

GM6.1.1



June 30, 2011

Marilyn Toft
12th floor, West Tower, City Hall
100 Queen Street West
Toronto, ON M5H 2N2

Dear Mayor Ford and Members of Council:

RE: Core Services Review Public Consultation Process

People Plan Toronto (PPT), a citizens' group that advocates for better planning and stronger citizen engagement in the planning process,¹ is writing to express its concerns over the public consultation process undertaken by the city as part of the Core Services Review.

Various PPT steering committee members have attended the city-run roundtable sessions, participated in independently organized discussions, and submitted the individual online feedback form. We recognize the pressing complexity of the issues and appreciate the fine work of city staff to educate participants of the roundtable sessions; we are also eager for the city to publically share the results of this important consultation process and indicate its next steps. Nevertheless, we would like to express the following key areas of concern regarding the consultation process undertaken by the city and the survey tools used.

Timeframe

The 6-week window provided by the city for the public to organize and submit feedback was too narrow. The limited time and opportunities between the official announcement of the public consultation process in early May and the deadline in mid-June compromised individuals' and groups' abilities to organize independent consultations, attend city- or councillor-led sessions, educate themselves on the range of budget issues, and thoroughly consider the options in the extensive online feedback form.

¹ People Plan Toronto (PPT) is a group of active, engaged citizens committed to reforming urban planning in Toronto. PPT convenes grassroots forums and round tables to discuss planning issues, advocates for better urban planning and promotes a strong community voice in the planning process. For more information about PPT, please go to <http://peopleplantoronto.org>.

If the city indeed values meaningful public input and takes seriously the consultation process on such complex and critical issues, a longer, more flexible and more robust consultation window would have been provided. The existing process has effectively thwarted or weakened much valuable input.

We feel that this short timeframe has established a shallow approach to the research and represents a missed opportunity to make Toronto's government more participatory and accountable.

Flaws in the Feedback Form

The inherent flaws in the feedback form have been well documented in André Bovee-Begun's June 6 *Torontoist* piece "Toronto's Budget Survey Deeply Flawed."

http://torontoist.com/2011/06/rob_ford_invites_you_to_plan_your_own_service_cuts.php.

This article highlights and provides examples of many of the shortcomings of the consultation process and of the survey form itself, and questions the value of input in such a flawed process. It is critical of the roundtable sessions being squeezed into a two-week period, of the suspect design and biases of the survey, of the lack of nuance and logic in the categories, of the overwhelming number of different service categories which unnecessarily included "bedrock services like health and firefighting," and of the lack of subtlety and flexibility offered to respondents in making their choices or framing their answers.

As respondents, we too felt overwhelmed by the preponderance of choices in the Service Priorities section (which included other nonstarter items such as Water and EMS Services), frustrated by the lack of nuance in the ranking of activities in the In-Depth Questions, and challenged by some of the broad labels and biased language in the questionnaire. For example, in Q1d, "Transparent and Accountable Government" is not a neutral phrase compared to "Infrastructure—water, roads and transportation," which itself is too broad a label since respondents get to choose both community involvement and transparent government under it.

In other instances, too much knowledge and background on how services are funded and delivered are expected of respondents in order to make an informed choice. Many of the services reviewed are not funded in the same way or from the same or single sources, while yet other services are not delivered in the same way or exclusively by the city; changing either the funding or the delivery of these services would have differential effects on different people. The survey captures none of this nuance and offers little background on the complexity of funding and delivering services.

With specific regard to planning issues in the feedback form, PPT steering committee members were perplexed by the in-depth question on Planning and approving city growth, which asks respondents to rank four activities in order of importance:

- 5a. Review and process applications to develop new buildings.
- 5b. Identify and protect historic (heritage) buildings.
- 5c. Help to design buildings and streets to make the City more beautiful, and work well for residents and businesses.
- 5d. Research, public consultation and planning on the growth and physical shape of the city.

The above is perhaps a necessary simplification of what the Planning Division does, but it also sets up respondents who think that beauty (5c) and planning on the growth of the city (5d) should go hand in hand to rank activities which they in fact feel are of equal and related importance. We understand the need for difficult choices in this process, but a sharper instrument than this feedback form would be necessary to accurately make the finer cuts asked of respondents. We are also concerned that without a clear and detailed explanation of the full role of the Planning Division, some respondents will consequently rank Planning as a lower priority.

Other respondents, like us, will no doubt be discouraged by the inherent flaws in the feedback form, underrate certain services due to a lack of understanding or the overwhelming number of choices in the Service Priorities section, rank activities against their true preferences because of an absence of nuance in the In-Depth Questions, or abandon the process because of feelings of frustration and futility.

Again, we feel that the flaws in the feedback form represent a lost opportunity for valuable input from the public, and put into question the reliability of the survey and the validity of the resulting dataset.

Recommendations

PPT recommends a more thorough and transparent process to engage, report back on, and respond to citizen input. Once the city publically shares the results of its consultation process, will there be subsequent opportunities for experts to analyze the dataset and for the public to respond to the initial survey results, including details of the city's planned next steps? We are concerned that the existing consultation process, without follow up and additional opportunities to respond, is superficial and truncated at best. In order for meaningful public engagement to occur, citizens require the opportunity to understand the complexity of the issues, reflect on them, deliberate, and respond—which combined would result in higher quality feedback.

PPT further recommends the future use of more efficient and nuanced feedback tools in combination with more robust and innovative ways to consult with and respond to the public. This could involve engaging the expertise of a credible firm with a proven track record in polling/surveys along with the implementation of more inventive ways to consult in person or online, such as the Dotmocracy feedback sheets used in the Liberty New Street public

consultation or web-based tools such as an ongoing Online Community Panel focused on civic governance. Again, the flaws in the existing feedback form put into question the reliability of the survey and the validity of the resulting dataset in such a critical and complex topic for public consultation.

Finally, PPT recommends the inclusion of certain contextual questions that could have been used to analyze respondents' level of use, familiarity, and satisfaction with service and budget issues. Some possible examples include:

- What services have you used in the past two years?
- Do you think you use a lot of city services, a moderate amount, not very much, or none at all?
- How satisfied do you feel about city service delivery and the cost of city services in taxes and service fees?
- How familiar are you with how the city sets and manages budgets?

Consultations such as the Core Services Review should open the door for accountable, participatory and responsive municipal government. People Plan Toronto feels that the existing process on Core Services falls short in this crucial regard, and we would welcome the opportunity to work with the city to facilitate opportunities for more innovative, efficient and effective ways of engaging and responding to citizen input.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input on this matter.

The Steering Committee of People Plan Toronto,

c.c. Mayor Ford
Councillors