

**“...more than
roads, sewers,
stores and schools.”**

Findings from our five-part
Meeting House series



United Way
York Region

“Social Infrastructure is not just the social services and programs available to residents and neighbourhoods, but the area’s resources and relationships such as spaces for gathering, opportunities for learning as well as partnerships and networks within and beyond the community level.”¹

¹*Toronto’s Inner Suburbs: Investing in Social Infrastructure in Scarborough.*
Deborah Cowan, Vanessa Parlette, Cities Centre University of Toronto, June 2011

In 2009, in the middle of an open field in Richmond Hill, United Way York Region released *...if addressed.*, a report on the region’s single defining social pressure: the intersection of pace of growth, the changing face of growth and the places where growth is taking place.

At the core of the report, and our work since, is a simple question:

in the face of the region’s unprecedented growth, how do we build a social infrastructure that can support and strengthen the children, youth, families and seniors who call York Region home today and for decades to come?

United Way’s five-part **Meeting House** series, *...more than roads, sewers, stores and schools.*, brought over 250 residents, community groups, local businesses and

labour partners together in the region’s five high growth communities* to discuss our future – and our ability to get ahead of pressing social issues.

**Nearly 60% of all new development in York Region over the next few decades will be in five specific corridors: Richmond Hill Centre/ Langstaff Gateway; East Gwillimbury; Vaughan Metropolitan Centre; Markham Centre; and Newmarket Centre.*

In recreation centres, places of worship and community halls, we listened to people’s aspirations about their family, neighbourhood and municipality, and learned about local opportunities to maintain a strong quality of life for all.

The answer is shockingly consistent, surprisingly straightforward, radically unoriginal and fiercely local.

What we heard

People love their community.

"I'm willing to say as a resident of East Gwillimbury...I love East Gwillimbury. We're at the cusp of massive growth and I'm ok with that. I just want to make sure that with all the growth, people and neighbourhoods come first. Caring for each other. That will make the town I love - we all love - even better as we grow."

East Gwillimbury resident

People don't feel connected.

"How do we get to know about our neighbour? How do we get involved in our community? What brought me here were the houses, schools and stores. What's going to keep me here is - do I feel connected to my community?"

Richmond Hill resident

People want to get involved.

"We have to get out and do something about it. Build civic muscle. That's job # 1. Because people solve problems. People in their own neighbourhoods - with all the associations and gifts they have. And money helps. Sometimes."

Markham resident

"Citizens have to say that this is our community and we're going to be heard and listened to and be part of the solution. The more engaged we are the better.

The trends and conversations are similar in each of the communities. What unites them all - us all - is our incredible potential as long as we find the will to make it happen. We can do it if we get engaged."

Ian Proudfoot, Vice President and Regional Publisher, Toronto Community News, Chair, Meeting House Series, United Way York Region



What we know

Attachment matters¹

Great schools, health care and safe streets all help create strong communities. But there is something deeper that draws people to a place – makes us love where we live. Surprisingly, social offerings, openness and beauty are far more important in creating a lasting emotional bond between people and their community than peoples' perceptions of the economy, jobs or basic services*.

Communities with the highest levels of resident attachment also had the highest rates of GDP growth over time. When residents are attached to their community, they care about and for each other.

It takes up to 15 years to build strong community attachment²

To help people settle and become attached in new and growing communities, research identifies the need for good quality social infrastructure and local services, support for community development, opportunities for residents to get involved in local decision making, and shared social spaces and activities.

Equally important are the less visible types of support that create opportunities to meet other residents, build local networks and shared social experiences. Without these social supports, formal and informal, new developments struggle to become cohesive, living communities with a sense of place, belonging and identity.

Strong community attachment is proven prevention³

There is now a range of evidence that attached and connected communities, with formal and informal associations, supports and services, are more likely to benefit from lower crime figures, better health, higher educational achievement, and better economic growth.

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 - **social offerings** Places for people to meet each other and the feeling that people in the community care about each other
 - **openness** How welcoming the community is to different types of people
 - **aesthetics** The physical beauty of the community including the availability of parks and green spaces

¹Soul of the Community, Knight Foundation ²Future Communities, The Young Foundation ³Halpern, D., 2009

People identified all kinds of local ideas



"For Vaughan to be great for all, we must practice the politics of inclusion. It's an economic imperative. And we must begin to engage residents, especially those struggling on the margins, in a new, innovation economy."

*Maurizio Bevilacqua,
Mayor of Vaughan*

"Every kid in East Gwillimbury needs spaces to hang out and some access to supports. How about a community group with youth, residents, businesses and agencies to get stuff done for our youth?"

East Gwillimbury resident

"We should support community initiatives at a local level. Grassroot groups doing good work in their neighbourhood will make a great Newmarket even better."

Newmarket faith leader

"A Richmond Hill with economic opportunities for all our youth – that's what I would like to see. And business, government – everyone should rally around this."

Richmond Hill entrepreneur

"Markham is a huge municipality – communities within communities. Let's unleash how people are caring in their neighbourhood, faith group or club. Small stuff adds up to big change."

Markham youth

Strength Investments

Unique to United Way York Region, this transformational funding supports projects that bring residents, community, business, faith groups and agencies together to work on social issues.

Strength Investments fund everyday people and groups, already at work in their community, to identify and solve their own problems.

Good work is happening in your neighbourhood

AURORA

Community Development in Action

Residents at the Charles Darrow Co-op are solving local issues. Together neighbours are building lasting connections and friendships through a community garden, leadership training and after-school program.

GEORGINA

The ReWilding Young Entrepreneurs Project

The Alliance for a Better Georgina and Ladies of the Lake work with youth to develop job skills, a sense of empowerment and the best tree-houses in the region.

VAUGHAN

Forging Empower Access Transformation - a project of Human Endeavour

Skilled newcomers working together to create social enterprises: multi-media, special events and an on-line shopping tool.



For more information on all of our Strength Investments projects, visit york.unitedway.ca

How do we build social infrastructure?

The answer is shockingly consistent, surprisingly straightforward, radically unoriginal and fiercely local.



Unleashing the Power of Community

Civic participation is the single most sustainable way to solve our pressing social issues.

United Way will:

- Leverage \$2 million over 5 years, through our Strength Investments, to support local solutions
- Engage government, funders and partners to invest in community-led initiatives
- Recruit volunteers to work on community priorities
- Communicate and celebrate success stories and recognize local champions

Change starts here.