

Another lightbulb moment for One Change

Backers of Project Porchlight turn attention

BY DON BUTLER, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN AUGUST 17, 2009



Stuart Hickox, founder and executive director of One Change, the non-profit Ottawa organization behind Project Porchlight, is gearing his team up for this week's launch of a pilot project that aims to distribute 13,000 free key-chain digital tire gauges to Ottawa residents by the end of September.

Photograph by: Wayne Cuddington, the Ottawa Citizen, The Ottawa Citizen

Last week was brutal for Stuart Hickox and his team at One Change, the Ottawa non-profit organization behind the wildly successful Project Porchlight campaign.

One Change's associate executive director, John Mulvihill, died suddenly Aug. 9, devastating the close-knit One Change family.

"It's like a bomb's gone off," a sombre Hickox said. "It's such a loss for us. John Mulvihill was just such a force."

The loss of Mulvihill, a retired Canadian Red Cross

executive who oversaw One Change's increasingly ambitious operations, could hardly have come at a worse time.

This week, One Change will launch a pilot project that aims to distribute 13,000 free key-chain digital tire gauges to Ottawa residents by the end of September.

A successor to Project Porchlight, which gave out electricity-saving compact fluorescent lightbulbs, the tire-gauge project is designed to increase fuel efficiency by encouraging motorists to properly inflate their tires.

"Maintain your tire pressure and you'll save \$65 a year on gas," Hickox says. If everyone in Canada properly inflated their tires -- about 40 per cent of us don't -- we'd save \$600 million on gas and cut

CO2 emissions by 1.4 million tonnes, says Hickox.

The new campaign has a tough act to follow.

Since its start in an Ottawa Giant Tiger parking lot in 2005, Project Porchlight has distributed more than 2.3 million free compact fluorescent light bulbs (CFLs) in about 500 communities in Canada and the United States.

The inspiration for the project came when Hickox spotted a life-altering statistic on the federal government's Energy Star website in 2004: if every household in Canada replaced one incandescent bulb with a CFL, it would be like taking 66,000 cars off the road.

At the time, Hickox, like many people, was aware that an environmental crisis was looming, but unsure what he could do about it. "So when I saw that, I thought, 'I can do that.' It's not going to change the world, but it made me feel that I could do something."

With some friends, he founded Project Porchlight. Within eight weeks of its launch, he says, "a couple of hundred volunteers had delivered 35,000 bulbs door to door, and we knew we were onto something."

By the time the Ottawa campaign ended, Project Porchlight had distributed 250,000 bulbs in the city.

More campaigns followed: "We just started getting calls from all over the place," Hickox says.

After an executive from EnCana, the Calgary-based gas company, received a free CFL while visiting Ottawa, the company quickly signed on as a sponsor. Project Porchlight has since delivered 840,000 bulbs in 200 communities in Alberta. It's now in the midst of a million-bulb campaign in New Jersey.

Supporters credit bulb giveaways for introducing CFLs to skeptical consumers and popularizing their use.

For instance, B.C. Hydro's Power Smart program handed out 1.7 million free CFL bulbs between 2001 and 2003. At the time, only one in five B.C. homes had at least one CFL bulb. By 2008, that had risen to 77 per cent.

Power Smart has calculated that CFL programs saved 235.5 gigawatt-hours of electricity in B.C. between 2001 and 2005 -- enough to light 137,000 households for a year.

CFL programs have also made it politically feasible for governments to bring in legislation phasing out the sale of inefficient incandescent bulbs, says Nancy Olewiler, an environmental economist at Simon Fraser University.

Not everyone is a fan. Lawrence Soloman, executive director of Energy Probe, disparages giveaway campaigns as "feel-good programs" that accomplish little and may even be counter-productive.

By creating the illusion of change, he argues, they divert focus from the harder reforms that are necessary. If the goal is to use energy efficiently on the road, Soloman says, we should charge motorists for the use of roads, as London and Stockholm are doing.

Hickox agrees those changes have to happen. But he rejects the notion that One Change's giveaway programs impede broader action.

"It's not a feel-good thing. It's a do-good thing. It's about making it possible for people to believe that simple actions matter. We're tipping people from awareness to action."

Many of Project Porchlight's 10,000 volunteers have never been involved in traditional environmental groups, he points out. "We feel that we're mobilizing a new demographic of people for positive environmental action."

Many mainstream environmental groups have been resistant to One Change's programs. Hickox thinks it's partly because One Change operates on a business model, with a strategic vision and an emphasis on marketing.

"That's all language that a lot of these organizations either don't understand or dislike, and often both," says Hickox, who has little time for the "negative, pessimistic, doom-and-gloom view of the world" that many environmental groups espouse.

As well, One Change -- which Hickox describes as a "social entrepreneurship" -- is well-funded by sponsors, including corporations such as Canadian Tire, a key backer of the new tire gauge campaign. This year, its gross revenues are about \$8 million.

That breeds resentment and suspicion among activists that it's being co-opted by companies or agencies to "greenwash" their images.

One Change carefully guards against precisely that, Hickox says. "But we feel it's critical that we engage a broad spectrum to get the job done.

"We're not here to pump up the problem, to make people scared. We think that's done enough. We just want to convert that to positive, real, local, measurable action."

One Change's tire-gauge program, Hickox says, fits the template.

"Like the bulb is to the house, the tire gauge is to the car -- a simple, universal first action that people can take that can convert their own self-perception about the importance of fuel efficiency and lead them to maybe consider doing other things."

Some of the gauges will be given away to those who attend one of nine clinics at Canadian Tire stores between Aug. 22 and the end

of September. But Hickox hopes about 10,000 will be distributed door to door by volunteers.

He agrees the tire-gauge campaign presents challenges "because it isn't the simplest action." That's why One Change opted for a key-chain gauge, to keep it visible and top-of-mind.

The package includes coupons worth \$30 off oil and filter work at Canadian Tire -- the next simple thing motorists can do to improve the efficiency of their vehicles, Hickox says.

If the Ottawa pilot project is successful, One Change hopes to extend the campaign to other jurisdictions. "All of our major funders and partners are watching with keen interest," Hickox says.

One Change has already pitched a proposal for a pilot campaign on water to EnCana and the government of Alberta. "And they love it," Hickox says. Though he declines to provide details, he's optimistic it will begin by next spring.

During a week when the One Change family lost a beloved member, that must offer some consolation.

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