GREATER VICTORIA
ACTING
TOGETHER

AN INTRODUCTION FOR
SPONSORS

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SUMMARY

GVAT is a diverse partnership of local unions, faith, education and civic groups. Our power lies in the united action of large numbers of people dedicated to advancing the common good.

The groups comprising GVAT are values-based. By learning and acting together, we can transform our communities.

We are non-partisan, prepared to work with all decision makers in the public and private sectors to advance our members’ shared priorities.

Our focus is relational learning and leadership. Relationships are strengthened as we learn about our members’ dreams and aspirations and the barriers they see standing in their way. Through this democratic process, emerging leaders with untold stories are identified and issues that concern us all are brought into sharp focus.

Well-researched, evidence-based, specific, winnable actions are advanced through the power of numbers, knowledge, diversity and relationships. This systematic process allows us all to learn about our communities and to identify, nurture and support new leaders. We can build a foundation for long-term, systemic changes which will bring about a society that better reflects our values.

We are seeking partnerships with sponsors who understand that for commonly held values to be reflected in public and private sector decision making, faith groups, unions, not for profits and educational institutions must improve their capacity to work together and to understand the complexity of our world. We are a registered charity and maintain that status because our focus is education and leadership. While actions are pivotal, most of our time and effort is spent choosing priorities carefully. We plan well so that participants have the experience of democracy as inclusive and collaborative rather than confrontational and win-lose.

This Prospectus aims to allow Sponsors a clear understanding of our work so that we may enter into conversations to build partnerships.
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The Problem
Victoria and its surrounding municipalities are blessed with a magnificent natural setting and unparalleled air and water quality. Our 350,000 citizens can send their children to free schools from Kindergarten to Grade 12. High quality health care is available without regard for income. Community centres offer recreation and support to children, their parents, and their grandparents. Unemployment is below 8% overall. Most of us think this is a great place to live.

But there is a darker side. We who are in leadership in Greater Victoria Acting Together are faith community, union and issue-based not for profit leaders. We see the shadows of the homeless in the doorways. We volunteer in soup kitchens and food banks. We know hundreds of families depend on such charity, including 1 in 6 children. A disproportionate share of First Nations people do not graduate from high school and occupy prisons. We read the headlines of the fentanyl death epidemic. We know special needs children are losing support in our school system. Poorly regulated housing markets mean shelter costs are too high for many people. We work in environmental advocacy and see the looming threat of increased dirty fossil fuel tanker traffic on our fragile shores. Our water and food supplies are insecure with increased drought. We are alarmed at the slow pace of change to a zero-carbon economy. We know that teenagers are kept home from school to babysit their pre-school age step-siblings because daycare is not affordable. We know many seniors are isolated and have no-one with whom to share a cup of tea or help them remember to get to their medical appointment.

For ten years, Faith In Action, a loose association of social justice activists from many faiths has been writing letters, circulating petitions, meeting with politicians and policy makers and protesting. We became increasingly frustrated and disappointed. In April 2015 we learned of a different approach- a tried and tested model operating in Vancouver designed to overcome a fundamental barrier to effective action: Civil society too often does not know how to work together. Too many of our organizations and networks work in silos even if we try to stretch beyond them. Metro Vancouver Alliance focuses on building capacity and education, helping people learn to work together.

A new approach
Victoria’s Faith in Action called a public meeting to explore appetite for such a model. With very little outreach, 75 people showed up. Six months later 35 people registered and paid the fee for a two-day training. It seemed there was interest.

In early February 2016, three of us attended a five-day intensive introduction to an organizing model used by the Metro Vancouver Alliance and 85 other groups around www.gvat.ca
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the world. With almost 60 member groups representing over 300,000 people, the MVA is simply too large and too diverse for decision makers in the public and private sectors to ignore.

But we doubted. Vancouver is much bigger. Is there really an appetite here in this region? We set out to find out. Over the past five months we met with, and listened, to hundreds of leaders and activists in more than 80 faith groups, unions, not for profits, and educational institutions. Over dozens of coffees, at meetings in private homes, at suppers and breakfasts, people told us that, despite all the bounty in Victoria, we share the same concerns as other citizens in other Canadian cities.

None of these issues is new. All of them have been well researched. Respected economists, lawyers, planners, engineers, nurses, doctors, social policy academics, engineers, priests, rabbis and academics have all made the case for change. Victoria residents commonly pack public meetings to support the drive to end homelessness or to take accelerated action on climate. In each case we know what must be done and why. All that is missing is the decision to reflect the values of most people.

The current work
Each issue has its own advocates. Most of the people who advocate for change on these fronts are hard working. They work for well-run organizations that raise millions of dollars. They often have issue-specific networks where they learn from each other and can amplify their concerns. They run carefully thought-out educational and activist campaigns attracting the best and the brightest to the work.

But things continue to get worse. While these wonderful groups certainly make a difference, the climate crisis is deepening, income inequality is growing and housing is less affordable. The Public Health Officer has declared fentanyl overdose deaths an epidemic. More children live in poverty and mental health care is less available. First Nations conditions continue to be sub-optimal. A liveable wage at steady pensioned employment with affordable day care and affordable shelter seems like a long ago memory. Many people cannot remember, and indeed do not know, that food banks are a recent phenomenon. People report feeling increasing despair.

We tried reacting to this agenda set by decision makers concerned with austerity by writing letters. We tried forming groups to oppose and research and educate and lobby. We tried networking those groups to be more effective. We tried mass petitions. Many in the climate movement are trying civil disobedience.

We have run out of time. We are tired of reacting. We need to decide that society must reflect our shared values and learn how to work together for the common
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good. Making sure we set the agenda for change requires that we learn to work together. That is why we are forming Greater Victoria Acting Together.

Our vision: Ten years from now
A critical mass of citizens in this region are shaping their communities to reflect their values. People who live here are equipped to participate in civil society and are aware of their own influence. The majority of residents in the region have heard of GVAT and understand that it provides an opportunity to participate in civil society in meaningful ways. Reconciliation with First Nations is a community-wide priority. GVAT members solve member-prioritized problems by expecting and getting accountability from decision makers in both the public and private sector.

Core rationale
Greater Victoria Acting Together is not single-issue focused. We help existing and emerging leaders of civil society organizations learn how to work together. We have so much more that unites us than divides us. We advance shared priorities, which means our society increasingly reflects commonly held values.

Our goals
GVAT, like its 80 sister organizations elsewhere in Canada\(^1\) and around the world\(^2\) has three goals:

- To build and maintain a resilient effective broad-based citizen’s voice for change in keeping with shared priorities;
- To strengthen member groups
- To identify and support emerging leaders.

Our organizing cycle
1. Listen to members of existing groups. What are their dreams? What barriers stand in the way? Train emerging leaders to listen and to tell their stories.
2. Gather delegates from groups together to discern shared priorities for change.
3. Research and implement winnable actions to advance these shared priorities.
4. Evaluate and advance the priority still further by repeating the cycle.

Our method
Using a well understood and tested method, citizens learn how to work together, identifying shared priorities, researching winnable actions within a systemic change

\(^1\) Vancouver, Calgary and Edmonton
\(^2\) The US, the UK, Germany, Australia, New Zealand and Hong Kong.

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framework (which involves understanding economics, history, politics, geography, negotiation, social policy and psychology) and evaluating outcomes in terms of values. Often called a “University of the Community” the method sees everyone learning all the time. The concept is “leaderful”. Priority is placed on developing a sense of agency and leadership in those who show promise but perhaps have lacked training or a sense of themselves as having this potential. As they engage with decision makers they learn they can make a profound difference in both the day-to-day lives of people and the systems which surround them, often without confrontation. Change can be produced by helping private or public sector decision makers understand why change is needed and why change is in fact in their interests. Change can also result from networking networks which together can identify and fill existing gaps in services. Change also comes when more citizens engage and become self identified as having agency.

Priorities likely to emerge
Our preliminary listening identifies the following common concerns.

- Homelessness;
- Affordable housing;
- Action on climate and clean affordable energy;
- Protecting our coasts;
- Income inequity – a living wage;
- Affordable accessible daycare;
- Mental health care especially for youth;
- Social isolation, especially amongst seniors, immigrants and low income single parents;
- Reconciliation with First Nations will be woven through everything this community does. It is clearly a core value.

Our successes to date
In February we identified some initial benchmarks. As of July 2016 we have:

- Discerned a shared appetite for working together to advance common priorities;
- Held dozens of meetings, (sometimes one-on-one, sometimes with a group in private homes, and in public spaces) exploring the concepts and getting to know each other;
- Identified 50-60 groups representing geographic, age, ethnic and sector diversity. They are willing to give time and energy to working together;
- Identified 20-30 emerging leaders who say they would benefit from training and whose organizations would be strengthened in the result;
- Tested that commitment; Over 150 people have participated in four large events lasting between 1.5 and four hours each, and in many two- hour house meetings (for a total of 1000+ hours);
- Obtained support and endorsement from key groups in faith communities, unions and not for profits; these include the Anglican and Catholic Bishops, the Rabbi of the
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synagogue, the Victoria and District Labour Council and many affiliates, and a substantial number of issue-based not for profits and service organizations;

- Begun outreach to First Nations in the region;
- Obtained start up funding through the Victoria Foundation;
- Obtained not for profit status and affiliated with a registered Canadian charity which supports the work of other organizations like ours such as the Metro Vancouver Alliance; One of our Directors is now also on the Board of the charity.
- Established stable Board governance. We have a retired CMA to ensure excellence in financial management and our Board includes a retired lawyer;
- Drafted a five-year operating plan;
- Begun using sound operating principles including Nationbuilder as our data base. We have built a preliminary website, and Facebook and Twitter;
- Established a culture of respect, curiosity, inclusiveness, accountability and evaluation;
- Prioritized developing strong relationships with key decision makers in the region so that we can work together to negotiate shared success.

Next steps
Consolidating success, planning ahead for future events, fundraising and drawing in organizations continues. We hope to engage more fully with First Nations in the region to learn whether and how they would choose to participate with us and how our priority shaping can support their aspirations.

- Fall program of intensive multi-access trainings for civil society.
- We hope to be engaged in priority setting by late fall or early 2017.

Some opportunities we see:
While priorities will be member-selected, it is evident that there are many existing opportunities for the kind of impact we seek. Co-ordinated civil society would accelerate the following kinds of decisions:

- systematic social planning throughout the region to address seniors housing and homelessness.
- several municipalities are on the verge of deciding that they and their contractors should become liveable wage employers.
- a large not for profit is organizing to have every municipality in the region take steps to become 100% renewable energy users by 2020.
- increase demand for alternative energy options in the private sector such as solar panels and heat pumps.
- civil society centered regulation of the housing market.

Other kinds of opportunities have also been noted:
- A co-ordinated approach to diverse forms of reconciliation with First Nations is entirely possible and broadly supported in the region.
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- Children and youth are fully capable of learning civics. Many school-based programs have been eliminated. We will stress the importance of educating emerging leaders of all ages.
- There is appetite for helping neighbourhood associations, congregations and parishes, and educational institutions and unions with community outreach.
- Several small not for profits working closely with young adults have said they will appreciate the leadership training.
- Bishop Melissa Skelton of the Anglican Church in Vancouver has suggested newly ordained priests and deacons will be more likely to help strengthen their congregations if they understand this model, as it draws in emerging leaders and encourages a culture of listening carefully and being accountable to diverse voices.

The pace at which we are able to continue to develop depends on our sponsors. There is some considerable history in this province of short-lived coalitions. Ideally, all early funding should come from sponsors, as organizations learn to trust each other.

What our sponsors will be supporting:

We are currently seeking funding to support an initial 3-5 year operating plan with one full-time or two part time organizers and a small amount of other core funding. Project specific funding is also being sought for enabling meaningful engagement with First Nations, ensuring children and youth voices are well represented and that specific groups are engaged.

After three years, the organization can be expected to raise much more of its income from member organization dues. But it is anticipated that sponsoring organizations like community foundations, faith communities and unions will continue to want, and will be needed, to support this organization.

Greater Victoria Acting Together has the capacity to advance the values of civil society from a unique vantage point: While we make change together, we will also be strengthening local organizations and identifying and supporting emerging leaders.

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