

LOCAL IMPACT

Participatory Budgeting Pilot

City of Toronto Preliminary Evaluation Report

November 2018



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<https://www.toronto.ca/community-people/get-involved/participatory-budgeting/>

Summary

Participatory Budgeting (PB) is a method of civic engagement that invites the public to propose ideas and vote on how a portion of a government's budget will be allocated. PB is distinct from other types of budget engagement activities such as consultations, online budget guides and calculators, or public deputations or hearings.

The City of Toronto ran a three-year PB pilot in three communities from 2015 to 2017. The pilot considered the effectiveness of PB as a method of civic engagement for local investments, and evaluated the feasibility of future PB projects in Toronto. This report describes the process and results of the pilot, based on information collected through surveys and interviews with residents, City councillors and staff, and external experts.

Key outcomes and observations from the PB pilot include:

- Over three years, across all pilot areas, residents suggested almost 700 ideas for local improvements (10% of which were eligible for PB funding), and voted for 37 capital projects in parks and other public spaces worth a total of \$1.87 million.
- Participation was low. Over 3 years, the Pilot had almost 2,500 interactions with residents, some of whom participated once while others contributed multiple times. An average of 0.8 percent of residents eligible to vote in the PB pilot areas cast a PB vote each year.
- Residents indicated that they welcomed information on how the City makes decisions and opportunities to discuss local improvements with City staff and neighbours even more than the opportunity to vote on which projects would be built in their neighbourhood.
- PB can inform certain types of infrastructure planning under specific conditions. It is very resource intensive – costs are high against participation rates – and, with a focus on fundable, local capital projects which can be built in a timely fashion, has limited reach as a method of civic engagement.

City Staff will report to City Council through the 2019 budget process on the PB pilot evaluation including a full-cost assessment of the budget and staffing resource implications for any future PB processes.

Introduction

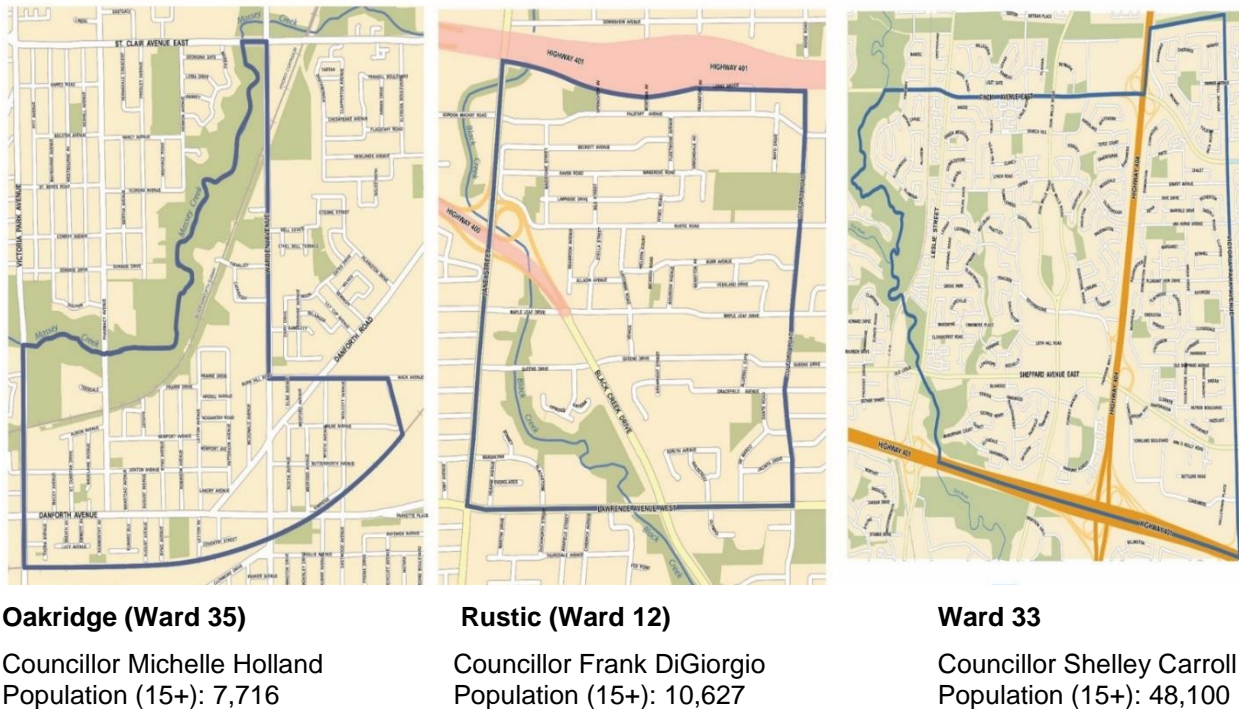
The City of Toronto ran a three-year Participatory Budgeting (PB) pilot in three communities from 2015-2017. The pilot considered the effectiveness of PB as a method of civic engagement for local investments, and evaluated the feasibility of future PB projects in Toronto.

This report presents findings from the evaluation to date. The evaluation included a jurisdictional review, surveys and discussions with participants, City councillors, staff, and organizations and cities with experience in PB and civic engagement. More information, including past City Council reports and a summary of ideas collected and projects implemented over the three-year pilot, is available at

<https://www.toronto.ca/community-people/get-involved/participatory-budgeting/>

The pilot ran in the entire municipal Ward 33 and smaller Neighbourhood Improvement Areas (NIAs)¹ in two other wards: Oakridge in Ward 35 and Rustic in Ward 12.² (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1: Participatory Budgeting Pilot Areas and Estimated Eligible PB Voters (Census data of residents age 15+). Actual numbers would be greater as residents 14+ could vote.



Toronto's PB Pilot Design

City Council initially directed staff to run the PB Pilot for a single year. At the end of 2015, Council expanded the pilot and increased funding and staff for two additional years to take advantage of the momentum build during the first year, and more fully evaluate the process. Council authorized up to \$150,000 in capital funds for each of three pilot areas in 2015, and \$250,000 per year for each area in 2016 and 2017.

City Council chose these pilot areas to build on prior PB activity in Ward 33 and to support the City's investments and social connections being built in the two NIAs. The differences in the size and demographics of the pilot communities provided an opportunity to compare various pilot approaches.

¹ Information on Neighbourhood Improvement Areas <https://www.toronto.ca/city-government/data-research-maps/neighbourhoods-communities/nia-profiles/>. Census data on residents 15 years and older was used to compare most closely to the PB voting age of 14 years and older.

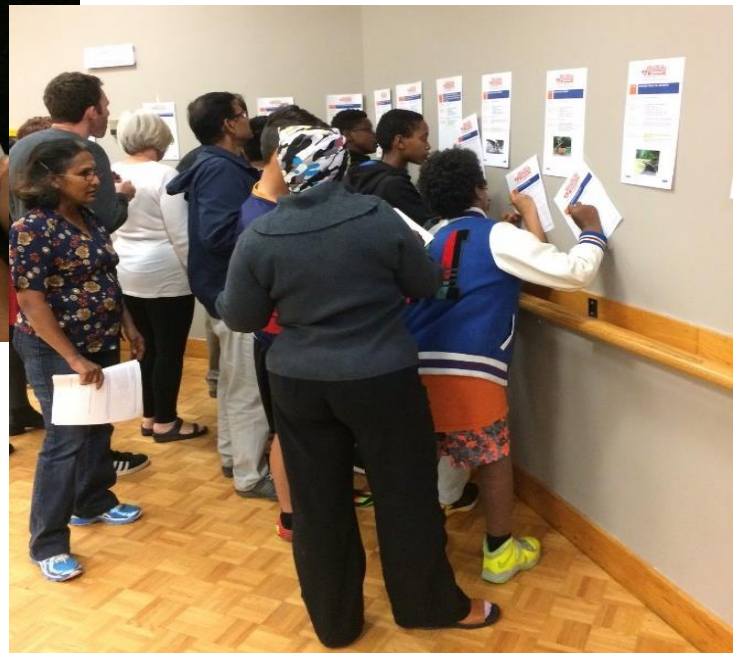
² These wards used for the PB Pilot were those that existed prior to December 1, 2018, when new boundaries and names are in effect.

The main phases of the PB pilot each year were:

- **Idea collection** (2-3 months) - Residents were invited to suggest ideas for community improvements at brainstorming meetings, booths at local events, suggestion boxes and online. City staff facilitated the process, and local councillors and their staff attended and supported the process through communications and soliciting ideas.



Ward 33 Residents sharing and discussing ideas



Oakridge residents select projects for their local ballot

- **Idea Review** (1 month) - Following the idea collection stage, staff in the City Manager's Office, the Parks, Forestry and Recreation Division and Transportation Services (Public Realm) reviewed the ideas against eligibility criteria.

Ideas submitted by residents had to be:

- Capital projects;
- Located on City property in the pilot area;
- \$250,000 or less (\$150,000 or less in the first year);
- Able to be constructed within 18 months of the vote;

- Aligned with existing capital plans; and
- Free of requirements for additional review (e.g. traffic studies), pre-existing partnerships (e.g. community gardens) or the application of other City policies (e.g. dogs off-leash areas).

In all three years, approximately 10 percent of the ideas met the above criteria and were brought forward to the ballot selection meetings. Remaining ideas were forwarded to the local councillor and City staff because they provided valuable insight into community needs, were requests for programs or services requiring operating budgets, were duplicate ideas or would cost more than the pilot budget.

- **Ballot selection** (1 week) – Participants were invited to meetings to review all the ideas proposed by residents in their area, discuss them with City staff and each other, and select 8-10 eligible projects to appear on the local voting ballot. The City considered multiple meetings and online methods for ballot selection and determined that a single meeting would let residents collectively discuss, introduce and pitch why each should be on the ballot, and select ideas without the shortlist being reversed at subsequent sessions.
- **Voting** (2-3 weeks) - Voting stations were set up in schools, libraries and community centres. Residents of each pilot areas who were 14 years or older were invited to vote for up to three projects on their local ballot. Each area had two voting days and multiple locations to increase ease and access for voters. Winning projects were selected based on the number of votes and the combined costs, which could not exceed available funds.
- **Project Implementation** (12-18 months) – Parks, Forestry and Recreation and Transportation Services (Public Realm) coordinated the planning, design and installation of the successful PB projects. Additional resident consultation occurred as required by City policy or the nature of the projects to finalize details.

Table 1 describes the numbers of PB events hosted each year.



PB signs during project construction



Opening celebration for a PB project.

Table 1: Number of PB Meetings, Events and Voting Locations					
Year	Activity	Oakridge	Rustic	Ward 33	Total
2015	Idea meetings	2	2	5	9
	Ballot selection meetings	1	1	1	3
	Voting locations	2	2	3	7
2016	Idea meetings	2	2	3	7
	Ballot selection meetings	1	1	1	3
	PB Champion meetings	N/A	N/A	2	2
	Voting locations	2	2	6	10
2017	Idea info booths	5	7	7	19
	Ballot selection meetings	1	1	1	3
	PB Champion meetings	N/A	N/A	2	2
	Voting locations	4	4	6	14
Total		20	22	37	79

Toronto's PB phases were typical of processes in many other jurisdictions, however each jurisdiction conducts PB slightly differently. Some specific characteristics of Toronto's pilot included:

- *Residents in Toronto had the final say on which projects were funded* - Like many cities, Toronto's pilot secured pre-budget approval from council, which allowed the public voting results to stand as the final decision. By comparison, Chicago and New York City run their public processes to the voting phase but final decisions go back to their councils where projects may or may not be confirmed or implemented.

The operating and staffing costs of both approaches are similar but where council can overrule public voting results, fewer projects may be built and the public role is more consultative than decisive. Council pre-authorization can, however, restrict the eligibility criteria for PB projects more than when councils can further review, adjust and approve projects.

- *Time commitment of participants was limited* - In Toronto Community Housing Corporation's (TCHC) process and a number of other cities, PB participants elect delegates to represent them and play an additional role in reviewing ideas, creating ballots, or promoting a project on the ballot as its champion. This approach is credited with developing skills and potential community leaders, however it can also reinforce power imbalances among residents by favouring those with experience or influence, and the considerable time commitment for residents may lead to participant attrition.

Toronto's goal was to invite as many residents as possible to participate in the pilot, whenever and wherever possible. A "champion" model was piloted in Ward 33, creating some opportunities for additional involvement. With the support of the Ward 33 councillor, residents were encouraged to champion their favourite projects and received training in community outreach and support from Seneca College faculty and students to create promotional materials. The councillor also facilitated a PB Steering Committee of local residents and organizations to support and promote the pilot.

- *Neighbour interactions were a priority* - Online tools are in use by some PB projects to invite people to suggest and comment on ideas and to vote. While Toronto has used online engagement tools for other initiatives, the PB pilot prioritized in-person engagement to encourage resident connections to other neighbours and foster shared understanding of community needs and ideas. Staff did increase the use of online tools with each year and encouraged residents to email their ideas and participate in the pilots social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. An online survey also was used to collect evaluations from participants and the broader Toronto public.

There seem to be opportunities and challenges with inviting online participation. Online methods might increase participation from some residents by providing more opportunities to participate, but might also increase participation from those who might live outside of the pilot areas. Online methods might limit participation from residents with less access to or comfort with technology, but might encourage others to participate who are less comfortable participating in person. There were a few instances of inappropriate comments by participants at in-person sessions; if online participation was to be considered it might have increased these incidents. An online voting system would need to secure personal information and confirm address and eligibility, otherwise the voting results could not be validated.

PB Pilot Key Outcomes and Findings

PB projects typically seek outcomes that include:

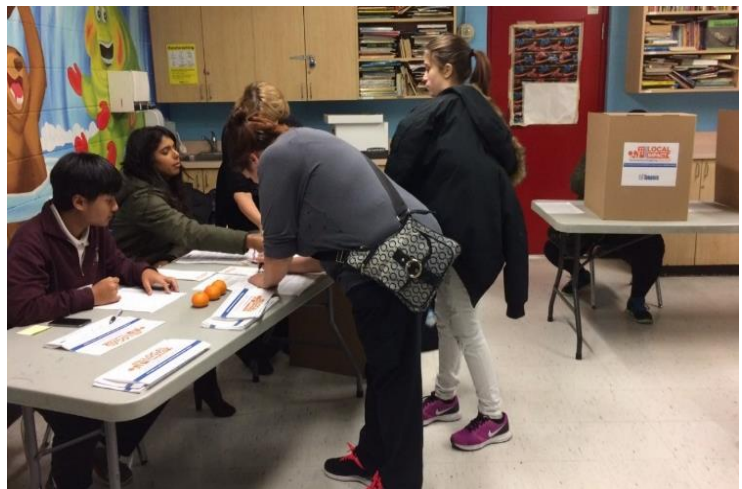
- community improvements;
- greater transparency in government;
- increased civic engagement of residents, particularly of under-represented community members;
- strengthened and empowered communities; and
- local budget decisions.

The City evaluated its PB pilot against these objectives to consider how effective it was as an engagement strategy to involve residents in making decision about capital investments, and in sustaining and enhancing public participation.

Participation in Toronto's PB Pilot

Across all three areas, and over the 3 years of the pilot, the City had almost 2,500 interactions with residents (See Table 2). This number includes residents who participated multiple times. Participation was highest during the voting phase (See Figure 2). All ages were invited to participate in idea generation and ballot shortlisting, and voting was open to those 14 years or older.

Despite the considerable staff and financial resources dedicated to the pilot, participation was low. Overall, an average of approximately 0.8 percent of residents eligible to vote in the PB pilot areas cast a PB vote each year (See Table 3). This voting rate is consistent with PB voting rates in some PB cities but lower than the 2.2 percent average PB voting rates across North American cities³. Observations by volunteers noted some participation by younger residents, but most voters were adults.



Resident vote at a community centre in Rustic

³ Public Agenda. December 2016. "A Process of Growth: The Expansion of Participatory Budgeting in the United States and Canada in 2015-16." <http://www.publicagenda.org/pages/a-process-of-growth>. November 2018.

Table 2: Estimated Total and Annual Average of Resident Interactions in PB Pilot Phases

Estimated resident interactions in each area, each year, for each phase (idea generation, ballot shortlisting, and vote). Note: A resident may have participated in any or all stages and their participation would have been counted each time.

	Oakridge			Rustic			Ward 33			Total		
	Ideas	Ballot	Vote	Ideas	Ballot	Vote	Ideas	Ballot	Vote	Ideas	Ballot	Vote
2015	48	29	72	31	17	74	47	43	384	126	89	530
2016	27	32	75	35	15	52	77	45	653	139	92	780
2017	75	12	45	60	10	53	120	40	277	255	62	375
Total	150	73	192	126	42	179	244	128	1314	520	243	1685
Annual Average	50	24	64	42	14	60	81	43	438	58	27	187
Total Resident Interactions										2448		

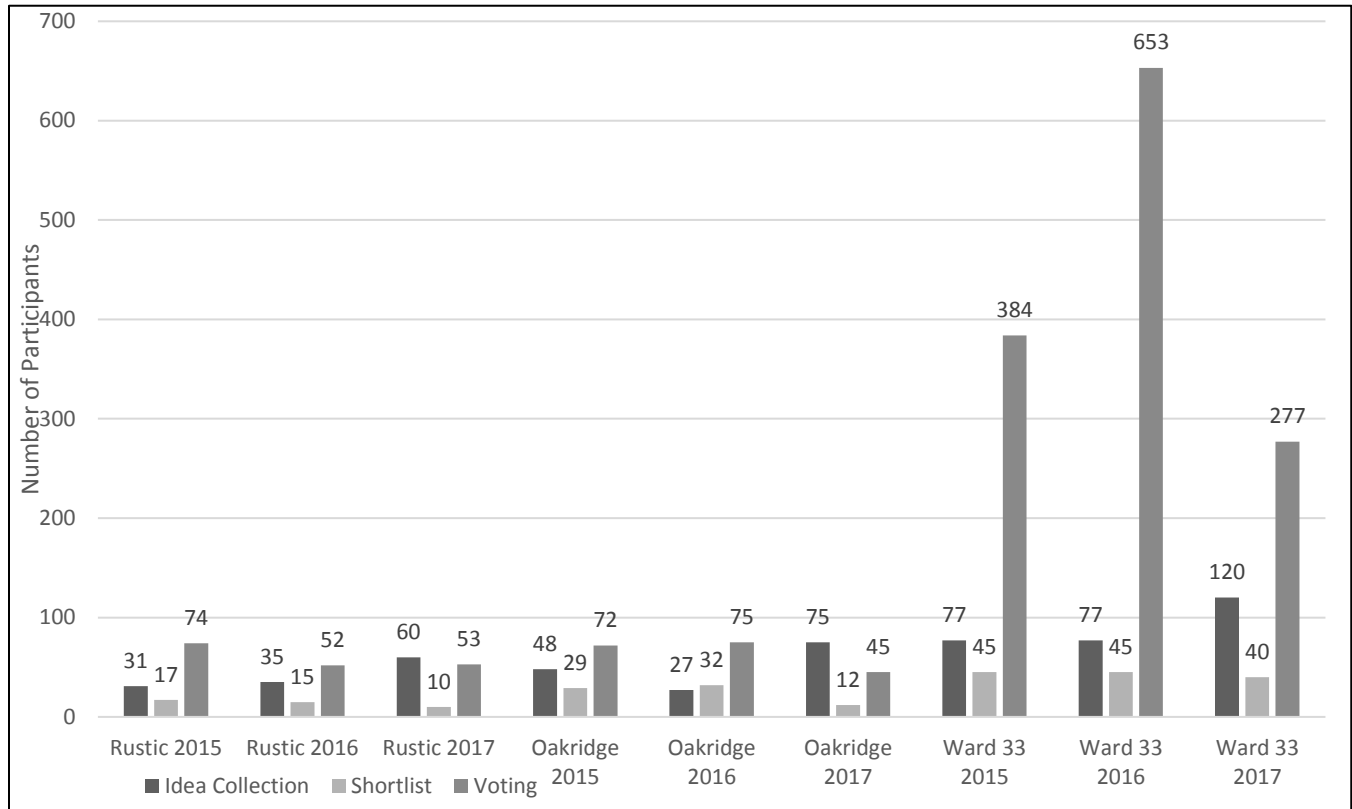
Table 3: Average Annual PB Voting Turnout by Pilot Area

	Oakridge	Rustic	Ward 33
Estimated population of residents eligible for PB voting ⁴	7,716	10,627	48,100
Average number of PB voters per year	64	60	438
Average percent voting turnout	0.8%	0.6%	0.9%

⁴ Population Information Based on City of Toronto Ward Profiles <https://www.toronto.ca/city-government/data-research-maps/neighbourhoods-communities/ward-profiles-2/> and Neighbourhood Improvement Area information <https://www.toronto.ca/city-government/data-research-maps/neighbourhoods-communities/nia-profiles/>. Census data are organized in age categories that do not separate out residents 14 years and older. Data on residents in age categories 15 years and older were used to estimate the number of people 14 years and older who could cast a vote in the PB pilot.

Figure 2: Estimated Participation in Participatory Budgeting Pilot Phases

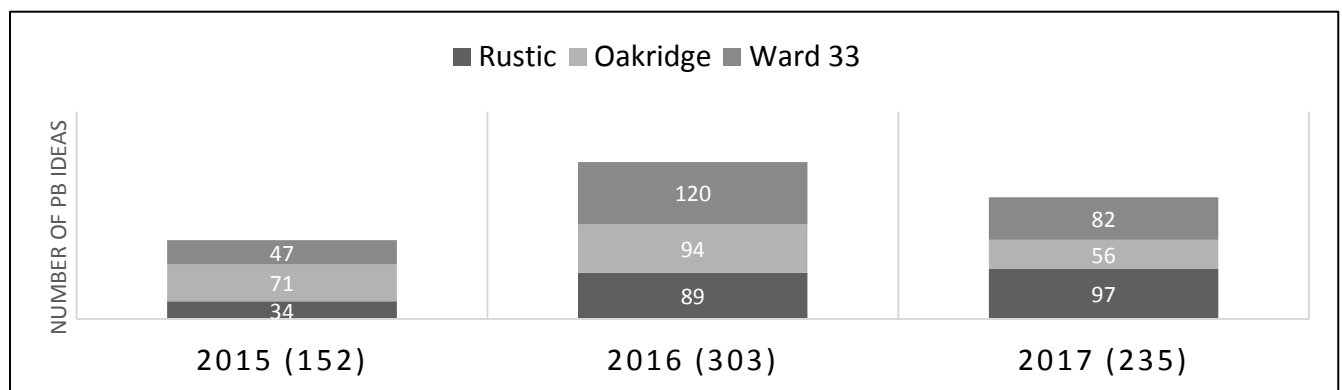
Note: A resident may have participated in any or all stages and their participation would have been counted each time.



Capital Investment Outcomes

Residents contributed 690 ideas for improvements to their neighbourhoods across all three pilot areas over the three-year pilot (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Number of Ideas Shared by Residents



The method used to collect ideas from residents – facilitated brainstorming meetings, information tables at community events, suggestion boxes in public places, online forms, etc. – did not appear to influence the types of ideas collected. Meetings where residents discussed and shaped ideas with City staff tended to make it easier to scope and cost ideas for the ballot selection phase, compared to when ideas were collected online or in less-formal settings.

Staff reviewed all ideas against eligibility criteria. Each year, approximately 10 percent of the ideas met the criteria and were brought forward to the ballot selection meetings. Remaining ideas were forwarded to the local councillor and City staff because they provided insight into community needs, were requests for programs or services requiring operating budgets, were duplicate ideas or exceeded the pilot budget.

Over the course of the pilot, each community chose almost the same total number of projects for their local ballot, and a total of 62 projects appeared on ballots.

Table 4: Number of Projects Chosen by Residents to Appear on Local Ballots.				
	Oakridge	Rustic	Ward 33	Total
2015	7	4	5	16
2016	8	8	10	26
2017	6	8	6	20
Total	21	20	21	62

Any pilot-area resident over the age of 14 could vote for up to three projects on the ballot, even if they were not a Canadian citizen or registered for City, provincial or federal elections.

To vote for a project, participants filled in a circle on the ballot next to the title of the project(s) they liked. They did not rank their votes – in other words they did not put a 1, 2 or 3 beside their choices to indicate which project they liked more than another. City staff reviewed the ballots and counted the number of votes cast for each project. The project with the most votes was declared the winner, and the cost of that project was deducted from the available funds. The next most popular project that could be funded with any remaining dollars was then selected, and if there were any funds left, the next most popular project that could be fully funded with the remaining funds was selected.

Across all pilot areas over the entire pilot, residents submitted 1,685 ballots and the resulting votes funded 37 capital projects in parks and public spaces. The estimated cost of the projects totalled \$1.87M of a possible \$1.95M available for the pilot (See Table 5):

- Oakridge: 11 projects valued at \$625,000 (192 voters)
- Rustic: 12 projects valued at \$630,000 (179 voters)
- Ward 33: 14 projects valued at \$615,000 (1,314 voters)

Table 5: PB Projects Selected by Resident Voting (including project costs, number of votes and annual cost)

Note: Each voter could cast up to three votes per ballot. Table does not show votes cast for non-winning projects

Year	Oakridge	Rustic	Ward 33
2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oakridge Park lighting improvement (\$90,000 - 50 votes) • Prairie Drive Park improvement package (\$60,000 – 20 votes) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rustic Park lighting improvement (\$75,000 - 59 votes) • Maple Leaf Park shade structure (\$75,000 – 44 votes) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brian Village "gateway" (\$50,000 – 200 votes) • Bellbury Park fitness park (\$70,000 – 200 votes) • Bike lockers at Don Mills Station (\$15,000 – 148 votes)
	Total: \$150,000	Total \$150,000	Total: \$135,000
2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oakridge Park performance stage (\$75,000 – 36 votes) • Pharmacy Avenue underpass mural (\$90,000 – 36 votes) • Walking/running path (\$75,000 – 30 votes) • Accessibility in Prairie Drive Park (\$10,000 – 19 votes) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Water bottle-filling stations (\$20,000 – 29 votes) • Movie wall in Maple Leaf Park (\$35,000 – 28 votes) • Lighting in Maple Leaf Park (\$75,000 – 19 votes) • Ping pong table in Rustic Park (\$10,000 – 17 votes) • Gazebo in Rustic Park (\$75,000 – 16 votes) • Chess tables in Rustic Park (\$20,000 – 13 votes) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Buchan Court Butterfly garden (\$75,000 – 349 votes) • Linus Park fitness track (\$100,000 – 226 votes) • Pedestrian Access around Bellbury & Lescon Parks (\$20,000 – 161 votes) • Water bottle-filling stations (\$20,000 – 159 votes) • Ping pong table in Bellbury Park (\$10,000 – 122 votes) • Benches in Parkway Forest Park (\$20,000 – 88 votes)
	Total: \$250,000	Total: \$235,000	Total: \$245,000 <i>(continued on next page)</i>

	Oakridge	Rustic	Ward 33
2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Madelaine Park lighting upgrade (\$45,000 – 31 votes) • Madelaine Park junior playground (\$100,000 – 29 votes) • Oakridge Park water bottle station (\$20,000 – 28 votes) • Madelaine Park pathway upgrade (\$50,000 – 24 votes) • Prairie Drive Park water bottle station (\$10,000 – 15 votes) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maple Leaf Park exercise park (\$75,000 – 41 votes) • Lights around Maple Leaf Park reservoir (\$50,000 – 34 votes) • Pathway around Maple Leaf Park reservoir (\$100,000 – 24 votes) • Maple Leaf Park chess tables (\$20,000 – 10 votes) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exercise park in Parkway Forest Park (\$75,000 – 203 votes) • Seniors exercise park in Godstone Park (\$50,000 – 171 votes) • Pleasantview Park improvements (\$20,000 – 103 votes) • Shawnee Park recreation improvements (\$75,000 – 92 votes) • Shawnee Park accessibility improvements (\$15,000 – 83 votes)
	Total: \$225,000	Total: \$245,000	Total: \$235,000



Bellbury Park Fitness Park in Ward 33



Maple Leaf Park Shade Structure in Rustic



**Pharmacy Avenue Underpass
Mural in Oakridge**



**Pedestrian Accessibility Measures in
Ward 33**

When asked, most residents felt that the projects would benefit their neighbourhood, but were less confident that the projects responded to larger needs of their communities, such as employment or safety. The strict eligibility criteria for PB projects – which were a necessary condition of City Council pre-approval – limited the ability to address operational or non-infrastructure needs.

Some residents also indicated that the process required too much involvement for what they felt were small projects, and that some of the completed projects were different than what had been depicted on the PB ballot.

Additional feedback from City councillors, residents and City staff describing strengths and challenges with the PB process as a capital planning activity, are listed below.

Operational Resources for the Participatory Budgeting Pilot

In addition to the capital funding needed to build projects, PB in Toronto and internationally requires considerable staff and other resources to support resident engagement and significant and ongoing promotion and communications. Toronto's PB operating resources included:

- A full-time coordinator to plan meetings, develop communications materials, participate in community events, coordinate other staff resources, oversee voting etc.;
- City staff (e.g. Transportation and Parks, Forestry and Recreation) in each pilot area to attend meetings, review ideas, estimate project costs and liaise with residents;
- City staff in several divisions to support outreach and voting in each pilot area;
- City councillors and their staff in each pilot area to promote the project, attend meetings, and liaise with residents; and
- City staff and councillors to support planning and installation of the community projects.

Participant Feedback

The City of Toronto's Manager's Office evaluated the pilot process and outcomes by undertaking a jurisdictional review and analysing feedback on the pilot through:

- one-on-one interviews and group discussions with participants, City councillors, staff and organizations with expertise in PB and civic engagement;
- written surveys of participants during each stage of the process; and
- an online survey of participants and non-participants following the pilot. (Non-participants were asked about general awareness of the PB pilot, thoughts on implementation features and interest in future involvement.)

See Table 6 for participation rates in different evaluation methods.

Survey results in this report are based on a small sample size which provide insights on overall themes and trends, but should not be considered statistically representative of PB participants or residents of the pilot areas. Total survey responses are indicated below, but not all respondents responded to all surveys or questions within a particular survey.

- Ward 33: Total respondents = 260 (15 % of Ward 33 pilot participants)
- Rustic: Total respondents = 49 (14 % of Rustic pilot participants)
- Oakridge: Total respondents = 68 (16 % of Oakridge pilot participants)
- Non-pilot areas: Total respondents = 110

Table 6: Evaluation Methods in Each Year of PB Pilot and Participation Levels				
Method	2015	2016	2017	Total
Interviews and group discussions with residents, City councillors and City staff	25	12	15	52
Participant surveys	19	190	159	368
Non-participant surveys	-	-	119	119

Feedback on the Strengths of the PB Pilot:

- Residents appreciated the chance to learn what infrastructure projects cost and how the City plans and prioritizes projects in their communities.
- Meetings created opportunities for neighbours to hear from each other and discuss community needs, and to meet City staff with responsibilities in their areas.

“It is a great idea. The community knows its needs best, and it’s a great way to engage people with local politics.”

“My neighbourhood has a lot of opportunities. It is encouraging to be given the chance to really be a part of change in the community.”

- Local residents

Feedback on the Challenges of the PB Pilot:

- The process created a sense of competition between neighbours for ideas and projects, which sometimes created disagreements and divisions.
- The size of the PB area influences the process – smaller areas have fewer parks and public spaces and less opportunities for investment, while larger areas can make the process less relevant to residents who don't live near the projects on the ballot.
- The final projects can differ from what residents suggested when, for example, there is a lack of detail in the initial proposal or design, community-created information about the project is not consistent with the City's proposals, and installation circumstances alter the scope or cost of the project.
- City capital staff were able to accommodate PB projects during the pilot period, but found that delivering these additional projects impacted their ability to deliver state-of-good-repair and other capital projects, and drew on capital reserve funds.

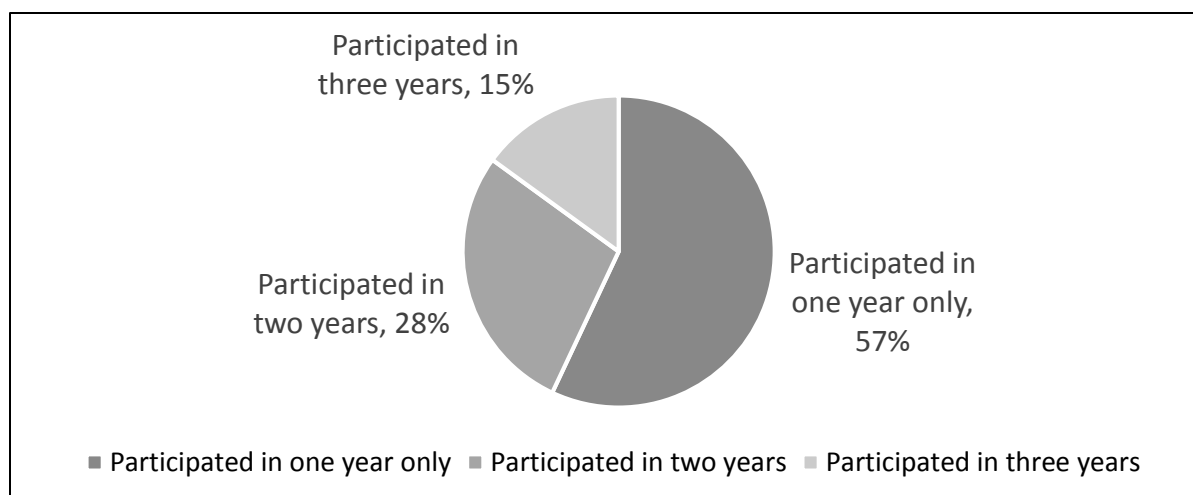
“We spent a lot of time planning our project but the end result was not what we asked for or voted for...this is hardly ‘participatory.’”

“I wish the money could go to a wider variety of projects, not just physical improvements... (the community really needs) support for small businesses, employment, children and youth.”

- Local residents

Of the 141 respondents to a survey question asking how many years they participated in the pilot, 57 percent said that they participated in only one year, while 43 percent joined the process for two or three years (See Figure 4).

Figure 4: 2015-2017 Resident Participant in All Areas (percent of survey respondents)



Participation and voting rates are only two indicators of the impact of PB, are known to fluctuate year-to-year in other PB cities and to be influenced by a range of factors, from participant attrition to the number of voting locations⁵. The pilot also assessed who participated, how they participated and whether or not PB builds capacity and public interest in continuing to be involved in other aspects of local decision-making. On these measures, overall resident and staff feedback on Toronto's PB process was generally positive (See Figure 5), with several key findings:

- Residents valued the opportunity to discuss ideas with their neighbours and City staff, and learn how much amenities like park benches and playgrounds cost and how they might fit with other capital plans. The evaluation suggests this outcome may be more valuable to participants than actually voting on a particular project.
- Most participants came with little or no previous experience engaging with the City through, for example, consultation meetings, Council or Standing Committee meetings, contact with their councillor, or communication through 311 (See Figure 6).
- The PB pilot may have built resident interest in future involvement. In participant surveys, 73 percent of 195 residents who responded to a question about future involvement indicated that they would be more likely to participate in other City decision-making activities because of their involvement in the PB pilot. 13% their involvement would not change, 12% said they did not know and 2% said they would be less likely to be involved in future City initiatives. (See Figure 7). It is not known if this is greater, less than or consistent with the impact other types of engagement have on an interest in future participation.

⁵ Public Agenda. 2016. Ibid.

Figure 5: Participant Views on Participatory Budgeting 2015-2017

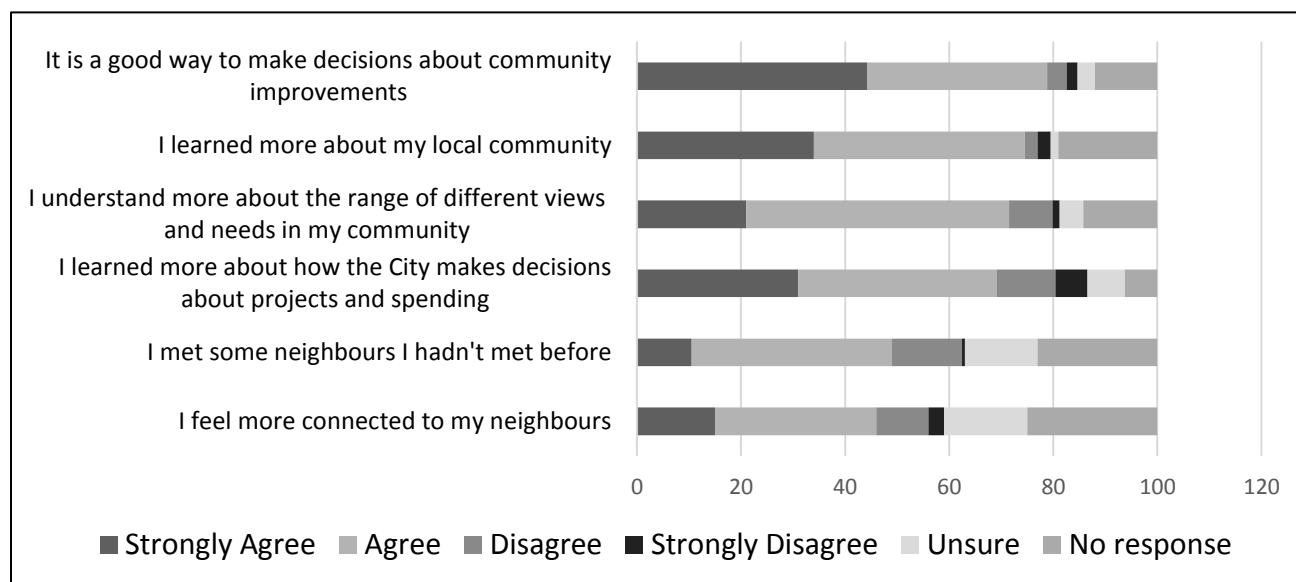


Figure 6: PB Participants in 2015-2017 Who Said They Had Previously Participated in Other Municipal Activities

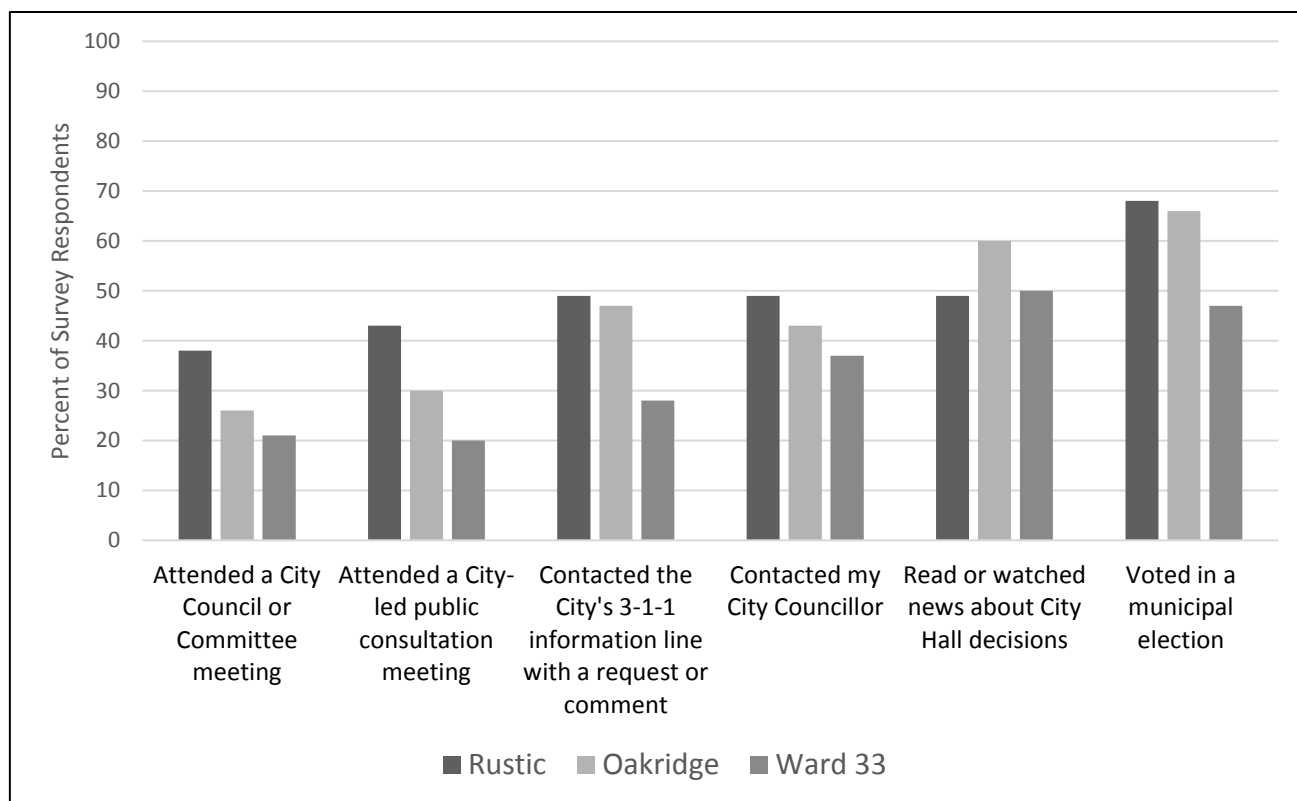
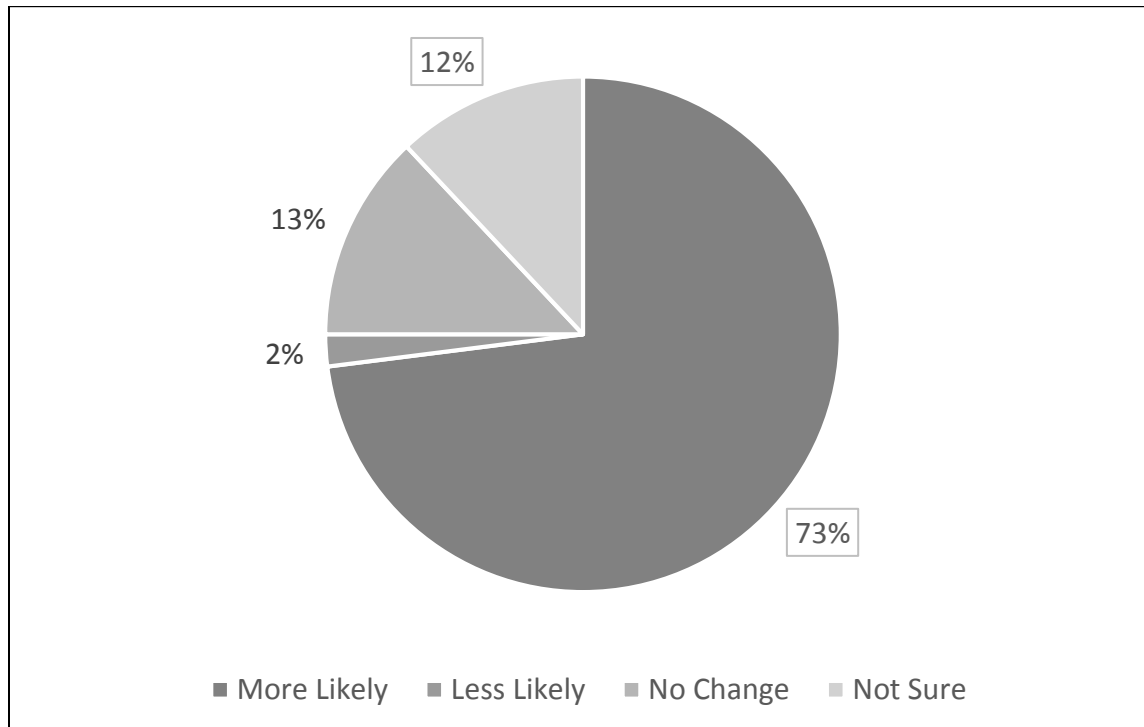


Figure 7: Percentage of PB Participants in 2015-2017 (All Pilot Areas Combined) Who Indicated How Likely They Were to Participate in Other City Decision-Making Because of their PB Involvement



Next Steps

City Staff will report to City Council through the 2019 budget process on the PB pilot evaluation including a full-cost assessment of the budget and staffing resource implications for any future PB processes.

Documentation

This report, evaluation data, participant reflections, outreach and communications material, and updates on the status of all projects selected through the City of Toronto's Participatory Budgeting Pilot are available at <https://www.toronto.ca/community-people/get-involved/participatory-budgeting/>.