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Community Engagement in Local Communities: Hearing the Voices of the Public

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Representative democracy is no longer enough for day-to-day governance as citizens demand more of their elected officials' time and more attention paid to matters that concern them. Public hearings, open houses and other traditional means of engaging with citizens, especially at the municipal level, are not sufficient for true participatory democracy. Nor is going to the polls on a set date enough to satisfy citizens' desires to interact more with elected officials.

Done properly, engaging with the community can enable politicians to make better decisions. It can also broaden their perspectives on issues, offer opportunities for better communication and relationship-building with a diverse public and allow new ideas to come into play in the decision-making process.

Although an Ipsos poll has revealed that just 20 per cent of Canadians have ever engaged in community engagement, those who did said they saw it as a positive experience. This paper examines the barriers to community engagement, including failure to reach people, time and place limitations, NIMBYism and the problem of strong voices dominating and making other people feel unheard.

The City of Nanaimo offers a successful model of community engagement. When preparing an Affordable Housing Strategy, officials reached out to the public through pop-up events, workshops, surveys and one-on-one conversations. Follow-up included a white paper that incorporated the engagement process, public feedback and policy options. Later, a draft of the strategy was presented to the public during an open house which offered a question-and-answer period.

Engaging with the public is not a small undertaking. However, this paper shows that problems such as divergent opinions, strongly vocal activists potentially hijacking the agenda, inevitable conflicts between factions and establishing the best times and places for engagement are not insurmountable.

This paper offers recommendations for community engagement that can be adapted by both large and small municipalities. The key to successful engagement is advance preparation, including deciding which projects are best suited for this approach, public communication to ensure as many people as possible know about the opportunity to engage and starting the engagement process early.

Taking the process to the people by going to popular local hang-outs and talking to citizens there helps mitigate the problem of inconvenient times and structured settings for many people. In smaller municipalities, officials can set up tables on Main Street, at libraries or local clubs.

Combining online engagement with other efforts could help bring together ideas and perspectives from those more likely to engage online and those who prefer traditional methods of engagement, which will help to improve the quality of the whole process. Online engagement can supplement in-person connections and can help to set out rules around behaviour and enforcement of them.

Municipalities can also partner with translators and cultural organizations to ensure that no one is left out of the process because of language or other barriers. Feedback and follow-up are two important parts of the engagement process as well. Citizens need to know that their input was valuable in determining final policies.

INTRODUCTION

With rising levels of polarization and the varied interests of the public, numerous challenges have arisen for local governments and elected officials. While in some cases voting rates are declining, residents are more and more demanding of elected officials' time. They expect to be heard on matters they are concerned about or that affect them. Despite this expectation, some communities also struggle to get people involved in talking about local government decisions. And as communities grow and change, it is harder for decision-makers to hear from the wide range of voices that make up those communities.

As one of a series of papers commissioned by Alberta Municipalities, called the Future of Municipal Government, this paper will outline the idea, promise and practicalities of community engagement. The paper first touches on the idea of participatory governance and then moves to focus on community engagement as a tool for participatory governance. We begin by defining what we mean by community engagement and then look at the expectations of different groups about community engagement, the challenges faced in local community engagement, some examples where we can draw lessons and some local context. We conclude with some recommendations for consideration in local government engagement efforts.

METHOD

This paper comprises a literature review of multi-disciplinary research on community engagement in local communities and provides recommendations drawn from that research. The review included academic literature in diverse research areas, including local government and governance, public participation and engagement, communications, community planning, public policy and public administration. It also draws on resources from local governments and other organizations working in engagement and community development.

PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE

Our traditional form of representative government, in which we elect a local representative (either as a member of a party or as an individual) to represent our interests in the legislature, the House of Commons or the council chamber has proven to be insufficient for day-to-day governance. Indeed, there have always been critiques of representative governance which can be seen to put a barrier between the people and the wheels of governance. A prominent figure in the research on governance, Benjamin Barber, was very critical of representative government and wrote extensively on the need for direct participation. Barber advocated for dialogue which stressed listening for commonality, but also recognized the reality and need for conflict. He viewed empathic listening as a way for two people to "… bridge the differences between them by conversation and mutual understanding" (Battistoni et al. 2018, 483).

One important idea of how people should be more involved in the governance of their communities is participatory governance. The ideas of participatory governance not only go beyond elections but also traditional types of feedback such as legislated public hearings and calling or writing to elected officials. As people look for more opportunities to influence their governments, elected officials and public servants, there is a recognition that while elections and representative government are the foundations of local government, legitimacy must be earned by additional means (Osborne, Mayo and Bussey 2021).

> Theories of participatory democracy … assert that citizen involvement has positive effects on democracy: it contributes to the inclusion of individual citizens in the policy process, it encourages civic skills and civic virtues, it leads to rational decisions based on public reasoning (deliberation) and it increases the legitimacy of the process and the outcome (legitimacy) … (Michels and De Graaf 2017, 875–876)

What do participatory forms of governance look like? Phillips (2010, 59–61) defines three models to understand the interplay of traditional governments and participatory processes. These models include:

- Community government (either devolution of decisions closer to citizens or opening up "existing institutions and policy processes to greater involvement by citizens");

- Local governance (focusing on partnerships and collaboration with non-governmental groups and supporting these partnerships through some level of co-operation and/or funding); and

- Community governance (control being decentralized to local groups to "mobilize collective action …" take "… leadership in decision-making, and …" act "both autonomously from governments and collaboratively with them.")

The different models require different levels of control by governments and their citizens, meaningful input and co-operation with non-governmental entities. Phillips (2010, 61) also notes that for community governance, "… the creation of new decision rules, new frameworks … and new decision-making institutions" is required. The ideas that have developed around the practice of community engagement (presented in the next section) can help local governments with ideas and tools for how to approach participatory governance.

Throughout the years, as governments made decisions that some portions of the public felt were against their wishes or ignored their views, and new theories, methods and technologies of communication and participation emerged, the public began to demand a say in the decisions made by their elected representatives, beyond elections. Many different academic disciplines have discussed participatory governance, community engagement and related questions. There is

a tension between public participation, citizen engagement and governance as many different factors go into decision-making. The suggested solutions may differ but finding ways to foster dialogue and public involvement in decisions that affect it is an over-arching theme in much research and public policy work in the last few decades.

HISTORY OF THE PRACTICE OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Community engagement is a broad term that means different things to different people. It can range from the idea of visiting with neighbours or talking to an elected councillor at the grocery store to the level of involvement people have in their community, to formal processes for hearing from stakeholders. This paper will focus primarily on the specific use of the term "community engagement" (also known as public participation, public engagement, citizen involvement, etc.) as the practice of local governments engaging the public on decisions that will affect it.

THE PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The roots of many current community engagement theories can be found in the work of Sherry Arnstein, whose 1969 paper defined citizen participation as "… a categorical term for citizen power … a redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future" (Arnstein 2019, 24). Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation (Figure 1) is a hierarchical list of ways the public may be involved in decision-making, from manipulation (seen as negative) to citizen control. Arnstein felt that governments needed to move towards more citizen control and away from manipulation and other forms of engagement with residents that were not authentic and did not involve two-way communication. This idea is reflected in the models of participatory governance presented above which move towards empowering citizens in their governance.
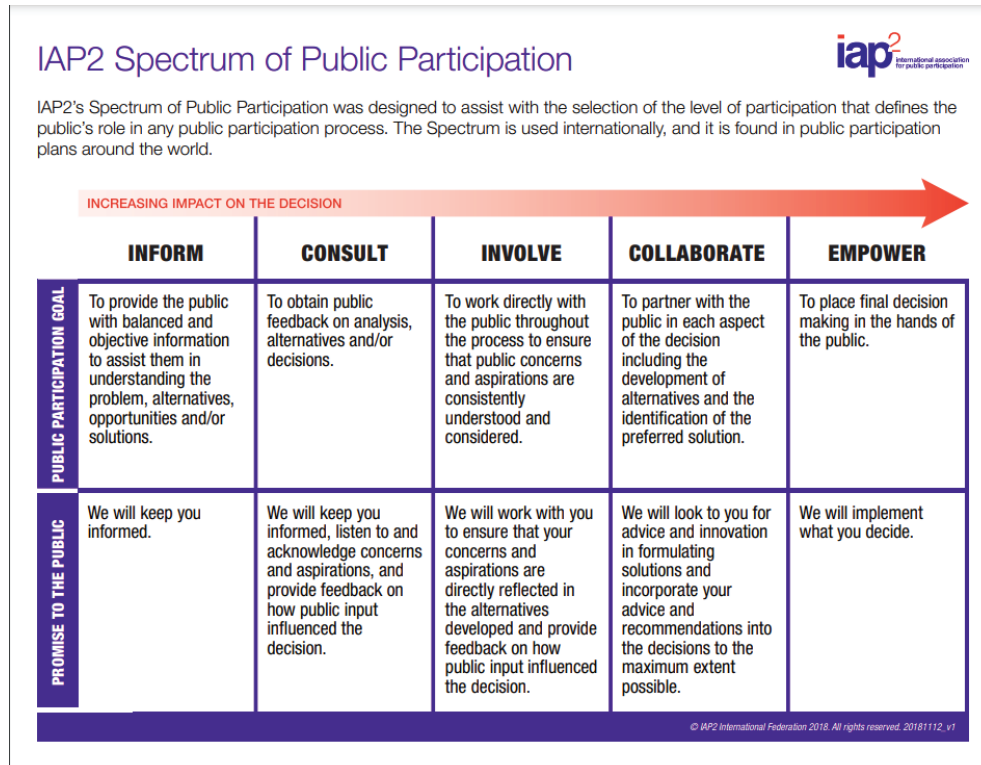
Figure 1.
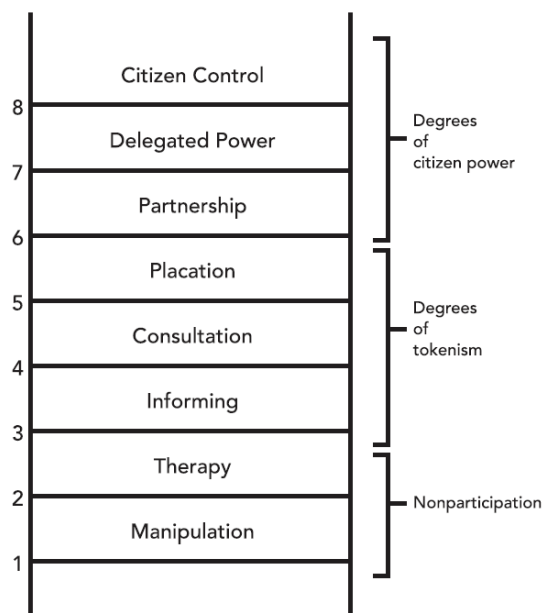
Source: Arnstein (2019)

It is easy to see the influence of Arnstein's ladder in the spectrum of public participation created by the International Association for Public Participation (IAPP) and widely used or adapted by local governments and other engagement professionals (IAP2 International Federation 2018). The spectrum (Figure 2) lays out levels of engagement and clarifies what each means and a promise to the public for each level. This spectrum and associated best practices regarding what types of tactics are used at each level have given community engagement practitioners and those writing community engagement policies a shared set of definitions and practices with which to work.

Figure 2.

IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation

IAP2's Spectrum of Public Participation was designed to assist with the selection of the level of participation that defines the public's role in any public participation process. The Spectrum is used internationally, and it is found in public participation plans around the world.

INCREASING IMPACT ON THE DECISION

|	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.

Source: IAP2 International Federation (2018)

This spectrum does not put a value judgment on the different types of community engagement but presents options depending on the project and other circumstances. This moves away somewhat from Arnstein's judgment that the forms of engagement which did not involve citizen power were inferior. Using the IAP2 levels can help to identify what type of engagement is right in what circumstance and help set resident expectations. It does, however, connect back to Phillips' models of participatory governance outlined above. For example, bottom-up decision-making by community groups could be facilitated under Empower. The decision is up to the residents or community group and the government will simply implement it.

Community engagement professionals use tools such as the IAP2 Spectrum in their day-to-day work and learn more every day about what works and doesn't work, and how to adapt the resources to their local communities. In the meantime, researchers continue to develop alternative models. Fung (2006) created the democracy cube (Figure 3), which attempts to better represent the complexity of community engagement and includes three elements: participants (who and how they are selected), authority and power (the level of authority the public has on the decision) and communication and decision mode (how the decision will be arrived at).

Figure 3.
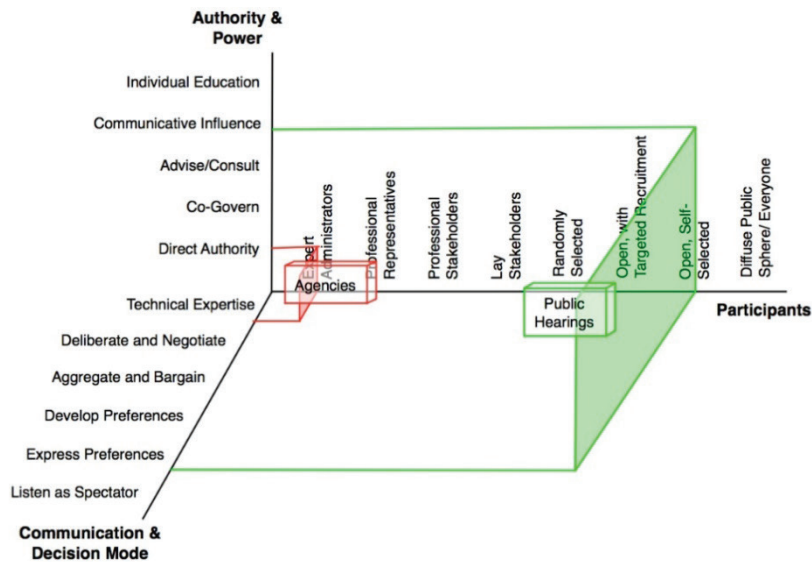
Source: Fung (2006, 71)

There have been other frameworks and models and researchers and practitioners will continue refining and building on others' work, but at this time no other over-arching model has emerged for the use of community engagement professionals. The current research, however, can help us look at the local government and community engagement landscape more holistically and consider the complexity of community engagement work in local government.

WHY DO LOCAL GOVERNMENTS ENGAGE?

In Alberta, municipal governments are required to have public hearings on certain types of decisions (such as land use changes) and now the provincial government has mandated that all municipalities have a publicly available public participation policy created and passed by council, to be updated every four years (AUMA, RMA 2018, 1) The AUMA (now Alberta Municipalities) and Rural Municipalities of Alberta (RMA) jointly created a public engagement guide in 2018 to help municipalities understand engagement and develop their policies. It is a useful guide and gives a good understanding of what is (and is not) public engagement. Some local governments' public engagement policies are a high-level guide, such as in the Town of Olds (2020). Some are more detailed, such as in the City of Fort Saskatchewan. Their framework includes guidance to decide what level of engagement is appropriate in differing projects and guidance around engagement tools and techniques as well as some evaluation information (City of Fort Saskatchewan 2021).

In addition to formal requirements for community engagement plans, and some legislated requirements to have public hearings and more formal processes[1] on certain matters, there is also a public expectation that local governments will engage. We touched earlier on the idea that participatory governance is an evolution of top-down representative government and that

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[1] There is a requirement for formal community engagement (public consultation) on certain types of projects in federal jurisdiction including oil and gas, mining and renewable energy. A 2019 presentation created by the Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency gives an overview of the *Impact Assessment Act* and engagement processes related to the act (Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency 2019).

governments need to gain legitimacy beyond elections. But what does the public think about the need to be engaged in government decisions? EKOS conducted a poll of Canadians over 18 years of age in 2017 (focused on the federal government) and found that 84 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement: "I would personally feel better about government decision-making if I knew that governments sought informed input from average citizens regularly." Eighty-three per cent believed that consultation should be representative of the population and the same percentage felt that as many people as possible should be consulted, whereas only 38 per cent felt that consultation should be limited to only those most affected (EKOS Politics 2017).

WHAT IS GAINED THROUGH GOOD ENGAGEMENT?

We have established that there are theoretical and governance reasons to engage, there are some legislated requirements to engage formally as well as have wider engagement policies and that the public expects some level of engagement in day-to-day government decisions. Beyond that, what do local governments have to gain by good engagement?

At its best, community engagement gives valuable resident insights to decision-makers. The benefits of community engagement can include a change in the parameters of the project when previously unknown information is shared or a change to a program that means it will better serve diverse residents. An example of this is the tourism development plan in Cow Head, Newfoundland and Labrador. Engagement with the community led to a change in the plan to include the protection of the natural and cultural landscape as opposed to narrowly focusing on tourism, which allowed the plan to align more closely with the community's vision (The Canadian Institute of Planners 2021).

A change to a program to better serve diverse residents is exemplified by the City of Surrey in its Parks, Recreation & Culture Strategic Plan Update in 2018. The process engaged "5,000+ people and 250+ community groups" online, at structured events, community-led events and pop-up opportunities and resulted in significant improvements to the original plan (City of Surrey 2018).

> The emphasis on an inclusive and diverse process led to a Plan with a strong emphasis on inclusion and intercultural appreciation. While the previous Parks, Recreation & Culture Plan focused mainly on City facilities and programming, this process led to many new policies addressing topics like universal accessibility, affordability, equitable access for all residents, programs, and services for all age groups, community engagement, and partnerships, more support for newcomers, partnerships with the LGBTQ community (and) … a significant focus on Indigenous collaboration … (City of Surrey 2018, 6).

When done well, community engagement can widen the perspectives that are taken in decision-making, provide opportunities for better communication and relationship-building with a wide range of the public, bring new perspectives and ideas into the process and lead to better decisions.

PERCEPTIONS OF ENGAGEMENT AND EXPECTATIONS

Having looked briefly at what positive community engagement can bring to the decision-making process, now we will look at some of the challenges facing engagement professionals and decision-makers as they work to promote community engagement.

We begin with research about public perceptions regarding community engagement processes. Ipsos surveyed 1,002 Canadian adults in 2017 using an online panel with balanced demographics (Knaus 2017). Among the key findings were:

- Only 20 per cent said they have participated in any municipal public consultation, and only 12 per cent of those had done so within the past two years. Of those:

  – Eighty-seven per cent reported participating through simple surveys (73 per cent online, 46 per cent by telephone and 34 per cent by mail);

  – Thirty-six per cent took part through social media and 31 per cent in an online discussion; and

  – Forty-five per cent attended in-person engagement events.

- Those who participated in engagement opportunities had a generally positive view of them.

- The most common barriers to participating were:

  – Didn't hear about the opportunity;

  – Felt that strong voices dominate;

  – Didn't think my contributions would make an impact on the final decision;

  – Didn't like participating in group discussions;

  – Times were inconvenient; and

  – Just not interested (38 per cent).

Looking a little more deeply at how participants feel about the community engagement process, and comparing their expectations with staff and elected officials, Berner et al. conducted a study based on telephone interviews with citizens, elected officials and administrators (staff) in four North Carolina cities regarding community budgeting engagement processes. Some interesting differences emerged in the different groups' expectations (Berner, Amos and Morse 2011).

The authors found that views regarding effectiveness did not vary by location, but instead by group (elected official, staff or the public). The comments from the public involved the need for administrators to communicate the objectives for the input, provide simplified versions of budget documents to help the public provide educated input and prioritize ongoing engagement rather than just at set times for specific projects.

Elected officials felt that hearing from the public directly both in public hearings and in their day-to-day interactions was the best way to engage. Eighty-six per cent felt that public hearings are an effective way to engage, which contrasts with only 46 per cent of the public surveyed.

Staff saw wider participation by residents in government as a positive but felt that an informed citizenry is needed for effective engagement, "one who is comfortable in the role of a community advocate, educated on issues, views issues from a broad perspective, and who can as easily educate the community" (Berner, Amos and Morse 2011, 155).

Across the groups, three commonalities emerged. First, the public should be given feedback regarding the engagement and how it affected the outcome; second, communication and co-operation are key to effective engagement; and third, the public's role in engagement is as an advocate and is not neutral.

From the Ipsos poll, we can see that a large portion of the population is not part of engagement processes (only 20 per cent having ever participated) and that some barriers need to be addressed to ensure better representation. From both the Ipsos poll and the North Carolina study, we can see that participants expect clear communication about the process and how the feedback influenced the final decision. The North Carolina study also raises important questions about how to address the differences in expectations among elected officials, staff and residents/participants regarding engagement processes.

GOOD ENGAGEMENT: CHALLENGES AND HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE REAL WORLD

Reviewing some real-world examples can be a good way to identify best practices of good engagement as well as some of the challenges to achieving successful engagement.

Hallström, Hvenegaard and Dipa (2019) used case studies of sustainability plan creation in Hinton and Wood Buffalo to review the engagement processes through the lens of Arnstein's ladder and the concept of deliberative democracy. They assessed the strengths and weaknesses of the two engagement approaches and suggested some areas for improvement in municipal engagement. Although these plans were created over 10 years ago and the research does not speak to the success of the plans going forward, it is worthwhile to look at these as local examples of processes that were seen at the time as having some success and areas for learning and improvement.[2]

The challenges in both communities showed similarities, including:

• The time required for participation;

• The uncertainty around how the feedback would be used in the final decision/outcome;

• Differences in people's understanding of what sustainability is;

• The difficulty of engaging in long-term matters;

• Connecting long-term visions to people's day-to-day lives; and

• The tension between community input and knowledge and the knowledge and experience of subject-matter experts.

Wood Buffalo leaned more on the technocrats (the term used in the paper for subject-matter experts) for final decision-making, focusing the engagement mostly on the first stage, asking about people's visions and concerns and not engaging at the implementation phase. It was thought that citizens could not understand the technical realities well enough to take part in decision-making. This finding fit with the views of the staff in the North Carolina interviews, who felt that participants should be informed (and educated) on issues.

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[2]   Further local research on actual community engagement efforts in all areas of local government in Alberta is needed to evaluate the successes and areas for improvement in our local community engagement landscape.

Both processes used a wide range of methods, such as a community advisory group and teams going out to local public venues to meet people in Hinton, and online surveys, telephone interviews and hiring high schoolers to go around the community to survey people in Wood Buffalo.

Both municipalities felt that engagement of a diverse array of citizens was important to sustainability plan creation. However, neither process appeared to move from surface levels of engagement to citizen decision-making. Without engagement at the implementation stage, it may be harder for the public to see a connection between the outcome and its own opinions, needs and insights.

Reporting back to participants and the community regarding engagement and project results can also be a challenge. The expectations section above notes that the public expects to see the results of engagement and how its feedback affected the outcome. The processes used in the City of Nanaimo's Affordable Housing Strategy give an example of good report-back processes. The engagement involved the public, other levels of government and local organizations and service providers. It also incorporated a steering committee with community representatives to help plan the process and check in throughout. A mix of engagement methods was used, including pop-up events, more organized workshops, surveys (online) and a few one-on-one conversations (to address some gaps in who was represented in the engagement feedback). Reporting back began with a housing expo (open house) to inform people of the engagement results and the draft policy options and recommendations. Interesting and informative activities were presented in a bid to attract participants, including families with children. A white paper was then created incorporating the background research, the engagement process and feedback and the resulting policy options. These policy options were used to develop the objectives in the resulting Affordable Housing Strategy, linking the results of the feedback to the outcome. A final open house was held to inform the public about the final Affordable Housing Strategy draft and included a question-and-answer period.

Having a report-back along with the presentation of the draft policy options and recommendations helped to draw a clear line between engagement feedback and the resulting objectives. Holding another event once the Affordable Housing Strategy draft was complete gave a final opportunity for people to ask questions and see how their feedback was used. Having an event in addition to posting results online can also be a good way to encourage people to review the engagement results and show that the project team is still listening.

The City of Nanaimo's current Affordable Housing web page includes links back to the Affordable Housing Strategy and updates on the strategy from the last three years, thus reminding people of the guiding strategy for current initiatives and decisions that were set out through research and community engagement (City of Nanaimo and CitySpaces Consulting Ltd. 2022).

POLARIZATION, NIMBYISM AND PROMOTING THE COMMON GOOD

Sometimes, community engagement efforts can be met by opposition known as NIMBY (not in my backyard), an acronym used to refer to people who do not want certain types of projects or development near them. This type of opposition is often related to projects such as homeless shelters, addiction treatment centres, waste management facilities or even public transit, rental or affordable housing. Used negatively, NIMBY refers to people who are not interested in authentic engagement but are simply against the project and attempt to derail both the engagement process and the ultimate project if not properly addressed.

Using the term NIMBY to mean any person who vocally opposes a project may miss some nuance. The motivation for opposition may be based on fear or perceptions about the negativity of certain types of projects. Change is scary for people and real fears based on unknowns or misconceptions can be very strong motivators of opposition. Declining property values is an example of a view that may either be based on some truth or a misconception. The fact that people's concerns may be either unfounded fears or real risks shows the nuance required in thinking about this topic.

Pol et al. (2005) drew from social and environmental psychology to analyze what they call the NIMBY effect. They reviewed 47 case studies from Catalonia (Barcelona area) in Spain with regards to "energy supply, waste disposal, services or transportation" (Pol et al. 2005, 45). Their review shows that some so-called NIMBYs are reacting to real safety and environmental concerns which could be addressed through authentic engagement, adjustment to plans and/or ongoing communication and trust-building, while some are using these same arguments to advance their interests in some way (Pol et al. 2005).

> Different factors can generate a NIMBY effect, especially fear of loss of the perceived quality-of-life status and economic value of property. The NIMBY effect could be considered "normal" due to perceived risk and nuisances associated with some social and environmental facilities. It includes fear of both objective and subjective risks (attributed risks), fear of loss of achieved well-being and quality-of-life status, and fear of loss of the economic value of property (Pol et al. 2005, 44).

While much of what we've learned about good engagement and communication can address the real concerns of some opponents, the true NIMBY, the self-interested types (Dear 1992, 288) focus on local context such as loss of parking, or increased traffic and noise as a justification for their stand that nothing should change. These may need to be addressed in different ways. In some cases, they might "... express their opposition in terms of the clients' needs, representing the host neighborhood as unsuitable or unsafe for the client group" (Dear 1992, 290) to disguise their opposition in caring terms.

If individuals in an engagement process raise these self-interested objections and the engagement reaches a large and diverse enough group, they may be balanced by other views and underlying concerns and fears may be addressed as part of the engagement and project planning process. However, when NIMBYs dominate the process and/or become organized, they may derail the process, discourage others from speaking up and make it appear as if everyone is opposed. Davison et al. (2016) examined the region of Parramatta, west of Sydney, Australia to look at opposition and NIMBYism related to affordable housing initiatives that were being encouraged by the state government, to assess why some projects attracted large, vocal NIMBY opposition. The state had initiated changes that permitted affordable housing in the area, despite local planning rules, either through the local housing authority or by incentivizing private projects. The authors analyzed opposition received, including 397 written submissions to 47 affordable housing project proposals from 2009 to 2011 (Davison et al. 2016). Not all affordable housing projects in the area attracted a large amount of opposition; indeed, many did not receive much public feedback at all. Davison et al. (2016) report that "the median number of submissions was three, two-thirds of all developments received fewer than five submissions, and 79 per cent fewer than ten. Nine planned developments received no submissions at all. There were ten cases in Parramatta where more than ten submissions were received in opposition …" (Davison et al. 2016, 290). The authors found only some cases resulted in escalation of NIMBY sentiments, including organized letter-writing campaigns, petitions to planning authorities, direct lobbying of politicians, demonstrations, legal action and threats and intimidation. They found five factors were present where opposition escalated:

- **Public notification period**: Less escalation occurred in cases including private developers who did not have a requirement to notify the public, whereas government-led projects did have a public notification requirement.

- **Sense of injustice:** Opposition was more often expressed in areas where the state had overridden the local planning authority. Opposition was often expressed through a concern regarding parking and traffic or being forced to open their community to people whom they felt hadn't earned the right to live there.

- **Prejudice against prospective occupants:** Almost 25 per cent of the responses were concerned about the low-income status of affordable housing residents, and 41 per cent mentioned a fear of worsening crime and safety. Many of these responses included language such as "taxpayer" or "solid citizen" to refer to themselves or people like them (Davison et al. 2016, 396).

- **Strong campaign leadership:** Where the highest opposition was received and where this opposition went beyond the formal engagement processes, it was found that "… there was invariably a small group of people or a single person who played a central role in fomenting unrest and recruiting objectors" (Davison et al. 2016, 393).

- **Involvement of politicians**: Councillors became involved primarily when it involved the state overruling local planning rules. Councillors may also become involved for other reasons, such as lobbying by opposition groups and politics. Political involvement can help to raise the objectors' profile and the opposition may receive more media attention, which could further inflame the situation.

The authors found that "each of these factors helped escalate opposition campaigns by either motivating or facilitating participation by members of the public. Where fewer than four were present in a campaign it did not gain scale or intensity (Davison et al. 2016, 387). Considering

these factors in the local context and mitigating them where possible could help to address NIMBY attitudes before they escalate.

One local example of a NIMBY argument that dominated the engagement process and public conversation was the Southwest Bus Rapid Transit (SWBRT) engagement in Calgary. An organized group called Ready to Engage used arguments about who used public transit and who is perceived to live in their affluent southwest Calgary community to argue against a planned BRT project that would connect the southwest communities with Mount Royal University and the downtown. During a television interview at a SWBRT engagement event in 2016, a person vocally opposed to the project can be heard claiming that no one in the area used public transit but instead could afford to drive a Mercedes — thereby implying that anyone who takes transit did not belong in their affluent community (Fletcher 2016). A review of the Ready to Engage Twitter page shows the multitude of reasons for the opposition: claiming local knowledge, proposed service was not needed and that the engagement itself was flawed, etc. (Ready to Engage n.d.). Four of the five factors listed above can be found in this case:

• A sense of injustice (this group felt that this project was being imposed on their community);

• Prejudice (negative perceptions about who uses transit and who lives in their community);

• Strong campaign leadership (organized with advertising money and vocal advocates); and

• Politicians' involvement.

Dear (1992) recommends several strategies to address the wider community and NIMBY sentiments to nip escalation in the bud. These strategies include:

• Community education: Start early to inform the wider community of the plan. This basis of understanding from the wider community could help counteract NIMBY voices when they arise, as the general population might be less liable to listen to misinformation or exaggerated concerns;

• Community outreach: Outreach to community groups such as community associations or other organized groups can be an important early step in working with the community. It can give planners a good idea of the community's sentiments and what type of concerns and opposition may arise. It can also foster community champions who may advocate for the project and/or any engagement opportunities with the wider community;

• Community advisory boards: This would allow targeted engagement and outreach to vocal community members and can also provide an opportunity to represent the demographics of the community more accurately; and

• Concessions and incentives to the community: In social services projects, there is often something like a good-neighbour agreement which outlines how the service provider will address some of the possible negative effects of its project on the community. For something like public transit, where design choices can be made which address some of the community's concerns without adversely affecting the project's desired outcomes, this can be a good way to address those concerns. This is simply responding to what has come from community engagement (Dear 1992).

Related to this topic is the problem of mis- and disinformation and the ability of individuals or small groups to dominate a conversation or engagement with incorrect and/or inflammatory information, which has affected many communities in Alberta and beyond. A recent example of this is the vocal outcry against the concept of 15-minute cities (which aim to make communities more walkable with diverse services) which erupted in many locations, including Edmonton. Some

people, whether misinformed or purposely providing misinformation, claimed that the City of Edmonton wanted to limit people's movements out of their neighbourhoods, raising the spectre of lockdowns (Butterfield 2023). The same guidelines around good engagement and NIMBYism can help address some of these instances; for example, having robust, diverse engagement with the wider population mitigates the risks of these outlier voices getting all the attention. Good facilitators with communication and de-escalation experience[3] are also very important for dealing with this type of problem in the moment. A strong communication and media relations plan may also be needed to counter disinformation that has reached a wider audience. Diffusing these situations is very important so that they do not deter the wider public from participating and the misinformation does not spread without a response.[4]

Taking all the steps recommended to address vocal opposition and NIMBYism can be time-consuming and costly, but especially for large-scale projects, delays and even ultimate rejections could cost far more time and resources in the long run. In the case of the Southwest BRT project, the organized opposition group dominated the conversation until other groups organized to support the BRT and city administration took extra time to counter misinformation. A better, more focused public communication and engagement plan anticipating some of the NIMBY sentiments could have identified the possible opposition early on and may have limited the number of people that would be brought onside to the most vocal and strident NIMBY group.

IDENTIFYING THE BEST FORMATS TO BROADEN INVOLVEMENT

Many of the challenges and lessons highlighted above can be addressed by working to broaden involvement by the community, ensuring a diversity of perspectives and giving people as many opportunities as possible to become involved. Having a wide cross-section of the population engaged leads to a wider range of perspectives and makes it harder for one vocal group to dominate the conversation. This section will look at diversifying engagement efforts and the opportunities for online engagement.

DIVERSITY

The research presented earlier pointed to limitations of engagement for some groups. The Ipsos poll showed that a large portion of the population has never been involved in engagement processes and we know that engagement participants tend to be older, whiter and wealthier than the average citizen (Knaus 2017).

Diversity in engagement is important because people from different backgrounds have different viewpoints and needs, both when it comes to project outcomes and engagement itself. Traditional engagement events might be harder for some people to attend. For example, lower income people may not have the time and flexibility to attend engagement events when they are scheduled, they may not have childcare outside of work hours or there may be language barriers.

Even when diversity is considered in planning for engagement efforts, it can be difficult to truly bring in the views of all residents. To begin to answer the question of how "... public bodies define or constitute the public that they wish to engage in dialogue" Barnes et al. (2003, 395) reviewed several case studies in two cities in the U.K. The paper focuses on four of the case studies which

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[3]   Facilitation and other training is available through Alberta's Community Development Unit, https://www.alberta.ca/community-development-unit.aspx.

[4]   More information regarding the City of Edmonton's 15-minute city concept (district planning) can be found at https://www.edmonton.ca/city_government/urban_planning_and_design/district-planning.

were deliberative citizen forums or advisory groups. These included a ward advisory board (place-based), a youth advisory group, an older people's group and a women's group.

The authors found four main factors that defined who took part in these public participation opportunities.

1. Discursive Practices: "Certain ways of categorizing people are deemed legitimate for the purposes of constituting who are 'the public' in these forums, but others are not spoken" (Barnes et al. 2003, 392), e.g., when who should be engaged was discussed, the word "poverty" was never mentioned and sexuality was rarely mentioned — meaning that people living in poverty and the views of the 2SLGBTQI+ are not being considered.

2. Competence: There were both implicit and explicit assumptions about who was considered competent to participate. For example, in the older persons' group, there was an awareness that the perspectives of those living in residential care and/or requiring more support were needed, but it was assumed that those people would be unable or unwilling to participate. In the ward advisory board, there was a feeling that people who did not live in the area would not know enough to take part, leading to an exclusion of groups that were not strictly locality based.

3. Skills*:* "Across the forums there was a perception amongst some participants that particular skills were necessary which might exclude people who either did not have or were not interested in developing those skills" (Barnes et al. 2003, 393). These skills included the ability to review application information for bids (in the ward advisory board), have some prior knowledge of previous decisions and initiatives and be able to digest the information and come up with a position. "Developing the capacity to take part is an objective of many initiatives that seek to enable members of the public to participate in policy making. But the form and content of the process affect both the skills that may be necessary and the opportunity to develop them" (Barnes et al. 2003, 393).

4. The Practices of Participation: As notions of who constitutes the public and who can and should participate are formed, these decisions can lead to further exclusion. For example, if people with disabilities are not spoken of or considered, then future participation forums are more likely to perpetuate that exclusion (by having physical barriers, for example). Another example would be formal meeting processes, which are found in the older persons' group in this study and at city council meetings everywhere. The formality of these processes is "… unlikely to encourage participation amongst those unfamiliar with such ways of working" (Barnes et al. 2003, 394).

The case studies also illustrate that even when the intention is to include diverse voices, the way the participants are chosen and who takes part in this process will itself colour the outcomes. In the case of the ward advisory board, the members were chosen by council members and thus reflected existing relationships and organizations of which councillors were already aware.

Keeping in mind the difficulty of constituting who makes up the diverse public with which we need to engage, there are some good examples of diverse engagement from which to draw.

The example in Nanaimo shows a wide range of engagement options and broad participation. Because the organizers were tracking who was being engaged, they were able to target certain groups for one-on-one engagement when they felt their voices were missing (City of Nanaimo and CitySpaces Consulting Ltd. 2018). Taking a targeted approach to audiences who are not represented can be a valuable tool.

In reviewing the creation of a multicultural coalition in Edmonton, Alberta researchers found that through understanding where diverse communities were coming from (literally and figuratively), the voices of diverse peoples could be heard. They concluded that governments " … need to develop a deep appreciation for the ethnic minority experience to provide opportunities for a meaningful civic activity for the betterment of Canadian society as a whole" (Mayan et al. 2013, 174). One approach used in this case was to employ community brokers (animators) who understood the barriers to participation experienced in their communities. They were able to build trust and present information in such a way as to bring people along in the process who might have been excluded otherwise (Mayan et al. 2013). Using community brokers can help to raise awareness of engagement opportunities and design processes to better welcome those groups.

The Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue at Simon Fraser University created a guide for equitable engagement, *Beyond Inclusion: Equity in Public Engagement.* The tools include eight principles for equitable engagement (Simon Fraser University's Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue 2020):

1. Invite participation within an authentic and accountable engagement process;

2. Plan early and proactively;

3. Establish respectful relationships with Indigenous Peoples;

4. Engage the internal diversity of a community. Recognize that communities themselves are not homogenous and that one person can never represent an entire community;

5. Work in a reciprocal relationship with communities. Building trusting relationships that are about giving, not just taking, is important;

6. Tailor engagement plans to the context;

7. Commit to ongoing learning and improvement; and

8. Advance systemic equity. Without equity throughout our governments and organizations, we will not be able to advance equity in participation.

If you are only hearing from a small portion of the population, you will not be planning for everyone. Until we can hear a diversity of perspectives and needs, we will be unable to create a community welcoming to all.

ONLINE ENGAGEMENT

Online engagement is not a new concept and research has identified best practices to draw on. The onset of COVID-19 was a unique circumstance that brought to the fore the opportunities and limitations of online engagement processes, and much will be learned from the scramble to move engagement online.

The Urban Sustainability Directors Network commissioned a paper published in 2012 which brought together general information about engagement, online engagement and case studies of online engagement in local communities to provide a resource for local governments (Fergusson et al. 2012). The authors argue that by not engaging online, local governments run the risk of missing out on conversations that are already happening online. They recommend, at minimum, listening in on conversations about the local government and community in online spaces to better understand what residents are thinking and feeling. Also, online engagement can help to meet people where they are (many people use online methods for most of their communication), reach more people (people who don't have time for face-to-face engagement

may be online) and manage resources (as online engagement can be more cost-effective than face-to-face) (Fergusson et al. 2012, 18).

Some examples of online engagement for different levels of involvement are highlighted in Appendix I.

As with face-to-face engagement, online engagement has its challenges. A review of the online participatory budgeting approach used in Madrid raises some questions to consider when planning and implementing online engagement efforts. The platform allowed "… residents to make, discuss and support (vote on) proposals for the cities, thus deciding how to spend part of the city council budgets" (Cantador, Cortés-Cediel and Fernández 2020, 2). As with face-to-face engagement, certain types of people are more likely to engage online. In this case, areas of the city that were more liberal-leaning politically were over-represented, while areas with more senior citizens were under-represented (Cantador, Cortés-Cediel and Fernández 2020, 17). A high number of controversial proposals were rooted in "historical political and ideological division," which the authors suggest may not be true in other contexts outside of Spain. Issues that affect people day-to-day and are seen as "annoying," such as animal nuisances and the cost of public transit, drew much of the attention while there were fewer proposals related to initiatives for the social good or to help minorities (Cantador, Cortés-Cediel and Fernández 2020).

When engaging online, either through municipally run sites or social media, challenges can arise regarding trolls and abusive behaviour. Fergusson et al. (2012) have some tips for managing abusive behaviour, such as:

- Defining what constitutes abusive behaviour in your terms of use and linking to that from your social media profile and posts;

- Communicating a clear, transparent and strong moderation policy and using it consistently; and

- Engaging "… users on a personal level, make them feel part of a community, and support user responses to inappropriate behavior" (Fergusson et al. 2012, 26).

While online engagement can present an opportunity to widen the reach of our engagement efforts and, in some cases, can be a cost-effective way to engage, it is important that it not be the only avenue of engagement. The examples provided in Appendix I are often a mix of online and face-to-face, and the Madrid study highlights the fact that, like any form of engagement, online engagement is more likely to attract a certain type of person and the views expressed may not reflect the diversity and nuances of the entire community. Combining online engagement with other efforts could help to address some of the bias, and if the people more likely to engage online are different from those reached through more traditional engagement approaches, the overall quality of engagement will improve.

MEASURING QUALITY OF ENGAGEMENT AND EFFECT OF INPUT

The research, case studies, large-scale polls and illustrative examples above have given us some best-practice examples regarding improving engagement processes. Engagement professionals and decision-makers will still need to assess the quality of their engagement efforts. The best way to know how your local engagement processes are working is to evaluate them. Two main types of evaluation are discussed here: evaluation of the process and evaluation of how the engagement shaped the outcome or decision (impact).

Process evaluation is relatively straightforward and can be done as a short survey given to in-person participants or a few questions provided at the end of an online feedback form. Evaluation can help to identify what worked, what didn't work and what we might want to do differently in the future. Checking in on long-term engagement throughout the process can help pivot as needed to ensure a successful process. Checking in afterward can give valuable insights going forward.

Looking at the evaluation literature, there have been some attempts to come up with criteria or evaluation frameworks for evaluating engagement. Brown and Wei Chin (2013) created one set of criteria by reviewing participation literature and consolidating their findings into a list of criteria for use in evaluating community planning processes. The table, copied in Appendix II, includes mostly process criteria, along with two impact criteria (marked with a blue star). The criteria can help identify the best questions to ask in conducting a process evaluation.

A sample process evaluation form (adapted from the City of Edmonton's engagement site), which touches on many of the criteria Brown and Wei Chin (2013) put forward is included in Appendix III (City of Edmonton n.d.). The City of Fort Saskatchewan also has guidance for a project team to evaluate the engagement process in its engagement framework document (City of Fort Saskatchewan 2021, 21).

Impact evaluation, or looking at how the engagement affected the outcome, is more difficult yet very important. Engagement promises that the public's views will be reflected in the outcome, and as noted earlier, if people can't see what impact their feedback had on the final decision, they are less likely to trust the outcome and by extension the planners and decision-makers. In addition to providing valuable insights to project teams and decision-makers, a good impact evaluation can also help in reporting back to the public on the impact the engagement had.

The public health field has been studying impact evaluation and a tool is available online from the Patient Engagement Collaborative at McMaster University. The Impact Evaluation toolkit could help planners and engagement professionals think through some of the ways to evaluate the impact of their engagement efforts. Adapting this tool to think through the impact evaluation process early in the project would help to identify what to look for throughout the process (McMaster University and the Public and Patient Engagement Collaborative 2022).

Including demographic questions in both process and impact evaluations can help to find out if a diversity of groups is being heard. Demographic questions are usually voluntary and given at the end of the survey so as not to be a barrier to participation (people may not feel comfortable providing their demographics, so if those questions are asked at the beginning, they may be less likely to complete the survey).

Both process and impact evaluation are important tools in ensuring that local government engagement efforts are successful, both in execution and outcome. Without reviewing our engagement processes and the ability to see how engagement affected the outcome, we run the risk of repeating processes that have been unsuccessful and alienating residents who may not feel represented or heard through engagement.

PROMOTING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

People are more likely to be interested in a topic when they feel that it directly affects them. Often, if a town hall or open house isn't well attended, it could mean that residents don't see the connection to their day-to-day lives. When thinking about improving engagement participation numbers, how you promote your engagement also matters a great deal.

First, think about the ways to get your message across. A sample engagement report from the Town of Olds illustrates how a variety of communication methods were used, including newspaper ads, a radio interview, posters at the project's location and other town facilities, a newsletter post and social media posts and ads (Town of Olds 2019, 3). This list is long, and these methods will likely be used when promoting a discussion that requires wide-ranging engagement. For projects that affect a particular community or population, more targeted communication efforts, such as through service organizations or groups representing ethnic or religious groups may be useful. Additional outreach might be needed to group through community brokers, mentioned in the section on diversity above.

Second, the message that you are sending matters. An illustration of a good way to advertise public opportunities for input is shown below (Figure 4). On the left is a common way of presenting engagement opportunities, including public hearings and town halls. On the right is a more inviting and dynamic presentation of that same information to draw people's attention and get them interested in the content and the opportunity. This engagement effort won an IAP2 visual engagement award in 2018 for capturing people's attention and getting them interested in a subject that was difficult to communicate (Region of Waterloo 2018).

Figure 4.
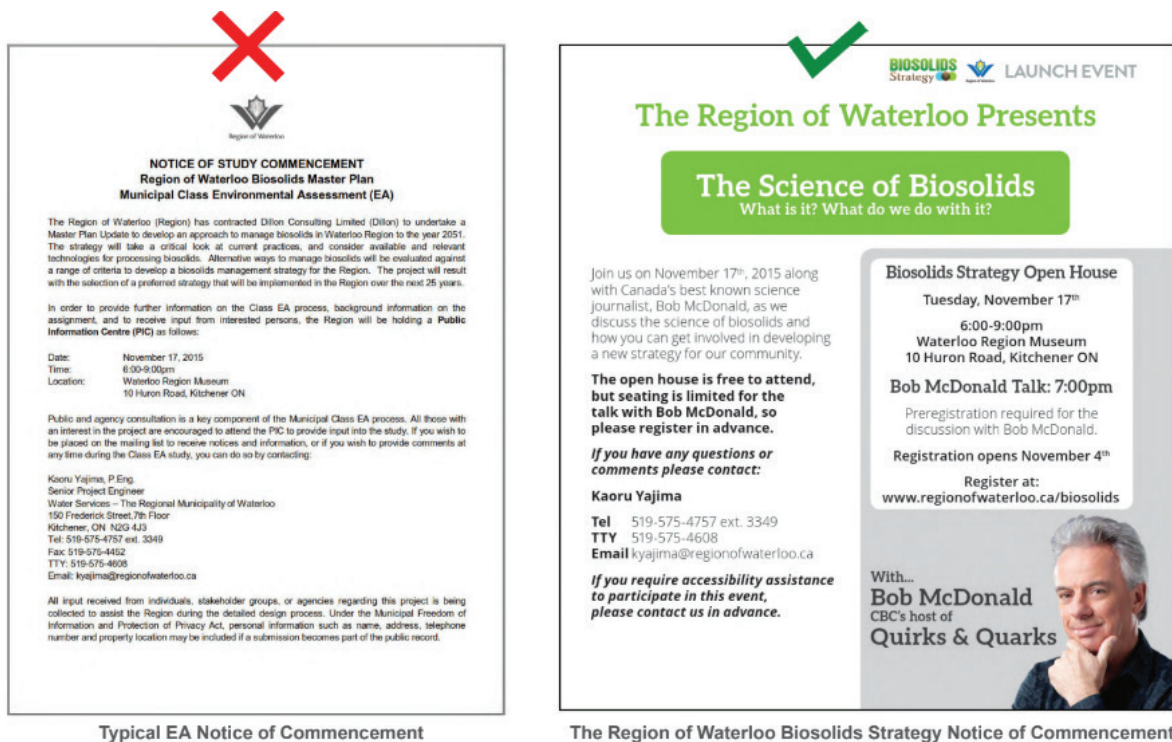
Source: Region of Waterloo (2018, 3)

The Institute for Local Government in California has produced a resource for strategic communications and media relations for engagement which gives some good insight into thinking through your audience, and the communication methods to use to reach them (Institute for Local Government 2013). Having good communication materials and methods is key to attracting people to your engagement events and keeping them interested once they are involved. There are a lot of communication best practices of which local government communications staff must be aware.

VIABILITY REVIEWS AND ENGAGEMENT

The province of Alberta instituted a program of viability reviews to explore the situation of smaller communities facing financial and demographic challenges. These reviews entail significant efforts to engage the local population in the review process. This section will highlight some examples of engagement efforts from the 24 reviews completed since 2015.

The viability review process allows a municipality to request a provincial review of its capacity, including a full infrastructure review or audit and an assessment of viability in areas such as sustainable governance, administration and operations, services and community well-being. The provincial government covers the costs for the infrastructure audit, review and community input. The requests usually are initiated by a resident petition or a motion from council. The reviews are done in co-operation with municipal elected officials, administration and surrounding municipalities. A report is prepared and following community information sessions and engagement, a vote of the electors is held on the question of remaining an independent community or being dissolved into a neighbouring municipality (usually into a rural municipality such as a municipal district or county as a hamlet) (Government of Alberta 2022).

Voter turnout is sometimes used as a metric for how engaged and involved a community is. Looking at a vote of the electors with such an important question (regarding the community's future) can give us a window into how interested people are in the running of their community. Also, it may be interesting to compare voter turnout with the outcome of the vote, to see if any connection can be drawn.

Figure 5.

	Viability Review Municipalities	Participating Neighbouring Municipalities	Vote Date	For - Votes	For - %	Against - Votes	Against - %	Total Population	Percentage of Eligible Population
Dissolved	Village of Minburn	County of Minburn No. 27	March 2015	44	88%	6	12%	105	59%
Dissolved	Village of Galahad	Flagstaff County	September 2015	49	98%	1	2%	119	44%
Dissolved	Village of Strome	Flagstaff County	September 2015	89	94%	6	6%	228	52%
Directives	Village of Clyde	Westlock County	May 2016	COUNCIL VOTE - UNANIMOUS					
Dissolved	Village of Willingdon	County of Two Hills	January 2017	62	58%	45	42%	319	43%
Directives	Village of Hill Spring	Cardston County	May 2017	37	43%	50	57%	162	69%
Dissolved	Village of Botha	County of Stettler	May 2017	52	91%	5	9%	204	42%
Dissolved	Village of Ferintosh	Camrose County	December 2018	60	54%	52	46%	202	67%
Directives	Village of Champion	Vulcan County	December 2018	MINISTER DECISION					
Directives	Village of Berwyn	Municipal District of Peace	May 2018	31	19%	129	81%	538	40%
Directives	Village of Rycroft	Municipal District of Spirit River	May 2018	96	43%	125	57%	612	47%
Directives	Village of Innisfree	County of Minburn No. 27	November 2018	29	30%	67	70%	193	57%
Directives	Village of Hussar	Wheatland County	October 2018	MINISTER DECISION					
Dissolved	Town of Grande Cache	MD of Greenview	September 2018	1065	97%	32	3%	3286	44%
Dissolved	Village of Gadsby	County of Stettler	November 2019	27	96%	1	4%	40	80%
Dissolved	Town of Granum	MD of Willow Creek	November 2019	188	74%	66	26%	406	82%
Dissolved	Village of Dewberry	County of Vermillion River	November 2020	50	72%	19	28%	186	48%
Dissolved	Village of Wabamun	Parkland County	November 2020	242	89%	30	11%	682	51%
Dissolved	Village of Cereal	Special Areas	October 2020	42	53%	37	47%	111	79%
Directives	Village of Bawlf	Camrose County	October 2020	76	46%	90	54%	422	51%
Directives	Town of Manning	County of Northern Lights	October 2020	43	12%	324	88%	1183	42%
Dissolved	Village of Hythe	County of Grande Prairie	March 2021	239	95%	12	5%	827	40%
Directives	Village of Halkirk	County of Paintearth	March 2022	22	40%	33	60%	112	56%
Directives	Village of Warner	County of Warner	March 2022	16	10%	150	90%	373	53%

Source: Alberta Municipal Affairs (2022)

While some of the dissolution votes attracted a large voter turnout (the highest being 82 per cent in the Town of Granum), the lowest voter turnout was only 69 per cent in the Village of Hill Spring. Comparing vote rates with outcomes and voter turnout suggests that there is no clear relationship between voter turnout and the outcome of the vote; however, there are other indicators of engagement in the process that merit attention.

Engagement is addressed in multiple sections of the viability reviews, including the background and process leading up to the review and in the sustainable governance and administrative capacity sections. The reviews speak to a wide range of circumstances when it comes to community engagement with residents.

In some cases, longstanding concerns of residents, or possible ongoing conflict has led to a review. A striking example can be seen in the Town of Granum. Municipal Affairs had been involved several times since late 2000 due both to requests from residents and town council. This involvement included multiple reviews and inspections which led to recommendations for improvement and votes regarding dissolution (in 2000, the vote was 84 per cent to remain a town and in 2011 it was 60 per cent). This all culminated in a valid petition of residents in May 2018 for a viability review, followed by the resignation of three town councillors in spring 2019. Without enough councillors for a quorum, Municipal Affairs appointed an official administrator and delayed byelections until the completion of the viability review. Through all of this, some tension between council and residents was apparent. The viability review made several recommendations should Granum remain a town, including the relationship between council and the CAO, workplace standards and establishing a public engagement policy "… that addresses how council will engage with residents inclusive of how residents can provide input on issues of services and services delivery" (Government of Alberta 2019, 13). These recommendations would seek to improve some of the tension between council and the public and set up a more positive

and transparent relationship. Instead, the relationship has changed due to Granum voting and becoming a hamlet of the MD of Willow Creek. The final vote, in November 2019, resulted in 74 per cent voting to dissolve (with a voter turnout of 82 per cent), a reversal from the 2000 vote in which 84 per cent voted to remain a town (Government of Alberta 2019; Alberta Municipal Affairs 2022).

Most communities do not have such apparent histories of conflict between council, administration and residents. Some municipalities have a public engagement policy and in many a good relationship with residents is reported. There are, however, some challenges noted with engaging residents. These challenges include lack of interest in becoming involved (in engagement processes or even as part of committees or running for council). Recommendations from the review often revolve around the creation of public engagement processes, more frequent and transparent communications and the creation of resources encouraging people to become involved in local government (Government of Alberta 2022).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Each section above illustrates some examples of best practices and things to consider when planning and executing engagement efforts in local communities. The recommendations are pulled from those sections which relied on both academic and practical sources. Each community will have unique circumstances and levels of experience and comfort with engagement but keeping these recommendations in mind will assist in ensuring good engagement practices:

- Consider what you are hoping to get from engagement (both for individual projects and overall) and how each of the recommendations below can help you in the short, medium and long term.[5];

- Work with staff and elected officials to come to an agreed-upon role for community engagement in the decision-making process. Seek to align the expectations of staff, elected officials and the public;

- Think carefully about what projects are best suited for structured engagement and what level of engagement is appropriate for each context;

- Communicate clearly with residents and participants about the engagement itself and the overall topic. Communicate with clear and accessible language to help residents provide informed feedback. Use a wide array of communication methods and tailor your message and methods to the audience(s) for that specific project;

- Start engaging as early in the process as possible. Don't wait until a plan is in place;

- Continue engaging through implementation. Without discussing the details of how a plan will be implemented with the public, decision-makers run the risk of missing important ways the public would be affected;

- Go where the people are. Rather than open houses or town halls scheduled at a certain time with an expectation that people will come to you, go to community events, busy locations or already popular locations and talk to people there. Allow online engagement parallel to in-person events to give people with less time or ability to travel the opportunity to provide input;

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[5]   Further research regarding how the best practices and tactics suggested in this paper affect local government engagement initiatives and resulting in further tailored recommendations would be useful.

- Ensure that diversity of participants is encouraged and enabled through tools such as translation, community brokers and partnering with service or cultural organizations. Some mix of representative polling with wider engagement efforts could also help to get a more fulsome picture of the population's views;

- Develop a culture of engagement and trust. Engage with the public on an ongoing basis and not just on particular projects and decisions;

- Tie the final product (plan or decision) back to the engagement. Indicate what feedback was and wasn't used, and why. Report this back to participants and the public in an accessible and transparent way;

- Review engagement processes for effectiveness. In a longer term project, this can be done on an ongoing basis to adjust the plan as needed. Review both the process and the impact of engagement on the outcome; and

- Keep an eye on possible vocal opposition groups and use tools to address. Targeted approaches may include up-front public education on contentious issues, engagement with vocal opponents early in the process and information sharing with elected officials.

IDEAS FOR SMALLER COMMUNITIES

All the recommendations above can be tailored to different circumstances. However, smaller communities often have fewer resources and therefore less ability to engage on as wide a scale as larger communities. Also, for administrators and council members of smaller communities, community engagement as a formal process can seem unnecessary. Why have formal engagement processes when you meet residents daily at the local grocery store or on Main Street?

As noted previously, in addition to the provincial requirement to have a public participation policy and the legal obligation for public hearings, there can be a public expectation for deeper community engagement and local governments can hear new ideas and diverse perspectives through engagement. People who are engaged with the local government and have a sense of trust may be more likely to volunteer on local committees or even run for local office, thereby solving a problem that faces many smaller communities.

It is worth highlighting some less resource-heavy and lower cost options for engagement for these smaller communities. We learned above that there is a need to go to the people rather than having stand-alone open houses or town halls. That may be good news for communities with fewer resources to rent a hall and hire multiple staff for the event. Some tactics can be done with fewer resources, such as:

- Setting up a table in a busy area or location (e.g., on Main Street or outside of the grocery store). Provide information about a proposed project and have surveys to fill out to gather formal feedback in addition to the informal conversation;

- Partnering with local clubs, libraries and service agencies to set up information for online engagement or a table for in-person engagement. There may also be opportunities to tap volunteers to help get the word out, hand out surveys or help at more formal engagement events; and

- Conducting online engagement through social media. Online engagement platforms may require a large investment of money. But online engagement can also be done through community social media channels, such as Twitter or Facebook. Advertise beforehand on social media and have a community social media account to ask questions and gain feedback. The replies can be copied from the social media site to be analyzed as formal feedback.

APPENDIX I

SAMPLE ONLINE ENGAGEMENT METHODS

Inform	Using online tools to inform the public about matters that will affect them. **Example:** The City of Nanaimo used social media and videos to inform the public about council decisions and to improve transparency. Using primarily existing resources, Nanaimo saw increased social media followers and 3,400 views on 22 videos on YouTube (Fergusson et al. 2012, 42).
Consult	Hearing from residents about what they think about existing services or the community in general. **Example:** The City of Seattle prominently displays all opportunities for residents to get in touch with the government (administration and elected officials) and replies to questions or comments and tracks what is being said (Fergusson et al. 2012, 43).
Involve	Hearing from the public about different options or alternatives. Reflecting this feedback in outcomes (Fergusson et al. 2012, 44.) **Example:** Online budget engagement with options within certain parameters. A budget has many inputs and so public engagement feedback may be somewhat limited. Communicating why the options are limited and how they are chosen is imperative to set citizen expectations and gain trust.
Collaborate	Asking for the public's feedback and taking that feedback into account as much as possible. "The key difference between 'involve' and 'collaborate' is that collaborating with the public results in significant public influence over the final decision" (Fergusson et al. 2012, 45). **Example:** Some cities, such as New York and San Diego, have held competitions to develop apps to address public issues. A team "... discusses and proposes solutions to the challenge, and the public vote on their favorite solutions" (Fergusson et al. 2012, 45). Online tools designed for this purpose or government websites and social media can be used as part of this process.
Empower	Putting "... final decision-making in the hands of the public" (Fergusson et al. 2012, 47). **Example:** Locally organized groups that bring together residents to discuss local problems and solutions. Models such as CityCamp, "unconferences" using online and in-person tactics to bring people together in self-organizing groups to discuss issues and come up with solutions. These are then implemented by the groups and by recruiting others in the community. This generally is done outside of local government, though the local government can co-operate and provide resources (Fergusson et al. 2012, 47).

Assessing the Effectiveness of Public Participation

TABLE 1. Evaluation criteria (variables) for public participation identified from the literature

Criterion	Description	Sources
Process criteria		
Representativeness	'The public participants should comprise a broadly representative sample of the population of the affected public'.	(Crosby *et al.*, 1986; Blahna & Yonts-Shepard, 1989; Petts, 1995; Carnes *et al.*, 1998; Lauber, 1999; Rowe & Frewer, 2000, p. 12)
Independence	'The participation process should be conducted in an independent, unbiased way'.	(Crosby *et al.*, 1986; Lauber, 1999; Rowe & Frewer, 2000, p. 13)
Early involvement	'The public should be involved as early as possible in the process as soon as value judgments become salient'.	(Blahna & Yonts-Shepard, 1989; Rowe & Frewer, 2000, p. 14)
Transparency	'The process should be transparent so that the public can see what is going on and how decisions are being made'.	(Lauber, 1999; Rowe & Frewer, 2000, p. 15)
Resource accessibility	'Public participants should have access to the appropriate resources to enable them to successfully fulfil their brief'.	(Rowe & Frewer, 2000, p. 15)
Seeking out and involving those affected by decisions	'Public participation seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by interested in a decision'.	(IAP2, 2007b, p. 1; Godschalk & Stiftel, 1981; Blahna & Yonts-Shepard, 1989)
Comfort and convenience	'The timing and place of meeting should be convenient to the participants' schedule. They should also feel comfortable during consultation sessions'.	(Halvorsen, 2001)
Deliberative quality	All participants should be given the chance to speak and provide their opinions.	(Lauber, 1999; Halvorsen, 2001)
Level of conflict	Public participation process should avoid or mitigate conflict (Laurian & Shaw, 2009)	
Seek input from participants in how they participate	'Public participation seeks input from participants in designing how they participate'.	(IAP2, 2007b, p. 1)
Task definition	The nature and scope of the participation task should be clearly defined.	(Rowe & Frewer, 2000, p. 16)

Non-technical information	The information provided to participants must be easy to understand and contain minimal technical language to prevent confusion.	(Chakraborty & Stratton, 1993)
Communicates influence on decision	'Public participation communicates to participants how their input affected the decision'.	(IAP2, 2007b, p. 1)
Outcome criteria		
Influence	'The output of the procedure should have a genuine impact on policy'.	(Petts, 1995; Carnes *et al.*, 1998; Lauber, 1999; Rowe & Frewer, 2000, p. 14; Butterfoss, 2006)

Criterion	Description	Sources
Increased understanding	Public participation should build mutual understanding between stakeholders and commit to the public good identified.	(Petts, 1995; Carnes *et al.*, 1998; Laurian & Shaw, 2009)
Consensus reached	Decisions made as a result of public participation were based on consensus and mutual understanding.	(Twight & Carroll, 1983; Innes & Booher, 1999)
Increased trust	Public participation should build trust and lasting relationships.	(Laurian & Shaw, 2009)
Workable solutions	Public participation should create a compromise and acceptable solution.	(Laurian & Shaw, 2009)
Satisfaction	Good public participation should result in high satisfaction amongst participants.	(Halvorsen, 2001; Butterfoss, 2006; Laurian & Shaw, 2009)

APPENDIX III

SAMPLE ENGAGEMENT PROCESS EVALUATION FORM

Source: City of Edmonton (n.d.)

1. Which activity did you participate in as part of this engagement?

    Please select one response only.

    ☐ Online survey

    ☐ Webinar/online event

    ☐ Engaged Edmonton (ideas, mapping, polls, stories, questions)

    ☐ Conference calls/phone calls

    ☐ Online one-on-one/small group session

    ☐ Online focus group

    ☐ Other (Please specify):

    _____

2. How did you hear about the activity?

    Please select all that apply.

    ☐ Outdoor signs

    ☐ Email

    ☐ Postcard in my mailbox (e.g. letter or postcard)

    ☐ City of Edmonton's Communications and Engagement Calendar

    ☐ Social Media (Facebook or Twitter, etc.)

    ☐ Word-of-mouth

    ☐ Posters in the community (library, community league, coffee shop, etc.)

    ☐ Community League (newsletter, email, Facebook, Twitter)

    ☐ The City of Edmonton website

    ☐ Newspaper advertisements (Please specify):

    ☐ City of Edmonton Insight surveys

    ☐ Other (Please specify):

    _____

    ☐ None of the above

3. Comments about the public engagement activity (What did you like? How can we do better?)

    (Open-ended)

    _____

4. Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with each statement.

    Please use not applicable if any of the statements do not apply.

    a. I understood the goal of the activity.
        ☐ Strongly Agree
        ☐ Somewhat Agree
        ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
        ☐ Somewhat Disagree
        ☐ Strongly Disagree
        ☐ N/A

    b. I understand how my input will be used.
        ☐ Strongly Agree
        ☐ Somewhat Agree
        ☐ Neither Agree nor Disagree
        ☐ Somewhat Disagree
        ☐ Strongly Disagree
        ☐ N/A

    c. The information provided was easy to understand.
        ☐ Strongly Agree
        ☐ Somewhat Agree
        ☐ Neither Agree or Disagree
        ☐ Somewhat Disagree
        ☐ Strongly Disagree
        ☐ N/A

    d. I had enough information to contribute to the topic being discussed.
        ☐ Strongly Agree
        ☐ Somewhat Agree
        ☐ Neither Agree or Disagree
        ☐ Somewhat Disagree
        ☐ Strongly Disagree
        ☐ N/A

    e. The timing of the activity was convenient for me.
        ☐ Strongly Agree
        ☐ Somewhat Agree
        ☐ Neither Agree or Disagree
        ☐ Somewhat Disagree
        ☐ Strongly Disagree
        ☐ N/A

f. The time allotted for the activity was enough to provide feedback.

☐ Strongly Agree
☐ Somewhat Agree
☐ Neither Agree or Disagree
☐ Somewhat Disagree
☐ Strongly Disagree
☐ N/A

g. This activity was easy to find online.

☐ Strongly Agree
☐ Somewhat Agree
☐ Neither Agree or Disagree
☐ Somewhat Disagree
☐ Strongly Disagree
☐ N/A

h. The technical support I needed to participate was available.

☐ Strongly Agree
☐ Somewhat Agree
☐ Neither Agree or Disagree
☐ Somewhat Disagree
☐ Strongly Disagree
☐ N/A

i. I felt safe during the activity.

☐ Strongly Agree
☐ Somewhat Agree
☐ Neither Agree or Disagree
☐ Somewhat Disagree
☐ Strongly Disagree
☐ N/A

j. I felt respected during the activity.

☐ Strongly Agree
☐ Somewhat Agree
☐ Neither Agree or Disagree
☐ Somewhat Disagree
☐ Strongly Disagree
☐ N/A

k. I felt heard during the activity.
   ☐ Strongly Agree
   ☐ Somewhat Agree
   ☐ Neither Agree or Disagree
   ☐ Somewhat Disagree
   ☐ Strongly Disagree
   ☐ N/A

l. I was able to express my views freely.
   ☐ Strongly Agree
   ☐ Somewhat Agree
   ☐ Neither Agree or Disagree
   ☐ Somewhat Disagree
   ☐ Strongly Disagree
   ☐ N/A

m. This activity helped build a positive relationship between the City and the public.
   ☐ Strongly Agree
   ☐ Somewhat Agree
   ☐ Neither Agree or Disagree
   ☐ Somewhat Disagree
   ☐ Strongly Disagree
   ☐ N/A

n. As a result of this activity, I am more likely to participate in future public engagement activities.
   ☐ Strongly Agree
   ☐ Somewhat Agree
   ☐ Neither Agree or Disagree
   ☐ Somewhat Disagree
   ☐ Strongly Disagree
   ☐ N/A

o. Please leave any further comments related to your experience with this public engagement activity.

   (Open-ended)

   _____

5. Demographic questions (often optional)

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She loves working at the intersection of local government, community, and academia and contributing to real-world, applied research bolstered by academic methods.

In her spare time, she likes to explore her home of Calgary, and travel both near and far to learn new things and experience different environments. She is also a lifelong learner who takes courses for work and for fun, recently including public administration, French, and conflict resolution.

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