

## **Effective Public Participation in City Planning Processes and Community Engagement - Update**

**Date:** September 7, 2021

**To:** Planning and Housing Committee

**From:** Chief Planner and Executive Director, City Planning Division

**Wards:** All

### **SUMMARY**

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Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, the City of Toronto, including the City Planning division, has turned to virtual engagement to continue advancing its work across the city. Since June 2020, the Committee of Adjustment has held over 230 virtual public hearings and the panels have made decisions on over 4800 applications, livestreamed to YouTube. Over 250 community meetings on development applications and studies were also hosted virtually through the pandemic. In addition to the virtual meetings, City Planning has also used surveys, phone calls, feedback forms, and "do-it-yourself" toolkits to engage community members.

Given this volume of virtual meetings and events and their cumulative impact on those who live and work in Toronto, it is important to assess the effectiveness, accessibility and inclusivity of City Planning's community engagement. The division will be reviewing current standards for virtual engagement, learning from best practices elsewhere, and exploring ways to integrate virtual consultation when we return to in-person meetings. The division is also building an "Equity Toolkit", which will give staff action-oriented resources to engage effectively with equity-deserving communities.

This report provides an overview of in-person engagement practices carried out prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, current practices for virtual engagement, and where improvements can be made to both. The report also discusses where City Planning's resources and work can contribute to the City Manager's overall review of engagement, and future updates that can align with broader actions brought forward through this review.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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The Chief Planner and Executive Director, City Planning Division recommends that:

1. Planning and Housing Committee direct the Chief Planner and Executive Director to collaborate with the City Clerk and City Manager's Office on improvements to engagement and equity-focussed engagement.
2. Planning and Housing Committee direct the Chief Planner and Executive Director to conduct public consultations on its virtual and equity-focussed engagement methods by gathering participant feedback in upcoming planning studies, development applications, and Committee of Adjustment hearings.

## FINANCIAL IMPACT

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The recommendations included in this report have no immediate financial impact. Future updates to City Planning's engagement strategies may require capital and operating budget investments.

## DECISION HISTORY

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On April 7, 2021, City Council directed the Chief Planner and Executive Director, City Planning, to review virtual planning consultation meetings, in consultation with members of the public, and report back to Planning and Housing Committee in the second quarter of 2021 with recommendations for improvement.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2021.MM31.10>

On July 14, 2021 City Council requested that the City Clerk and the Chief Planner and Executive Director, City Planning report back to the Planning and Housing Committee on actions which could be taken to address systemic barriers to accessing the public engagement process.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2021.PH25.24>

## Equity Impact Statement

The City Planning division undertakes a wide range of activities that impact the lives of Torontonians. These activities include city-wide policy initiatives, area studies to manage growth, and site-specific development applications. Community engagement is an important part of these city-building activities. It provides an opportunity for community members to share their thoughts and ideas on change in their communities, help identify opportunities and challenges that change brings, and build relationships, trust and transparency between the City and the public. As the City of Toronto looks ahead towards rebuild and recovery post-COVID-19, it is important to ensure that the

perspectives and experiences of Indigenous, Black, and equity-deserving or vulnerable populations are represented in planning decisions.

When done right, community engagement results in new and innovative ideas, better decisions, and stronger communities. However, traditional engagement practices, and the ways in which we choose to define “community” can burden or marginalize the voices of Indigenous peoples, women, persons with disabilities, low-income households, Black and racialized groups, renters, and vulnerable seniors and youth.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the City of Toronto has moved its services and community engagement online. Virtual engagement can have many benefits such as enabling stakeholders and members of the general public to drop in to online events without having to travel, learning more about planning issues and initiatives outside of their local geography, and gaining easier access to recordings of proceedings after the fact.

However, there are barriers to and within virtual engagement that intensify existing inequities in the city-building process and/or introduce new ones. These are typically related to technology (including internet connectivity, access to data plans, and support for screen readers and closed captioning), age, ability, access to, and comfort in virtual planning spaces. Individuals and communities in Toronto who have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 may also be less likely to participate in engagement activities.

The actions and recommendations in this report will help staff adopt a standardized approach to virtual and equity-focussed engagement which will have positive equity impacts for Torontonians in need of improved access to affordable housing, affordable childcare, City spaces, and public transit. They also align with ongoing initiatives and strategies by the City of Toronto, such as the Confronting Anti-Black Racism Action Plan, Priority Calls for Indigenous Reconciliation, the HousingTO 2020 -2030 Action Plan, Youth Engagement Strategy, and the Seniors Strategy.

## COMMENTS

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### **Overview of Community Engagement Activities Prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, a majority of community engagement by the City Planning division was held in-person. In-person engagement activities included: Open Houses, pop-up events, small stakeholder meetings and walking tours. For example, a temporary pop-up storefront was piloted on the King-Parliament Secondary Plan Review study. City Planners also participated in World Town Planning Day events across high schools in Toronto. Virtual tools like surveys, Social Pinpoint, and e-update lists supplemented these in-person activities.

In-person meetings and events help avoid some of the barriers that people experience in virtual engagement, specifically around access to and comfort with technology. It allows planners to meet people in their own communities, and hear directly from

participants. However, in-person events have usually been held at fixed evening time slots, which can prevent those with irregular schedules from participating. In-person events may also be perceived as too narrowly focussed on the local area when broader participation may bring different perspectives. As the City prepares to return to in-person community engagement, City Planning staff will review and update current standards, so that best practices in equity engagement are followed. These include providing alternative days/ times for community meetings and providing meeting supports such as honoraria, translation services, and childcare.

### **The Planning Review Panel**

The Planning Review Panel was established in 2015 as a 32-member advisory body consisting of residents selected through a randomized process called a Civic Lottery. This process helps ensure that the members of the Toronto Planning Review Panel represent the diversity of Toronto's population, while broadening engagement by bringing new voices into the planning process. There have been two cohorts of the Planning Review Panel since then, each with two-year mandates.

Since being formed, the Planning Review Panel has provided input on a range of City Planning projects including: Expanding Housing Options in Neighbourhoods, Housing Now, TransformTO, Exhibition Place Master Plan, and Inclusionary Zoning for Affordable Housing, among others. The Planning Review Panel was designed to bring a balance of new voices into the planning process, to offer members access to city planners, independent experts, and stakeholders, and to support members as they work together to produce informed, representative public input on major city planning initiatives shaping Toronto.

The second Panel cohort concluded its mandate in December 2019 and has been on pause as we review our public engagement initiatives. This review will explore opportunities to deploy the Planning Review Panel in the future, if aligned with future engagement initiatives.

### **Current practices for virtual and equity-focussed engagement**

In 2020, the City Planning division established an e-consultation working group to develop an approach to virtual community engagement. This resulted in a set of guidelines for all staff to ensure that virtual community meetings are consistent across the division.

The City Planning division has worked with Technology Services to make the Webex experience more accessible to those participating on the phone and with screen readers. A majority of staff have undergone training in Webex Events. In the event of staff capacity issues, the City's Public and Stakeholder Consultation Services Roster remains available and has been used to procure engagement facilitators to moderate events. The standard meeting length is 90 minutes, with the majority of the time being saved for questions and answers. If participants do not get to offer their feedback during the meeting itself, they are able to submit their comments via email to the Planner. This feedback is included in the Meeting Summary and becomes part of the public record.

The City Planning division will continue to work with Technology Services to improve the attendee experience in virtual meetings. For example, Webex Event attendees have noted that they cannot see other attendees in the room, an issue which requires further review.

Checkmarket surveys have been a successful technique of gathering feedback on planning initiatives. For example, the Garden Suites survey received over 4000 responses, and the Multi-Tenant Housing Review received a total of 1035 responses (including 1033 online responses and 2 telephone responses).

Since the pivot to virtual engagement, staff have assessed the efficacy of virtual meetings, and have introduced ways to support equity and inclusivity within the engagement process. For example, virtual engagement have been augmented by analog methods, such as including a tear-off card with pre-paid postage, which allow anyone to request hard copies of meeting materials and a feedback form. Community members can also request documents by leaving a voicemail for staff on designated phone numbers. All hard copy packages include a pre-paid postage return envelope so participants can mail their feedback. On some projects, staff have left hard copies of the meeting presentation and other materials at local community centres or libraries and advertised this in the meeting notice so that residents can pick-up and review materials at their convenience. Telephone office hours have also been offered, where community members can "Phone a Planner" to provide direct feedback about a development application or initiative.

Do-it-Yourself (DIY) Toolkits have been successfully used by initiatives such as the Multi-Tenant Housing Review and Inclusionary Zoning Policy Review. Through the DIY Toolkits, the City provided grants to eligible organizations to facilitate their own engagement sessions in their communities at a time and place convenient for them. This approach can result in increased engagement and representation of groups that are usually under-represented in municipal public consultation processes. For example, 14 organizations completed the DIY Toolkit for the Multi-Tenant Housing Review, and participants included tenants; student tenants; youth at risk of, or currently experiencing, homelessness; operators; and racially-marginalized populations.

Meeting notices on some projects have offered translation of the notice through 311. Live captioning services and live translation to American Sign Language (ASL) have been offered when requested by community members.

The Notice of Proposed Development Application sign template was last updated in 2017, following consultation with staff and the Planning Review Panel. The updates helped improve the clarity and readability of the signs. As of July 1, 2021, the Committee of Adjustment introduced a redesigned Notice of Public Hearing sign across the city. The signs, first piloted in Scarborough District in 2020, are designed to be consistent with development application signs, and be more visible and understandable to residents. They help create greater public awareness about minor variance and consent applications in neighbourhoods, and highlight important information such as the meeting date and time.

The City Planning division will be undertaking a review of all public facing materials such as meeting notices and development application signs to ensure they are still providing clear information to the public, and where additional supports (such as translation) may be included. Opportunities to develop a more comprehensive and visual public meeting notice will also be explored. This work will be done in coordination with the City Clerk's Office to ensure compliance with statutory requirements.

Meetings and events hosted by City Planning have been promoted through the division's social media platforms including Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. Some projects have also "boosted" event posts, which increases the visibility of posts in specific areas, or among audiences belonging to specific demographics. However, this practice is not consistent across the division, and requires a review. All City Planning consultation events are posted at:

<https://www.toronto.ca/community-people/get-involved/public-consultations/city-planning-consultations/>.

### **Building an Equity Engagement Toolkit**

In 2019, the Wellesley Institute, Monumental Projects and the City Planning division partnered to develop a toolkit to support consultations and engagements with equity-deserving groups. Research was conducted on best practices for engagements with equity-deserving groups, and historical case studies of similar engagements that had been led by the City Planning division. The Equity Toolkit will support individuals designing and delivering consultation at the City of Toronto, as well as vendors bidding on projects to engage residents in the city around specific planning and policy issues.

The Equity Toolkit is based on material gathered through interviews with subject matter expert interviews (civil servants, third party consultation vendors, and academics), case study research, a literature review and environmental scan of existing toolkits within and outside Canada, and staff workshops. The Toolkit will provide guidance on the following five themes identified as requiring the most support:

- How to set goals and measure impact
- How to reach a more diverse public
- How to identify paths to community ownership and power sharing
- How to lead an equitable meeting
- How to communicate with communities

The Equity Toolkit will be launched Fall 2021, and all Planning staff will be trained on how to use this resource. This is designed as a living platform that can be expanded and improved over time

### **Opportunities for a Hybrid Engagement Model**

As the City prepares to return to in-person meetings and services, the City Planning division will explore ways to retain a simultaneous virtual component within in-person community meetings where possible. Alternatives including holding both in person and virtual consultations will also be explored. This hybrid model has been implemented in limited ways before the COVID-19 pandemic, where staff have livestreamed to

Facebook. There is now an opportunity standardize this approach, supported by best practices from elsewhere.

In Fall 2021, the City Planning division will be working with a group of Master's students from the University of Toronto on the opportunities to integrate a virtual component to in-person meetings. The project will include:

- Undertaking a policy scan to understand the policies, guidelines, rules and regulations that shape the City of Toronto's approach to engaging stakeholders and members of the general public in the planning process;
- Undertaking an environmental scan of other Canadian and international municipalities to gather best practices and lessons learned, including specific attention to accommodations or alternatives available to persons who are unable to fully participate in the virtual process as designed;
- Undertaking debrief meetings with persons responsible for virtual planning meetings hosted by the City of Toronto (with an emphasis on, but not necessarily limited to, planning processes led by the City Planning division) to gather best practices and lessons learned;
- Developing a list of inventories of:
  - barriers to participation in virtual planning process, both externally imposed and intrinsic to the virtual processes;
  - best practices for making accommodations or providing alternatives to enable participation in the planning process without full virtual participation;
  - key case studies that demonstrate a hybrid engagement model; and,
  - opportunities to improve accessibility for members of the public and, in particular, members of the public participating by phone;
- Developing a series of recommendations on how the City Planning division should proceed in the development of standard practices for hybrid engagement.

The City Planning division has not conducted consistent and direct community engagement on virtual engagement methods to date. As part of this review, the City Planning division will be asking participants in upcoming virtual meeting to provide feedback on the virtual engagement experience and where improvements can be made. These questions can be asked as part of post-event feedback forms, or in-meeting polling questions.

### **Towards a City of Toronto Engagement Strategy**

In October 2020, in response to the COVID-19: Impact and Opportunities report by Toronto Office of Recovery and Rebuild and the City Manager's recovery report, City Council recommended the development of an engagement strategy that promotes meaningful engagement with racialized communities and Indigenous peoples, and improved data and research coordination. Accordingly, the City Manager's Office will be

conducting a comprehensive review of engagement practices at the City, and will report back to City Council on opportunities for improvements.

City Planning's resources and work described in this report can contribute to the City Manager's overall review of engagement, and future updates on our work will align with the broader actions brought forward through this review. City Planning has a number of immediate priorities and collaboration opportunities that could be explored in the City Manager's review, including:

- Updating the City's roster of civic engagement vendors to include community-based agencies in different areas of the city. These agencies have on-the-ground relationships and networks in the neighbourhoods where they work.
- Developing a City-wide Accessibility Roster to enable staff to more easily source and provide services such as live captioning, interpretation, and ASL translation.
- Implementing more accessible and equitable policies to provide a range of accommodations such as childcare and disbursement of honoraria to Indigenous Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and vulnerable populations sharing their lived experience.
- Standardizing the use of a direct business mailing account with Canada Post so that residents who receive notices can share their input on the project or planning application outside of/ in addition to the public consultation meeting.
- Piloting a "print-to-mail on demand" option for physical supporting materials such as presentation slides which may not be available to those without computer access.

In conclusion, the City Planning division will build on work already underway towards effective public participation in City Planning processes and community engagement. The collaboration with the City Manager's Office creates opportunities to share learnings, resources and tools with other divisions, and ultimately, an engagement approach that builds trust and relationships through a consistent, accessible and high quality engagement experience for the public.

## **CONTACT**

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## **SIGNATURE**

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## **ATTACHMENTS**

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