



Building Social Infrastructure for Resilient Communities

Summary

This interactive session, led by Eric Avner of the Waterloo Region Community Foundation, examined how intentional investments in social infrastructure—the physical and relational spaces where people build trust and community—are essential to resilient, thriving communities. With a rapidly growing population and a region facing high rates of both in-migration and out-migration, Eric highlighted how physical development (like roads and housing) must be complemented by infrastructure that nurtures human connection.

Drawing on local and national research, including studies from the Toronto Foundation and Community Foundations of Canada, the session highlighted alarming declines in social connection and civic participation. Eric presented the Waterloo Region Community Foundation's strategic shift toward fostering social cohesion through investments in three core types of social infrastructure:

- Havens – safe spaces grounded in shared identity (e.g., LGBTQ2S+ youth centers, cultural hubs)
- Hubs – intentionally diverse and accessible gathering places (e.g., libraries, arts centers)
- Hangouts – informal, open spaces where people can simply "be" together (e.g., public plazas, co-working spots)

Participants explored the practical implementation of this framework through case examples and group discussion. The session also introduced digital platforms developed or supported by the Foundation, such as grant directories and AI-powered community space maps, showcasing how technology can enhance—not replace—real-world connection.

The core message: social infrastructure is not a luxury—it is foundational. Trust, civic participation, and community wellbeing depend on creating spaces and experiences where people feel safe, seen, and part of something larger than themselves.

Key Takeaway Actions

1. **Invest in All Three Types of Spaces:** Ensure your community includes and supports:
 - a. **Havens:** identity-affirming spaces (e.g., LGBTQ2S+ youth centers)



- b. **Hubs:** cross-community gathering spaces (e.g., libraries)
- c. **Hangouts:** casual spaces (e.g., plazas, co-working areas)
2. **Support Activation, Not Just Infrastructure:** Don't just build physical spaces—invest in programming, staffing, and design to animate and sustain engagement.
3. **Recognize Fragility of Havens:** Havens are often underfunded and narrowly focused; they require sustained, flexible, and culturally competent support.
4. **Use Shared Experiences Strategically:** Programs like "On the Table" and civic reunions build common ground. Use these as tools to collect insights, foster identity, and drive momentum.
5. **Leverage Digital Tools Thoughtfully:** Build or enhance shared platforms (e.g., public resource directories) to amplify access and connection, especially in underserved or rural areas.
6. **Redefine Community Trust as Critical Infrastructure:** Social cohesion is foundational to tackling systemic issues—philanthropy must prioritize rebuilding trust and social capital.

Reflective Questions

1. What havens, hubs, and hangouts already exist in your community? Which are thriving, and which are fragile or missing?
2. How can we support under-resourced spaces that serve specific communities (e.g., racialized, rural, youth)?
3. Are there shared experiences that could anchor a stronger sense of belonging across community lines?
4. How can digital tools complement real-world connection, rather than replace it?
5. What would it look like to treat social infrastructure with the same urgency as roads or housing in your region?