1.2. Advocate to the City to support the expansion of non-profit rooming house development with supports for tenants.
    - 1.3. Ensure the City implements the recommendations in the Rental Accommodation Study. Prioritize tenant rights education, improving pest control, and enforcing property standards.

[41] The Planning Collective, (2018)
[42] Bremner et al., (2017)
[43] Emery, Fleming, Prince, and Zanon (2016)
[44, 45] Building Healthy Places Network and NeighborWorks America, (2020)
[46, 47] The Planning Collective, (2018)

1.4. Together with the community, SWCHC will continue to track the City's Rental Accommodation Study on the enforcement of property standards.

2. Affordable housing

2.1. SWCHC will continue to support and contribute to the development of the Ottawa Community Land Trust where land can be purchased and held in trust for affordable housing development.

2.2. Advocate to the City to require private market developers to set aside units for permanent affordable, accessible, and adequate housing in new developments.

2.2.1. 20% of units in new developments of 60-99 units.

2.2.2. 25% of units in new developments of more than 100 units.

2.2.3. Ensure a range of affordability including deeply affordable rates (shelter allowance), below-market rates, and market rates.

2.2.4. Ensure accessible units and a range of unit sizes to accommodate families.

2.3. In new non-profit developments, advocate to the City to provide adequate funds to:

2.3.1. Provide 25% deeply affordable units for people on social assistance.

2.3.2. Ensure accessible units and a range of unit sizes to accommodate families.

2.3.3. Include community benefits and community space.

3. Equitable development

3.1. Together with the community, SWCHC will continue to support and contribute to advancing community benefits in new developments. Through the LeBreton Flats Community Benefits Agreement Coalition and the National Capital Commission's LeBreton Flats Public Advisory Group, SWCHC will advocate for equitable and inclusive development with a strong accountability mechanism in place.

3.2. Together with the community, SWCHC will develop an Equity Impact Assessment tool for West Centretown. This tool will be used to advocate to developers and the City of Ottawa to assess new developments.

3.3. Together with the community, SWCHC will develop a Community Benefits Framework for West Centretown. The Framework will be used to advocate for the inclusion of community priorities in new developments.

3.4. Together with the community, SWCHC will work with the City of Ottawa to facilitate more inclusive engagement in consultations.

3.5. Together with the community, SWCHC will work with the City of Ottawa to include residents who are low income, homeless, and precariously housed in the planning process.

3.6. Advocate to the City and to private and non-profit developers to require accessible and meaningful consultations:

3.6.1. Include the voices of residents who are on low and modest income, homeless, and precariously housed in the planning process.

3.6.2. Provide at least 3 weeks notice for development-related meetings, open houses, etc.

3.6.3. Provide accessible materials for review at least 1 week before the meeting or open house. Materials should be in multiple languages and simple language for low literacy.

3.6.4. Provide supports to address barriers to participation including childcare, translation, and food.

3.7. Advocate to the City to require that new development proposals are assessed using an equity and inclusion lens.

3.7.1. Advocate to the City to require community benefits agreements between community coalitions and developers.

3.7.2. Advocate to the City to create a Housing Commissioner role. This role would ensure that planning decisions use an equity lens.

PROTECT AND EXPAND PUBLIC SERVICES

Context

West Centretown has a strong social services network committed to equity and social justice. These non-profit services contribute to and support diversity and build connections. Local agencies create a critical pathway for marginalized residents to learn about and engage on community issues[48].

Access to health services is a human right and necessary for a healthy community. Yet those on low-modest income often have the greatest challenges accessing adequate health and social services[49].

There is also concern that as low-modest income families are displaced, local schools may be forced to close. Developments planned and underway are generally not designed for families and young children.

Residents shared that we must strengthen and expand social services, particularly as the population grows[50]. Gentrifying communities often lose vital health and social services as demographics shift[51]. It will be critical to maintain services in West Centretown as the community changes.

Needs

- Services and supports for aging residents[52].
- Outreach services that travel to the client[53].
- Accessible community services on the weekend[54].

Assets

- Strong non-profit sector to support residents[55].
- Several low barrier services in the neighbourhood[56].

Vision

- Accessible health and social services help all residents feel valued and socially connected.
- The community has the health, community, and social services available to meet the needs of residents and the growing population.
- Schools and services for children and youth are maintained.

Areas for Action

4. Increase and expand practical assistance and outreach workers who can respond to a variety of needs. Explore partnerships with other agencies to help meet the demand.
5. Develop new and innovative ways for community agencies to meet changing demographics and support new and emerging needs.
6. Secure spaces in the community that are accessible 24 hours/day and that make people feel valued and important.
7. Advocate for increased supportive housing for populations that need extra supports for health and wellbeing.
8. Ensure support services are available to prevent and respond to homelessness.
9. Ensure aging populations, including those in rooming houses, have access to adequate supports.
10. Increase the number of housing support workers for tenants.
11. Work with local schools, parent councils, and School Board Trustees to ensure schools remain open.

[48, 56] Thompson et al., (2018)
[49] Mikkonen and Raphael, (2010)
[50] The Planning Collective, (2018); Ghaffari et al., (2018)
[51] Ghaffari et al., (2018)
[52, 55] The Planning Collective, (2018)
[53] Bremner et al., (2017)
[54] Somerset West Community Health Centre (2019)

FACILITATE SOCIAL CONNECTIONS AND INCREASE PUBLIC SPACE

Vision

- The diversity of the community can connect, gather, and engage in free, accessible and productive spaces available throughout the community.
- Businesses that serve low-modest income clientele and businesses that serve ethno-cultural communities are retained and thrive.

Context

Social connection is an important part of a healthy community. Social isolation impacts physical and mental health and can worsen other life situations[57]. Social isolation also impacts marginalized communities at higher rates[58]. Racialized groups experience higher rates of social isolation as institutions do not always support diverse community needs[59]. Strong social connections represent a healthy and resilient community[60].

West Centretown has been a landing place for new immigrants and diverse populations. Residents have highlighted this diversity as a critical community asset[61].

Residents have also shared the importance of accessible public spaces and programming. Free, accessible programming and space combats isolation, increases connections and sense of belonging, and improves mental and physical health[62].

Needs

- Accessible social spaces in the neighbourhood[63].
- Affordable events and activities for community members.
- Address the social impacts and tension resulting from gentrification.
- Outdoor spaces for community activities.

Assets

- The diversity of West Centretown in terms of socio-economic status, culture, and ethnic backgrounds[64].

Areas for Action

12. SWCHC is completing a feasibility study on an affordable community grocery store. Move forward on recommended next steps in the study.
13. Regular free community-wide gatherings.
14. Advocate for free community spaces on weekends.
15. Create campaigns and initiatives that address stigma and build connections among neighbours.
16. Advocate to the City of Ottawa and developers to require a percentage of new commercial spaces at affordable rates to facilitate the inclusion of community organizations, social enterprises and small businesses.
17. Advocate to the City of Ottawa to require investors and developers to sign long-term and affordable leases with community organizations, social enterprises and small businesses.
18. Advocate to the City of Ottawa to require investors and developers to make long-term financial contributions to support the community's wellbeing indicators such as food security, community space, affordable housing, and recreation and leisure.
19. Advocate to the City of Ottawa to require developers to incorporate community space, including both spaces for community agencies for programming as well as informal space for community use.
20. Advocate to the City of Ottawa to protect public land and public infrastructure for public benefit.

[57] Province of Ontario, (2017)
[58] Building Healthy Places Network and NeighborWorks America, (2020)
[59] Mikkonen and Raphael, (2010)
[60] Williams, (2019); Mikkonen and Raphael, (2010)
[61] The Planning Collective, (2018); Thompson et al., (2018)
[62] Building Healthy Places Network and NeighborWorks America, (2020)
[63, 64] The Planning Collective, (2018)

INCREASE ACCESS TO RECREATION AND LEISURE

Vision

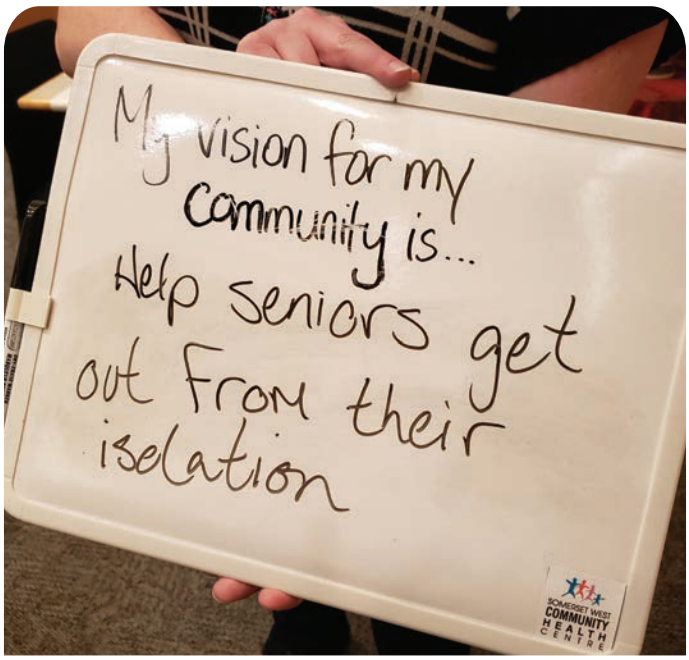
- Affordable recreation opportunities are available to West Centretown residents in their own community.
- Free and low-cost recreational opportunities are designed to facilitate social connections among community members.

Context

Free and accessible recreation improves physical and mental health, builds social connections, and creates a sense of community. Yet cost often excludes low-modest income populations from recreation opportunities[65].

Greenspace provides an accessible space for community building and engagement[66]. With the least amount of greenspace in Ottawa, West Centretown has limited outdoor space for recreation and leisure[67].

Residents shared that the Plant Recreation Centre (PRC) is a key community asset[68]. Residents also shared that the PRC is operating at capacity and planned new housing will increase usage even more. Barriers must also be addressed to make recreation more accessible to the most at-risk residents. Free or low-cost programming also continues to be challenging on evenings and weekends when agencies are closed[69].



Needs

- Accessible and affordable recreation and leisure activities.
- Community engagement and consultation to ensure the recreation and leisure activities in West Centretown best serve its residents.
- Greenspace and parks.

Assets

- The Plant Recreation Centre[70]

Areas for Action

21. Survey residents to identify the community's priorities related to recreation.
22. Advocate to the City of Ottawa for increased free and low-cost recreation in the community.
23. Advocate to the City of Ottawa to require recreation space and programs in new developments such as Rochester Heights and Gladstone Village, as well as on publicly owned sites like LeBreton Flats and Booth Street Canlands.

[65] Mikkonen and Raphael, (2010)
[66] Building Healthy Places Network and NeighborWorks America, (2020)
[67] Ottawa Neighbourhood Study, (2020)
[68] Thompson et al., (2018)
[69] The Planning Collective, (2018); Somerset West Community Health Centre, (2019)
[70] Thompson et al., (2018)

ENSURE EQUITABLE ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOOD

Vision

- Affordable and equitable access to nutritious and culturally-appropriate food is available for all community members.

Context

Food insecurity[71] affects many people in the West Centretown community[72]. When high rent costs deplete the majority of residents' monthly income, healthy food becomes even less accessible[73]. The area also lacks an affordable grocery store since the Loeb grocery store closed in 2006[74].

Residents told us that the community needs a grocery store that is affordable for people on low-modest income, and accessible by foot and transit. Residents also shared the need for services such as food banks and community kitchens during evenings and weekends. These food services also build social connections and support wellbeing[75].

Needs

- An affordable grocery store accessible by foot, bike, and public transit[76].
- Encourage residents to use and support existing grocery options.
- Ensure free and accessible food supports (i.e. food bank, meal programs)[77].

Assets

- Ethno-diversity in current food grocers.
- Food security organizations including Dalhousie Food Cupboard, Parkdale Food Centre, and St. Luke's Table with strong collaboration among partners.
- SWCHC Good Food Markets at 280 Rochester St. which offer opportunities for scaling up.
- Ottawa Community Food Network led by Parkdale Food Centre has facilitated promising practices across local organizations, including the Community Fridge.

Areas for action

24. Incorporate edible public gardens/community gardens in new developments whenever possible and engage local businesses.
25. Facilitate opportunities for farmer's markets and Good Food Markets.
26. Advocate for the addition of an affordable grocery store in the area as new developments on public land (LeBreton Flats, Gladstone Village, Rochester Heights, Booth Street CanLands) are planned.
27. Explore strategies for expansion of food programs (food banks/lunch clubs) on weekends.
28. Seek funding for a community kitchen in the neighbourhood.
29. Explore strategies to retain local small businesses that provide affordable food.

[71] Note: Ottawa Public Health defines food insecurity as stress from running out of food, not being able to afford healthy meals, going hungry by eating less or skipping meals, or lack of access to a variety or quantity of food due to lack of money (https://www.ottawapublichealth.ca/en/public-health-topics/food-insecurity.aspx)
[72] Mikkonen and Raphael, (2010)
[73] Bremner et al., (2017)
[74] Thompson et al., (2018)
[75, 76] Engels and Latham, (2019)
[77] Bremner et al., (2017)

AFFORDABLE AND RELIABLE TRANSIT AND ACTIVE FORMS OF TRANSPORTATION

Vision

- Affordable transportation[83] is available to everyone in the community.
- Movability within our city is a priority including sidewalk maintenance, bike infrastructure and safety.

Context

Accessible transportation is a necessary component of an inclusive community. Available, affordable, and reliable transit ensures that all residents have the opportunity to get to where they need.

Residents shared that West Centretown is central, walkable, and accessible by bus. But, there are areas in the community that are difficult to navigate due to traffic and congestion.

The community also has a new rapid-transit station. This will make the community more accessible but has the potential to contribute to gentrification[78]. Including affordable housing in the area will be critical to ensure low-modest income residents can make use of the O-Train.

Needs

- Address traffic congestion to ensure safety of walkers and bikers[79].
- Accessible and affordable transit options[80].
- Sidewalk maintenance in the winter and shelters at bus stops.

Assets

- West Centretown is a walkable neighbourhood[81].
- West Centretown is centrally located and connected to other areas of the city by public buses and the O-Train[82].

Areas for Action

30. Work with the City of Ottawa to add bike racks throughout the community. Launch a consultation process to identify priority locations.
31. Support Healthy Transportation Coalition to advocate to the City of Ottawa for snow clearing standards of all sidewalks in the City of Ottawa to a Class 1A standard. Prioritize areas where there are high levels of low-modest income residents to ensure the mobility of those who face the most barriers.
32. Support Healthy Transportation Coalition to advocate to the City to ensure streets are safer for active transportation (i.e. walking, bikes). Begin by identifying areas that should be converted to dedicated bike lanes.
33. Work with Healthy Transportation Coalition and Bike Ottawa on a pop-up project in the West Centretown area where streets would be redesigned over the course of a day, a weekend, or longer with the goal to create Healthy Streets[84] and Complete Streets[85] in the area long-term.
34. Advocate for free transit passes for people on social assistance.
35. Advocate to the City for affordable transit for people on low/modest income.

[78] Dubé, Rosiers, Thériault, and Dib, (2011)
[79] Thompson et al., (2018)
[80] Engels and Latham, (2019)
[81] Thompson et al., (2018)
[82] Thompson et al., (2018)
[83] Note: Working definition of affordability: households spend less than 20% of their budgets on transport, or less than 45% on transport and housing combined (Victoria Transportation Policy Institute).
[84] Healthy Streets (2020)
[85] Complete Streets for Canada (n.d.)

MOVING FORWARD

The neighbourhoods of west-central Ottawa are experiencing significant challenges. Large-scale development is impacting on the community's affordability and diversity. This is limiting access to affordable housing, healthy food, recreation and park space. There are also concerns that as the population grows, health and social services will not keep up with demand.

Yet the community also has endless strengths. Residents from diverse backgrounds report a strong connection to the community. The neighbourhood's distinct character, diversity, strong sense of community, and neighbourhood institutions are referenced as key assets[87]. Residents have told us of their strong sense of neighbourhood identity and their investment in the future of the community. This report aims to capture the hopes and dreams of the community, concrete policy opportunities, and areas for action to guide our future work.

There are also encouraging advancements. There is increasing awareness in Ottawa on the challenges of affordable housing and homelessness. The City of Ottawa has invested in affordable housing in recent City Budgets. The City has also identified land near rapid transit stations for affordable housing development, and there is a commitment to affordable housing within the new Official Plan.

The public has also mobilized in support of more affordable housing. This resulted in Ottawa City Council endorsing Councillor McKenney's motion to declare a housing emergency on January 29, 2020. There is also a new Community Benefits Agreement Coalition for the National Capital Commission's LeBreton Flats redevelopment and the creation of a new Ottawa Community Land Trust.

This report was completed a few months into the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 has revealed critical flaws in our social support system. Yet the pandemic response has also showed that governments can act fast to create new programs and adapt policies. The full impacts of the pandemic on community members who face the most barriers and plans for an equitable recovery are still to be seen. To begin reflecting on these impacts and next steps, an addendum to this report includes input from community members on the impacts of COVID-19.

Next steps in this work include the development of a workplan that supports the implementation of the vision and areas for action. We are committed to ongoing meaningful engagement with the diversity of the community and our partners in this work over the long-term.

The challenges in West Centretown are complex and systemic. But there are many opportunities to build on the neighbourhood's strengths. A strong non-profit sector, cultural diversity, an existing social housing stock, and new public transit are all assets to be leveraged. Most of all, the community itself is invested in building a neighbourhood where those who are experience marginalization can feel welcomed and thrive.

> **"People who say they feel that they 'belong' to their community are happier than those who do not. And people who trust their neighbours feel a greater sense of that belonging."**
>
> Charles Montgomery

[87] Thompson et al., (2018)

ADDENDUM

Recognizing how COVID-19 has affected the community, we did a small-scale consultation to revisit the community priorities in this report. The aim of this consultation was to reflect with the community on the impacts of COVID-19 and how those impacts have changed or reaffirmed community priorities.

Residents shared that COVID-19 has made it more difficult to access resources. The uncertainty of the pandemic has had a negative impact on their lives.

Participants provided feedback on housing, income supports, social connections and social services accessibility.

The most pressing priorities were housing, resources related to housing, and income. Since the pandemic, reaching workers for housing and income supports has been difficult to impossible. Current income supports were not meeting needs and people had increased spending due to the pandemic. Housing rental prices continue to rise making the neighbourhood increasingly unaffordable. One resident shared that although they would like to stay in the community, the cost of housing and the added stress and uncertainty may force them to leave.

Feedback from the community affirms early learning of COVID-19 impacts. The pandemic amplifies inequality and has a disproportionate impact on people who face systemic barriers to health and wellbeing.

Residents reported that social connections are strained and limited. This is the result of increased stress and concern of contracting COVID-19. According to one resident, people are “on edge about everything so even casual community interactions have felt hard”. Lack of public space and limitations on gatherings has made it difficult to connect with others. This has had a drastic impact on mental health. According to one resident, life has shifted to “just trying to get by everyday.” Many residents used community spaces as anchors to routine. The loss of these spaces has caused feelings of lost identity. One resident reported feelings of community solidarity deteriorating.

Residents who are street involved reported feeling more alienated than ever. The visibility of being homeless has increased. Those who are street-involved are not able to follow stay at home orders. This forces them into the public eye or into unsafe or crowded housing situations. The need for more support from neighbours on the stigma of living with low-income, sleeping rough and drug-use was also shared.

Respite centres are seen as a positive resource. These spaces provide access to basic and social needs. The pandemic also highlighted the need for centralized resources where people can meet their basic needs in one location.

In reflecting with the community, it is clear that the community’s priorities continued to resonate for residents. In fact, COVID-19 has made these priorities more urgent than ever.

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