

Building the new City of Toronto: Reflections on Civic Engagement

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1. Why is the City of Toronto interested in civic engagement?

The seven municipalities of Etobicoke, East York, Metro, North York, Scarborough, Toronto and York were amalgamated into the City of Toronto on January 1st, 1998. After amalgamation the Special Committee to Review the Final Report of the Toronto Transition Team (Miller Committee) was charged with helping to build the post amalgamation Toronto. The Miller Committee involved Torontonians in an active discussion on how to create better local government. Discussion groups were held, people mailed, faxed or e-mailed written comments; people made deputations to the Community Councils and City Council, and many groups held their own meetings.

People had many ideas and concerns about local government, but one central theme emerged from all this discussion: people's involvement is a cornerstone of local government. The people of Toronto made it clear that they want the City government to be visible, accessible, meaningful and sensitive to them - they want the City government structure to be people-centered.

On March 2, 1999, the City of Toronto adopted four key principles of civic participation:

- collaborative decision-making;
- accessibility;
- continuous improvement in citizen participation; and
- community capacity building.



The first Strategic Plan for the City of Toronto also reflects a strong commitment to an open, accountable, transparent and participatory process of political decision-making:

"The City of Toronto promotes and maintains a system of responsible and accountable governance where the interests of individuals and communities are balanced with those of the City as a whole. Public participation is an integral part of the City's decision-making processes... We facilitate active community involvement in all aspects of civic life, both locally and city-wide. (p.2)."

2. What has the City of Toronto done to date?

As part of this commitment to active citizen engagement, the City of Toronto organized a five part

discussion series exploring the notions of civic engagement and community participation. This series provided a unique opportunity to engage elected officials, academics, City Staff and Toronto's residents in a dialogue on how to strengthen civil society in Toronto.



"People develop ownership of an issue, when they are involved early on in the discussion."

The discussions explored questions such as:

- What is a useful framework for civic participation?; What are major global trends which influence civic participation?
- What constitutes meaningful civic engagement?
- How does the City of Toronto engage its citizenry?; What are the strengths and weaknesses of its civic engagement practices?
- What lessons can we learn from civic engagement practices in other cities?
- What role should municipal governments play in community capacity building?

Session 1:

The first session "The Challenges of Civic Engagement" examined the notion of civic participation and civic engagement in contemporary Canadian society and in the City of Toronto. It addressed the various trends and societal forces which influence and shape our current understanding and views of civic engagement. The session, which was held on February 10, 2000 from 7:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. at the Metro Hall Council Chambers, featured:

Dr. Janice Stein, Political Science Department, University of Toronto

Dr. Roger Keil, Environmental Studies, York University

Mr. Phillip Haid, Institute on Governance

Session 2:

The second session "Active People: Active Democracy" explored meaningful approaches to effective civic engagement in political decision-making. The discussion explored people's preferences in interacting with municipal decision-makers and addressed how marginalized groups can have input and representation at City Hall. This session held on April 18, 2000, at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, featured:

Dr. Benjamin Barber, Rutgers University, New York

Dr. Neil Nevitte, Political Science Department, University of Toronto

Ms. Elizabeth May, Sierra Club, Ottawa

Session 3:

The third session "Ready, Set, Civic Action" was an interactive play that used theatre as a means to examine civic participation and to explore how people define issues and find solutions. This interactive play produced by Mixed Company called on the audience to participate and be part of shaping solutions.

Session 4:

The fourth session "Civic Participation: Open the Toolbox" examined lessons learned from other places. Participants heard about civic participation in other places and joined discussion groups to talk about what we can do in the City of Toronto. This session held on June 26th from 7 pm to 10 pm at the Memorial Community Hall in the North York City Centre featured:

Dr. Anne McAfee, Director of CityPlan, Vancouver

Mr. Jim August, Consultant, Jim August Consultants, Winnipeg

Ms. Linda Stewart, Consultant, Public Consultation Services

Mr. Jamie Swift, Author, Civil Society in Question

Session 5:

The fifth session in the series was a celebration of how people in communities can effectively work together to address and resolve community issues. This session was sponsored and organized by the Healthy City Office. The session featured the annual Neighbourlies Award Ceremony, an event that is now in its 9th year and enjoys broad community support and interest.



The theme of the event was "Festival of Community". The event was a reunion of former Neighbourlies Award winners with displays of their community-based projects. This celebration of success stories spreads the word on how residents can work together to build a healthy neighbourhood.

The event was also an engagement opportunity with several innovative methods for residents to share their views on civic participation. People had the opportunity to voice their opinions and views using a video and a tape booth, flip charts and a visual art site. People discussed ideas with each other and with representatives of community organizations showcasing their projects. A "Neighbourlies Newsletter" which shares people's viewpoints is now available.

3. What does the City of Toronto want to accomplish?

Together with Toronto residents, the City plans to develop an overall framework for civic participation in the City of Toronto. The discussion series provides a basis for the development of the framework, as it will:

- identify and define concepts of civic engagement and civil society;
- share information on examples of effective civic engagement practises in other cities;
- review and examine civic participation practices in the City of Toronto; and
- define the role of municipal government in community-capacity building.

4. What has the City of Toronto learned from these seminars?

4.1 What is civic engagement?

Phillip Haid defines "civic engagement" as the active involvement of citizens in resolving issues of public concern, shaping government policy, and ensuring that citizens' needs are central to program design and service delivery.

Janice Stein describes "civic engagement" as the "engagement of citizens with and without government on issues of community and public concern."

The notion of civic participation and civic engagement are often used interchangeably and lack a commonly accepted definition. For the purpose of this summary, we have defined civic engagement as a process by which citizens are asked to reflect upon policy choices to inform political decision-making. Civic engagement can take many different forms, such as community activism related to specific social causes, volunteer activities, participation in government processes. The most important aspect is that people get involved in building their community.

There are a variety of reasons why effective civic engagement should be of concern to governments. Broad-based public input on an issue improves political decision-making. For example, public discussion of an issue may generate innovative problem solutions which decision-makers may not have discovered beforehand. Through consultation, political representatives and citizens can explore the value choices that underlie decision-making. Civic participation also strengthens the commitment among citizens and political representatives alike to pursue an agreed-upon course of action.

Civic participation builds social capital to the extent that people become actively involved in political decision-making. Political representatives have to demonstrate how the ideas and viewpoints they have heard during a consultation process have actually influenced the final decision on a given issue. Civic participation holds political representatives accountable and makes decision-making more transparent.



"Torontonians do not want to be treated as consumers of municipal services. First and foremost, Torontonians are citizens of this community."

For the purpose of this summary, the term "citizen" is not defined in its political sense, referring to a member of a nation-state. A citizen is defined in this context as a person who is a member of our community.

4.2 Major Themes

This summary extracts major themes and questions for review and reflection. Appendix B contains copies of overhead presentations given at the various discussion sessions.

Theme 1: Think about residents as citizens, not consumers or clients

Torontonians do not want to be treated as consumers of municipal services. First and foremost, Torontonians are citizens of this community.

Session participants felt that the term "consumer" relegates residents to a passive role: as a consumer, residents are asked to simply choose from a menu of available goods and services, just like shopping at the supermarket. Participants indicated that the "consumer role" was reinforced by the current language use at City Hall which uses business concepts to describe governance processes, such as "City Hall is in the business of delivering services to the taxpayer; bureaucrats re-engineer and restructure operating practices and devise business plans."

However, the role of the citizen is much broader: citizens, in collaboration with each other, define the values which govern their community. Citizens question and debate what these values should be. Together citizens engage in a process of developing a collective vision for their community. Seminar participants clearly want the opportunity to explore the different value choices that underlie public policy making. Participants also stressed that it is important for citizens to have a physical meeting space at City Hall; citizens do not wish to be perceived as merely guests or visitors to City Hall. City Hall should be a place that belongs to all Torontonians, not just to City Council and civil servants. The play "Ready, Set, Civic Action" emphasized this theme.

Benjamin Barber argued that citizens themselves have to undertake an important shift in thinking: they need to stop thinking of government as a service provider and themselves as clients; citizens need to accept their larger role as policy developers and political decision-makers. Elizabeth May confirms Barber's observation. She argues that people need to reclaim their own ideas of citizenship. In this process, citizens need to transform the language currently used at City Hall from the "business-client model" to the "governance/citizen model". May states that "the client model is very corrupting: it apes the free-market globalization model." Once government starts separating people out as clients with different service needs, the idea of citizenship is undermined. People come to perceive themselves as members of special interest groups rather than citizens with their rights and responsibilities.

Theme 2: Civic participation processes need to be guided by clear goals and objectives

Effective participation processes organized by the City of Toronto require clear goals and objectives. Citizens have to see how their input affects specific outcomes.



"Good civic participation processes have a clear purpose and context."

Phillip Haid and Janice Stein both presented guidelines for engaging people in political decision-making. Stein argued that participatory processes are only successful when government has a clear set of objectives in place and when decision-makers know what they want from the process. However, at the same time, the process should not be so rigid that people feel that they are constrained to address a narrow part of a larger issue in which they have an interest and which may be relevant to the decisions ultimately made. Haid proposed several principles of good civic participation processes:

- be clear on purpose and context
- the outcomes should not be predetermined
- base the purpose and process on values of openness, honesty, trust and transparency
- avoid a cookie cutter approach
- the agenda and the process should be negotiable
- ensure all the relevant participants are selected and represented
- integrate participants' views into the early stages of the policy cycle
- develop partnership through shared responsibility and ownership of process and outcome
- be clear about costs and responsibility of costs at the outset

There are, of course, a number of obstacles to effective civic participation which have to be taken into account when designing civic participation processes. Some questions that need to be addressed in this context focus on:

- the availability of resources (Does the City have the time and resources for a given form of consultation process?)
- the representativeness of the stakeholder group (Does the City have a representative group of stakeholders at the table?)
- participation fatigue (Are the same people participating all the time?)
- involvement of all community groups (How can the City involve people who have not participated in political decision-making?)
- effective facilitation (How can the City develop consensus among stakeholders with competing agendas?)



Theme 3: The City has a responsibility to assist communities to resolve issues

The City of Toronto has to be a key player in assisting community members to organize around particular issues and to advocate for the resolution of these issues. The City of Toronto needs to provide support and resources to community groups whose goals include solving crucial community problems and issues. This type of support and assistance is especially needed for marginalized groups who require further knowledge, expertise or resources to enable their full participation in government processes. Of particular concern in this context are immigrants and newcomers to Toronto who are not familiar with the community and political decision-making processes in the Canadian context. To a certain extent, the City of Toronto does provide expertise and financial support (e.g., grants) to emerging community groups; however, there is still room for improvement.

Session participants indicated that government funding for community organizations has been reduced in recent years to project-based funding; however, it is important that community organizations have the necessary operational core funding in order to ensure their continued existence and to engage in project development and implementation.

Theme 4: The City has to take an active role in combating citizens' distrust of government

Residents have to clearly see that their contribution to the political decision-making process is recognized and appreciated. Residents want to see how their ideas and viewpoints are indeed reflected in the final decisions taken by political representatives. Residents need to feel that issues will be dealt with in a timely manner; issues will not be pushed aside for a later day or tied up in endless research and study processes without definite visible results.



people."

"The challenge of civic participation lies in reaching young

People have a lack of confidence in elected officials and the institution of government. Janice Stein noted that cynicism about government is at a record high level in Canada. In order to actively engage citizens in political decision-making, government has to devise consultation processes that clearly communicate to citizens that their input matters. Haid indicated that the degree of cynicism about government and government actions is especially pronounced among youth. Roger Keil stressed that civil society demands that all sectors of the community have equal access to the political decision-making process. Political representatives have to come to terms with the fact that in a working democracy, control over decision-making has to be shared with members of the community. The theatre play "Ready, Set, Civic Action" highlighted that people feel shut out and alienated from the governance process. They feel that government consultation is often an empty meaningless process. Politicians and City staff simply go through the motion of soliciting ideas about pre-conceived policy positions. Some session participants felt that real input from the community is often not wanted at all.

Theme 5: The City should use many different methods to consult with people and to engage them in political decision-making

People should be able to participate in political and municipal government decision-making in a way in which they feel comfortable. Many people do not feel comfortable giving public deputations at Council meetings. Other people may not have the time to sit on community advisory committees, and opportunities to do so are limited. People may not be aware of issues on which the City requires input. There are currently a limited number of ways in which citizen input is directly communicated to Council.

Many residents who attended the discussion sessions suggested that people need greater opportunities to come together to discuss issues that impact their communities. Ideas included the provision of citizen-centered rooms at City Hall and the civic centres, weekend community conferences held in places away from the centres of power, and the provision of experts for grassroots seminar discussions on local community issues.

Janice Stein and Phillip Haid provided a sample of citizen participation techniques, while emphasizing that this list was by no means exhaustive:

- Public opinion polls
- Constituent surveys
- Town Hall meetings
- Focus groups
- Royal commissions
- Stakeholder meetings
- Legislative hearings
- Policy conferences
- Search conferences
- Policy roundtables
- Deliberative polling
- Study circles
- Citizen juries
- Civic journalism
- Public deliberation



"Community groups require support and resources, in order to effectively resolve community issues."

The proliferation of internet technology has opened new and creative ways of involving people in consultation processes: Haid highlighted that there are a number of different types of e-participation, such as electronic consultations, chat rooms, polls and petitions.

The City of Toronto should use a variety of consultation forms that will allow people to express their opinions and views in a manner in which they feel comfortable.

Theme 6: The City needs to make consultation processes more accessible and provide increased support for people's involvement in political decision-making

A number of factors can prevent people from participating in public engagement or consultation processes. Committee and Council meetings are held during day-time hours when many people work; many people do not have access to child care; a language barrier may exist; and systemic barriers such as poverty and racism can discourage participation.



"Governments need to clearly communicate to citizens that their input matters."

Phillip Haid emphasized the importance of reaching out beyond the elites who are already engaged to involve disadvantaged and marginalized groups. The need to engage youth and the challenges that this presented was provided as one example. Challenges include reaching out to "youth at risk"; helping youth organizations overcome internal barriers such as high turnover and lack of financial management; and shifting mindsets and work culture. Engaged youth offer unique perspectives and engaging youth promotes learning, skill development and leadership abilities. Unique and targeted approaches are required to overcome barriers to youth participation.

The City should help and support the participation of all groups in community consultations and political decision-making. This requires the identification of barriers and the introduction of ways to overcome these barriers. Efforts to overcome barriers may include but not be limited to using accessible meeting facilities, providing on-site childcare, reimbursement of costs (such as transportation costs, sign language interpretation, outreach, attendant care) providing healthy food at meetings, and more.

Theme 7: The City should ensure that information is accessible to the public. Accessibility includes plain, easy to understand language and sufficient notice for events.

Information is not always easily accessible to the public. Furthermore, Committee, Council and consultation agendas are often not published or widely disseminated prior to meetings.

People who participated in the breakout sessions at the fourth seminar recommended that the City needs to make information more accessible.

The City should provide information on Committee, Council and consultation agendas sufficiently in advance of the event to provide realistic opportunities for people to prepare for the event. This is particularly important in cases where policy and financial decisions will be made that will directly impact communities. Information materials should be free of technical jargon and should explain the subject matter at hand in plain language.

Theme 8: The City of Toronto can learn from innovative civic engagement practices in other cities

The fourth seminar focused on three initiatives that showed creativity and innovation in involving people in political decision-making processes. These initiatives included the participatory budget process in the City of Winnipeg, the development of the City of Vancouver community plan (CityPlan) and the public participation policy for the former City of Ottawa.



People who attended the breakout sessions after the seminar suggested that Toronto should also look internationally to cities with comparable populations to see how they encourage public participation within a large population base.

The City of Toronto should be a continuous learning organization which strives to improve its civic participation practices on an ongoing basis. A regular dialogue with other cities on civic participation would be a vital step in the right direction.

Theme 9: Avenues provided for civic participation must be genuine and provide real opportunity to affect results

A failure to acknowledge and directly address the results of public consultations and other participatory processes in the actual decision-making process causes people to question the legitimacy of the decisions that are made. Lack of clarity or the type of civic participation techniques chosen can give people the wrong impression about the level of input they will have in the actual decision-making process. This can breed distrust and indifference in people towards participatory processes and undermine democratic practices in the City.

The type of civic participation techniques chosen should provide different opportunities for involvement. They should reflect and clearly articulate the type of input that the City hopes to gain. Phillip Haid argued that an effective process will identify the nature of participation a government hopes to achieve and also the target participants. For example, an information session should not be publicized as an opportunity for people to voice their views and opinions. A government seeking public input must help to create an environment of enquiry: Barber identified this environment of enquiry as contributing to a working democracy. Democracy is built on dialogue, the exchange of a diversity of ideas and the careful weighing of the consequences of different choices. Barber argued that real citizenship is about power. People want to be active if they see that the avenues created for participation give them real power. People who attended the "Ready, Set Civic Action" interactive theatre play emphasized the importance of creating genuine avenues where they can be heard and their input considered.

Public meetings should seek solutions to problems and issues, not just provide pre-conceived solutions to residents. People want the opportunity to explore the values underlying policy choices. People in the community need the opportunity to be involved in decision-making from start to finish. They need to be involved in a meaningful way in making decisions that affect the City. Decisions that are made should clearly address any public input received and indicate how that input has influenced the decisions that have been reached.



Theme 10: The City has a responsibility to promote civic education

A lack of understanding about government processes and the roles and responsibilities of both government and the citizen can make it difficult for people to be engaged in civic society. This lack of understanding may encourage apathy.

Many people who attended the seminars identified a need to educate people about civic rights and responsibilities. Dr. Neil Nevitte argued that the dynamic in the relationship between government and citizens has changed over time and that one of the primary factors in that changing dynamic is the increased education of the public. Increased educational and social opportunities have decreased the skill gap between politicians and the public and have been instrumental in the development of a Canadian public that is more politically active and engaged.

An ability to access government effectively, however, involves a basic understanding of government processes. Phillip Haid argued that youth are generally not engaged and lack an appreciation for democracy. Engaging youth promotes learning and ultimately strengthens civil society. A teacher who attended the first seminar argued that programs specifically designed to educate youth about civics were in fact needed in the schools.

Many audience members recognized that there is a special need for civic education programs for immigrants and refugees. These audience members felt that more needed to be done to educate newcomers to Toronto about how to access the halls of power. While Dr. Keil and Dr. Nevitte both proposed that newcomers are in fact generally more involved in their communities and civic society in general, it was acknowledged that they do need more information on how to access government and to provide their input into government decision-making processes.

The City needs to be actively involved in public education about the values of civic participation and civic engagement. The development of programs that are targeted at youth and newcomers to Toronto would be valuable.