

Being An Effective Advocate: Stories from Organizing To Win

By Liz Benneian, president, Oakvillegreen Conservation Association

lizcdn@yahoo.com, 905-562-3819

I'm very pleased to speak with you today. I love coming to the Ontario Urban Forest Conferences because I find they are always so inspiring. Whenever people ask me how I keep going with all the various environmental battles I fight I tell them what keeps me going are the people I meet, like the people here at this conference. People who are striving to make the world better. People who want what's best for the "we" rather than the "me".

Today I'm going to give you a brief background on Oakvillegreen and how I came to start doing Organize To Win seminars and then I'm going to tell you some stories about successful campaigns that illustrate some of the points from Organize To Win.

In my time today I can barely scratch the surface of the Organize To Win info but I would be happy to provide you with further information after the conference. You can contact me at programs@oakvillegreen.org

As you've heard, for 7 years, I was the president of Oakvillegreen Conservation Association, an environmental advocacy group that was originally formed by 4 citizens concerned about the development of 7,600 acres of agricultural land in North Oakville. Since then, Oakvillegreen's mandate has broadened considerably and we have has a very successful record of protecting our community's natural areas and lobbying the Provincial government on a variety of issues from waste reduction to developing a multi-modal transportation system for Ontario. If you want to learn more about our accomplishments you can find them on our website which is www.oakvillegreen.org

As well, Oakvillegreen's tree planting group Ground Breaker's has planted 11,600 native trees and shrubs in Oakville since 2004. We have also carried out Heritage Tree Hunts that groups around the country are now copying and we do tree seed collecting and sapling growing through our tree foster parent program. In recent years, we have added a full range of public education programs including urban forest tours and presentations correlated to the Ontario Science Curriculum that we present in schools. Additionally, we

have become the go to group for schools in our Region that need help in renaturalizing their schoolgrounds.

So, as you can see, we have been a very active group that has amassed a lot of experience working in our community and at the Provincial level. But we realized many years ago, that making improvements in our little corner of the world wasn't enough. In reaching out to other groups we recognized that many groups were trying to make a difference but there was a lot of reinventing the wheel happening, a lot of time spent on ineffective activities and a lot of frustration in not getting the results they wanted.

Oakvillegreen decided we needed to change that. I created Organize To Win Seminars to teach people how to build robust community groups, that could last over time, and successfully tackle a host of issues.

Through some wonderful mentorship and by analyzing our own failures and wins, Oakvillegreen has come to understand that to successfully mount a campaign, no matter what you are fighting for, or against, you must do certain things if you want to be effective. The stories I will tell you today will highlight those things.

Before I get to the stories I want to emphasize one thing:

Never Under-Estimate Your Critical Role In Community Decision-Making

Advocacy organizations are absolutely essential to community decision making. Democracy is not an arcane political theory. It is a human endeavour that needs to be exercised to be kept healthy. Democracy must be practiced. People must take part. Multiple voices must be heard — if we want the best decisions made.

That's the job of an advocate — to make sure the people's voices are heard; to keep watch on the influence of lobbyists and to guide political-decision-making and, most importantly, to speak truth to power.

It is the advocates, whether they are fighting for social justice, women's rights or the environment who make positive changes in the world. It's an important role and one we must be willing to shoulder.

The first story I'm going to tell you is Story Tutela Heights and the point of the story is that you **MUST BE ORGANIZED IF YOU WANT TO WIN.**

- Loose group of neighbours, heard about a large residential development planned on agricultural land in their rural area near Brantford
- Sent out notices to neighbours about Public Information Sessions, were disturbed by what they heard.
- Concerned no sewers going to area developer was proposing a big septic system and they were very concerned about the impact of that on the Grand River.
- Concerned about tree loss and impact on Grand River from road building especially traffic as there had already been problems with erosions and washouts in some areas.
- Individual neighbours contacted Councillors with concerns but got no response.
- Organized their own information session, that was good but what wasn't good is that they weren't organized, no leader, no agenda.
- Three prominent community members showed up, aggressive, took over meeting, argued the development couldn't be stopped and urged compromise with developer, wanted to use their connections with local politicians to tinker with changes to development application.
- Original loose collection of neighbours came away angry and upset, felt like they'd been hijacked called me.
- I met with them three times. First two times to get their core group of leaders organized. Second time to do an Organize To Win for the larger group.
- What happened? They selected a core group of leaders whose values were aligned: they were opposed to the development. They wrote a mission statement stating who they were and what they were opposed to. They gave themselves a name: Tutela Heights Residents Association. They chose a spokesperson. They agreed on how they were going to make decisions. They issued a press release and gave interviews. They started developing strategies and tactics in line with their mission. Then they organized their own information meeting. They took control of the next public information session that I'll tell you more about in a few minutes.

This story illustrates why you need to be organized to win.

1. First, your opponents are so you had better be.

2. Second: As a lone wolf, you are easy to dismiss – you're just another crazy tree hugger and besides, no politician cares about losing your one vote. On the other hand, a group of people making noise is harder to dismiss and decision-makers can never be sure how many people are in the group. They also figure, if that many people are taking action, how many other people are supporting them? Ultimately, with politicians, they start worrying about whether they will be reelected. Organized groups make decision-makers nervous and that's a good thing, because it makes them willing to listen and to negotiate.
3. Third. Having a group brings more resources to bear because you have the knowledge and expertise of more people. With the Tutela Heights group they found people who had a long history of the area and new of past problems with building along the Grand. They found people who were photographers who could provide photographs of problems that had occurred and also of the beauty of the area. They found people with ties to the native community. In fact, the Men's Council Fire from Six Nations showed up at the next public meeting and said they would fight the proposed development. They found someone in the neighbourhood who was an expert in sewage systems and who could make expert comment on the proposed plan. They found people who were willing to do the essential job of delivering fliers.
4. Fourth, Bringing like-minded individuals together allows you to develop a position and then build strategies and tactics.
5. Fifth, You can craft a clear and consistent message and chose a spokesperson to deliver it. At the Tutela Heights public meetings the developer didn't have 30 spokespeople speaking on behalf of the company. They had one. The developers' message was clear and consistent. We have to learn from our opponents.
6. Sixth, Being organized draws more people to your group. Give you an example from Tutela Heights. (Story of putting out chairs at the second public information meeting and controlling the meeting. Made people realize they were organized and powerful and more neighbours joined.)
7. Seventh, decision-makers don't want to negotiate with a bunch of different people who may want different things, they can negotiate with a group that has a clear position.

8. Eighth, because organizing yourselves, naming your group and stating your position, makes you the local experts. The group outflanked those three men who came to their first meeting. They became the residents' association who were the voice of the neighbourhood.

Result: Still in the early stages of the development proposal so we don't know what's going to happen with it yet but they have created a large, strong, organized citizens group that has the attention of the County and the developer. And more important, neighbours have got to know each other. As one person said, the last time I was there, I've met more of my neighbours in the last month than I met in the past 20 years. And that alone is a very good thing.

The next story I'm going to tell you is about the importance of gathering allies. It's the story of Shell Park.

Shell Park was an ANSI now developed into residential area and park with soccer fields, manicured gardens, skateboard park, parking lot, channeled stream and there is a very small remanant of Carolinian forest that no one had cut down and grass over a gas pipeline.

- bulldozers move in and neighbours stand in front of them
- someone calls me, realize it's the opening battle in war against paved pathways through the hardwon NHS
- Got them to call Councillors and walk them through the area
- Got them to connect with other groups, residents association, South Peel Naturalists, other green groups, Friends of Bronte Creek Provincial Park. Connections were done in person not just by email and phone.
- Organized their own meeting with Town Staff to answer questions, overflowing with people, made their own presentation, Councillors and Mayor attended
- Did their research got study of migratory birds that had been done for a nearby development that demonstrated beyond a doubt that this was critical layover area for migratory songbirds
- Lobbied all Councillors, not just the ones in their ward.
- Put information together into a Powerpoint presented to Council.

— Seven groups showed up and presented a united front

1. Excellent job of communicating with supporters, allies and Council. Involved door to door, neighbourhood signs, walking the trail and talking to everyone who was using it, collecting emails, meeting face to face with potential allies, sending letters to the editor and press releases to the media. They Communicated well with their supporters and got them out to meetings. They held well run meetings with a capable chair who could move things along and keep things civil.
2. They did good research. Finding that migratory bird study was critical.
3. They produced good presentations with lots of photos of destruction that had occurred and would occur if the path continued.

Result: Council ordered Parks staff to return area to natural state. Renaturalization plan put into place. A Mayor's Committee on Trails was struck Oakvillegreen conducted native tree planting in the area. So as you can see, that was a really good outcome and it was largely a result of really good communication and bringing allies together.

The Next Story I'm Going To Tell You is an Oakvillegreen story about the Battle For the Natural Heritage System

In 2000 plans were being made to draw 7,600 acres of agricultural land into Oakville's Urban Envelope For Development. No Scientific study of the land had been done. Plans were for typical urban sprawl. The newspaper was doing a terrible job telling the public about the issues. Four citizens who kept meeting each other at Council meeting got together to let the rest of the community know what was happening and to lobby Council to do things differently.

What They Did Right: Understood How Decisions Are Made

1. They came to understand that decisions are almost always based on self-interest. That flies against what we want to believe doesn't it? We want to believe that people in power make decisions on what's best for everyone. I mean, isn't that why we elect them? But that is not what humans do. Decisions, let me repeat again, are almost always made on the basis of self-interest. I don't think the Oakvillegreen folks understood that in the

beginning. They thought, as many groups do, that if they just explained things clearly enough, Council would say, wow, you're right and change their development plans. But Council was resistant to changing the plans and deaf to Oakvillegreen's sensible arguments. So Oakvillegreen appealed to their self-interest by getting the community on-side in such large numbers that the politicians started to realize if they didn't change the plans, people wouldn't vote for them.

2. So how did they get the public onside? They created an appealing alternative vision, one that would preserve nature with an integrated natural Heritage System, that would control growth, that would promote sustainable, livable transit-first higher density communities that had Town centres and many amenities. And suddenly 700 people were turning out to Council meetings.

3. They realized they needed to be powerful. To gain power they amassed information and disseminated it. For instance, it was an Oakville citizen who poured through Provincial records to prove to Oakville's Council that a moraine did exist in the area they wanted to develop. They held their own meetings because they realized that the process set up by Council was meant to defeat them. So for instance, they held a huge public meeting and brought in Margaret Atwood and sustainable planning experts. But they also worked through the process so they showed up at every committee and council meeting, at every public information session, and eventually they even appealed to the OMB. They kept people informed and told them how they could have input. They became too powerful to be ignored by Council. Another way they took power was to run for Council. Three of Oakvillegreen's four original founders were elected to Council. Another member of Oakvillegreen was also elected. In 2006, the leader of an allied green group was elected as Mayor. Oakville went from having a pro-development Council in 2000 to having a pro-environment Council by 2006.

4. They were persistent. The group was strong enough to be in it for the long haul. The development plan was 8 years in the making. So the message here is the key to winning is persistence.

5. They were careful to attack the issue by appeal to the person. The simple fact is you can't win over decision-makers by calling them names.

6. They rallied people over things they cared about. For instance the battle may have been about the environment but they weren't adverse to pointing out that protecting greenspace would help keep property values high.
7. They refused to let politicians call them a special interest group. They kept reminding people they were taxpayers who represented taxpayers and unlike the developers, they didn't stand to gain anything personally from the Council's decision.
8. They kept taking action. This is important: Campaigns succeed or fail depending on the amount of action you take and action is defined by connecting directly with decision makers. That means meeting with decision makers, phoning/emailing them, speaking up at public meetings etc. The closer the contact the more effective it is, so email is okay, making a phone call is better, meeting one on one is most effective.
9. They didn't give up, give in or compromise. They took a stand based on sound decision-making and stuck to it.

Result: A scientific study of the land was conducted. Based on that a Natural Heritage System was created that preserved about 30% of the 7,600 acres of land. The community was designed to be higher density, built in five neighbourhoods with Town centres and many amenities. An Environmental Strategic Plan for the community was created. An environmental fund was established. Oakville became the first community in Ontario to create a Natural Heritage System. Since then, the Region of Halton was secured 33% of its land as Natural Heritage. It was a big victory.

So let me just spend a minute now to talk about what doesn't work:

- * Petitions mean almost nothing to politicians. They can be useful to get a group started and motivated and to generate mailing lists but a petition is a tactic or activity and not an effective way to influence decision-makers. It can be helpful to groups to enlarge their contact/email list.
- * Lobbying bureaucrats is not effective. You have to go after decision-makers.
- * Becoming part of the system is not effective – not that members of your group shouldn't sit on town committees etc. but usually such committees are set up to limit public influence not encourage it. Being on committees is good for intelligence gathering.

I like to conclude with this. Don't be Afraid to Be An Advocacy Organization and Don't Be Afraid To Make Waves

I know many of the people in this room are not afraid to be advocates for our urban forests but I can tell you there are many groups that are. In some cases, they are worried advocacy activities will jeopardize funding. In other cases, they live in small communities and they don't want to stir up animosity. Sometimes, they simply dislike conflict and would rather go with the flow than challenge the decision-makers. So the most important thing I want to tell you today, is that we all must become advocates. The challenges we face, whether it's tree loss from development, Global Warming, Emerald Ash Borer or the new esthetic that favours large lawns and lollipop trees, these challenges pose such a threat to our tree cover that we cannot sit back and let developers and politicians, parks staff and planning officials make decisions without our input and advocacy. We know more about the value of trees, in fact the necessity of having healthy, thriving forests in our cities, our countryside and around the world, than they do.

Being an advocate for our urban forests isn't easy.

In travelling around the province and speaking to many community groups I've learned that many communities don't have Forestry Departments. In many cases, tree-related issues are managed by Parks, and Parks are focused on creating recreational spaces for human activity, not on maintaining healthy natural environments. Some smaller communities don't even have much of a parks department and tree-related issues are managed by Public Works. In that case, trees are often dealt with as both a nuisance and a liability

And an even more difficult challenge now, with the economy depressed and budgets shrunk, is that often the first thing to be cut are "frills" like tree planting and maintenance programs.

We have a tremendous challenge ahead of us but it is a challenge we must meet by banding together, taking strength from one another and learning to be effective advocates who fight for trees.

If we won't stand up for nature, who will? If we don't protect and enhance our urban forests, who will? If we don't speak for the trees, who will?

Thank you.