

# A Better Tent City Farm

## Purpose

The following information is provided to support community leaders and neighbours on Spitzig Road as they consider the future of A Better Tent City in Waterloo Region.

## Context

There continue to be hundreds of homeless people in Waterloo Region, many of whom remain unsheltered. A Better Tent City (ABTC) is novel solution built in our community that provides a home and a sense of belonging for a segment of this population.

ABTC has been operational for over one year and is planning to relocate, enhance and continue to improve the services provided on site to support residents.

The ABTC leadership team continues to be actively engaged with municipal staff, elected representatives, potential neighbours, and community leaders to identify potential opportunities to continue and to enhance this community project.

It has not been an easy path to arrive at a sustainable vision for A Better Tent City, and the actions, ideas, and plans outlined in this document are the result of ongoing prayer, reflection, and collaboration.

## Establishment of A Better Tent City

On April 15<sup>th</sup> 2020, a broad cross-section of unsheltered people, service providers, community members, Regional staff and concerned citizens gathered to discuss the potential of creating a better tent city at Lot 42. This resulted in the creation of a small self-organized community of people built on respect for each other and for their shared home.

ABTC began as a low barrier/housing first approach to provide:

- an opportunity to move unsheltered people from dangerous conditions on the streets into a more safe and supportive community
- protection from the environment, adequate access to hygiene and sanitation facilities, and connection to services and healthcare on a path to stable housing

ABTC began with modest goals to keep 30 people safe during the pandemic by providing basic shelter. Safety of the residents was our primary concern.

## Positive Outcomes

As ABTC has grown over the last year, it has surpassed our original goals and it has demonstrated significant positive outcomes in our first year of operations by:

- changing residents' lives for the better:
  - o as they keep themselves and their belongings safely indoors ABTC residents no longer worry about frequent moves and the dangers inherent in living rough; they have a home
  - o with access to a kitchen, whole, healthy food, and opportunities to contribute to collaboratively prepared evening meals residents are healthier, have an increased sense of well-being and belonging
  - o regular visits and support from community health and outreach workers have further improved residents' health and connection to broader supports in the community
  - o an on-site addiction treatment program is now supporting over 30% of ABTC residents to stabilize their lives enabling them to attend school and find and maintain jobs
  - o paying residents to complete tasks necessary to maintain the space has increased dignity and self-worth and reduced theft in the community

- building a diverse community
- creating a meaningful learning opportunity to document and continuously improve encampments for the unsheltered in our region and across the country
  - o jurisdictions from across North America have reached out to learn from our experiences
  - o our advice and experience have supported comparable initiatives across Ontario and as far away as Vancouver Island.

## Lessons Learned

After a year of learning and building community and connections, the leadership team has learned key lessons:

- Growing slowly is essential
- Growth must follow the expressed needs of the residents – we need to listen before we plan
- Rehabilitation only comes with unconditional love
- Wellness goes hand in hand with connection, belonging, and stability
- Most residents have not had stability with respect to family, home, and shelter
- Compassion and caring are critical for the development of healthy relationships
- Positive relationships with regular onsite volunteers can be an important support on the road to stability
- Providing access to essential community services on site (health, housing, income support) can improve both the uptake and efficacy of the service
- Another good source of support for residents can be the residents themselves, and nurturing a caring community is essential to strengthen that web of support
- Our community and the homes are cleaner when men and women live alongside one another

## Collective Leadership Team

ABTC is presently held by a committed collective that consists of:

- Fr. Toby Collins, CR (Pastor, St. Mary's Parish)
- Stephanie and Joe Mancini (The Working Centre)
- Jeff Willmer (retired CAO of the City of Kitchener)
- Laura Hamilton and Aleksandra Petrovic (Social Development Centre WR)

The ABTC collective is responsible for overall direction of and responsibility for the project, oversight of staffing, decision making about funding in collaboration with organization partners and funding partners, promotion of the project, and fundraising in cooperation with organizational partners. The collective also sets parameters and a framework for residents of ABTC and ensures practices are consistent and cooperative.

By collaborating to support this project as a partnership we are building on what we have already discerned to be the best use of all our gifts, organizational capacity and access to community resources.

In the coming months, the Roman Catholic Diocese of Hamilton will incorporate ABTC as a diocesan project operated by the leadership team mentioned above. Land and liability insurance will be provided by the Diocese.

## The Residents of A Better Tent City

ABTC residents are men and women, all adults and range in age from their late twenties through to their sixties. Many have lived unsheltered or have been precariously housed for years, some have lived rough for more than a decade before joining this community. Most struggle with mental illness, trauma and drug addictions that preclude them from living independently or accessing regional emergency shelters. ABTC is home to those for whom no other home has or could be provided. All our residents are seeking to stabilize their lives to:

- o improve their health
- o learn new ways as seeing themselves as lovable
- o re-establish their relationships with family and community (many are estranged from their parents and from their children)

- reclaim dignity by being a part of an affirming community
- find hope and begin to imagine a different future

Residents contribute to this community by:

- contributing to the project with the “housing allowance” portion of their government assistance
- cleaning the kitchen, shared spaces and washrooms
- assisting with meal preparation
- assisting with maintenance, gardening and construction projects
- supporting one another

## Next Steps in the Development of A Better Tent City

ABTC began to simply create a safe space and has evolved to create opportunities for recovery and integration. We are now planning to build a unique residence that will not only continue to assist tenants to stabilize with housing, methadone treatment, health care and addictions counseling, but will also provide on-site work opportunities through the development of agricultural projects that include community and market gardens and vertical container food production.

As the Hamilton Diocese incorporates ABTC as a diocesan project we will develop their land on Spitzig Road. The shift to a diocesan project will mark ABTC’s shift to ABTC Farm: a supportive agricultural/residential project predicated on positive relationships with each other and with the land.

Initial development proposed for the summer of 2021 includes building an access lane, bringing power into the site from the road, drilling a well, installing a septic system and building an agricultural shed.

Once this infrastructure work is complete and the project is incorporated our initial goal is to establish a community of approximately 30 to 40 residents (agricultural worker trainees) on this site and begin to prepare the land for food production and to establish a vertical container gardening system.

Learnings from the first year of operations will be applied to the structures that we establish to strengthen this community and support life in their new home. Roles and responsibilities for staff and residents will be clarified and we will increase the variety, number and impact of non-residents in supportive roles on site. Specifically:

- An additional staff member will be hired to ensure that someone is always available onsite to support residents and volunteers.
- Increases in the number and variety of community engagement initiatives ranging from additional health and wellbeing visits from other service providers’ staff to more brunches and dinners being prepared and served on site to gardening, food processing and groundskeeping work will expand opportunities for residents to work alongside community volunteers. We have observed the benefits of these positive relationships on both individual residents and on the collective. Our goal is to have two to four volunteers or community support workers on site each day between mid-morning and early evening.
- Expanding opportunities for residents’ work/training programs that support residents to learn skills and earn pocket money as they maintain the space and assist with construction.
- Enhanced opportunities for recreational activities on site will also be created, we have learned that music and art not only bring people together, they also enrich the positive energy in shared spaces.
- Residents’ “Commitment Agreement” will be updated to clarify and increase their contribution and requirements to support the collective and to enhance security.
- All visitors to the collective space will continue to be documented, the single lane entrance to the Spitzig Rd. property will support enhanced security.

## Other Key Considerations for A Better Tent City Farm

### Programming

- The Social Development Centre will continue to seek and secure funding to support daily operations and to improve the lives of ABTC residents and will continue to connect this project into the broader network of supports for unsheltered and for people experiencing food insecurity, and to observe and document learnings. The SDC's longstanding research relationships with both universities will support ongoing evaluative efforts related to this demonstration project.
- The Working Centre's experience and success in creating good work opportunities through local food production will contribute to the success of this initiative.
- The proposed agricultural development on site will dramatically increase the productivity of the Diocese's land.
- The owners of [GR365N](#) growing systems have reached out to ABTC leadership to offer their support in establishing a vertical growing system that would produce fresh greens for sale 365 days a year. A local family foundation has offered to help to finance the establishment of this social enterprise on site at ABTC farm.

### Community support:

- Regional staff are supportive of the leadership team and on side with the recognition that such a facility is necessary.
- ABTC has created opportunities to engage people across our region who seek to give dignity back to those who they recognize have lost so much
- approximately 40 regular volunteers support the collaborative cooking initiative to prepare daily evening meals and weekend brunches
- over 50 volunteers support the development and maintenance of the space and life at ABTC
- a variety of faith and community groups have shared their collective time and talents to support and improve life at ABTC
- the relocation and re-establishment of ABTC is being planned and managed by a team of committed volunteers comprising project managers from the private sector, Conestoga College, and local trades people. They are also actively supporting the fundraising campaign to fund the move and secure in-kind donations of time, services, and materials

### Financial Sustainability

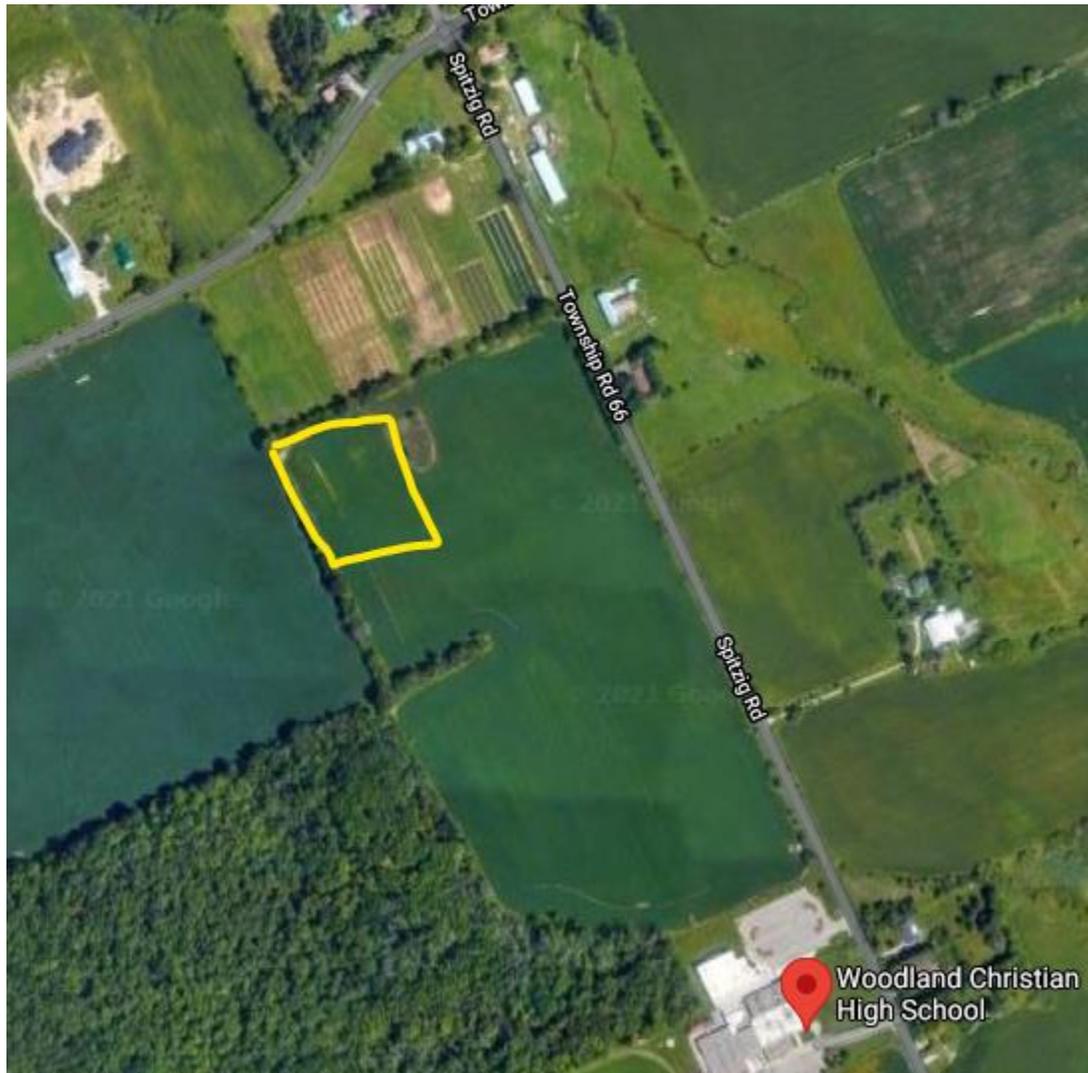
- The backing of substantial financial and moral commitment from the Diocese of Hamilton adds stability and longevity to this initiative.
- The Community Foundation has funded the construction of portable shower and laundry facilities and the first 12 tiny homes
- St Mary's parish has raised funds to support the construction of 20 additional tiny homes

- The United Way has funded the establishment and operation of ABTC's kitchen and collaborative cooking project through the Community Kitchen Cooperative of KW
- Canadian Municipal Association grant has been used to provide nominal compensation to support two on-site coordinators
- Kindred Credit Union has funded the work/training program that supports residents to learn skills as they maintain the space and assist with construction
- Community financial donations by hundreds of local supporters and family foundations totaling in excess of \$160K has supported ongoing operations and the construction of additional tiny homes

### Being Good Neighbours

As we move through the process of finding a new home for ABTC, we are acutely aware that while stable housing and communal belonging are essential for our residents, this small community will also bring unique challenges to the local neighbourhood where it becomes established.

The yellow area below is a general outline of the location of the houses, washrooms, kitchen/dining, and programming areas on the Spitzig Road property.



Our ongoing site planning process includes specific consideration for:

- **Security of our residents and our neighbours**

As is the case at our current site, the key to security is building a sense of community and belonging for our residents. Community and belonging are at the core of ABTC and they are established by providing a sense of home in the form of an affordable tiny home, and through our programming which addresses the physical, mental, and emotional needs of residents.

- The commitments agreed to by all residents note that theft from a neighbour will result in immediate eviction. Our residents respect their community and their neighbours. As described previously, the ABTC site is supervised by paid staff 24/7 and there is also a heavy additional volunteer presence throughout the day.

The site planning process also has security of our neighbours as a primary concern – tiny homes, washrooms, dining, and programming facilities will be located at a maximum possible distance from all neighbours.

- **Pedestrian and vehicular traffic flow in and out of our site**

Our site planning includes intentional planning for foot traffic that avoids the parking lot at Woodland Christian School and that does not cross the driveways of other neighbours on Spitzig Road.

Vehicular traffic will be limited to volunteers and staff, as well as weekly food delivery, waste management and emergency services vehicles. There will be ample parking set aside on-site so that there will be minimal traffic impact on Spitzig Road.

- **Sound and Visual Aesthetics**

Our site planning includes orientation of houses so that their front doors face away from the street and towards the natural embankment in the northwest corner of the property. This will result in only the backs of the colourful houses being visible from the street and noise being dampened naturally.

The northwest corner of the property is also shielded from any direct sightlines to Woodland Christian High School

- **Developing Relationship with Woodland Christian High School**

Given the mission and challenges of our work at ABTC, we recognize natural connections and opportunities for relationship building with Woodland while also acknowledging the need to ensure ongoing confidence in the safety of Woodland's campus for students, staff, and visitors. It is important to us that our role as neighbours is collaborative and based on listening and understanding the needs of the school. We see the school as a key stakeholder in our plans, and we hope that our relationship will develop so that the board, administration, staff, and families of Woodland also feel that they are key allies of ABTC. To develop these relationships, we plan to be open in our communications throughout the planning phase, and, just as we have adapted our programming based on lessons learned at our current site, we will remain open to listening and learning to ensure the viability of our program.

Beyond an open and listening administrative relationship, we hope that our presence as neighbours will provide authentic opportunities for teachers and students to make connections and become part of our ABTC community. For example, our farming programs that will be integral to our programming for residents at ABTC can also provide meaningful curriculum connections and opportunities for students and teachers to build direct relationships with some of our residents.