

**Engaging Citizens – How do BC municipalities
engage citizens in their communities?**

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Abstract

This report looks at the non-statutory citizen engagement practices in local governments in British Columbia. This information is important for several reasons. First of all, citizen engagement is a cornerstone of representative democracy. Secondly, the Community Charter's emphasis on accountability is a step toward encouraging greater interactions with citizens. Thirdly, the Annual Reporting exercise required by the Community Charter should include a citizen engagement component in order to ensure that there is a feedback loop into what is being measured.

This report will outline the key findings from a survey and case studies with Chief Administrative Officers in BC municipalities. These results will be explained within the framework of the International Association of Public Participation spectrum. Conclusions and recommendations for the Ministry of Community, Aboriginal and Women's Services to consider are based on this analysis.

Introduction

Local governments are said to be the most democratic level of government in that they are the closest to the people. Local governments have a history of citizen engagement, both through formal mechanisms like planning processes and informal mechanisms like chatting with a council member in the grocery store. Increasingly, however, it appears that the nature of this relationship is changing. The complexity of some of the issues facing municipalities and the demand for transparency and accountability in government are two of the main drivers for citizen engagement.

The *Community Charter* came into effect in January 2004 and is premised on the principles of broader powers for municipalities, clearer jurisdictional recognition between the province and local governments, and greater accountability. With more scope and flexibility in powers under the *Community Charter*, municipalities may have more options for providing services or enacting bylaws, and therefore, more need to engage citizens as they make their choices.

One of the provisions in the *Charter* requires local governments to produce annual reports outlining their objectives, measures and accomplishments. The annual report is one mechanism for local governments to be democratically accountable to their citizens, with the goal of providing open, accountable and transparent local government (Gergley, 2004).

Successful implementation of performance measurements, requires participation on the part of the administration, the council and the citizens (Wray and Hauer, 1997; Callahan and Hodzer, 1999). The full participation of both council and the citizenry ensures that the annual reporting does not simply become a bureaucratic exercise, but rather, that it adapts, and incorporates the needs and views of those whom it is meant to serve. However, Barb Svec's study of annual reporting in British Columbia indicates that only

21% of municipalities consulted with citizens and only 18% of communities received feedback from the public on the 2004 annual report (Svec, 2005).

Further, citizen engagement is now viewed as integral to good practice in policy circles. To this end, *The Regulatory Best Practices Guide* was designed to offer guidance to local governments as to how they can best make use of these broad powers. The guide emphasizes the rational approach to policymaking; it encourages municipalities to work through issues that arise and to evaluate possible options and solutions. Some of these options and solutions may include regulation. However, the guide also suggests that alternatives to legislating may be the optimal solution in some cases. Either way, “involving those affected” is highlighted as a best practice for arriving at the ultimate outcome. Involving those affected – or citizen engagement, is one mechanism for ensuring both accountability and good policy practices.

The *Charter* then brings citizen engagement into the limelight through the need to use citizen engagement in the policy process as well as a component of the use of performance measures.

The Context

Broadly speaking, the roles of governments and of citizens are shifting and changing. These changes impact the environment in which local government is functioning and the relevancy of citizen engagement. Docherty et al argue that “the current ascendancy of community participation in urban governance can be seen as a response by governments and citizens to a simultaneous crisis of confidence in the ability of the state and the market to create socially cohesive and economically successful cities” (Docherty, Goodlad & Paddison, 2001, p.22225). The trends are briefly outlined:

Urban Political Economy

- Globalization, international capital, free trade
- Knowledge economy
- Impersonal technological revolution
- Intergovernmental nature of wicked policy problems (Maxwell, 1997)

Citizens Question Democracy

- Government bureaucracies are perceived as distant and difficult to be held accountable
- Perception that interest groups dominate politics
- General distrust of political process
- Citizen alienation
- Democratic deficit – decline in voter turnout (Curtain, 2003)

Changing Society

- Changing demographics
- Families are diverse: single parent households, two wage earners (less time for civic affairs)
- Mobility of people
- Long commutes (Saturn, 1998)
- Suburban isolation
- Job instability/ frequent job changes
- Decline of welfare state
- Increasingly educated populace (Curtain, 2003)

The Relevancy of New Public Management

A new paradigm of government administration evolved in response to the perceived inefficiency of government during the 1960s and 70s. Called New Public Management, this ideology has penetrated and changed the way that all levels of government work (NPM). David Osborne and Ted Gaebler's 1992 book called *Reinventing Government* is considered the starting point of this revolution. NPM relies on the theory of the marketplace and on implementing a business-like culture in public organizations.

NPM places the emphasis on the citizen as a customer (consumerist participation). The values associated with this assumption are not necessarily congruent with the values of democracy and citizenship (Sharpe, 1990). The emphasis on the customer obscures that which the citizen might actively contribute to the community. The customer is a passive recipient rather than an active partner. NPM encourages citizens to be passive by giving citizens the power of exit, while discouraging the "original power of voice" (Vigoda, 2002, p.533). Eran Vigoda argues that "the term client or customer, which is so applicable in the private sector, contradicts the very basic notion of belonging, altruism, contribution to society, and self-derived participation in citizenry actions" (2002, p.534).

According to Cheryl King et al, the implications of this shift on the administration of local government are significant (1998). Given the increasing interest in citizen engagement and the potential for new partnerships, the primary responsibility of citizens is to become actively engaged in running their lives and communities. This can be accomplished at the individual, group or institutional level (King et al, 1998). For the administration directly, the implications of this shift mean that skills in communication, team building, meeting facilitation, and listening are of critical importance. In addition, the administrator must come to value experience as well as expert knowledge (King et al, 1998). Some of these shifts speak to a culture shift within an organization. The degree to which this paradigm is new will impact the degree to which the administration will need to adapt.

Ultimately, this shift from the citizen to the customer and back again is an important starting point for thinking about citizen engagement. Ironically, it seems that local governments are being forced toward viewing the citizen as client and viewing the citizen

as citizen simultaneously. As higher levels of governments increasingly seek to regulate and standardize practices across municipalities, they are complying with accounting principles and a government philosophy of business accountability. On the other hand, as citizens increasingly demand participation and are critical when they are not given sufficient opportunity, local governments are being forced to respond to a different definition of *accountability*. Both higher levels of government and citizens are putting pressure on local governments in BC for increased accountability – so defined in differing terms.

A Definition of Citizen Engagement

The definition of citizen engagement is difficult to pin down. Ideas about citizen engagement get lumped in with and overlap other concepts such as community, civic and public consultation or participation. The following are a few examples of the divergent thinking about citizen engagement:

- Participation simply means the act of participating, in whatever form (Aslin and Brown, 2004).
- Engagement goes further than participation and involvement...Engagement implies commitment to a process, which has decisions and resulting actions. So it is possible that people may be consulted, participate and even be involved, but not be engaged (Aslin and Brown, 2004).
- Consultation has been a common term in the lexicon of decision-makers over the past decade. This has generally meant better canvassing the view of stakeholders and clients in the making of sound public policy, often in the form of advisory boards, forums or task forces. Citizen engagement, by contrast, has emerged more recently to denote processes of deliberation with individuals and groups who may be affected by policy or program changes, but who lie outside the circle of departmental clients as conventionally defined. It also entails agenda-setting and more open time frames for deliberation on issues of public policy (A voice for all, p.1, 1998).
- Involvement is usually taken to mean the involvement of people in official local decision making but involvement in the voluntary and community sector is more accessible to the whole population, and for most a necessary stepping stone to other forms of involvement (Urban Research Summary#10, 2003).

Citizen engagement is obviously a somewhat ambiguous term. The implications of the definition are significant, so it's important to be clear about what is being discussed. Two common typologies of citizen engagement are Sherry Arnstein's ladder and the International Association of Public Participation's spectrum (Arnstein, 1969; IAP2 spectrum available at <http://iap2.org/practitionertools/index.shtml>). Both of these typologies define citizen engagement in terms of a continuum, with different implications and expectations associated with different points along the continuum.

The confusion over the lexicon of citizen engagement leads to further questions over what is within the purview of local government responsibility. Both Arnstein and IAP2 make a distinction between those activities/tools that share decision-making power and those that do not. This distinction is very divisive and is often considered to be the difference between citizen *participation* and citizen *engagement*. Both typologies also stop short of including ideas about social capital, empowerment or community building.

The International Association of Public Participation has created a visual typology in the form of a public participation spectrum. IAP2 distinguishes the various stages along the spectrum by the participation goal and the promise the goal entails to the public. The spectrum also provides examples of tools that are appropriate for each stage (IAP2 spectrum available at <http://iap2.org/practitionertools/index.shtml>).

The IAP2 spectrum includes the following stages of increasing citizen impact:

1. Inform: to provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problems, alternatives and or solutions
2. Consult: to obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and or decisions
3. Involve: To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public issues and concerns are consistently understood and considered
4. Collaborate: to partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution
5. Empower: to place final decision-making in the hands of the public (IAP2 spectrum available at <http://iap2.org/practitionertools/index.shtml>)

The public participation goal is KEY to the entire process. Depending on what stage of the policy process the local government is currently at, they will have different objectives and goals for using citizen engagement. In addition, the type of issue they are dealing with will impact where they should be along the spectrum. Perhaps most importantly, matching the types of tools that are used to the appropriate public participation goal is critical to the success of the process.

The International Association of Public Participation Spectrum

INCREASING LEVEL OF PUBLIC IMPACT				
INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
Public Participation Goal:	Public Participation Goal:	Public Participation Goal:	Public Participation Goal:	Public Participation Goal:
To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problems, alternatives 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 issues and concerns 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:	Promise to the Public:	Promise to the Public:	Promise to the Public:	Promise to the Public:
We will keep You informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and issues are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for direct 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.
Example Tools:	Example Tools:	Example Tools:	Example Tools:	Example Tools:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Fact sheets ● Web Sites ● Open houses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Public comment ● Focus groups ● Surveys ● Public meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Workshops ● Deliberate polling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Citizen Advisory Committees ● Consensus-building ● Participatory decision-making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Citizen juries ● Ballots ● Delegated decisions

<http://iap2.org/practitionertools/index.shtml>

Citizen Engagement as a Paradigm Shift

The debate in the literature around the definition of citizen engagement goes beyond the degree to which decision-making is shared. There are issues about the culture of the local government bureaucracy and its ability to adapt to more participatory processes (Vigoda, 2002; Walters et al, 2000; A Voice for All, 1998; Sharpe, 1990). Walters et al argues that citizen engagement means fundamentally redefining roles within the bureaucracy (power shift) (2000; Nalbadian, 1999; King 1998; Yang, 2005). Vigoda outlines the conflict that between the traditional bureaucratic paradigm and one premised on citizen engagement:

Based on the Weberian legacy of clear hierarchical order, concentration of power among senior officials, formal structures with strict rules and regulations, limited channels of communication, confined openness to innovation and change, and non-compliance with the option of being replaceable. These ideas seem to be substantially different from the nature of collaboration, which means negotiation, participation, cooperation, free and unlimited flow of information, innovation, agreements based on compromises and mutual understanding, and a more equitable distribution and redistribution of power and resources (2002, p.529).

Another strand of this debate focuses on the types of outcomes that different tools tend to engender. Traditional citizen engagement tools are considered more antagonistic than some of the newer and more meditative types of tools (town hall meeting vs. open house). The following table illustrates this division:

Traditional models	Engagement models
Encourage venting, advocacy	Encourage reflection, learning, choices
Treat interest groups one by one, creates a platform for them	Force interest groups to a) Listen to citizens b) Interact with other interests
Encourage a "me-first" dynamic	Permit focus on common ground
Focus on technical choices	Focus on moral choices – no right or Wrong answer
Seek validation of government's choices "govt knows best"	Assume citizens will add value and that new options will emerge
Tend to control process, focus on process, not outcome	Encourage new ideas through an open-ended process
Impose rigid deadlines	Take time, cannot meet deadlines

http://www.iog.ca/policy/CP/Public%20Library/library_reference_civicengagement.htm

Making the case for participatory democracy on theoretical grounds is much easier than demonstrating that it will work. Only the naïve would assume that simply creating new opportunities for participation will lead to expanded political activity, more knowledgeable and capable citizens, enhanced public confidence in government, or any of the other benefits promised by advocates of participatory democracy. Changes in opportunities need to be coupled with new efforts at political socialization and significant

changes in the political culture. Yet politicians seem to have little incentive to expend their political capital to pursue structural reforms that may pave the way for more participation. Even sympathetic political elites are likely to reason that efforts at expanding participation have been tried before and have failed. (Berry et al, 1993, p.21).

Citizen Engagement Matters Because....

The Urban Research Summary from the UK, *Searching for solid foundations - community involvement and urban policy* argues that the reasons local governments should use citizen engagement fall into three broad categories: involvement as governance, as social capital, and as service delivery (2003).

Citizen engagement is an important governance tool. Citizen engagement is a mechanism or forum through which issues can be discussed and the tradeoffs of different decisions can be clarified (Curtain, 2003). As citizens learn more about the issue, they may become more empathetic to the decision that the municipality faces as well as more understanding or aware of other perspectives (Irvin and Stansbury, 2004, p.55). In addition, by taking part in the process, people are more likely to have a stake in the issue and have greater ownership of the solution. Greater buy-in is an effective regulatory and enforcement strategy for the municipality (Irvin and Stansbury, 2004, p.56).

Citizen engagement can also lend credibility to a municipality. By actively seeking public input into decision-making, citizen concerns are heard and legitimized. Richard Curtain argues that in order to “overcome a common perception among citizens of a democratic deficit, governments have to demonstrate that they are open to citizen input and are responsive to their concerns” (Curtain, 2003, p.9).

Citizen engagement is also a means of encouraging social capital in a community. Citizen engagement is often a face-to-face process and can build trust and relationships. Citizen engagement can be a forum to build up the density of relationships and strategic alliances within the community. These relationships and networks can benefit both current and future projects (Irvin and Stansbury, 2004).

Further, many argue democracy requires that citizens learn how to be citizens through some form of civic learning, of which citizen engagement is one possible option (Sharpe, 1990; Investing in Canada, 2004). Communicating with others about issues in the community can help to break down nimbyism and overcome feelings of exclusion and alienation from the political process (Pelisso, 2003).

According to *Investing in Canada: Fostering an Agenda for Citizen and Community Participation*, a report by the Sports Matter Group, citizen engagement and the resulting impact on community have far reaching positive impacts. They explain:

When citizens choose...to participate in collective action two outcomes occur. The individual gains personal benefit and they create mutual benefit for the community. The results are exponential and pervasive. Health and psychological

research shows that individuals who feel connected to others and to their community experience higher levels of well-being and health status, do better in work and economically, raise better adjusted children and are encouraged to stay active. Community development and economic research tells us that communities with high levels of citizen participation are safer, more democratic, more attractive to investment, have lower incidences of crime, homelessness, pollution, youth and newcomer alienation (Investing in Cnd, 2004).

Lastly, citizen engagement is a tool for increasing the efficiency of municipal service delivery. Citizen engagement can be used to discern citizen preferences on a specific issue or set of issues (Sharpe, 1990). This may increase efficiency over the long run by being more responsive to citizen demands (iPlan - Planning information and services for New South Wales¹). Udaya Wagle explains:

If the goal of the whole concept of policy science is to improve the quality of public policy that essentially invokes improvement in the quality of information on which such policy decisions depend, the notion of community participation has much to offer in this process. This is precisely because the quality of info will improve, only when it truly reflects the subjective values and individual interests and preferences of those who are the ultimate stakeholders of public policies (2000, p.218).

Some Broad Guidelines for Using Citizen Engagement

Successful citizen engagement processes require that the *purpose and the nature of the issue be appropriately matched to the right use of tools* (Leatherman and Howell, 2000; Best Value Victoria; Walters et al, 2000; Health Canada, 2000). The IAP2 spectrum is an example of a framework for citizen engagement that broadly maps citizen engagement purposes to the appropriate tools. For example, John Clayton Thomas states that decision makers should involve the public to gain information and to exchange public acceptance for influence (1995). He recommends *more public participation when the acceptance of a decision is important and less public participation when the quality of a decision is important* (1995, p.352).

It is important to note that none of the stages of policy development necessarily exclude successful citizen engagement. Walters notes that:

the purposes for including the public require different forums and approaches to solicit that participation. Using this process of determining a policy's status in the policy development process enables decision makers to narrow the purpose possibilities, which in turn, provides guidance on when to include the public and the best methods to solicit that participation. Good decisions on citizen participation methods facilitate their success by both managing public expectations and clearly specifying how public input will be incorporated into the analysis (2000, p. 354).

¹ See <http://www.iplan.nsw.gov.au/engagement/essentials/benefits.jsp>

Success Factors

- Set the goalposts (from the beginning)
- Clarify expectations
- Create process minders (someone over viewing process)
- Have people talk to each other
- Choices are about values not technical expertise
- Use a variety of involvement techniques
- Creating informed choices – use surveys cautiously
- Reach out to groups and communities (White, 2004, p.113-14)

Our findings indicate that effective, or authentic, public participation implies more than simply finding the right tools and techniques for increasing public involvement in public decisions. Authentic public participation, that is, participation that works for all parties and stimulates interests and investment in both administrators and citizens, requires rethinking the underlying roles of, and relationships between, administrators and citizens (King et al, 1998, p.317).

Barriers to the Use of Citizen Engagement

Despite the numerous arguments in favour of citizen engagement, there are several significant barriers or disadvantages for local governments who pursue citizen engagement strategies. Key among them, are the financial cost of citizen engagement to the local government, citizen complacency, issues regarding representation, managing expectations, and the cost of wrong decisions.

The financial cost of citizen engagement is one of the most significant barriers, especially since it is not often accounted for in annual budgets (Stansbury, 2004). As such, citizen engagement process may pull resources away from projects with more tangible results. The difficulty of measuring the outcome can be a deterrent for investing money in citizen engagement. It is difficult to quantify the impact that citizen participants may gain by becoming involved. It is also difficult to quantify whether the policy is implemented more effectively due to greater citizen input and buy-in. Evaluation and success is not often measured in terms of these qualitative measures, and therefore, rationalizing a justification for investing in citizen engagement can be difficult. The lack of studies on the actual impact or result of citizen engagement in the policy process at the local level doesn't help. That being said, another financial cost that is difficult to quantify, is the cost of not using citizen engagement.

Next to the cost of citizen engagement, one of the more pervasive arguments against using citizen engagement is the complexity of the issue (Walters et al, 2000; Curtain, 2003). The professionalization and specialization of knowledge within local governments has lead some experts to think that Joe Citizen will be unable to grasp the complexities of the issue.

Apathy is another challenge for local governments trying to use citizen engagement. Complacency may exist because of the nature of the issue, the form/tool of engagement, or the culture of the community (Stansbury, 2004). The extent of the demand for citizen engagement varies from one municipality to another. Some municipalities have contributed to citizen expectations for engagement over time by choosing to engage often. In some cases, engagement begets more engagement. Other municipalities choose not to engage and are not faced with a significant demand from their citizens.

A study done in the UK regarding citizen's perspectives on citizen engagement indicate that citizen apathy is often mistaken for disinterest. Where in fact, the participants in their study cited the following reasons for not participating: 1) Citizens have a negative view of the municipality 2) Lack of awareness about opportunities to participate 3) A lack of council response 4) 'it's not for people like me' – issues of social exclusion (Lowndes, Pratchett & Stoker, 2001).

Ensuring the appropriate representation of stakeholders can be a challenge for the local government to overcome. It is important for the municipality to establish who the stakeholders are, determine if there are any barriers to participation, and then adjust citizen engagement processes to accommodate those stakeholders. Recognizing that there some citizens face barriers to participation ensure that all stakeholders have a voice in the process (Stansbury, 2004). Further, depending on the tool chosen for citizen engagement, highly polarized views can become exacerbated; leading to the conclusion that citizen engagement is divisive and caters to organized interests (rather than diverse stakeholders). This may be the case regardless of the tool chosen, however, some tools are certainly better than others for allowing space for dialogue.

Managing citizen's expectations is a critical part of successful citizen engagement processes. Insufficient communication can make citizens feel disappointed and disillusioned with the process. It is very important for the local government to set out expectations, responsibilities and roles at the very beginning of the process (Stansbury, 2004). Citizens like to see how and if their input is going to be heard and used. If this communication loop is not connected, then citizens may feel disenfranchised and duped.

Finally, in some cases, the local government may choose to allow citizens to make the final decision. This scenario is usually the cumulative result of a long process that involved many different citizen engagement tools along the way. Although there are benefits to choosing to do this, the potential negative outcome is that the less desirable option is chosen – it might be less efficient, etc. (Stansbury, 2004).

CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT SURVEY

The purpose of this research was to obtain information about the forms, methods, purposes and implications of citizen engagement being used in municipalities in British Columbia. The survey allowed us to get a general sense of what is happening from a larger sample population. Recognizing that it may be difficult to generalize across a

broad range of engagement initiatives, the survey simply tried to get a flavour of what is happening.

Survey Methodology

The survey was administered by CivicInfo BC. An email was sent to participants, which indicated that they could complete the survey online. The survey was sent to Chief Administrative Officers and Municipal Clerks in 154 municipalities in British Columbia. Regional Districts were not included in the survey population since the *Community Charter* does not apply to them. CAOs and Municipal Clerks were chosen for the survey because it was assumed that they would have a broad view and that they would not have professional biases that positions like communications or planning may have.

Respondents were given approximately two and half weeks to complete the survey. A reminder email was sent out approximately 10 days into the process to encourage more participants to reply to the survey. The results from the survey were obtained from a secure website administered by CivicInfo BC.

For the purpose of the survey, citizen engagement was defined as any voluntary initiative through which a municipality seeks to interact with or involve members of the public in the planning, decision-making, implementation or other activities of the municipality. Members of the public may be individual citizens, groups of citizens or representatives of established interests such as the business community, environmental groups or other sectors. For the purpose of this survey, citizen engagement does not include interactions that are required by legislation or regulations (e.g. public hearing for a rezoning; notice/opportunity for representation in relation to a road closure).

Summary of Survey Results and Key Findings

The following is an analysis of the key issues that arose from the survey data.

Response Profile

A total of 46 people responded to the survey representing a total of 41 municipalities. This results in a response rate of 27%, or roughly one third of the survey population. Despite being emailed to respondents in specific positions, the survey appears to have been passed along in some cases. Of the 46 respondents, 24 are COAs (52%) and 14 (30%) are Municipal Clerks (including Corporate or Financial Administration).

Respondents were asked to indicate the population size of their communities as either very small, small, medium or large. Respondents were more or less dispersed evenly between four population categories. 14 respondents were from very small municipalities, 13 from small municipalities, 7 from medium municipalities and 12 from large municipalities.

Perspective

The definition of citizen engagement is a key part of any discussion about the topic. It's possible that respondents were considering examples of statutory engagement given that they listed "statutory requirement" under the "other" category of several questions in the survey. Another fuzzy spot is the variety of positions that respondents hold. Different positions within the municipality probably have different views on the use of citizen engagement. The survey results do not unfortunately provide consistency in this regard. Regardless, however individuals defined or understood citizen engagement for themselves, will have had an impact on the results and any subsequent discussion.

Frequency

100% of respondents report using citizen engagement. Of these, 50% report using citizen engagement at least 11 times a year. Apart from how the respondents define citizen engagement, frequency might also be related to the capacity of the municipality to undertake these initiatives or the culture for citizen engagement in the community.

Either way, this is an interesting result. Similar data for other regions either within Canada do not appear to be available. It would be interesting to know if this was consistent with experiences of other provinces. It would also be interesting to determine if there are regional differences within BC. For example, do northern communities use citizen engagement to the same degree as those on the lower mainland? Does geographical location have any impact?

IAP2 Spectrum – inform – consult – involve – collaborate – empower

Responses to multiple questions in the survey indicate that respondents' experiences with citizen engagement appear to be predominately at the "inform" end of the IAP2 spectrum. More than half of the respondents ranked gaining information on citizen views as the number one purpose for choosing to use citizen engagement. The second most important purpose is increasing citizen awareness. These two purposes fall under the "inform" and "consult" end of the IAP2 spectrum.

The most frequently used forms/tools used also fall under "inform" and "consult". Informal feedback was overwhelmingly ranked 1st as the most frequently used tool followed by information from municipality to citizen and public meetings. The proliferation of web-based applications may be part of the explanation for this result.

The results of the survey also indicate that respondents engage more often at the beginning of the policy process. Respondents ranked gathering background information, identifying options, and identifying the issue as the top three points in the process they choose to engage. These three stages also correspond to the "inform" or "consult" end of the IAP2 spectrum.

Pros and Cons

Both critics and proponents list various reasons for using or not using citizen engagement at the local level. Interestingly, the survey results confirmed the validity of both perspectives. According to critics, the significance of the decision, the contentiousness and complexity of the issue are reasons not to engage with citizens. Respondents indicate that these issues are the top three considerations when choosing which tool to use in a given situation. This suggests that respondents are not shying away from these types of issues.

Other big issues for critics are the time consuming and expensive nature of citizen engagement. While time and money are certainly barriers or negative consequences, they are not preventing respondents from using citizen engagement (the case studies pick up on this theme). The issues over which respondents would choose not to engage citizens are legal, administrative/management or commercial issues. It appears that respondents would prefer not to engage if there is some kind of negotiation involved.

Interestingly, lack of public interest was considered the number one barrier for using citizen engagement. This calls into question whether there really is an increasing demand for citizen engagement. It may also point to the types of issues over which respondents are trying to engage (expanding a highway versus discussing budget priorities).

Supporters of citizen engagement cite greater citizen awareness (which can lead to increased ownership of issues and responses) as well as improved decision-making as reasons to engage. Greater citizen awareness and better decision-making (even if slow) were the top two positive outcomes according to respondents. Greater citizen awareness speaks the “inform” end of the IAP2 spectrum and perhaps to the tools and purposes to which respondents choose to engage. Better decisions also speaks to the fact that citizen engagement is always a two way learning process. Even if a local government’s purpose for engagement is just to give information, they will inevitably hear about it from citizens.

Population Size

Does population size impact the experiences of local governments with regard to citizen engagement? Where it was possible to make this kind of analysis, it appears that population size does make a difference. Choosing which tools to use, deciding what issue to engage over, the frequency of use, and the existence of a formal policy about citizen engagement all indicate a different experience for different sized populations. The largest contrast is between very small and large municipalities. The trend throughout the survey is of larger municipalities tending toward the more formal citizen engagement processes and tools and smaller municipalities tending toward less formal (this theme will also be carried forward in the case studies).

Paradigm Shift

Interestingly, culture, is another consideration that respondents listed as being taken into account when choosing between forms/tools. Specifically, respondents wrote, “heavy citizen involvement has always been part of community’s culture” and “our framework and politics for public involvement”. This seems to imply that there is a culture of engagement or that there are expectations on the municipality (sometimes formal) about how they will engage (the case studies will pick up on this theme).

Source of Pressure

The results of this question fall into three groupings. The top two sources of pressure were closely ranked. Individual citizens and council members are overwhelmingly the top two sources of pressure for citizen engagement. Missing from the list, is the option to choose “staff” as a source of pressure in the community. The reasons listed under other point to the fact that staff do in fact form a source of pressure in some cases.

The business community, other interest groups and non-profits are closely ranked in third, fourth and fifth.

The media, neighbourhood associations, and other are ranked at the bottom of the list in sixth, seventh, and eighth. One would assume that the activity of neighbourhood groups varies from one municipality to another.

Interesting Insights

- Citizen engagement processes can be a training ground for council
- Purpose for using citizen engagement: “distribute the political burden”
- “Heavy citizen involvement has always been part of community’s culture”
- Negative consequence of citizen engagement: “change is viewed negatively”

FOLLOW-UP CASE STUDIES

The purpose of the case studies was to elaborate on a specific example of citizen engagement in a local government. They were conducted with an eye to getting at the more nuanced decisions, pressures and rationales that get made throughout the public policy process. The case studies allow us to glean examples of what works and what challenges municipalities may have faced in using citizen engagement in their communities.

Case Study Methodology

The final question in the online survey asked, “Would you be willing to do a follow-up interview (by phone or by email) about an example of citizen engagement in your

municipality that you thought was particularly successful or from which lessons could be learned?” This question allowed participants who completed the survey to identify if they would be interested in doing a follow-up case study. To some degree, then, the case study participants were self-selected.

Those who volunteered were then emailed about their availability for conducting an interview. 8 interviews were arranged. In keeping with the assumption that small and large communities experience citizen engagement differently, respondents were chosen from each population category. Interviews were conducted with respondents from 1 very small community, 3 small, 2 medium and 2 large.

Respondents were then contacted by phone at a time convenient to them. The interview questions were similar to those in the survey, as they applied to the specific scenario the respondent was describing.

Analysis of case study results

Population Size

In the very small and small municipalities, citizen engagement tends to happen from the ground up. The city is often aware of issues within the community by word of mouth, complaints, and people dropping by the city hall (informal engagement). According to respondents, citizen engagement tends to occur when there is a demand for it as it relates to a particular issue or concern.

Contentious Issues

Most of the respondents identified examples where they increased the use of citizen engagement with regard to a particular issue while they were in the midst of addressing it. The degree of public concern, outcry, complaints, interest, etc urged the city to look for ways to include citizens to a greater degree, be it through information sharing or focus groups.

Undesirable Outcomes

A possible outcome of citizen engagement is that council may make a decision that might be less than optimal. The outcome of a referendum might have significant impacts for the community. In order to avoid undesirable results, the city may increase its citizen engagement strategies, particularly of the information sharing kind. Even if the city is not using a referendum for a particular issue, Council might be pressured to accepting suggestions or ideas that have come out of consultation with the public. Ideas that are derived from citizen engagement processes possess a certain degree of democratic legitimacy despite the fact that the ideas may be less technically sound.

Education & Access to Information

The importance of access to information cannot be overstated. Access to information is the fundamental starting point for all other forms of citizen engagement. According to respondents, getting information out to citizens was an integral component of turning a contentious issue into a dialogue between stakeholders as opposed to a confrontation. When citizens have access to information, they are more able to weigh the tradeoffs and become collaborators with the city as opposed to strictly playing the watchdog role. Further, educating citizens mean that they can help to frame and expand the discussion about the issue. One respondent had a very positive experience with a developer when pictures of a similar development were made available to citizens – this enabled citizens to understand what might happen.

Tools/Forms

Respondents report using a variety of tools depending on what the situation calls for. Ultimately, however, several respondents commented that they try not to use traditional town hall type meetings. These types of public meetings tend to be highly confrontational. Further, those who are upset will monopolize the microphone. One respondent claims, “public hearings are the last true blood sport.” King et al. confirm this view. They argue that the public hearing is the most ineffective technique and they do not work, “administrators recognize that the structure of public hearings and public meetings prohibits meaningful exchange” (King et al, p.323, 1998; See also Kweit and Kweit, 1990).

Respondents report that open houses can be a successful form of citizen engagement. Open houses are non threatening means for people to ask questions, get information, engage with various stakeholders, and problem-solve about the issue. One respondent indicated that using an open house as early on in the process as possible, allows the problem definition, options and solutions to remain somewhat open to possibilities. Some respondents in medium and large municipalities report contracting out citizen engagement to third parties.

Positive Outcomes & Challenges

Among the various barriers that were mentioned, it was generally agreed that time and money are always a hindrance. Citizen engagement can often consume a lot of staff time, however, the result is that the issue does not come back to bite you! Respondents report that citizen engagement is generally a positive experience for citizens, staff and council.

Some respondents report having difficulty dealing with neighbourhood and interest groups who tend to dominate the process. Others, however, note that inclusion of groups in the process (via focus groups, open houses, etc) incorporates their energies into problem solving and ownership of the solution. Lastly, apathy is generally an issue and a

concern for some of the respondents. Trying to get people to participate in engagement processes over certain issues can be difficult.

Paradigm Shift

Several respondents indicated that a particular experience with citizen engagement caused them to consider incorporating these tools more frequently. Others reported that their municipality uses citizen engagement because that's just the way that they do business. The municipality may not have a formal policy for using citizen engagement, but it is apart of the culture of the organization (including council).

One respondent noted that citizen engagement requires direction and leadership in order for the municipality to function this way – there is a fundamental paradigm shift that needs to happen. This particular municipality is broadening the staffs that are involved in such initiatives to go beyond the planning department to include the engineering and recreation departments. Further, this paradigm allows a lot of the groundwork to be done before the issue even gets to council. Contentious issues receive a lot of attention (citizen engagement) and council does not get drawn into the debates to the same degree.

According to one respondent, the intent of Community Charter is positive and it serves to re-enforce citizen engagement paradigm.

Source of pressure

There was no discernable trend regarding the source of pressure to engage among respondents. The pressure to engage appears to be specific to particular issues and circumstances and may also become a fundamental expectation on the part of citizens that the city will allow them to participate. One respondent noted that pressure for citizen engagement comes as more things change.

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

This research paper set out to understand the current non-statutory citizen engagement practices in local governments in British Columbia. This information is important for several reasons. First of all, citizen engagement is a cornerstone of representative democracy. Secondly, the Community Charter's emphasis on accountability is a step toward encouraging greater interactions with citizens. Thirdly, the Annual Reporting exercise should include a citizen engagement component in order to ensure that there is a feedback loop into what is being measured. The following key insights have come out of this research project:

1. 100% of respondents report using non-statutory citizen engagement.
2. Citizen engagement tends to fall toward the “inform” end of the IPA2 spectrum for purpose, tool and goal. Information is the foundation of further citizen

- engagement (we are seeing increasing availability of local government websites as well as communications officers on staff).
3. Population size impacts the use of citizen engagement. Small municipalities tend to be more informal and use citizen engagement less frequently. In addition, they are less likely to use tools that fall under the “empower” end of the IPA2 spectrum.
 4. In some cases, there is an understanding of the link between the kind of tool being used and the overall purpose trying to be achieved.
 5. Confrontational forms of engagement such as town hall meetings are not the most effective and can have negative impacts (hardening of positions).
 6. Time and money are significant concerns.
 7. Some respondents report having difficulty dealing with certain groups.
 8. Citizen apathy is a concern.
 9. The use of citizen engagement within the municipality may constitute a paradigm shift. Some local governments report “its just the way we do business”.
 10. Citizen engagement is a two-way learning process. Both staff and council learn valuable input from citizens as well as learning about the impact of using citizen engagement in decision-making. Citizens, for their part, learn more about the issues affecting them.

Recommendations for the Ministry of Community, Aboriginal and Women’s Services to Consider

The Use of Citizen Engagement - from inform to empower

Question: Are local governments using citizen engagement? If so to what degree? What kinds of engagement are they using?

Answer: 100% of the respondents report using citizen engagement in their municipality (as defined in the preamble of the survey). 50% of respondents indicated that they use citizen engagement at least 11 times per year. Informal feedback and information sharing are the two most used forms of citizen engagement.

Implications:

Information is the foundation for all citizen engagement. However, moving further along the IAP2 spectrum is important as citizens are increasingly called upon as customers, evaluators, coproducers, and catalysts for community action.

Consider encouraging/fostering the use of more citizen engagement in local governments.

Consider encouraging/fostering the movement along the IAP2 continuum toward more shared decision-making models. Especially with regard to the annual report, it is essential to have a feedback loop into the process in order for the objectives and measures to have meaning and reflect citizens' preferences (efficiency).

Any tools or best practices guides with regards to annual reporting should stress the link between citizens, staff and council in annual reporting and suggest means by which local governments can incorporate citizen engagement in the process.

The Implications of Population Size

Question: Does population size impact the use of citizen engagement?

Answer: Yes. Population size impacts the frequency of engagement and the types of tools that are used. Smaller local governments tend toward more informal citizen engagement.

Implications:

Any tools or best practices guides that might be developed should consider the relevancy of population size. A small community may be better suited to the use of informal tools.

A Citizen Engagement Paradigm - within Local Government Bureaucracy

Observation:

The literature review, the survey and the case studies point to the fact that citizen engagement requires an emphasis on the process rather than merely on the outcome. This constitutes a shift in the way that some bureaucracies function. Given the degree of technical expertise within local government, this may constitute a fundamental paradigm shift (experts vs. facilitators). Citizen engagement should be considered at the outset of the policy process and not merely an add on.

Implications:

Consider further exploration of how to foster a culture of citizen engagement in local government bureaucracy.

Access to Resources

Fundamentally, MCAWS should promote a better understanding and appreciation of citizen engagement in local government. The following information could be included in a best practice guide, in case studies, in courses, or on the MCAWS website.

- Provide information on various citizen engagement tools. This might include what the pros and cons are for using different tools. It might compare tools. It might also suggest which tools are more conducive than others to particular circumstances. Other governments have created charts that map particular tools to particular situations.
- Town hall meetings are not great – steer clear of these.
- Suggest that local governments anticipate that they will be using citizen engagement and plan on spending money (it's the way to do business). Citizen engagement should be considered at the outset – a go no go decision. If this is always the case, then a culture of citizen engagement will be engendered and local governments can anticipate that they will have to allocate time and resources to the process.
- Make information available about how to engage different stakeholders.
- Offer suggestions/best practices for dealing with citizen apathy. This may relate to what tools are being used; it may be much broader (i.e. democratic deficit & changes in society).

Questions for Further Study

1. Trend data - are local governments moving along the IPA2 spectrum? Is engagement increasing?
2. Specifically, what issues are local governments engaging over?
3. Investigate the use of citizen engagement with respect to annual reporting.
4. What works in British Columbia? Make case studies and examples available.
5. How is capacity built within local government so that they are better able to respond to citizens?
6. How can local governments overcome barriers to participation?
7. How are local governments engaging with aboriginal peoples?
8. What other resources are needed?
9. It is not uncommon to use citizen engagement in issues around sustainability as well as population health. What are other Ministries doing in this regard? What tools have the BC government already developed?
10. Would training workshops be useful (see IAP2 courses for example)?

Conclusions

Local governments in BC have long been engaging citizens. This report highlights some of the trends and issues currently facing local governments in BC. The recent inception of annual reporting highlights the need for ensuring that local governments know when to engage, what tools to use, and why. The success of performance measurement programs rests on the input, feedback and engagement of staff, council and citizens in the process.

Ultimately, the Ministry should encourage and support the use of citizen engagement at the local level in both general policy decisions as well as specifically regarding the annual report. Governments in Australia and the UK have written toolkits, case studies and many other resources for local governments to access with regard to citizen engagement. The fundamental starting point in the provision of information is making clear the links between citizen engagement and governance, social capital and service delivery. It would be useful to highlight the importance of engagement regarding annual reports as well as providing case studies and examples of what others in British Columbia are doing. Further, a guide that would match the tools of engagement that are available to the point in the policy process as well as the engagement goal would be helpful.

Community consultation enables governments to govern better and communities to be more engaged and connected. Active, informed citizens who are involved in the life of their communities and who take an interest in their government, will give rise to better candidates for office, more transparent and accountable decision-making and, generally, better governments. In a well-developed local community, the council and the community are mutually reinforcing pillars of representative democracy and good governance.

Community Consultation Resource Guide, p.4 (available at:
http://www.vlga.org.au/library/contents/issues/consultation_engagement_BestValueVictoriaCommunityConsultationResourceGuide0.pdf)

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