

Background Paper

Civic Engagement and the City of Toronto: Review and Reflection on Current Practices and Future Approaches

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Introduction

In September 2005, the Governing Toronto Advisory Panel requested the completion of a research report with two objectives:

- An assessment of the current modes of citizen involvement and engagement in decision making at the City of Toronto; and
- Identification and analysis of practices that should be considered by the Panel in its deliberations.

This research is intended to help inform the Panel's findings reported to Council on governance issues related to the new *City of Toronto Act*. The purpose of this research was not to provide an academic literature review of citizen engagement theory but rather to begin to assemble an overview of how the City of Toronto currently interprets the notion of civic engagement and then to offer suggestions for actions that might enrich that interpretation to allow for more robust citizen-local government interactions. Accordingly this report has been written in a non-academic style.

This report is organized into four subsequent sections. In the following section, the approach used to inform the findings of this report are briefly described. In the third section, 'civic engagement strategies carried out by the city' the findings are organized into eleven sub-themes. In the section that follows, drawing from these eleven themes, a group of four questions are presented. Examples from other jurisdictions are offered as a partial means of responding to these questions and then concluding thoughts are offered.

Approach

In order to assess the current models of citizen involvement and engagement at the City, key informant interviews were conducted with City staff from the following divisions: City Manager's Office including "Diversity Management and Community Engagement" group, Public Health, the Public Consultation Unit (primarily serving Solid Waste Management, Toronto Water and Transportation Services), the Community Resources Unit (Social Development and Administration Division), Parks, Recreation and Forestry; and Planning.

Personal observations were gathered through participation in the "City of Toronto Workshop and Models of Engagement Practices" held on Tuesday September 27th with over 75 city staff in attendance. In addition, literature from academic, government and civic society sources relating to civic engagement was also reviewed as a means of informing the discussion of 'other practices'.

Preliminary Findings: 'Civic engagement' activities carried out by the City

The City staff who were recommended as key informants for this research were generous with their time and reflections on their experience with civic engagement and

public involvement at the City of Toronto. These interviews were revealing in terms of providing a general overview of the range of activities in which the City currently invests, the context in which civic engagement activities currently operate and finally, helpful in suggesting issues for further consideration and action.

Theme 1: “Civic engagement” at the City of Toronto includes everything from voluntarism to becoming an elected official

During interviews, staff was asked to identify the types of civic engagement activities in which the City participates. The term ‘civic engagement’ is currently used at the City to describe a wide range of citizen-local government interactions that include:

- Capacity building activities: The City of Toronto has a number of grants programs in place for community groups. Many of these programs have a goal of expanding community capacity to participate in a wide range of community building activities that include participating in local government processes (e.g. Access and Equity Grants and Community Services Grants).
- Public Consultation¹: The City routinely hosts public consultation activities for a wide range of policy development and project implementation initiatives. Some of the consultation activities are legislatively required (e.g. through environmental assessment or *Planning Act* requirements). In other cases the City is seeking early input into future policy work.
- Participation in local government political processes: There are many ‘traditional’ opportunities for citizens to provide input into the City’s decision-making processes which include deputations to Community Councils and Committees as well as voting in elections.
- Membership in roundtables, boards, agencies, commissions, working groups and panels: Through appointment to or membership in these City groups, selected citizens have opportunities to participate in local government decision-making. In some of these cases, citizens have direct input into the allocation of City resources.
- Listening to Toronto (L2T): in 2004, the City hosted two series of ‘Listening to Toronto’ events as “opportunities to consult Torontonians about important city-wide issues and the kind of strategies the municipality should consider.”
- Participation in the City’s recreation, culture and special events: Citizen involvement in the City’s range of these kinds of activities was also cited by staff as another important element of citizen involvement in the City of Toronto.
- Other staff cited a range of volunteer activities as examples of civic engagement activities.
- In 1999 a “Framework for Citizen’s Participation in the City of Toronto” was developed that conceptualizes the highest form of citizen participation as “getting elected”.²

¹ Public consultation is defined here as the “two way communication process in which citizens provide feedback to the municipal administration” (OECD, 2001)

² By comparison, a recent report (2005) “Trends in Public Consultation in Canada”, Canadian Policy Research Networks and Ascentum, ranks participation in deliberative dialogue as demonstrating the highest level of commitment to citizen involvement.

This range of ‘civic engagement’ activities identified by staff reveals how broadly the term is interpreted and used by City staff, including everything from capacity building activities to running for public office to parks and recreation program participation.

Theme 2: *The City lacks a common definition of civic engagement*

This research also revealed that there is no corporation-wide common definition of ‘civic engagement’. The City has no civic engagement strategy, no collectively agreed upon working definition of what is civic engagement, and City-wide civic engagement principles do not exist. Interviews revealed, however, that some units/departments/groups have developed their own working understandings of civic engagement and some strategies have been developed on a project-by-project basis.

Theme 3: *Civic engagement activities are dispersed, not centralized*

In the organizational structure of the City, some staff has positions with formal links to civic engagement and public consultation. For example, in the City Manager’s office there is a Manager of “Diversity Management and Community Engagement” and a Community Engagement Unit. A “Public Consultation and Outreach” group exists to primarily serve the Solid Waste Management, Toronto Water and Transportation Services groups, but which has also provided services to other parts of the City. As another example, under the reorganization in Parks, Recreation and Forestry a new Manager of Civic Engagement position has been created. In general then, the City’s civic engagement activities are hosted, convened and organized by staff in a wide range of divisions independently and in a decentralized manner. Hence, the City had no corporation-wide centralized or coordinated civic engagement unit.

When asked to respond to the potential impact a centralized civic engagement group might have, some staff suggested that a centralized unit would have limited functionality because these civic engagement ‘generalists’ would lack the substantively specific knowledge needed to ensure that the input solicited from the public consultation process would be sufficiently robust. Moreover, staff working on civic engagement activities have information networks and working alliances with other employees in other parts of the corporation who are doing similar work and with whom they work well.

Interviews also revealed that informal, staff-driven efforts at developing a civic engagement network have not yet been successful – there has twice been an effort to develop a staff civic engagement network (eight years ago and two years ago), but these networks have not yet had a continued presence.

Theme 4: *City is sending mixed messages about its commitment to civic engagement*

It is fairly well recognized that Mayor David Miller has a long-standing commitment to citizen engagement. However, on the Mayor’s webpage, there is a link titled: “You are invited: Mayor Miller wants you to get involved”.³ When the link is followed, the page that next comes up is an invitation to an event held in November **2004** – ‘Listening to Toronto’. This dated link is out of sync with his widely accepted support of a more inclusive, open government.

³ http://www.toronto.ca/mayor_miller/index.htm, accessed November 9th, 2005.

On a brighter note, on the front page of the City’s website, under the “Accessing City Hall” column, there is another “get involved” link and this link leads to a current list of volunteer and consultation activities. There is a link on the “get involved” page that provides information about “Making a deputation to a committee”⁴. Also of interest is an item on Councillor Chow’s website “Olivia Chow’s Citizen Guide to City Hall”⁵. This interactive demonstration tells citizens, in clear language, how City Hall works, how to make deputations and access committees, how to organize and promote campaigns, and where to turn for further information. Despite this, I was only made aware of this resource because a staff member drew my attention to it. For a citizen seeking more information about how to get involved, they would not be directed to the site by either ‘get involved’ links discussed here.

Theme 5: Citizen engagement opportunities are more episodic than sustained

With the exception of citizen participation in recreation, culture and special event activities – which it is important to note some city staff suggested were examples of civic engagement – civic engagement activities at the City of Toronto could be characterized as episodic rather than sustained. Many citizen-local government interactions are specific to one or two meetings about a particular issue (e.g. a planning decision). Others are longer term but still finite in duration (e.g. membership on a roundtable) and then typically specific to a subset of Toronto issues (e.g. Roundtables on Environment, City Beautiful, etc.), or target a specific population of Torontonians (e.g. Youth Cabinet, Toronto Senior’s Forum).

In a city that could be still characterized as growing into its new amalgamated state, the need for citizen engagement opportunities that build citizens’ sense of commitment and affinity to the city as a whole are very important. Through the more traditional consultation processes around site-specific development projects, citizens have access to the decision-making processes that affect them at a local level. Community Councils have the potential to contribute here as well. Although these processes can be improved (see Theme 8 below), these arenas for more localized inputs exist. With the exception of ‘Listening to Toronto’, there remain limited opportunities for citizens to participate in activities or forums with a *city-wide focus* for a *sustained* period of time.

Theme 6: Civic engagement activities are vulnerable to the same capacity issues that precipitated, in part, the need for a New City of Toronto Act

Interviews with City staff provided important insight into the context in which current civic engagement activities operate. It comes as no surprise that the capacity constraints under which the City as a whole currently functions have an impact on staff’s ability to develop and deliver civic engagement activities. Among the issues raised by staff were the challenges of working with tight timelines, limited budgets, the “inherent contradiction within the City by saying: ‘undertake civic engagement, we want involved citizens, do what you need to do’ and then having staff deliver a balanced budget ‘while we’re broke’”, the need for more staff training on facilitation, and the perceived lack of recognition of civic engagement success. Staff also expressed frustration with consultation processes in Toronto being held to the same provincial timelines and standards for development projects that less complicated political environments

4 <http://www.toronto.ca/council/deputation.htm>, accessed November 9th, 2005

5 <http://www.oliviachow.org/citizen-guide/>, accessed November 9th, 2005

elsewhere in Ontario are held. Despite these challenges, these interviews and my participation in the September 27th workshop revealed that staff commitment to and enthusiasm for civic engagement activities at the City are deep and high. It is also important to note that despite the capacity challenges identified by staff, the City also has a long-standing interest in civic engagement issues and strong in-house capacity to conduct civic engagement work.

Staff also emphasized the challenge of responding to Toronto's great wealth of community diversity. Ethno-cultural diversity results in the City needing to be able to communicate with residents with a wide-range of first-languages spoken. Socio-economic diversity results in the City needing to provide childcare, transportation access and meals to enable some residents to attend meetings. The exchange of information at meetings must accommodate the range of participants' ability to see, hear and speak. The large geographic scale of the City provides challenges in terms of making decisions about convenient and appropriate meeting locations. The choice of meeting times can exclude some residents while making the meeting more accessible to others. Some communities of citizens have long-standing distrust of the City as an institution and engagement of these citizens must occur at a different pace than the political process demands. Interviews also revealed a strong level of staff commitment to engaging commonly disenfranchised populations including youth, the homeless, new Canadians, and seniors.

Staff made the point repeatedly that any consideration of civic engagement in Toronto must also recognize that the formal political process (voting) excludes residents who are not Canadian citizens. At the time of the last municipal election it is estimated that in addition to the 1.6 million registered voters, there were approximately 300,000 residents of Toronto who are over the age of 18 but were not Canadian citizens and thus ineligible to vote.

Theme 7: *There are no formal measures or indicators of civic engagement used by the Corporation to evaluate progress.*

Readers of this report may perhaps be waiting for an evaluation of the range of City of Toronto civic engagement activities. That assessment will not be provided for the following reasons. First, an assessment of the *quality* or *caliber* of civic engagement activities was not part of the terms of reference. Second, if this assessment had been requested, it would have proven challenging to complete given a) the City's lack of definition of what might constitute civic engagement activities and b) the absence of an institutionalized set of indicators or performance measures by which to judge the City's civic engagement efforts. Furthermore, in light of the City's own lack of a detailed inventory of civic engagement activities, a comprehensive evaluation of such activities by an outsider would likely prove incomplete.

Theme 8: *The mechanics and processes of consultation and deputation need further attention*

While it was not the specific intention of this research to evaluate any one particular City civic engagement initiative, through the course of the interviews and feedback received it became clear that there are those (both inside City Hall and out) who feel that elements of the consultation and deputation processes need to be revisited in light

of Council's stated commitment to citizen involvement.⁶ The issue of Councillors not giving the appearance of listening or paying attention during deputations is a widely held concern – whether Councillors are actually listening is hard to assess but their conversations during deputation's speaking time, their getting up and leaving the room and their body language at times can suggest their attention is elsewhere. The positioning of the deputation at the back of the room also sends a message that is contrary to the spirit of true commitment to citizen involvement. Although staff expressed the importance of Councillor involvement in consultation processes, concern was also expressed about Councillors acting as meeting facilitators in public consultation sessions. The concern comes from the reality that Councillors, as the political representatives of the community in which the consultation is being held, are generally not neutral stakeholders in consultation processes and thus cannot truly act as facilitators. The City, however, has recognized the need to evaluate how its meetings function and the City Clerk Department's "Meeting Management Initiative" is making strides towards improvements.⁷

Although not within the scope of this research specifically, staff also suggested that the Community Council process be evaluated to explore new opportunities for this decision-making body to contribute meaningfully to civic engagement initiatives at the City.

Theme 9: *The complexity of the City requires agility in civic engagement response*

Another theme that emerged was the need for some 'agility' in terms of how, when and where civic engagement activities are organized. This theme comes from two subsets of comments. First, one staff person at the September 27th workshop offered the suggestion that the City needs a public consultation van that could be used to help provide information about specific consultation initiatives at less-traditional venues (e.g. soccer games, shopping malls, school parking lots, through barber shops and grocery stores etc.). Given the broad geography of the City, this ability to take information to the citizens seems like an obvious priority.

The importance of agility was also raised in the context of the need for the City to expand its 'toolkit' of civic engagement activities beyond the mechanisms regularly used. Two examples were offered here: first, despite the success of Listening to Toronto, some staff emphasized that this event could not be used in perpetuity as the City's one real civic engagement activity; and, second, the City needs to be more creative in the ways in which it reaches out to citizens. Praise was offered for the TTC/City of Toronto collaboration on the 'Live with Culture' events on the subways. The new "Zoning Bylaw" project is another example of the City experimenting with new consultation methods as a way of reaching people in a different way. Staff from Diversity Management and Community Engagement, Public Health, the Community Development Unit, among others all reported tailoring engagement activities to meet the needs of specific participant groups with the goal of expanding citizen capacity for participation. At the September 27th workshop, staff were introduced to the work of the Portland City Club as well as the study circles and appreciative inquiry approaches to civic engagement. The framework for Listening to Toronto was informed, in part, by the previous experience of "AmericaSpeaks". This process of experimenting with new civic engagement approaches is important and highlights city staff's ongoing interest in finding and

⁶ Taken from "Toronto City Council priorities for 2003-2006"; council priority #9: "Increased public involvement in civic affairs", http://www.toronto.ca/city_council/priorities.htm, accessed November 2, 2005.

⁷ <http://www.toronto.ca/mmi/mmi4.htm#links>, accessed November , 2005.

improving ways to reach out to citizens. These efforts should be encouraged to continue.

Theme 10: *Toronto has two varieties of ‘usual suspects’ in the civic engagement realm*

Through interviews with staff and observations at the staff workshop, it’s clear that some staff are concerned about ‘usual suspects’ (consultation-regulars who are active participants at events) who tend to dominate civic engagement activities. My own observations suggest the City might be aware of a second variety of ‘usual suspects’ – those people who are routinely and consistently receiving political appointments to agencies, boards, commissions, and roundtables. While there is clear benefit to having some appointees with in depth of City of Toronto experience, the City must balance this experience with an infusion of new ideas and input, particularly as our population expands and diversifies.

Theme 11: *Opportunities for citizen involvement: Are citizens unaware of what exists, does what exists not meet their needs, or both?*

A review of the Listening to Toronto comments from the November 2004 session suggests residents want to feel as though they have more of a say in City decision-making. These sentiments were echoed in the public comments provided at the City of Toronto Act workshops held in June 2005 and by the Toronto Act Now Coalition in their submission to the Governance Panel. Yet, after speaking to City staff, there are a tremendous number and variety of opportunities already in place for citizen-local government interaction. When comparing citizen comments about the need for more opportunities for involvement with the range of involvement activities highlighted here, it is possible to conclude that there may be more opportunities for involvement than citizens are aware of and perhaps one of the reasons for this lack of awareness is an absence of a centralized place to turn for information. It is also possible to conclude that the types of involvement sought by citizens are different than what are currently being offered and thus new mechanisms for citizen involvement are needed.

While the above themes are not exhaustive, they highlight eleven central issues requiring further consideration and reflection. From these themes and drawing from examples of citizen engagement in other parts of the world, below I suggest five key questions that need further consideration.

Moving forward: Questions Requiring Further Consideration

Interviews with City staff reveal that there are some central questions or themes of questions requiring further consideration. Likewise, there is an interest in understanding whether there are lessons to be learned from outside the City of Toronto. Building on the eleven themes identified above, I propose four groups of questions needing further consideration:

- *What steps can be taken to help the City align its civic engagement activities to send a more consistent message? Does the City need a corporation-wide formal working definition and a civic engagement strategy? Should civic engagement activities be coordinated by one central group in City Hall? How important is it that the public has one, comprehensive, current place to turn for information about citizen engagement activities at the City of Toronto?*

- *What new initiatives from elsewhere might provide ideas for the City to consider? What examples of long term, sustained discussions by citizens, staff and politicians on matters of importance to the City as a whole can the City learn from?*
- *What lessons can be learned from elsewhere about how to develop a rich, qualitative measure of civic engagement activities?*
- *If the City opts for new civic engagement initiatives, how can these be initiated without taking resources away from the existing initiatives that are important/successful?*

Examples from other jurisdictions and organizations are offered here to help inform the City's reflection on these questions. The final question will not be responded to in this section but is revisited in the 'Concluding Remarks' final section of this paper.

Lessons learned from other municipalities that speak to the above issues

One of the compelling challenges faced when trying to find examples from other locales is: to whom do we compare Toronto? As this research was being conducted and examples from elsewhere were shared with staff, initiatives in other municipalities were sometimes ruled out initially because a setting or municipality was too small, too big, or too ethno-culturally homogenous. It is a challenge to find good comparative examples for Toronto.

In the end, my research suggests there are no obvious examples of municipalities with more effective civic engagement strategies in place that can serve as templates for Toronto's future initiatives. In the case of what Toronto might need to consider, the net was cast more widely to include civic engagement initiatives by larger and smaller municipalities, states and non-governmental organizations. These examples are not offered with the suggestion that they could be directly transplanted into Toronto but because they each offer an element of a missing piece of a future more enriched civic engagement strategy for Toronto.

Question(s) 1: What steps can be taken to help the City align its civic engagement activities to send a more consistent message? Does the City need a corporation-wide formal working definition and a civic engagement strategy? Should civic engagement activities be coordinated by one central group in City Hall? How important is it that the public has one, comprehensive, current place to turn for information about citizen engagement activities at the City of Toronto?

This set of questions warrants discussion by Council, staff and citizens collectively. If the City is going to move forward on civic engagement initiatives with genuine intent, then the process used for framing, developing and implementing a new or revised civic engagement approach should be a model of progressive civic engagement practice itself.

Should these discussions lead to "yes" answers, then there are examples from elsewhere that can be considered by the City. For example, Montréal has a "Charter of Rights and Responsibilities" that highlights the "values serving to unite and engage

citizens as well as their own rights within the City”⁸. The London Civic Forum, a not-for-profit organization that contributes to the civic engagement initiatives of the Greater London Authority has a “Civic Charter”.⁹ There are other mechanisms for codifying Toronto’s civic engagement intentions through strategies and frameworks. The City of Vancouver has “Guiding Principles for Public Involvement” that were adopted by Council in 1998 and figure prominently on the city’s “Public Involvement in the City” webpage.¹⁰

If the City decides that it is important to proceed with a formal articulation of civic engagement principles, it is imperative that the City take steps to ensure that this document becomes the internal and external reference point for future activities. Without taking efforts to use this document as the foundation for civic engagement initiatives, then the document will do little to advance civic engagement in the City.

Cities such as Portland, Oregon (Office of Neighbourhood Involvement) and Seattle Washington (Department of Neighbourhoods) have offices that serve as direct links to neighbourhood association and neighbourhood-scaled citizen involvement initiatives. The mission of the “Office de Consultation Publique de Montréal” is to carry out public consultation mandates with regard to land use planning and development matters under municipal jurisdiction.¹¹ These examples are offered to illustrate how other municipalities have centralized their citizen involvement initiatives. Given Toronto’s need for city-wide engagement on issues that matter to the City as a whole, if a centralized office were to be considered, it is recommended that its scope not be limited to neighbourhoods or specific functions of the City (e.g. land use planning). Further, any attempt to centralize or coordinate civic engagement activities should also keep in mind key issues raised by staff: the complexity of the City requires agility in civic engagement response and an office of civic engagement ‘generalists’ may lack the substantively specific knowledge needed to ensure that the input solicited from the public consultation process would be sufficiently robust to inform an issue or sector specific initiative.

Question(s) 2: *What new initiatives from elsewhere might provide new ideas for the City to consider? What examples of long term, sustained discussions by citizens, staff and politicians on matters of importance to the City as a whole can the City learn from?*

If the City decides to proceed with an attempt to provide civic engagement opportunities for “long term, sustained discussions by citizens, staff and politicians on matters of importance to the City as a whole” it appears as though the City may be breaking new ground in North America. Research thus far has yet to reveal another municipally-organized set of sustained activities on this scale.

The participatory budgeting process in Brazilian cities provides some important insight into the range of activities that are needed to achieve such a goal. In Porto Alegre, there are two plenary assemblies held in each of its 16 districts. The first plenary is used to disseminate information, and then meetings are held in neighbourhoods to discuss

8 http://ville.montreal.qc.ca/portal/page?_pageid=133,301836&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL, Accessed November 2, 2004

9 <http://www.londoncivicforum.org.uk/newsexpand.asp?id=135>, accessed November 2, 2005

10 <http://vancouver.ca/publicprocess/pdf/gpp.pdf>, Accessed November 2, 2005

11 http://ville.montreal.qc.ca/portal/page?_pageid=133,263661&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL, accessed November 2, 2005.

priorities. In the second round of assemblies, representatives are elected to move on to a smaller budget council. In Belo Horizonte, delegates join ‘priorities caravans’ to take bus tours to cross-check the priorities identified in bigger plenary meetings with smaller community groups. The efforts to deal with municipality-wide issues in a variety of forums are an important lesson for the City to keep in mind – one size of event does not fit all. And, in the case of Belo Horizonte, the government went to the people rather than expecting the people to come to them. These examples are also a reminder that civic engagement can be expanded at a time when there is a ‘congested agenda’ of local government issues including: housing, education, health care and public transportation (Souza, 2001).

There are also compelling examples from outside of local government where success has been achieved in terms of sustaining long term discussions about matters of civic interest for a city as a whole: London Civic Forum and the City Club model (e.g. Cleveland, Portland, Chicago, San Francisco).

Although a non-government initiative, The London Civic Forum provides a creative package of civic engagement activities for consideration by the City of Toronto. The London Civic Forum serves the following roles:

- **Advises the Mayor and Greater London Assembly** - as an independent and inclusive consultative body, the Forum will have sufficient knowledge and experience to support the Authority's work of promoting the economic, social and environmental well-being of London. It will enable the Mayor to consult on his key strategies and policy proposals; it will support the Assembly in scrutinising the Mayor.
- **Monitors the effectiveness of the Greater London Authority** - the Civic Forum will monitor how effectively the new bodies engage civil society in their work, promote equal opportunities and evaluate the impact of their policies.
- **Encourages cross-sectoral partnerships** - a cross-sectoral and cross-community Forum will promote partnership working between organisations from different sectors and areas of the capital, as well as between the Civic Forum and the new functional bodies for London.
- **Acts as a catalyst for civic engagement and promote civic entrepreneurship** - the Civic Forum is an opportunity to extend the reach of public-policy debates, particularly to communities that are marginalised from such discussions.

The Civic Forum works on the assumption that: “Citizen participation in the regional governance of the capital depends on people understanding the roles and responsibilities of the Greater London Authority (GLA), and on people having the confidence that their views and concerns are valued and acted upon.” The Forum is funded in part by the Greater London Authority but also receives funding from other sources. It hosts a range of interesting programming and activities including “How London Works”, an initiative that seeks to expand citizen capacity to influence the future of London at both the local community level and in city-wide initiatives by providing information about the politics, infrastructure, society and culture of the City. The Civic Forum conducts public policy research, hosts conferences and public talks and developed the “London Civic Charter”. The organization hosted a debate during the last Mayoral election that posed

the question: “How would the mayor involve Londoners in the life of their city?” Civic Forums are also being used in Scotland and Northern Ireland. The original thinking behind the Civic Forum approach was that “a preparatory structure, whether with or without constitutional status, is a recognition that the *problems of modern governance are not greatly helped by the power to tinker at the edges after decisions are made*” (Lindsay, 405, 2000, emphasis added).

The City Club of Portland (Oregon) is another example of a city-wide model at work in the United States. The mission of the City Club is: “To inform its members and the community in public matters, and to arouse in them the realization of the obligations of citizenship.” The Portland City Club is a membership-driven organization that was founded in 1916. The relevance of this organization to Toronto’s civic engagement landscape is that: the organization is devoted to meaningful discussion about issues that matter to the City as a whole (as well as state issues of relevance to Portland); the breadth of its programming (book clubs, lunch speaker series, weekly radio broadcast, citizen-based research committees), and the importance of the Club in the political landscape in Portland. The Mayor of Portland gives his annual “State of the City” address at the Club, as does the Governor who gives his “State of the State” address. The City Club of Cleveland has been addressed by every U.S. President since its inception.

These examples from Portland, London and Brazil provide examples of how the City of Toronto could expand the capacity of its citizens to participate. These organizations offer a variety of opportunities for civic learning and engaging, and the opportunity to participate extends beyond responding to one particular issue of importance (e.g. “I don’t want that high rise in my neighbourhood”). The City currently has an arms-length relationship with the organization “Moving the Economy”, the City might consider a similar relationship with a Toronto Civic Forum as a new civic engagement initiative.

Research for this report also discovered a range of smaller, more episodic activities that the City might consider using to: help clarify its political agenda for citizens; assist citizens in understanding how to access City Hall, and provide new opportunities for citizens to get involved in the political process. Here are some simple suggestions:

- The Mayor should make an annual “State of the City” address – this event could clarify for residents the agenda for the year ahead and also focus citizen attention of the work of local government.
- In the spirit of “How London Works”, the City should consider offering “City Hall 101” classes that explain how City Hall works and how citizens can get involved. In an ever-growing city of newcomers, these classes could serve as important invitation for new residents to get involved.
- “People’s Question Time” – twice a year the Greater London Authority hosts an event to provide members of the public with an opportunity to put questions to the Mayor and Assembly members and to enable the Mayor and Assembly members to respond. Toronto could consider a similar event.
- The City of Seattle has an “Early Notification System” that allows citizens to receive E-mail agendas from the City Council, Council and Ad Hoc Committees, Boards and Commissions.

Question 3: What lessons can be learned from elsewhere about how to develop a rich, qualitative measure of civic engagement activities?

Given the absence of a common framework for civic engagement, a detailed inventory of engagement activities as defined by a framework, and a rich set of indicators, the City of Toronto's ability to track, evaluate and improve its civic engagement work is undermined.

The Office du Consultation Publique de Montréal publishes an annual report that details its consultation activities, and project-by-project information about consultation processes (key consultation date, source of consultation mandate, community concerned, purpose of the consultation, summary of the post-consultation report and subsequent steps taken). In 1999 the City of Vancouver conducted a "Public Involvement Review" with a three step process: 1) to investigate and record all the ways in which City processes include the public; 2) to conduct an independent evaluation of how well the City involves the public; and 3) to develop improvements based on the evaluations.

The City of Toronto should avoid the pitfalls of developing a superficial civic engagement indicator series. Perhaps the most common indicator of civic engagement tracked in North America is voter turnout – as earlier noted, in the City of Toronto this excludes a very large demographic of the city's residents. If the City is serious about its civic engagement work, it will move beyond such simplistic measures to develop more sophisticated ones, the data from which can then be used to improve the decision-making and implementation efforts by Council, Staff and the Mayor.

Over an 18 month period in 2001-02, an interdepartmental team of staff volunteers working with the now defunct Sustainability Roundtable developed a draft series of indicators with a civic engagement focus. These indicators were intended to provide rich feedback in the City's decision-making process about the success of civic engagement activities and the focus of these indicators was guided by the priority elements of Council's strategic plan. Here are some examples of the draft indicators proposed:

- **Validity of public inclusion in decision-making:** Percentage of citizen volunteers in a governmental advisory capacity who are satisfied that their recommendations were carefully and respectfully considered.
- **Representation in municipal decision making:** Percentage of elected body, committees and bureaucracy that represents the characteristics of population (gender, age, income, race and ethnicity, physical ability, etc.)
- **Accessibility and availability of City information:** City budgets/financial reports available in good time to councillors, the public, the media and NGO's; number or percentage of Departments and Standing Committee's that produce these materials in good time.

"Communities Scotland" is a Scottish Executive agency whose aim is to work with others to ensure decent housing and strong communities across Scotland. They have recently released their "National Standard for Community Engagement" report that provides a series of ten standards for community engagement and a subsequent series of

indicators to measure the quality of implementation of each of the standards.¹² This detailed and rich combination of standards and indicators serves as an important reminder of the complexity of civic engagement and the subsequent need to reflect that complexity in efforts to evaluate implementation progress. Rather than counting heads, the City needs to explore the qualitative elements of citizen engagement: did agency, board and commission members feel as though their ideas were duly considered? Do political appointments balance previous experience with the need for a fresh perspective?

This non-exhaustive list of examples serve as ‘food for thought’ for the City and the Governance Panel. No other city in the world is like Toronto, therefore no other city provides a neat and easy template that Toronto can apply. Engaging citizens and city residents in the public affairs of the city is a daunting and vexingly challenging task. The examples provided above help the City and city staff in particular reflect on how their current practices compare and contrast to some other notable efforts.

Concluding Thoughts

In the course of completing this research, I discovered the following excerpt from a 1999 staff report:

"The most important form of support for citizen involvement may come from a municipal culture that accepts the public's role in decision-making. Both elected officials and staff are part of this culture. It builds communication and trust between citizens and their civic government, leading to solutions with broader community ownership and positive use of the time and energy of dedicated volunteers. In addition to making sure that intersectoral efforts are effective, the city needs to ensure that interdepartmental partnerships are developed and run in support of this same strong culture."¹³

This statement serves as an important reminder of the bureaucratic and political prerequisites needed by the City to foster an environment where civic engagement can really take place.

Any progress toward new civic engagement initiatives, including the development of a civic engagement framework, should model the new civic engagement processes the City is trying to develop. These initiatives cannot be created in isolation by any of staff, politicians or residents. The process needs to strive to set new standards for accessibility excellence thus showing citizens that their wide range of voices and ideas are important to the City. If the City opts for new civic engagement initiatives, then the question of “how can these be initiated without taking resources away from the existing initiatives that are important/successful?” must be resolved.

Long winded discussions about indicators can cause even the most committed civic engagement practitioner’s eyes to glaze over. As a closing point, here are two examples of indicators that meet the spirit of the recommendations offered here. First, in our current climate of citizen-local government interaction, citizens often participate in processes to “fight City Hall” or to “fight” a particular project. If a person left a public meeting at which they spoke against a particular project that was then not approved by

¹² http://www.communitiesscotland.gov.uk/stellent/groups/public/documents/webpages/lccs_008411.pdf, accessed November 2, 2005

¹³

http://web.archive.org/web/20011125225604/http://www.city.toronto.on.ca/healthycity/working_guide.htm, Accessed November 2, 2005

the Council Committee but left saying “although the decision didn’t go the way I’d hoped, I still felt as though my ideas were listened to and considered as part of the decision-making process”, would that not be a measure of a good citizen-involvement process? And if, over the next ten years, after the City expanded its commitment to and implementation of civic engagement opportunities, citizens started to talk about working *with* City Hall rather than *fighting* City Hall, would that too not be a measure of true progress?

References

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