ACT Solutions

Creighton/Gerrish: Affordable Housing and Neighbourhood Renewal Demonstration Project

Halifax, Nova Scotia

The issue

While about four decades of community and housing renewal have had a positive impact on the North End of the Halifax Peninsula, pockets of sub-standard housing and underutilized real estate remain, leaving the rejuvenation of this area incomplete. One area of lingering blight was the block bounded by Creighton, Gottingen, Gerrish and Cunard streets. The proponents of this project wanted to build a demonstration affordable home ownership project there, hoping to trigger a process that would eventually revitalize this block.

The plan

Harbour City Homes (HCH), the City of Halifax Non-Profit Housing Society, proposed to use its ACT funds to develop a renewal plan for a parcel of land centred on the intersection of Creighton and Gerrish streets. Based on a consultant's report, Harbour City Homes concluded that a single demonstration project was unlikely to kick-start widespread neighbourhood rejuvenation. HCH concluded that a strategic, not a piecemeal effort, was the proper way to redevelop the target area. As a result, HCH became part of a partnership that devised a new plan for redevelopment of the block in five distinct phases.

The project team

Although HCH initiated the project in 1993, the Creighton/Gerrish Development Association (CGDA), a partnership of four community-based non-profit groups, assumed control in 1995. CGDA's job was to design and build the ambitious, mixed-use redevelopment.

The results

CGDA's business plan was primarily residential in character but it also contained an institutional component and modest amount of retail space. Its five separate construction projects would be individually financed but developed as interdependent parts of a comprehensive scheme with a total estimated (2002) value of about $7.5 million.

Even though CGDA devised that plan in 1997, the official opening of the first housing took until February 15, 2002. Making financial arrangements, acquiring the land, demolishing an existing structure, and cleaning up some serious site contamination, consumed most of the intervening years. Perseverance was rewarded, though, when low-income singles began moving into the 18-unit building in January 2002. Run by Metro Non-Profit Housing Association, the rent-gated-to-income facility also provides office space for the agency's housing support centre that helps homeless people and other individuals cope with issues that limit their ability to function in society.

It could work for you!
Although the Creighton/Gerrish project is substantially different from that originally conceived by the HCH consultant, ideas for regulatory changes, proposed in the report, promoting more intensive land use and more varied housing forms, did survive. The City adopted the proposed bylaw amendments, which included revising land use, allowing smaller lot sizes and frontages, and greater lot coverage.

The next phase of Creighton/Gerrish is construction of six semi-detached units (three buildings), which will each have three bedrooms and fully accessible basements, suitable for home offices or as supplementary rental flats. By the summer of 2002, CGDA had begun planning for the phase to follow that one – about 35 two- and three-bedroom row houses on small lots.

**First Housing**
This non-profit rental project for low-income singles was the first housing built by CGDA. It opened in February 2002.

**Related reports**
ACT case study: Creighton/Gerrish: Affordable Housing and Neighbourhood Renewal Demonstration Project, Word-Works Communications Services, Ottawa 2002

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**What Was There Before**
This old building, which housed Club 55, was demolished to make way for the non-profit singles rental project.
ACT CASE STUDY

CREIGHTON/GERRISH AFFORDABLE HOUSING AND NEIGHBOURHOOD RENEWAL—HALIFAX

Building Better Homes and Communities
Affordability and Choice Today
AFFORDABILITY AND CHOICE TODAY (ACT) DEMONSTRATION PROJECT

CASE STUDY

Creighton/Gerrish affordable housing and neighbourhood renewal—Halifax

Harbour City Homes and Creighton/Gerrish Development Association, Halifax

Prepared for:

Federation of Canadian Municipalities
Canadian Home Builders' Association
Canadian Housing and Renewal Association
Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation

Prepared by:
Word-Works Communications Services
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ACT case studies may be downloaded from the ACT Web site at www.actprogram.com, ordered on-line from CMHC at www.cmhc.ca or by contacting CMHC at 1-800-668-2642.
The project documented in this report received a grant under the Affordability and Choice Today (ACT) program. ACT is a municipal housing regulatory reform initiative sponsored by Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) and jointly managed with the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM), the Canadian Home Builders’ Association (CHBA) and the Canadian Housing and Renewal Association (CHRA).

ACT seeks to stimulate changes to planning and building regulations and residential development approval procedures to improve housing affordability, choice and quality. The United Nations Centre for Human Settlements recognized ACT in 1998 as one of the top global best practices for improving the living environment.

ACT awards grants to municipalities, builders, developers, non-profit organizations, industry associations, educational institutions, planners and architects across Canada to change housing regulations and streamline approval processes. ACT grants are awarded under three categories:

- **Demonstration** projects involve both regulatory change and residential construction, renovation or conversion to demonstrate an innovative aspect and how the regulatory change improves housing affordability and choice.
- **Approval Process** projects involve changing regulations or streamlining municipal development procedures to improve housing affordability and choice.
- **Promotion** grants are awarded to promote regulatory reform initiatives.

Pursuing regulatory change and innovation in housing options requires the participation of many stakeholders. ACT provides a unique opportunity for groups at the local level to work together in identifying housing concerns, and developing and implementing solutions.

All projects receiving an ACT grant are documented in order to share solutions and lessons learned with other Canadian communities.

Case studies, solution sheets and other program information are available from the ACT Web site [www.actprogram.com](http://www.actprogram.com)
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The issue

While about four decades of community and housing renewal have had a positive impact on the North End of the Halifax Peninsula, pockets of substandard housing and underutilized real estate remain, leaving the rejuvenation of this area incomplete. One area of lingering blight was the block bounded by Creighton, Gottingen, Gerrish and Cunard streets. The proponents of this project wanted to build a modest, affordable home ownership project, hoping to trigger a process that would eventually revitalize this block.

The plan

Harbour City Homes Non-Profit Housing Society (HCH) proposed to use its ACT funds to develop a renewal plan for a parcel of land centred on the intersection of Creighton and Gerrish streets.

Based on a consultant’s proposed renewal plan, Harbour City Homes concluded that a single demonstration project was unlikely to kick-start widespread neighbourhood rejuvenation. HCH concluded that a strategic, not a piecemeal effort, was the proper way to redevelop the target area. As a result, HCH became part of a partnership that devised a new plan for redevelopment in five distinct phases.

The project team

Although HCH initiated the project in 1993, the Creighton/Gerrish Development Association (CGDA), a partnership of four community-based non-profit groups, assumed control in 1995. CGDA’s specific purpose was to design and build the ambitious, mixed-use redevelopment proposed for the Creighton/Gerrish block and then turn each new structure over to the appropriate partner as a turnkey operation.

The results

CGDA’s plan was primarily residential in character but it also contained an institutional component and modest amount of retail space. Its five separate construction projects would be individually financed but developed as interdependent parts of a comprehensive scheme with a total estimated (2002) value of about $7.5 million.

Even though CGDA devised that plan in 1997, the first housing units were not opened until early 2002. Making financial arrangements, acquiring the land, demolishing an existing structure and cleaning up some serious site contamination consumed most of the intervening years. Perseverance was rewarded, though, when low-income singles began moving into the 18-unit building in January 2002.

Run by Metro Non-Profit Housing Association, the rent-geared-to-income facility also provides office space for the agency’s housing support centre which helps homeless people and other individuals cope with issues that limit their ability to function in society.

Although the Creighton/Gerrish project is substantially different from that originally conceived by the HCH consultant, ideas for regulatory changes, proposed in the report, promoting more intensive land use and more varied housing forms, did survive. The City of Halifax adopted the proposed bylaw amendments, which included revising land use, allowing smaller lot sizes and frontages, and greater lot coverage. They are part of the City’s detailed area development plan.
The next phase of Creighton/Gerrish is construction of six semi-detached units (three buildings), each having three bedrooms and fully accessible basements suitable for home offices or as supplementary rental flats. By the summer of 2002, CGDA had begun planning for the phase to follow that one—about 35, two- and three-bedroom row houses on small lots.
**Introduction**

When an ACT grant was awarded to Harbour City Homes of Halifax in 1993 no one realized a marathon had begun. The plan was to develop a scheme to promote affordable home ownership in a run-down inner-city neighbourhood—a few laps around the track compared to what actually occurred. By mid-decade, the scheme had rebounded from near collapse and mushroomed into a neighbourhood redevelopment project ambitious enough to require managing by a non-profit company created specifically for that task. More years would pass before the project finally saw completion of its first affordable housing. And the job is still not done. Another three of four years will probably pass before the last official ribbon is snipped and Halifax’s Creighton/Gerrish project finally crosses the finish line.

### 1.1 Project incentive

The North End of the Halifax Peninsula has been the focus of community and housing renewal programs for about 40 years, according to a 1995 study of the area completed by Prof. Grant Wanzel, Dalhousie University architecture professor, social housing activist and eventually President of the Creighton/Gerrish Development Association. Although the cumulative impact of tens of millions of dollars of investment and years of effort has been positive and substantial, pockets of substandard housing and underutilized real estate left the rejuvenation of this area, commonly called Peninsula North, incomplete. One prominent area of blight was the block bounded by Creighton, Gottingen, Gerrish and Cunard streets.

<table>
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<th>Creighton/Gerrish major milestones</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1993</strong>—Harbour City Homes awarded ACT grant.</td>
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<td><strong>1994</strong>—Harbour City reports on prospects for affordable ownership housing at Creighton and Gerrish.</td>
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<td><strong>1995</strong>—Harbour City takes on development partners. Creighton-Gerrish Development Association formed.</td>
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<td><strong>1996</strong>—Association works on new development plan.</td>
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<td><strong>1997</strong>—Association unveils new plan.</td>
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<td><strong>1998</strong>—Negotiations for land purchases and city approval of plan continue.</td>
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<td><strong>1999</strong>—Land purchases concluded, City OKs development agreement, site clearance for first phase of project completed.</td>
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<td><strong>2000</strong>—Construction starts, then halts. Site found to be contaminated. Cleanup plans drawn up.</td>
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<td><strong>2001</strong>—Federal Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative (SCPI) funds awarded for first rental housing. Construction proceeds.</td>
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<td><strong>2002</strong>—First rental housing opens; work proceeds on additional phases.</td>
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"It compromises what has been achieved and serves to slow continuing efforts, both public and private, to successfully develop and maintain decent and affordable housing there," Prof. Wanzel wrote. "Improvement of this block is critical to the well-being of Gottingen Street, the larger North End neighbourhood and the Halifax Regional Municipality as a whole. The immense investment that has already been made in the North End will only be secure if its regeneration is carried to completion."
The target block contained two vacant lots, one small and the other large. The Sobeys supermarket chain owned the large lot. There were several rundown rooming houses as well as a number of well-maintained, single-family homes, some of which were owner-occupied.

The proponents of the Creighton/Gerrish project clearly saw the vacant properties as the keys to revitalization. Get affordable housing on at least one of them, they reasoned, and you begin to reverse the blight. Their hope was that this small step could trigger a process of renewal.

1.2 Project objectives

Harbour City Homes Non-Profit Housing Society (HCH) proposed to use its ACT funds to explore ways of providing affordable home ownership in the inner city. The project would be part of a "Secondary Planning Process" for Peninsula North, which was being conducted by the City’s Development and Planning Department. The municipal process had already been underway for several years and had produced various proposals for continued rejuvenation of the entire area.

Harbour City intended to develop a renewal plan, through a process of community involvement and consultation, for the area centred on the intersection of Creighton and Gerrish streets. The proponents foresaw a probable need to revise the Municipal Development Plan and the City’s land use bylaws to encourage affordable housing in the area. Specifically, Harbour City anticipated regulatory reforms involving lot sizes, frontages, lot coverage and lot configuration. It also anticipated changes to development agreements to allow for more cost-effective use of the land through intensification and increased density and to clear the way for more varied housing forms that might be needed.

The non-profit society hoped to build one demonstration dwelling to show the practical impact of the regulatory reforms.

1.3 Methodology

HCH planned a two-step approach to the project. First, it would carry out community consultation and then prepare a site plan.

Consultation

HCH agreed to participate in focus group sessions with area residents. The purpose of these meetings, which were already built into the City planning process, was to determine:

- residents’ housing issues and their concerns over neighbourhood renewal
- the type of redevelopment needed and its possible alternatives
- the boundaries for any renewal project.

This phase also involved regular consultations with City planners and the faculty at the Technical University of Nova Scotia for advice on housing forms suitable for the area and to identify barriers to implementing a redevelopment plan.

1.4 Site plan

This phase of the project would produce a site plan and propose any bylaw amendments required for the project to proceed. Included in the plan would be proposals for the renovation and reuse of existing housing and the construction of infill dwellings. It would also contain ideas for increasing home ownership in the neighbourhood and ways to stabilize rental tenure.
2.1 Initial feasibility study of target area

Harbour City hired consultant Jim Duke to coordinate a study to determine the feasibility of using a City-owned property at the corner of Creighton and Gerrish streets for housing that would serve to spark renewal of the target block. The study also sought to learn if home ownership initiated, sponsored and supported by the City would be affordable to residents of the area and could be sustainable once the city completed its participation. In the research phase of the study, the consultant participated in a series of City-sponsored public meetings and hearings in the neighbourhood.

In 1994, the consultant’s survey of the target area showed:

- 20 of approximately 180 housing units were owner-occupied
- 14 residential units were vacant and boarded up
- there were 25 units of public housing, 27 units owned by HCH, a 22-unit co-op, and 85 privately owned rental units in buildings ranging in size from one to four units
- a large vacant lot owned by the Sobeys supermarket chain
- a pair of vacant properties on Creighton Street, which nearby residents used as parking and open space
- the area contained a smattering of small commercial operations and a day-care centre and legal aid clinic that operated from a converted school.

Speculation over the disposition and eventual use of the Sobeys site, the largest single parcel of vacant land in the target area, contributed to a sense of neighbourhood instability. After the company demolished a grocery store in 1990, it kept the lot trash-free and allowed it to be used by patrons of a nearby public library and YM-YWCA for parking. Proper disposition of this land was considered the key to the refurbishment of Gottingen Street and completion of the Peninsula North renewal.

In April 1994, the HCH study made recommendations both for the City-owned site and the surrounding area. It passed these recommendations to the City’s Planning Advisory Committee, overseers of the on-going Peninsula North planning process. To remove impediments to the creation of affordable ownership housing in the neighbourhood, the study recommended:

- That existing commercial facilities be rezoned for minor commercial use rather than major commercial use, as the current zoning designation allowed. Businesses in the area are mostly smaller enterprises serving the neighbourhood rather than the city at large. Major commercial designation discourages nearby residential development and encourages owners to hang onto property in expectation of future profits—a contributing factor to the existence of a large number of vacant lots and abandoned and boarded-up buildings in the neighbourhood. As long as land bears major commercial designation, owners would be reluctant to part with it at prices consistent with the creation of affordable housing.
• That the zoning on existing residential and vacant land should be loosened. Such land should be given a residential use designation that permits maximum flexibility for residential infill, conversions and extensions. The study specifically advocated zoning that permits smaller lot sizes, additions and extensions to existing buildings, smaller setbacks (or their elimination) and greater lot coverage.

• That bicycle use be promoted and a solution to the winter parking ban be found to ease problems with parking and automobile traffic.

With respect to the City-owned lot that Harbour City favoured for a demonstration housing project, the report said it could contain eight freehold dwellings, described as "starter homes", with room for parking and future expansion of the units. The report included a plan showing how the units could be situated on the land. Although these homes would be affordable to households earning $46,000 a year, this income level was well beyond the average of local residents. The housing could be affordable to neighbourhood residents only if the City contributed the land for a nominal sum.

In the event the City decided not to contribute the land, the question is whether housing in the area would attract households earning $46,000 a year. Specifically, would the area attract families in search of starter homes? Could such housing start a regeneration process that could be sustained by private interests? The report cast doubt on this theory. It noted that more than three decades of government-subsidized interventions in Peninsula North had failed to ignite self-sustaining regeneration and had attracted scant private sector interest. Building homes on that site, without a City contribution, would not do much for the housing options of local residents, the report stated. It would, however, expand the city's stock of affordable housing and that, in itself, would be beneficial.

### 2.2 A significant shift in strategy

Shortly after it issued this study, Harbour City found itself in a dilemma. According to Nancy Wooden, HCH's General Manager, there was no money to build demonstration housing. HCH questioned its ability and desire to continue with the Creighton/Gerrish project, particularly given the resources needed to raise private capital. Prof. Wanzel, head of the Affordable Housing Association of Nova Scotia, agreed to take over as project coordinator. Backed by ACT, HCH changed the direction of the project.

One thing made apparent by the consultant's study was that this project was more complex than originally conceived. Because the study concluded that a single demonstration home was unlikely to kick-start widespread neighbourhood rejuvenation, Harbour City concluded that the best approach was to create a plan for the entire block even though actual redevelopment would probably occur incrementally as smaller, individual undertakings.

Breaking the project into component parts made the whole idea more achievable, by rendering each of its parts easier to finance—an important consideration for any participants who lacked mortgageable assets. Harbour City held a series of meetings with federal and provincial government agencies, lenders, developers, construction managers and design professionals to test their respective interests in participation.
At the same time Harbour City decided it needed partners and made a presentation to the City, the Metro Non-Profit Housing Society and the Black Community Work Group. All agreed to join a possible public-private initiative for a project that could have commercial, residential and recreational components.

Together, they devised a new plan that called for redevelopment of the entire 0.8 hectares (2 acres) of land over three to four years. It consisted of five separate projects, each developed independently by one of the partners. This was the new proposed line-up:

- Harbour City Homes—15 affordable condominium units
- Metro Non-Profit Housing Society—20 rental units for low-income singles
- Harbour City Homes—six units of affordable ownership housing
- the Black Community Work Group, a coalition of 40 different organizations—a multi-purpose community centre
- a commercial/residential building with 40 units of rental housing, plus retail outlets.

As a group, the partners determined that progress hinged on disposition of the Sobeys land. They put these options in front of the grocery chain:

1. Sobeys acts as master developer of the entire one-block target area, selling various pieces to individual owners when needed.
2. Sobeys sells off chunks of its land individually to the partners to enable the partners to proceed in concert with projects on the City-owned land.
3. Outright purchase of the Sobeys land by the partnership.

Not surprisingly, Sobeys had little interest in being part of an enterprise so unrelated to its core business and the company sold the property intact.

### 2.3 Under new management

With a new, ambitious plan on the table, the partners quickly realized that the project had grown to a scale and scope that required dedicated supervision and coordination. As a result, late in 1995, the Creighton/Gerrish Development Association (CGDA), with Prof. Wanzel as President, was formed as a partnership of four nonprofit groups. (see Appendix, Partner profiles, page 12). Nancy Wooden, HCH’s General Manager, said CGDA, as a legal entity, would undertake the project in its own right, meaning that neither HCH nor any of the other partners faced any legal risks.

### 2.4 Revised business plan

In 1997, CGDA revised the business plan for the development. Its proposal called for the participation and cooperation of all three levels of government, but CGDA said it could accomplish its purpose largely without ongoing subsidies. In fact, it forecast that redevelopment would produce a gain for the City from increased property tax revenues.

The revised plan was primarily residential in character but it also contained an institutional component and a modest amount of retail space. The mix of elements, said CGDA, was sensitive to the community’s existing fabric and uses. The five separate construction projects contained in the plan would be individually financed, but developed as interdependent parts of a comprehensive scheme with a total estimated (2002) value of about $7.5 million. These were the five projects:

1. A 19-unit apartment building providing studio units on a non-profit basis to low-income singles.
2. Six semi-detached, two-storey, three-bedroom houses offering affordable freehold ownership and a fully accessible lower floor with potential as a home office or rental apartment.

3. Two 20-unit condominiums offering affordable home ownership in two- and three-bedroom, two-storey dwellings organized in four-unit blocks.

4. A Black Community Work Group multi-purpose, three-storey centre—1,812 m² (19,500 sq. ft.)—for business, education, job training and cultural programs, to be built in two stages.

5. Six semi-detached, two-storey, two-bedroom starter houses offering affordable freehold home ownership and featuring a partially finished second storey.

CGDA said it could build and sell dwellings for between $65,000 and $90,000, which would have monthly housing charges well within the means of renting households in the neighbourhood, whose annual incomes ranged from $24,000 to $30,000. As CGDA’s plan took shape, a number of factors contributed to achieving housing affordability.

The land—The five building components required three properties. CGDA used an interest-free loan from the provincial Department of Housing and Municipal Affairs to purchase the largest parcel, which was the Sobeys land, for $465,000. Although the actual purchase took place several years after the price had been negotiated and the land’s value had appreciated in the interim, the original price held. The two remaining properties, owned by the City, were turned over to the CGDA for $1 each. The City agreed to make all the properties tax exempt until they were redeveloped.

Soft cost support—With assistance from CMHC’s Canadian Centre for Public-Private Partnerships in Housing (CCPPPH), CGDA obtained an interest-free loan from the federal agency’s Proposal Development Fund. The loan enabled CGDA to hire the experts needed to develop a detailed plan. Soft costs are also contained because CGDA is serving as the developer on a non-profit basis and also because it had the full-time services of Prof. Wanzel for a year at no cost. At the time, he was on sabbatical from his Dalhousie University teaching job.

Hard costs—These are contained through construction management, which enables CGDA to obtain the best possible product for best price. The association has a top-notch development team that includes an architectural firm, development adviser, construction accountant, construction manager and financial and legal advisers.

Housing design—At the outset, CGDA determined that the dwellings would be compact. Those offered for sale, for example, range in size from about 74 m² to 93 m² (800 to 1,000 sq. ft.) while being designed and built to the highest quality.

Favourable financing—CGDA’s lender, League Savings and Mortgage Company of Halifax, agreed to provide financing for each of the five projects at up to one per cent less than its best lending rate and agreed that the mortgages would cover the construction process. CMHC agreed to underwrite loans for the ownership residential components of the project. In similar fashion, the provincial housing department guaranteed Metro Non-Profit Housing Society’s loan for construction of 19 rental units for low-income singles and said it would subsidize rents in five of the units. The Nova Scotia Department of Economic Renewal said it would provide a loan guarantee for the Black Community Work Group’s multi-purpose centre.
Financial windfall—As it turned out, Metro Non-Profit did not have to borrow to build its rental project for singles. In March 2001, Metro was awarded a $1.4 million grant from Human Resources and Development Canada through its Supporting Communities Partnership Initiative (SCPI) program. The Nova Scotia Housing Development Corporation topped up the federal contribution with $160,000, bringing the total grant to $1.56 million. These funds left the Metro Non-Profit project mortgage-free and helped CGDA deal with unexpected costs, described in the following section.

2.5 Frustrations and perseverance

Putting the Sobeys and City land deal together took about three years. The project proponents used a process Prof. Wanzel calls "ratcheting", which involves getting interlocking commitments so that when one piece falls into place, the rest follow.

Even though the City supported Peninsula North redevelopment, CGDA still met civic resistance in its quest to get its hands on the City-owned land. On one of the lots stood a 160-year-old building that housed Club 55, a social venue for locals. The City’s Heritage Advisory Committee opposed the demolition of the structure until it learned that the structure had lost much of its historical value because the entire first floor had been rebuilt after a fire many years ago.

Finally, in May 1999, City Council agreed to sell the lots to CGDA. At the same time, the City approved the association’s business plan, which contained many of the suggested rezoning provisions outlined in the 1994 consultant’s report. The City’s recently-approved development plan for the entire area is written to accommodate CGDA’s plans for the Creighton/Gerrish block and was directly influenced by the consultant’s report undertaken with ACT program funds.

"In sum, the bylaws were changed to facilitate what we are planning to do," said Prof. Wanzel.

But there were more delays. A civic employees’ strike in the summer of 1999 delayed issuance of permits for demolition and construction. Construction on the first phase—the rental building for low-income singles—was to begin in March 2000. But while trying to remove the last of Club 55’s foundation, workers saw oil floating on pooled rainwater. CGDA brought in an environmental consulting team. After studying the problem, they removed about 26 tonnes of soil contaminated with fuel oil. This process consumed months of valuable time but it still left CGDA in a bind. Work could not proceed without certification that the site was both clear of contamination and would remain so. Such assurance could not be given, of course, until the source of contamination was eliminated.

The consultants were certain that the oil came from a nearby property but with months already lost, CGDA did not relish the prospect of chewing up even more time in legal haggling to force the unco-operative property owner to clean up the source. Fortunately the consultants offered a solution. CGDA could build a dam between the properties to keep the oil from moving to the CGDA site and the job did not need any participation by the unco-operative property owner. The bad news was that this solution would cost $120,000—money CGDA simply did not have.

Another construction year had wound down before financial salvation arrived. In December 2000, Metro Non-Profit learned it would get the SCPI funding. The amount would not only pay for the Metro rental housing project on the old Club 55 site but would also pay for the dam. The federal government’s SCPI contribution was announced in March 2001 and CGDA could finally proceed.
In June 2001, construction resumed and occupants began moving in on January 15, 2002. On January 25, CGDA turned the completed building over to Metro Non-Profit Housing Association. The official opening was held February 15.

In addition to housing 18 tenants plus a live-in support worker, the facility provides office space for Metro’s housing support centre, which helps homeless people and other individuals cope with issues that limit their ability to function in society.

Buoyed by visible success and obvious momentum, CGDA immediately began development of the next phase, construction of six semi-detached units (three buildings), which will each have three bedrooms and fully accessible basements. The basements are suitable for home offices or as supplementary rental flats. These units will sell for $90,000.

By the summer of 2002, CGDA had begun planning for the phase to follow, which will deliver about 35 small-lot, mews-style homes, which are row houses on small lots. They are two- and three-bedroom houses and sell freehold for between $70,000 and $80,000. This phase was originally to have been 40 condominium units, but CGDA decided to make them freehold after obtaining expert advice to go that route if at all feasible. Not only are freehold units easier to sell, CGDA learned, but they also make more sense for first-time home buyers of modest means: freehold tenure is less complicated than condominium ownership and it does not involve condo fees.
3.1 An area of need

In the old north end of Halifax, where the Creighton/Gerrish project is underway, property values and household incomes remain below the average of the rest of the city. More than 70 per cent of the area’s households have annual incomes below $30,000 a year and almost a third scrape by on less than $10,000. The area contains a high proportion of rental housing and has large public housing projects as well as a large number of housing co-ops and non-profit housing projects, comprised mainly of high-rise buildings and two and three-storey row housing.

The single block in this neighbourhood that became known as the Creighton/Gerrish Planning Area has an ethnically mixed population residing in attached homes, most of which were built about 1900. Surrounded by arterial and commercial streets, it has acquired a reputation as an epicentre of urban blight, not just because of run-down buildings and vacant lots but also because of high rates of unemployment, crime and drug abuse.

3.2 Creighton/Gerrish Development Association

As the Creighton/Gerrish project evolved, the Creighton/Gerrish Development Association assumed overall charge. Formed in 1995, CGDA was incorporated in 1998 as a partnership of four community-based non-profit groups with decades of combined experience. The members, profiled in the Appendix, page 12, are Harbour City Homes (the initiators of the Creighton/Gerrish plan), the Black Community Work Group, the Metro Non-Profit Housing Association and the Affordable Housing Association of Nova Scotia. CGDA’s specific purpose was to design and build the ambitious, mixed-use redevelopment proposed for the Creighton/Gerrish block and then turn each new structure over to the appropriate partner as a turnkey operation.

Under a development agreement with the City, CGDA President Grant Wanzel and the board of directors employ all the consultants and have sole responsibility for completing all stages of the project.
In April 2002, the Metro Non-Profit Housing Association building for low-income singles won the Lieutenant-Governor’s Medal for Architecture, the top award made by the Nova Scotia Association of Architects.

The Creighton/Gerrish project serves as a model for similar initiatives across the country and will:

- serve as a catalyst to the revitalization of Gottingen Street
- help to secure the renewal of the much improved residential areas adjacent to it
- present a small demonstration of where and how to deal with homelessness—beyond shelters
- give material shape and identity to an important community institution through construction of the Black Community Work Group multi-purpose centre
- return considerable additional tax revenue to the municipality
- serve as a laboratory for studies in community partnerships and sustainable community development.

4.1 Expanded rental choice and affordability

The opening of the 18 studio apartments for low-income singles addressed a critical housing need in the north end. Figures from CMHC’s Market Analysis Centre for the late 1990s show a rapid drop in Halifax’s rental vacancy rates. The vacancy rate dropped to 1.9 per cent in 1999 for one-bedroom apartments. A year before, the figure for bachelor apartments was 0.5 per cent. At the same time, rents for these types of units were generally higher than elsewhere in the city. Rooms in the north end were available for between $280 and $360 a month with some welfare recipients paying as much as $490 a month. The social assistance shelter rate, at $225 a month, was significantly below the average rent.

With provincial rent supplement support provided for all 18 units, rents in the Metro singles building are geared to tenant incomes. The fact that the society has no mortgage and was able to build on land donated by the City means expenses for this project are limited to the costs of operating the building. A significant portion of rental income, therefore, is available to subsidize the support and outreach programs Metro operates for tenants and neighbourhood residents.

4.2 Ownership housing a strategic choice

At the outset of the Creighton/Gerrish project in 1993, Harbour City recognized the importance of a home ownership component. Owning a house empowers people, gives them a stake in the community and helps build community pride, said Harbour City. Prof. Wanzel’s 2002 report described the challenge that faced CGDA as it worked on plans to create affordable ownership housing in a poor part of town.

"If it’s affordable, homeownership is not only sustainable without subsidies, it’s also easier to understand and administer than other tenure forms," he wrote. "The question for us was whether we could produce dwellings of high enough quality which would still be affordable to neighbourhood households. Our principal market is a local one consisting of those who are living there now or are anxious to return. We know that if we out-price this market, we will have no market at all - having built up-scale dwellings in an inappropriate location."
4.3 Lessons learned

The experience CGDA has gained with the Creighton/Gerrish project can benefit others groups trying to get affordable housing projects off the ground.

**Strategic lessons**

- Develop an idea or vision with broad appeal.
- Be committed.
- When in doubt, ask: developers will readily offer advice.
- Get small commitments in principle from everyone involved and pyramid them.
- Be professional. It is about working with people, building partnerships and networking. Get the best consultants and pay what they ask but expect 150 per cent from them.
- Work with public servants. They can and will help in many ways and not always with money. Show them how your project’s objectives complement what their departments are trying to achieve.
- Involve the media. They can promote your project and also educate the public about the issues your project addresses.
- Keep politicians informed. At strategic moments, they can be very helpful.

**Tactical lessons**

- Get the land. Without land, you’ve got nothing.
- Keep moving: momentum is everything.
- Never let your fate rest on a single decision or in the hands of a single decision-maker.
- Make fast decisions. Keep lines of authority in your organization short and fast. Keep the organization tight.
- Document everything.
- Keep everybody informed, even if it’s just to touch base.
- Be optimistic and confident. This is easier said than done, but working with solid, committed people helps.
- Ratchet: build success through interlocking commitments. As others gain a stake in your project, they can often be persuaded to risk a bit more on your behalf.
Partner profiles—The Creighton/Gerrish Development Association

**Harbour City Homes**—A private non-profit housing society, experienced developer and owner-manager of affordable rental housing. Established in 1978, Harbour City operates more than 200 dwellings in 30 buildings across the old north end.

**Black Community Work Group**—Formed in 1988, the group functions across the Halifax Regional Municipality as a coalition of 40 community groups representing 1,200 people. It operates as many as 15 projects in the north end and hopes to consolidate much of this activity in the new building planned for the Creighton/Gerrish block.

**Metro Non-Profit Housing Association**—Founded in 1980, Metro operates five buildings containing 55 dwellings for low-income singles in Dartmouth and Halifax, including the structure opened in February, 2002. The association not only provides housing, it also provides counselling and support services for tenants and sponsors special projects that benefit both tenants and non-tenants.

**Affordable Housing Association of Nova Scotia**—This non-profit group represents individuals and institutional members drawn from the public, private and non-profit sectors. It was established in the 1980s to promote the development, management and maintenance of affordable housing across Nova Scotia and has pursued these objectives through research, education, lobbying and development.