



September 20, 2021

10th floor, West Tower, City Hall
100 Queen Street West
Toronto, ON M5H 2N2
Attention: Nancy Martins

RE: PH26.3 Effective Public Participation in City Planning Processes and Community Engagement - Update

This report provides a status report on public participation processes in City Planning in response to both a Members Motion moved by Councillor Jaye Robinson and adopted by City Council on April 27, and a Motion recommended by PHC and adopted by City Council on July 14-16, regarding systemic barriers.

FoNTRA wrote to City Council in strong support of Councillor Jaye Robinson's Motion, as follows:

- City Council direct 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, including:
 - a. guidelines and practices to ensure that virtual community consultation meetings are consistent and effective;
 - b. strategies to improve opportunities for members of the public to participate in virtual community consultation meetings;
 - c. best practices related to virtual consultation in other jurisdictions; and
 - d. opportunities to improve accessibility for members of the public and, in particular, members of the public participating by phone.

Resident associations are huge champions of public participation, and are very effective at getting the word out about community consultations regarding planning exercises and development applications. However residents have numerous concerns regarding the virtual consultation process which has become *de rigeur* in the past year. Based on feedback from multiple residents and RAs, the consensus is that virtual consultations have unfortunately resulted in an overall reduced ability of residents to have meaningful participation in the planning process, and effectively influence decision-making.

Virtual meetings are inherently inequitable, excluding residents who lack computers, and technical experience and confidence with technology, and so tend to be biased against older, less advantaged, and racialized residents. However, in addition, there is a concern that virtual public meetings and tribunals (like the committee of adjustment), may be far more susceptible to being "gamed" to limit the effectiveness of residents' voices, than are in-person meetings.

There needs to be a conscious and sustained effort to design and implement processes that not only overcome the inherent barriers to participation raised by the virtual environment, but ensure fairness and evenhandedness in managing engagement. There may be need for an “ombudsman” function to review conduct.

Looking ahead to the day when COVID 19 pandemic restrictions are lifted, we are of the opinion that in-person meetings should remain the core element of the City Planning’s Community Consultation process. While there is a role for supplementary virtual meetings, they should not be viewed as a substitute for in-person public meetings.

We also note that Committee of Adjustment as a tribunal with its own rules and regulations is very different than a community consultation for a proposed large commercial/residential development. It is unclear how to improve engagement and equity-focused engagement for Committee of Adjustment hearings. City Planning is to report back on issues with Committee of Adjustment and needs to consult with residents groups before doing so.

The Report acknowledges the need for equity-focused engagement – but there are no proposals for additional tools, techniques or ways to attract such groups to a planning discussion.

Finally, the report presents a summary of the current processes and some of the challenges. Unfortunately It does not include the insights on the current situation expected from undertaking public consultation, or a plan for improvement.

Therefore we strongly recommend:

- that City Planning arrange focused consultations with residents associations and other community groups to provide informed feedback and advice regarding current processes and plans.

Yours truly,

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Cc: Councillor Jaye Robinson
Councillor James Pasternak
Councillor Mike Layton
Chris Murray, City Manager
Gregg Lintern, Chief Planner and Executive Director, City Planning Division
Kerri Voumvakis, Director, Strategic Initiatives, City Planning Division

The Federation of North Toronto Residents' Associations (FoNTRA) is a non-profit, volunteer organization comprised of over 30 member organizations. Its members, all residents' associations, include at least 170,000 Toronto residents within their boundaries. The residents' associations that make up FoNTRA believe that Ontario and Toronto can and should achieve better development. Its central issue is not *whether* Toronto will grow, but *how*. FoNTRA believes that sustainable urban regions are characterized by environmental balance, fiscal viability, infrastructure investment and social renewal.