

Let's act on poverty and racism in '07

By Evelyn Myrie
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Building strong and vibrant communities takes time and commitment from citizens and government alike. Over the coming year, Hamiltonians will have to begin to show how the many projects they have on the go are actually making a difference in our community. Let's take a quick look at some of these pressing issues.

We have heard the mantra over and over again -- we want to make Hamilton the best place to raise a child.

On May 13, 2005, a group of Hamiltonians came together to launch what they called an offensive to poverty in our community; they formed the Roundtable for Poverty Reduction. Unlike previous anti-poverty initiatives in the community that tended to be led by those affected directly by poverty or social justice advocates, this group took a new approach. They invited business leaders, key institutions, government, labour, education and a few representatives from anti-poverty groups to sit down and come up with a new plan. It was to be a plan that would work to make Hamilton the best place to raise a child.

With a group of heavyweight movers and shakers around the table to address the needs of the poor and disenfranchised, the community is looking for meaningful deliverables in addressing this growing problem of poverty in Hamilton. With a poverty rate of more than 20 per cent, we cannot afford to ignore this problem as we move into 2007. Many of those who are poor hope the Roundtable for Poverty Reduction will come up with a meaningful plan with real teeth and real impact on real people.

The other issue that has been around for some time is the idea of making Hamilton a model community when it comes to racism. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, we in Hamilton suffered a major blow to our community spirit and cohesiveness as a result of the bombing of a local Hindu temple. Our city made headline news at the time; we were viewed by many to be a bit backward when it came to dealing with racism and cultural diversity. As the Chinese proverb declares, let's see crisis as an opportunity. We have since created Hamilton's Centre for Civic Inclusion (HCCI) and sanctioned it to move on the issue of making Hamilton a racism-free city. It is a lofty goal, but we have to start somewhere. Armed with some funding from the city and other levels of government, the centre has hired a team of committed and skilled staff, coupled with a group of committed community volunteers, and in 2007 is ready to move forward with its mission that promises to "initiate and support transformative processes that promote equity and create racism-free and inclusive

environments in all areas of civic life."

Both the Roundtable for Poverty Reduction and the former Strengthening of Hamilton's Community Initiative (now HCCI) have brought significant volunteer resources to their respective tables.

These are local people who are committed to improving the quality of life for all community members. I believe Hamiltonians by and large are supportive of these initiatives. But for 2007, they are expecting a more action and less talk.

They are right to demand action. Those who live in poverty have seen their stories on the front pages of The Hamilton Spectator, one of the members of the Poverty Roundtable. Their issues have been dissected and assessed. They, too, are expecting action. They want to see real change in institutions and systems that will promote their meaningful participation in the economic life of the community.

It would be foolish to think poverty and racism will be eradicated in 2007. But I believe as a community, we can begin to shift the trajectories in our thinking and in our behaviour. Strategies to combat poverty and racism require a multi-sectoral and multi-dimensional response from key stakeholders. We are not there yet, but the trajectory is shifting and people are watching for action in 2007.

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