

# From NIMBY to YIMBY: A Case Study on Effective Community Engagement

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# Case Study: Cedarvale House

Today we'll talk about BGM and WoodGreen's Community Engagement work for the opening of **Cedarvale House**, including:

- The Project particulars
- Activities and strategies
- Key lessons for success
- 1-year later – where are we now?

# About Us



Opportunity made here.

## **WoodGreen Community Services**

For 85 years, WoodGreen has been a leading social services agency, providing integrated programs in the areas of health services, housing, employment, and more which serve seniors, youth, refugees, and more in Toronto.



## **BGM Strategy Group**

BGM is an Toronto-based consulting firm working in the public, non-profit, and private sectors. One major area of focus is housing, where we frequently work with housing providers to strategize, plan, and execute complex projects.



## CEDARVALE HOUSE – EAST TORONTO

- Originally a parking lot, adjacent to large public park, rec center, and school
- Constructed by City of Toronto as part of **HousingTO Action Plan**
- Modular construction, local manufacturer
- 59 studio units, common area, offices, and industrial kitchen



*Artist's rendering*



## CEDARVALE HOUSE

- **WoodGreen Community Services** selected as operator pre-completion
- Affordable long-term housing with supports for seniors (55+)
- Primarily individuals experiencing/at risk of homelessness
- WoodGreen & BGM took over Community Engagement in Fall 2022



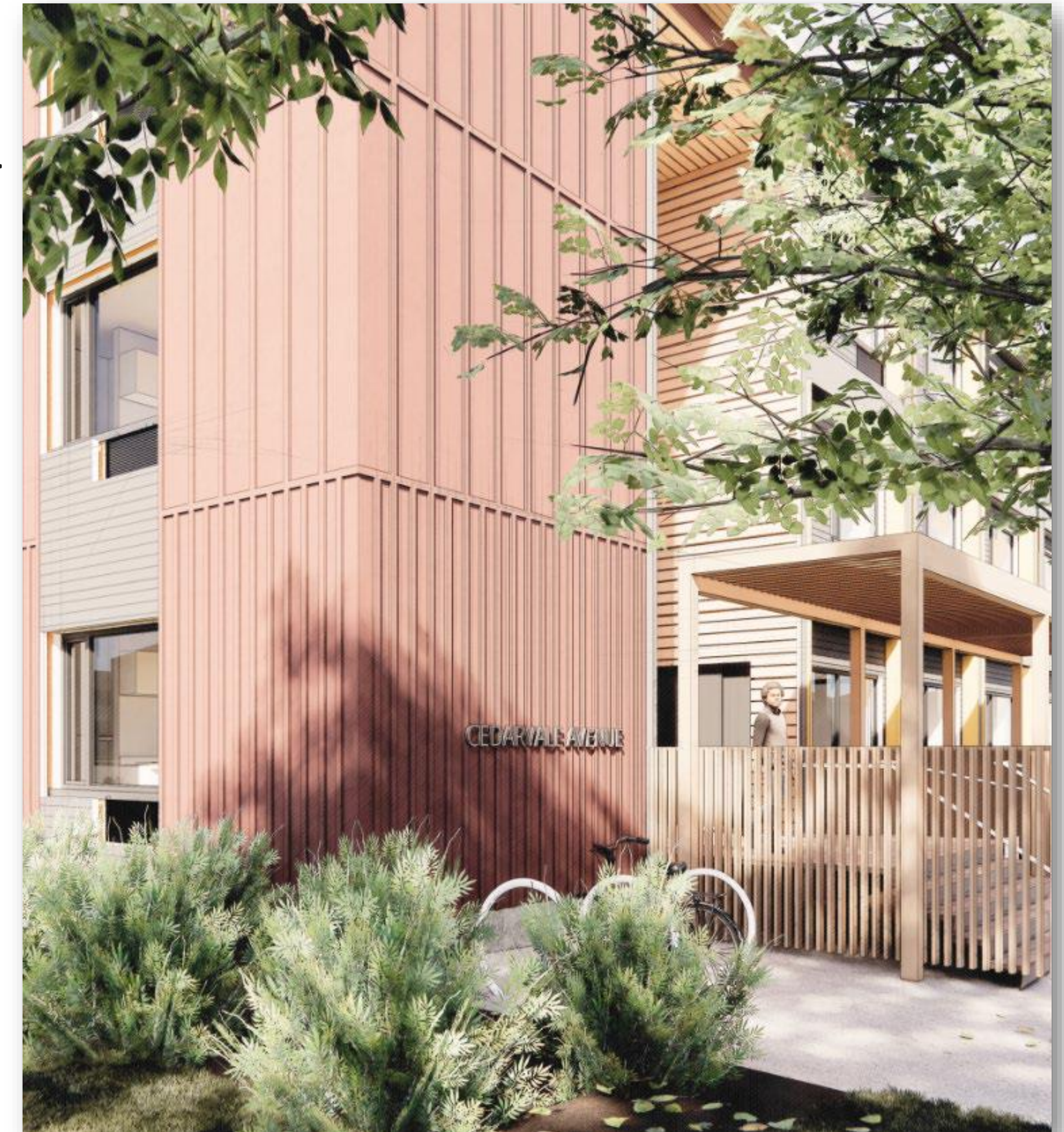
*Artist's rendering*



# Our Challenges

We inherited several key challenges for this project:

- Construction had been *significantly* delayed by COVID-19, labour disruptions, and supply chain issues
- Community Engagement:
  - Community Liaison Committee had become unproductive and contentious
  - Communication from project team insufficient to date
- Misinformation and outright discrimination around homelessness, shelters, and supportive housing





# Laying a Foundation

**Start from a place of strength.**



# Foundation



We began with planning and establishing a foundation for our goals, including:

- Identifying key stakeholders involved and directly affected by this new development, including:
  - Local schools: Principals and Teaching Staff
  - Public Services: City's SSHA, Toronto Fire, Toronto Police, Parks and Rec
  - Government Officials: Local City Councilor, Mayor, MPP, Minister of Housing
  - Community Members
  - Local churches, businesses, and community groups
- Strategizing methods of engagement
- Setting target dates and list of required deliverables
- Understanding our critical path & timelines



# Key Lessons

1. **Be intentional** – do as much as you can, but do it purposefully

2. **Timelines are precarious** – be ready to adapt when they change

# Shifting Approach

**Inherited strategies, processes, and plans  
shouldn't work against you.**



# Approach



We needed to shift the approach from previous community engagement efforts: namely, the City's Community Liaison Committee.

- CLC needed to be **tactfully disbanded**
- We called a **final** meeting, provided information updates, **thanked them** for their service to the community
- Post-meeting - provided ongoing communications post-meeting on future opportunities to be involved in **productive, positive ways**



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# Stakeholder Consultation

**Ask and you shall receive**



# Consultation



- Stakeholder consultations were done continuously throughout the process
- Early, ongoing consultation was vital to building buy-in with the community
- Our attitude (particularly for NIMBYs) was intentional. We continuously reminded each other that:
  - Every conversation is an important opportunity to share our key messages and generate support
  - NIMBYs are just people like you and me, driven by their own unique fears, prejudices, and priorities
  - You can't convince everyone to change their opinion – confirmation bias is very real
  - The community has limited control over the outcome – don't tell them otherwise, and don't relinquish control
  - No community will ever support you 100%, and that's okay



# Consultation



We centered consultations around the following areas:

1. Varied opportunities to participate (with boundaries)
2. Invitations to share their own ideas (such as welcome baskets, a collaborative, community-driven contribution)
3. Transparent communication of our plans and project status
4. Fielding concerns, questions, and complaints – resolving or addressing them wherever possible



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**4. Consultation is vital** – You need community support

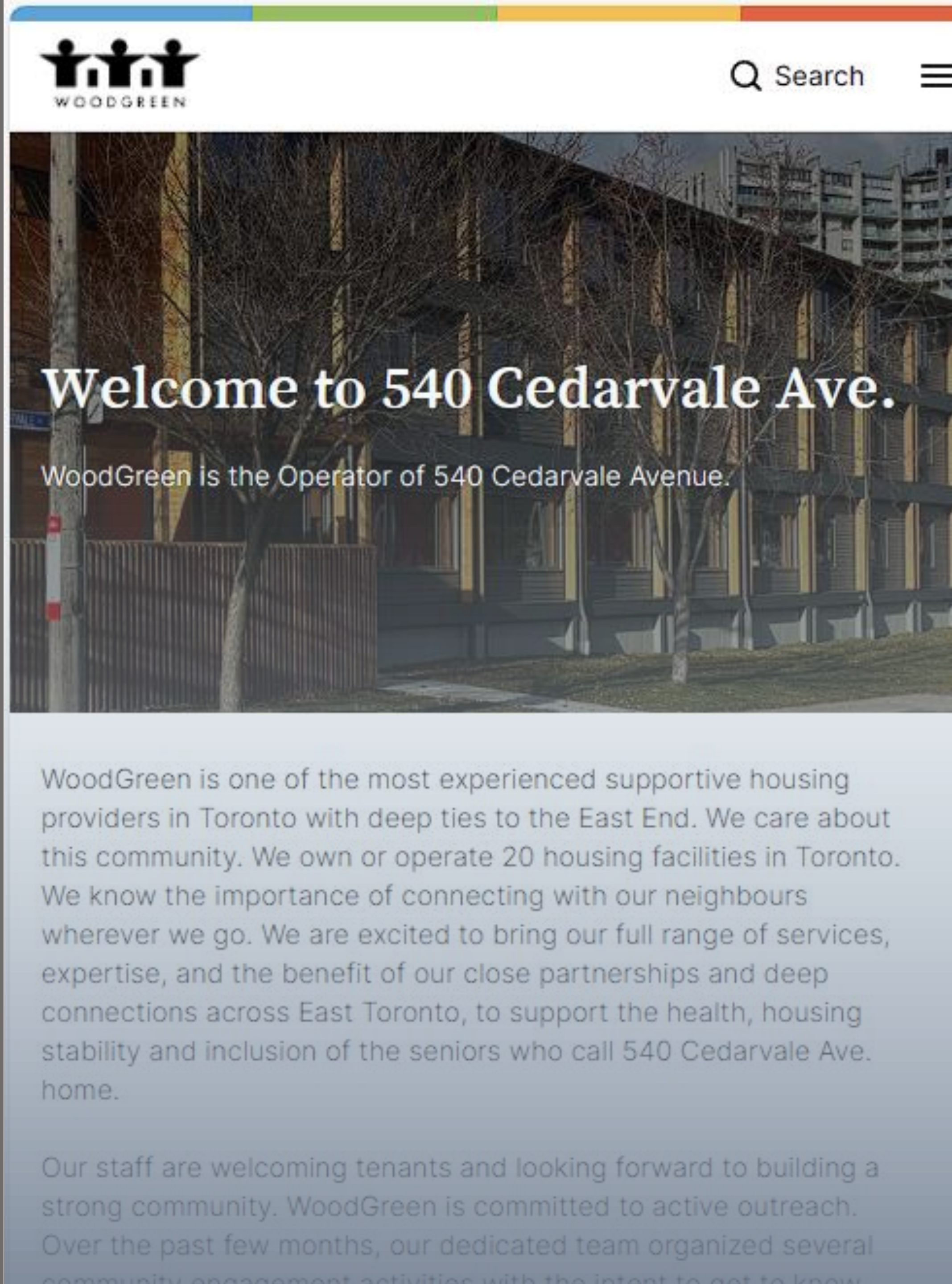


# Communicate

**(and then communicate again)**



# Communicate



- We developed key messaging immediately to ensure consistency
- Then – we deployed multiple touchpoints for this content
- Physical:
  - Press releases
  - Flyers
  - Door-knocking
  - Mailers
- Digital:
  - Website page
  - Social media posts & calendar
  - Blog posts
  - Dedicated email inbox
  - FAQs



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**5. Do not communicate uncertainty** – ensure messages are clear and confirmed



# Support Partners and Staff

**You're on the same team – stay on the same page**



# Staff & Partners



- Key messages shared with WoodGreen staff
- Scripts with FAQ content were developed
- Pathways to direct inquiries to appropriate team were established and reinforced
- Once appointed, leadership of Cedarvale House were brought into key meetings and planning
- Information updates were periodically sent to external partners and stakeholders (i.e. City Councilor, school administrators)



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**6. Make sure your team is prepared** – speak with a shared voice



# The Open House

**Eliminating mystery and generating  
empathy**



# Open House



- We centered engagement efforts around a Community Open House:
  - Positive, celebratory, and exciting
  - Brought community together
  - Demystified the building, WoodGreen, and its future-residents
  - Encouraged and generated empathy
  - Educated the community on key issues
  - Professional videographer



# Open House



- Arguably the most important element of our plan
- Was important it was executed well to end on a positive note
- Full awareness of critical path was vital – continuously ask:
  - To complete this task, what must happen first?
  - What don't we know yet?
  - What roadblocks might we encounter?



# Open House



- Making it a celebration:
  - Free Snacks and drinks
  - Arts and crafts table
  - Balloons, streamers
  
- Involving the community:
  - Children's art and welcome letters
  - 50+ gift baskets from community groups
  - Direct invitations – people felt we wanted them there



# Open House



- Demystifying and generating empathy:
  - Introducing WoodGreen – who are they? Why are they the best choice for this work?
  - Staged a suite to look lived in – this is someone’s home, not a shelter
  - Tours were given (with clearly marked boundaries)
  - Told real stories where possible (lived-experience testimonials)



# Open House



- Educating the community:
  - Several “exhibits” in various rooms – high quality, professional signage
  - Signage about building/construction, homelessness in Toronto, challenges facing seniors in poverty, and the supports WoodGreen would provide
  - “Experts” stationed by displays to answer questions



# Open House



- Post-event follow-up:
  - Approx. 300 people attended (triple our goal)
  - Thank you's were sent via mass email/direct email to known stakeholders and participants
  - Event blog post featuring pictures, a recap of what happened, and repeat of Call to Action
  - Decision tree contact sheet – information provided to residents on who to call (police, staff, City planning, etc.) for various scenarios
  - WoodGreen recruited, launched, and facilitated their **Access and Inclusion Advisory Committee (AIAC)**



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**6. Make sure your team is prepared** – speak with a shared voice

**7. Community involvement** – Provide positive ways for them to contribute

**8. Teach don't preach** – educate without shame and show empathy to neighbours

**9. Center around a milestone** – An open house, BBQ, etc. generates inclusivity



# One Year Later

WoodGreen's Community Engagement work has continued:

- 6-month door knocking campaign to engage further with neighbours
  - Sentiments had changed significantly
- Advisory committee launched Feb 2023, meets quarterly
  - Mandate: promote a sense of belonging and community and bring together long-time residents and new members of the community
  - Recently hosted a Community BBQ for Cedarvale residents and entire neighbourhood





*Thank You!*



*Artist's rendering*