



## **Nelson Social Planning Action Network Society**

### **STRATEGIC PLAN 2017 – 2019**

#### **Introduction**

The Nelson Social Planning Action Network (SPAN) is a non-profit society, incorporated in 2009, operating in the city of Nelson, British Columbia. Membership is made up of both organizations and individuals. Despite having very limited access to resources, SPAN has become a local champion for the social services sector, and a credible voice in bringing forward community concerns to decision makers and the public.

#### **Background**

In late 2005, Nelson Committee on Homelessness (NCOH) began to promote the concept of a Social Planning Council for Nelson. The concern was that NCOH was beginning to take on some of the functions of a Social Planning Council and that broader community participation was imperative to address the social environment of Nelson.

Conversations were held with numerous groups and stakeholders to determine the purpose and structure that the council might take. The name SPAN was chosen in January of 2006, and reflects the intent to have a broad network of supporters and participants involved in addressing the social needs of Nelson and its surrounding area. Formal registration as a society took place in July of 2009.

The organization evolved over the years, with membership numbers and levels of participation varying depending on the issues being addressed and the resources available through key member organizations. The model for the organization was that of an umbrella group, working to connect stakeholders with similar interests while not spending significant time or money developing an infrastructure for the organization itself. Administrative duties were shared among members, with Nelson Cares taking on the role of “banker” and other groups offering minute-taking, advertising, meeting space and coordinating functions. A part-time coordinator was in place for a few months at one point in the society’s life, however no formal location or host was ever established, and the majority of work was undertaken through volunteer efforts, short-term contract assignments and project-specific funding.

From 2009 to 2016 SPAN was able to access funding for a variety of projects and initiatives, building a reputation for leadership in the social services sector, and gaining credibility with funders, partners and the community. The organization connected with initiatives in other parts of the country, including Vibrant Communities and BC’s Living Wage campaign. In 2014, SPAN initiated and hosted the first year of a major cross-sectoral community-based poverty reduction project called “Nelson at its Best”. Some significant community engagement took place around this issue and a plan for moving forward was developed in 2015. At the end of year two of the project (October 2016) a long-term strategy for targeted poverty reduction efforts in Nelson was developed and can be found on the project’s website [www.bestnelson.org](http://www.bestnelson.org).

In June 2011, a meeting was held to develop some strategic planning goals for SPAN. A list of eight goals was created, however these were not ever adopted into a formal plan. By fall 2016, the need for a more formal plan and an analysis of the organizational structure became apparent. A consultant was hired, and a strategic planning session was held on November 30, 2016 including board members, community volunteers, agency representatives, and representatives from Nelson City Council. This document is the result of that effort.

A key question at the beginning of the planning session was whether or not the founding concepts needed to be revisited. It was determined that these concepts were still relevant, and needed only minimal adjustment to be included in the plan.

### **Founding Concepts**

**Purpose:** Community collaboration to identify and respond to our social needs

**Mission Statement:**

SPAN Nelson strengthens the community by providing collaborative, action-oriented leadership in building a caring, inclusive, dignified and socially just community.

**Vision:**

A safe and healthy community in which everyone has an equal voice in defining problems and offering solutions to improve quality of life

**Goals:**

- To work collaboratively to identify and respond to the major social issues of the community
- To generate research and information
- To educate the larger community about social issues and the inter-connectedness between sectors
- To provide opportunities where people can raise existing and new community issues which need a coordinated response
- To integrate social needs into all aspects of community planning.
- To provide recommendations to community and governmental agencies
- To help develop, and provide ongoing evaluation and revision to, a community social plan

**Operating Principles:**

- Collaboration, cooperation and coordination among all sectors of the community
- Community participation and input from a variety of voices
- Inclusiveness, diversity and equity, both within the organization and in its relations with the community
- Transparency of process and communication in ways that everyone can understand
- Sharing of power, information, resources and leadership
- Action on practical, effective solutions
- Recognition and celebration of contributions to community

### **Successes and Achievements**

As the first step in the planning process participants were asked to describe what achievements of SPAN they were most proud of. Four clear themes emerged, reflective of the purpose and goals of the organization.

**IDENTIFYING ISSUES & INITIATING ACTION:** SPAN has played a key role in bringing forward issues that need to be addressed by more than one group, for example starting the conversation on poverty in the Nelson area. With its diverse yet connected membership, SPAN has its finger on the pulse of the community, and can identify gaps at the systemic level. SPAN creates a space for

interactions and a point of contact for community expertise so that issues can be named and “given legs”. In 2013, a study led by SPAN called “Ideas into Action” assessed “Community Perspectives on Local Strengths, Priority Social Issues & Recommended Actions”. Topics for other areas of research, such as the “Volunteer Hub” concept, have been suggested and then acted upon.

**COLLABORATION:** SPAN has provided a vehicle for collaborative and cross-sectoral efforts among many agencies, organizations, and individuals in Nelson. The Nelson at its Best project (NaiB) is a prime example of this. Positive relationships have been built with partners such as the Rural Development Institute (RDI) of Selkirk College, funders such as Columbia Basin Trust (CBT) and local government, especially Nelson City Council.

**CONVENING & HOSTING:** Throughout its existence, SPAN has shown leadership in bringing people together for educational events, community conversations and opportunities to learn and share ideas. In 2011, SPAN co-hosted an “All Candidates Reverse Forum” with NCOH where political candidates and community members engaged in dialogue on youth poverty, homelessness, living wage employment and food security. In October of 2016, SPAN hosted a Community Forum featuring the mayor of Victoria speaking about innovative solutions for promoting healthy communities.

**PROVIDING A CREDIBLE VOICE FOR THE SECTOR:** Through a variety of formats, SPAN has consistently endeavoured to bring under-represented voices to the table. SPAN contributed significantly to the development of Nelson’s Official Community Plan, providing advice and expertise on social sector challenges. A series of interviews was conducted with local experts on topics of affordable housing, poverty, and mental health and then published and distributed to raise awareness. A Living Wage Report was produced, and priority has been placed on bringing forward the views of individuals with lived experience and grassroots connections.

Overall, SPAN has been successful in using its assets (knowledge, experience, passion and connections) to bring new information into public debate and to help form consensus around progressive solutions. The organization has been sustained through the commitment of key members and the generosity of member organizations, operating “off the corners of many desks”.

### **Challenges**

Despite its impressive list of achievements, SPAN faces a number of challenges in its operation, which participants identified during further discussion:

- The lack of infrastructure (no dedicated phone number, email, office or staff) has meant that there are gaps in communication.
- There has been a lack of clarity around the membership structure, leading to questions around who is actually a member.
- As with many non-profit organizations, the lack of ongoing, sustained funding has meant that projects are often planned with short-term goals and limited outcomes while waiting for the next grant application or funding cycle.
- Work being done off the corner of many desks means that there is no one place that is the home for the organization, leading to confusion and some items falling through the cracks (i.e. website not functioning).
- Member organizations that are providing support are burning out.
- Focussing on frontline initiatives has meant that the operating principle of “recognition and celebration” has not received adequate attention.
- Engaging partners and/or members outside the social services sector has not been as successful as desired.

## Current Status

Participants in the planning session then discussed SPAN's role, and the impact it has on Nelson and its citizens. The consensus was that SPAN plays an important role in community development, monitoring the community's health and well-being and initiating change where needed. Without SPAN on the scene there would not be an aggregate voice for the social sector, or any group to take the lead on network building, issue identification and follow through.

In terms of existing work, currently SPAN has commitments in place for two initiatives – NaiB and the Volunteer Hub. Both projects have recently completed funded phases of their work, and are poised to continue depending on the results of outstanding grant applications and community engagement. The group also felt that the upcoming provincial election (Spring 2017) would provide an excellent and immediate opportunity for SPAN to once again take a lead in helping citizens and potential decision-makers explore and address issues by hosting one or more “All Candidates Reverse Community Forums”. There is obvious work to be done, and SPAN is well-positioned to take on this work.

However, it was clear that in order for SPAN to continue its work, a more effective organizational model is needed. The current five member board (made up of individual volunteers and representatives of member agencies) will need to take some concrete steps to formalize the operations of the organization and to ensure its future viability.

## Future Directions

In the next step of the planning process, four different models were evaluated for how well they might fit SPAN's current needs. It became clear that no matter which model might be selected, in order to move forward, SPAN will need to seek some diversified sources of funding, develop some infrastructure and hire some staff.

The model which suggested *maintaining the status quo* was not recommended as it was not considered sustainable or effective. The model suggesting *expanding and growing significantly* was also not recommended as it was clear that insufficient resources were available and burnout was a real possibility. The model suggesting a *city contracted Social Planner* (based on the Revelstoke model) was not seen as desirable due to concerns about the position being somewhat precarious and subject to the character or tone of city council's priorities. There was also some concern about a lack of independence.

The fourth model suggested the *hiring of a Social Planner* by SPAN itself, and a clarifying of the roles of members, network participants and partners. This model was felt to have some clear advantages, as well as being achievable, and some steps were identified to see it put into place.

This model would see a focus on creating a “hub for the wheel”, assigning responsibility for SPAN's mandate and operations to a specific person, who would be supported and advised by an engaged and informed board of directors. The board would meet monthly, with the staff person, and would provide direction around priorities for the organization. A **small society membership** of committed groups and organizations would elect the board annually and manage the requirements for maintaining society status.

Rather than putting a lot of effort into building a large membership base, the organization would focus on building its **network** – individuals, agencies, groups, and supporters who would be connected in different ways and at different levels depending on their interest and connection with specific issues. Invitations to events might go out to the entire network for some occasions and to more targeted groups for others. The “Action Network” as a whole would be invited to meet on a quarterly basis for information sharing and updates. Input and participation from network members would be sought on a regular basis for specific issues and/or projects.

Another type of relationship would be built with **partners**, such as RDI and the City of Nelson. Written agreements outlining the details of the partnerships would be developed and put into place so that expectations would be clear. This could possibly include a convening function on behalf of the city.

The advantages of having a dedicated and professional **staff person** in place were clear. This individual could provide the centralized “hub” for the organization, being available not only to answer the phone and provide consistent communication but also to reach out and connect to other sectors. They could be attending meetings and events, such as those with the Chamber of Commerce, and Nelson and Area Economic Development Partnership (NAEDP), building relationships and representing the sector. They could provide a credible and accessible resource for City Council, while still maintaining independence. They could be linking to provincial and national initiatives and providing information to SPAN society members and network participants. Ideally this individual would have a strong social planning and community development background.

This model also has the advantage of involving key players in a practical way, making best use of time and resources, especially for the board. Additionally, this model received positive feedback from the city councillors participating in the discussion.

Obviously funding a staff position of this nature will be a challenge, however examples already exist of City Council providing funding support for other organizations, such as the Cultural Development Committee. A proposal from SPAN requesting similar support was highly recommended. Approaching other funders, such as the Osprey Foundation and CBT, was also strongly suggested, as diversified funding sources will provide better security for the position. The position may need to begin as a small part-time contract and evolve into a larger one.

### **Next Steps**

Looking forward to the next two years, there are three main areas of focus for the work SPAN needs to do in order to continue to fulfill its purpose, vision and mission. One focus area is the care and maintenance of SPAN itself, and the second is the ongoing delivery of current commitments. The third is the taking on of new or additional work.

#### **Focus Area 1 - Care of the Organization: Providing concentrated attention to the infrastructure of SPAN**

Within this focus area are steps that need to be taken in the immediate to short term range in order to sustain the work of the organization. There will also be some resulting work that is ongoing. Primary responsibility for this area will lie with the board of directors.

**Seek funding** – Prepare a proposal for City Council requesting ongoing funding/core funding (ideally embedded into the budget). Link funding to the position of Social Planner. Also identify and pursue other sources of funding, leveraging support as appropriate.

**Create a job description** – Strike a committee to create a job description for the staff person. Although it might be easier to secure funding for a less expensive administrator-type position, the intent here is to “aim high”, creating a description for the ideal preferred future of a “social planner”. Originally the position may be very part-time, but with the goal of increasing hours over time.

**Hire staff** – Create a Personnel Committee and hire a staff person. The Personnel Committee will be responsible for ongoing management of the position, including performance reviews, etc.

**Clarify society membership** - Update the membership file and confirm the fee structure.

**Develop a clear network structure** – Create sign up procedures, separate mailing lists (issue specific, event specific, etc.), and set dates and locations for seasonal meetings. Communicate regularly with the network and sub-sets of the network.

**Formalize relationships with current partners** – Meet with representatives of partner organizations and negotiate details. For City Council this would include a commitment to ongoing funding but also a formalizing of how SPAN is connected and can provide input.

With RDI the agreement will clarify the mutually beneficial arrangement of issue identification for research purposes and provision of resources to conduct and distribute such research.

**Formalize financial status** – Remove financial responsibility from Nelson Cares, and create an independent bank account in SPAN's name. Consider applying for charitable status, so that donations can be accepted.

### **Focus Area 2 - Commitment to Current Work: Continuing as a champion for existing initiatives**

Within this focus area there are existing efforts that need to be supported, and/or continued. Primary responsibility for the first two items will lie with the volunteers/contractors who have already been engaged with the projects. Responsibility for the third item will lie with a project team to be developed early in 2017. All will be supported by the staff person once they are in place. Timeline is short to mid-term.

**Continue to support Nelson at its Best** – NaiB already has a brand, suggested next steps, and recommendations to move from a project to a community initiative. It reflects the guiding principles of SPAN and has a structure in place to involve interested parties. SPAN can make a major contribution without “reinventing the wheel”. Members of SPAN will continue to be involved on committees and as advisors. The intent is not to do the work but rather to ensure that the work is being done.

**Support the Volunteer Hub** - Significant energy has already been invested in this project, and SPAN has taken it on when another organization was not able to continue. It has the potential to have a very positive impact on the social sector and is a logical place for continued effort. SPAN will act as the host and provide support for the project lead.

**Support citizen engagement in the upcoming provincial election** – SPAN already has a reputation for bringing issues forward, and a template for engaging voters in democratic dialogue with the Reverse Forum concept. A team of supporters for this project (similar to the Task Force concept from Victoria) should be recruited and put to work in January 2017.

### **Focus Area 3 – Taking on Additional Work: Identifying gaps and looking for solutions**

Within this focus area the guiding principle must be that resources are in place before taking on more work, and that the organization has the capacity to add to its workload. Responsibility for this area will lie with SPAN staff once they are hired and in place. The timeline is in the mid - to long-term range.

**Initiate work on recognition and celebration of the sector** – SPAN has the opportunity to provide leadership in celebrating the success and capacity of the social services sector, focusing on positive achievements rather than deficits. This could involve events, communication strategies, or other activities as determined by stakeholders.

**Develop new partnerships** – Once the core partnerships have been solidified, additional partnerships with groups such as the NAEDP can be pursued.

**Thoroughly assess new opportunities to host or champion work** – Create a process for evaluating the costs and benefits of possible new work. Take on projects only when there is no other logical home for a project, and with resources in place.

### **Conclusion:**

In late 2016 SPAN found itself at a crossroads, with a strong history of engaging and mobilizing the community around social issues, but significant challenges in sustaining the work. An analysis of the organization revealed the need to invest some time and energy into SPAN itself (not unlike doing maintenance on a vehicle) in order to continue forward on its journey. The formalizing of processes and the hiring of a dedicated staff person will be critical in achieving this outcome. Going forward the organization should see positive results from this more focussed approach. Checking in with an evaluation in early 2018 will help keep the momentum on track.

Facilitated and reported by: Val Mayes  
[valleymayes@gmail.com](mailto:valleymayes@gmail.com)