

## **LISTENING TO TORONTO. TOWARD BROADER CIVIC ENGAGEMENT**

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### **1. Contextual factors**

#### **A. Enabling factors/policies**

- Tradition of stakeholder engagement on local issues
- Staff experienced and knowledgeable with consultation and engagement and with communities' needs and expectations
- Increased emphasis on governance, not only government
- Changes in leadership at all 3 levels (municipal, provincial, national)
- Renewed interest in innovation and in public good
- New commitments to transparency and accountability at municipal and provincial levels
- Recognition (on some parts) that citizen involvement must extend much more deeply into social and cultural fabric of cities

#### **B. “Moment in time” = Opportunity + Readiness**

- Changes in political leadership at all levels
- Need for “a new deal for cities”
- Demand for electoral reform
- Dissatisfaction with existing institutions alongside desire for greater involvement in decision-making
- Need to make organizations and institutions more permeable, transparent, adaptable and inclusive
- People's willingness to engage on policy issues
- New institutions: Federal Democratic Reform Secretariat, provincial Democratic Renewal Secretariat
- Electoral Reform initiatives in 4 provinces
- Dynamic Mayor
- Proactive senior staff

#### **C) Challenges/limitations**

- Decade of downloading of services from higher levels of government without commensurate downloading of funds
- Decision making “behind closed doors”
- Citizens' cynicism/scepticism about government
- Lack of strong municipal leadership
- Limited power of cities (creations of provinces)
- Imposed amalgamations, with administrative challenges and dramatic impacts on citizens and NGOs, including breakdown of well-established informal networks

**D) Outdated myths about citizens engaging in policy processes<sup>1</sup>**

- Citizens don't have the time.
- Citizens are not sophisticated, intelligent or dedicated enough.
- They will only be interested in what affects them directly (NIMBY).
- There's no point in getting citizens engaged, because decision makers won't listen anyway

**E) Citizens claiming spaces**

- History of "visioning" processes, with resource implications
- Campaigns (largely NGO initiated) - anti-poverty, child poverty, affordable housing, social justice
- Community health initiatives (tailored to communities' needs and languages)
- "Council Watch" – NGOs monitoring government decision-making

**F) Relations between local governments and civil society groups**

- Ambivalent
- Growing recognition of need to hear from "unaffiliated" citizens, individual voices
- Tensions: Do elected officials represent their locality or the whole city? Can they adequately represent large constituencies? Will going directly to citizens undermine their power?

**G) Objectives of initiative (to address challenges)**

- Need for more open decision-making
- Citizens' desire for meaningful involvement
- Desire for greater citizen input
- To set a new leadership standard

**2. Listening to Toronto: Details of Engagement**

**A) Strategies**

- To be inclusive and accessible;
- To enrich political decision-making through dialogue with citizens.
- To allow decision makers to hear citizens' values, concerns and priorities
- To de-mystify budget process
- To promote understanding of City Council's work

**B) Who was involved**

- Mayor's office
- Design Team drawn from key municipal departments (CAO's office, Finance, Works and Emergency Services, Communications) to address internal and external communications and outreach, recruitment and training, site logistics, registration, media, liaison with elected officials

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<sup>1</sup> As articulated by Carolyh Lukensmeyer, AmericaSpeaks

- 200+ city staff involved
- Mayor and Chair of Budget Committee – to provide overview of fiscal situation and to listen
- City Councillors – in listening capacity
- Citizens across the city – to think about the needs of their communities as well as the city as a whole

### **C) Activities**

- Inspired by AmericaSpeaks 21<sup>st</sup> Century town Hall Meeting
- January 2004, Listening to Toronto
  - 7 three-hour sessions across the City in one week
  - 1000+ people in facilitated, small group discussions
  - 200 through phone, email or written submissions
  - Advance registration, including demographic information
  - Special needs accommodated (ASL interpretation, personal aides, childcare)
  - 3 key questions: What makes Toronto great? What keeps it from being as great as it should be? What advice would you give to Councillors as they set the 2004 budget for the City?
  - Mayor and Chair of the Budget Committee at all sessions
  - Background materials with information about city expenditures and sources of revenue
  - Comments – individual and collective – taken to an on-site “Data Team” for review and preliminary sorting
  - Reports provided over the course of each session
  - Large screens for visibility
  - Synthesis report (produced in 10 days) used to launch 2004 budget process
  - Report to all participants
  - All materials and citizens’ comments posted on City website
  - Mayor continues to reference sessions in speaking for the people of Toronto
  - Complete catalogue of public input (almost 10,000 suggestions) posted on the city’s website [www.toronto.ca/listeningtotoronto](http://www.toronto.ca/listeningtotoronto).
  - Feedback highly positive (including former “maysayers”)
  - Requests for information from other cities, organizations and levels of government.
- November 2004, Listening to Toronto 2 (“second annual”)
  - Similar format, plus closed-captioning
  - 1 four-hour session in central location
  - 700+ people in facilitated, small group discussions
  - 6 Data Teams and one overall Theme Team
  - Key questions related to City services, priorities for the City, civic participation
  - City Election Machines to tabulate responses
  - Synthesis report for December 6th

### **C) Highlights**

- Planning process – detailed, comprehensive and effective; special needs accommodated; training; quality of materials
- Number of participants (70% for Listening to Toronto 2 were new)
- Events:
  - Presence of Mayor and Councillors
  - Palpable excitement
  - Fair opportunity to speak
  - Immediate feedback
  - Commitment of decision-makers to process and to using input
  - Commitment to identifying “next steps”

### **3. Engagement Factors**

#### **A) What helped?**

- Proactive recognition of “moment in time” on part of civil servants
- Direction from highest levels
- Innovative, challenging, but doable process
- Carefully crafted proposal for newly elected officials
- “Behind the scenes” activities - persistent communication, cultivation of appropriate municipal staff

#### **B) What hindered?**

- “Expert” mind-set
- Critics – media, some elected councillors
- Time, especially for more targeted outreach

### **4. Breakthroughs and Accomplishments.**

“Largest public event in the history of the amalgamated city”

- Specific:
  - Opening the budget for police to public scrutiny
  - Introduction of delegation from Porto Alegre as inspiration for this process
- More general:
  - Mutual learning: Affirming citizens’ interest and capacity for civic engagement; enhancing citizens’ understanding of fiscal realities and constraints, forging stronger links between citizen voice and government response
  - Healthier debates about solving problems and addressing real issues
  - Work in progress - stage has been set for new kinds of conversations, new spaces being created for citizen participation

## **5. Lessons Learned and Future Challenges.**

### **A) Critical success factors**

- Decision makers involved and committed
- Good information
- Getting right people, right content and right process
- Meaningful outcomes
- Understanding local context(s)

### **B) Initiating local level engagements on resource issues?**

Experience in Canada indicates that there are many citizen-initiated engagement efforts on resource (and other) issues. The challenges seem to be with decision-makers (elected officials, civil servants, governments) rather than with citizens. The larger question is how might citizens' efforts to engage governments get the attention they deserve?

### **C) Sustaining engagement over time**

This is one of the biggest questions in the engagement world! Our research has shown that citizens are, in many cases, doing all the right things. Governments must demonstrate political will and commitment to engagement; this could be demonstrated in a several key ways:

- Institutionalizing/"entrenching" engagement (policies)
- Implementing engagement policies
- Monitoring and reporting on engagement
- Helping to fund/facilitate engagement
- Visibly using input
- Sharing power

### **D) Claiming more spaces**

- Efforts are underway around the world
- Experience demonstrates value and reduces fears and concerns
- Elected officials and civil servants begin to pay attention
- Citizens' involvement increases
- Information sharing is essential

### **E) Future challenges**

- Inclusion/more targeted outreach
- Sustaining momentum
- Electoral reform
- Engaging citizens in strategizing and decision-making, not only input
- Documenting experience (positive and negative)
- Patience

## **6. Questions**

The more we learn, the more there is to learn!

- What is the relationship between enabling policy frameworks and “moment in time”?  
Is one more important than the other?
- How can important new initiatives survive changes in leadership?
- How to delineate the situations in which citizens can make significant changes without government and those where government involvement and commitment is essential?
- How best to “entrench” citizens’ voice in decision-making?
- How to “persuade” elected official (who, at one point, were, themselves, citizens!) of the value and importance of citizens’ voice?
- ???