Engagement to Action: Improving Policy Outcomes Through Better Consultation

Kate Nelischer
About IMFG

The Institute on Municipal Finance and Governance (IMFG) is an academic research hub and non-partisan think tank based in the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy at the University of Toronto.

IMFG focuses on the fiscal health and governance challenges facing large cities and city-regions. Its objective is to spark and inform public debate, and to engage the academic and policy communities around important issues of municipal finance and governance. The Institute conducts original research on issues facing cities in Canada and around the world; promotes high-level discussion among Canada’s government, academic, corporate, and community leaders through conferences and roundtables; and supports graduate and post-graduate students to build Canada’s cadre of municipal finance and governance experts. It is the only institute in Canada that focuses solely on municipal finance issues in large cities and city-regions.

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Executive Summary

In an era of increasing political polarization, agreement seems difficult to come by. At the same time, recent reports show public trust in government is declining. Both conditions can make public consultation more challenging, as communities and individuals hesitate to engage with one another and with institutions, further removing themselves from policy-making processes that impact them. However, bringing people together in thoughtful dialogue remains critically important, especially as cities like Toronto continue to grow and become more diverse.

Ensuring that the many different needs and priorities of residents are accurately understood is also a challenge, as researchers document lower participation rates in municipal public consultations among newcomers, women, and those with lower levels of education or income. How can meaningful consultation be achieved amid these realities?

In December 2019, the Institute on Municipal Finance and Governance (IMFG) hosted a panel discussion on the role of public consultation in policy making within the context of intensifying polarization, erosion of trust, and increasing diversity. Experts offered insights gathered through their experiences in urban planning, community development, social planning, and policy initiatives, mostly within the Toronto region. The panellists were:

- **Cheryll Case**, Urban Design Coordinator with the City of Brampton, Founder and Principal Urban Planner of CP Planning
- **Lindsay (Swooping Hawk) Kretschmer**, Executive Director of the Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council (TASSC)
- **John Robinson**, Professor at the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy and the School of the Environment at the University of Toronto
- **Nicole Swerhun**, founder of Swerhun Inc., a public consultation firm
- **Dave Meslin** (moderator), activist, artist, community organizer, and author

Panellists explored the role of public consultation in policy development, connections between consultation and good governance, and challenges in existing approaches to consultation. They discussed why improvements to these processes are necessary at this particular time and offered potential strategies for more effective and inclusive decision-making. This paper presents five key principles for more meaningful consultation, distilled from panellists’ insights and relevant academic literature:

1. **Build trust** between government and communities, and between neighbours
2. **Recognize privilege** and its impacts on decision-making, and address inequities by making every effort to design more inclusive consultation processes
3. **Share power and let communities lead**, including reformulating concepts of power and recognizing the expertise and knowledge that communities hold
4. **Communicate clearly and honestly**, recognizing the power dynamics inherent in determining and sharing information
5. **Record feedback and take action** to build trust, legitimize the process, and ensure mutual benefit for participants and organizers

These principles may help organizers, governments, and planners bring communities together in decision-making processes that capture the value of collective wisdom. They are predicated on the belief that better engagement will lead to policies that are more effective in addressing the many different conditions, opportunities, and challenges of our growing and diversifying urban neighbourhoods, and support the long-term health and vitality of our communities.
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Introduction

If policies and plans are to be effective, they must be created in collaboration with the people they are intended to serve.

This notion seems common sense today, but it was relatively recently that local, provincial, and federal governments began actively involving residents in decision-making processes.¹

In 1969, Sherry Arnstein's seminal “A Ladder of Citizen Participation” served as a turning point in participatory decision-making theory. The ladder identified and categorized various forms of engagement, from non-participation, through tokenism, to citizen power.² Arnstein criticized top-down decision-making processes and advocated participation models in which power and knowledge would be shared between governments and residents, leading to policies and plans that more effectively addressed community issues.

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Arnstein’s work inspired subsequent studies of the value of participatory processes, alternative forms of categorization, strategies for implementation, and potential challenges.³ During the 1970s and 1980s, researchers and practitioners developed new and innovative approaches to public participation that are still in use today, including communicative planning, deliberation, and consensus building. During this same time, public demand grew for greater transparency, accountability, and collaboration in government.

This confluence of research, practice, and community activism led to the acceptance of public participation as a standard practice for governments, especially municipalities, and an important component of good governance.⁴ Today, facilitating consultation is an expected role for planners and policy makers. Many governments and institutions have entire teams dedicated to this work, and processes are often mandated for particular decisions (such as by the Ontario Planning Act).

Although consultation is considered a best practice, questions remain about residents’ level of influence in shaping policies and plans through these processes.⁵ In an era of deepening political polarization and waning public trust in government, communities and individuals have become reluctant to engage in discussions and agreement seems increasingly difficult to come by.⁶ Lower levels of participation in consultation can increase the separation between governments and the public, further removing communities from the policy making that affects them.

Meanwhile, as cities like Toronto continue to grow and become more diverse, engagement remains vital to identifying the many public interests and visions in our communities and ensuring they are addressed in policies and plans. These conditions require rethinking our approaches to consultation.

### A word on language

The title of this event, **Engagement to Action: Improving Policy Outcomes Through Better Consultation**, uses both the terms “engagement” and “consultation.” There is a significant body of literature on the definitions of these terms and where they fall within the larger umbrella of citizen participation. One notable example is Sherry Arnstein’s set of definitions, which treats “consultation” as a form of tokenism. However, this paper does not use the word in the same way and employs the broadest definitions of both consultation and engagement to refer to a range of approaches to public participation in governance processes. For guidance, we can look to the City of Toronto, which uses the terms “public consultation,” “outreach,” and “engagement” interchangeably to refer to opportunities for residents to become involved in local government initiatives.

In December 2019, the Institute on Municipal Finance and Governance (IMFG) hosted a panel of experts to discuss the role of public consultation in policy making within the context of increasing polarization and erosion of trust. Panellists spanned the public, private, non-profit, and academic sectors. Many have experience working in urban planning, community development, social planning, and policy initiatives, so the resulting conversation touched on all these areas. Since all panellists are based in Toronto and most have significant experience with municipal processes, the majority of the discussion centred on issues of local governance. The panellists were:

**Cheryll Case**, Urban Design Coordinator with the City of Brampton, Founder and Principal Urban Planner of CP Planning, and an editor of *House Divided: How the Missing Middle Will Solve Toronto’s Housing Crisis*. Cheryll’s urban design and planning work specializes in community engagement.

**Lindsay (Swooping Hawk) Kretschmer**, Executive Director of the Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council (TASSC) and former Executive Director of the Ontario Aboriginal HIV/AIDS Strategy. Lindsay’s family comes from Six Nations of the Grand River Territory. She is German and Mohawk (Wolf Clan) and her spirit name is Swooping Hawk.

**John Robinson**, Professor at the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy and the School of the Environment at the University of Toronto, Adjunct Professor at Copenhagen Business School, and former Visiting Professor at Utrecht University. John is also the Presidential Adviser on the Environment, Climate Change, and Sustainability at the University of Toronto.

**Nicole Swerhun**, founder of Swerhun Inc., a consulting firm that designs and delivers public consultation processes. Nicole has led the design and delivery of hundreds of public consultation projects, including work in postwar Bosnia, post-Katrina New Orleans, and in cities across Canada and the United States.

**Dave Meslin** (moderator), activist, artist, and community organizer. He is the author of *Teardown: Rebuilding Democracy from the Ground Up* (2019) and *Local Motion: The Art of Civic Engagement in Toronto* (2010). He formed the Toronto Public Space Committee, which published the first issue of *Spacing Magazine*. Dave appears as an expert on political engagement on national media and works to inspire better engagement between governments and citizens.

This paper summarizes insights conveyed during the event. Panellists identified challenges in existing approaches to consultation, speculated on why improvements to these processes are necessary at this particular time, and suggested potential strategies that could lead to more effective decision making. This paper distils these recommendations into five
To understand the value of collective wisdom, we can look to traditional Indigenous talking circles, which serve as a model for many forms of deliberative democracy.

Why consult? The value of collective wisdom

Moderator Dave Meslin initiated the discussion by asking, “Do we believe in the value of collective wisdom?” This is an especially important time to consider this question, he argued, citing Brexit and recent federal elections in Canada and the United States as examples of how polarized politics and communities have become. This polarization has resulted not only in growing mistrust of institutions, but also in mistrust between neighbours, leading to cynicism about collective decision making among residents, politicians, and planners alike. Coupled with these challenges to consultation are many physical and logistical barriers. As an example, Meslin described the unwelcoming environment of Toronto City Hall. Meslin asked panellists, “How do we then create public consultations in an environment that is rigged against meaningful dialogue?”

To understand the value of collective wisdom, we can look to traditional Indigenous talking circles, which serve as a model for many forms of deliberative democracy. Circles strengthen communities, foster mutual understanding, and build relationships through communication and storytelling. They are informed by the belief that everyone is affected by the problems around them, and that participants can address conflict by identifying shared values. Circles create an environment of mutual respect to ensure participants have opportunities to engage and that their contributions are weighted equitably, which reduces discrepancies in power.

In speaking of her Mohawk ancestry, Lindsay Kretschmer noted that the Mohawk worldview centres on the belief that success is not an individual achievement. Instead, success is found through recognition that the whole is greater than the individual. The commitment to collective responsibility easily translates into a commitment to consult. Kretschmer argued that consultation should not focus on whose idea wins or loses, but should recognize the benefits that come from collaboration. Nicole Swerhun echoed Kretschmer’s position: “Success is the success of community.”

Collaborative processes offer opportunities to consider professional expertise may be tempted to think they know best, Swerhun cautioned those in leadership positions against making decisions in isolation from the public. “People are best able to understand the condition of their own lives,” she argued, and have the will and the capacity to work and plan together.

John Robinson agreed with Swerhun: “Don’t tell people what they are experiencing.” Consultation allows government to learn about the experiences and interests of residents. Furthermore, those experiences and interests are always in flux, and therefore ongoing dialogue between governments and the communities they serve is required to generate timely and accurate understandings of people’s needs, desires, and priorities and to benefit from communal wisdom.

A University of Toronto student in the audience provided panellists with an opportunity to move beyond theory and discuss the value of collective wisdom in action. The student noted that because she lives in an expensive city, finding affordable housing is difficult. However, she wondered...
whether there is any benefit in attending public meetings to discuss affordable housing when the City of Toronto is unable to provide that housing within a timeline that could help her. Swerhun impressed upon the student that a wide range of voices is valuable in every consultation process. “One of the most important things that happens at public meetings is that people hear from each other,” noted Swerhun. That discussion helps everyone in attendance – neighbours, planners, policy makers, consultants, politicians, and others – to develop a full picture of the multitude of views in the community. Broad participation strengthens the participatory process.

“Public engagement is one of the main tools planners use to make sure the city’s diverse perspectives and priorities are reflected in their work, and through public engagement people can have a real and meaningful influence on planning and on Toronto’s future.”

Toronto City Planning, Youth Engagement Strategy Discussion Guide, 2015

Cheryll Case agreed with Swerhun. She noted that by engaging in consultation processes, participants have the opportunity to share their views with decision makers. Case also noted that an additional (and perhaps even greater) benefit to attending these events is the opportunity for community members to engage in dialogue with one another. Connecting in this way allows neighbours to become more familiar with their own communities, collaborate, and identify allies. “Consultations are an open meeting ground,” said Case.

She noted that she has witnessed the value of this many times in her own consulting work, and highlighted the recent success of the community-led initiative to establish a $17-million land trust for affordable housing at the corner of Bloor Street West and Dufferin Street. When the Toronto District School Board sold the surplus property to developers in 2016, neighbours attended City-led consultations and then began to hold their own meetings to ensure the new development included community benefits. In consultation with the new property owners, City Council, and local non-profit organizations, the community developed a plan for the site to include an eight-storey affordable rental building, which was approved in 2019.

Residents may decline to participate in consultation processes because they do not believe their contributions will make a difference.

Meslin proposed that one problem in fostering more meaningful consultation is that governance systems are planned to be adversarial. This can even extend to the physical spaces in which these processes take place, such as the Houses of Parliament, which are designed so that parties sit in direct opposition to one another. “People don’t come together to talk, they come together to win,” he lamented. Communicative planning scholar Patsy Healey has similarly acknowledged the detrimental effects these structures can have on collaborative processes, but she argues that well-designed consultation strategies are vital tools in navigating highly political environments and power differentials, and can ultimately improve governance systems to be less adversarial.

In Toronto, the many barriers to meaningful consultation are an ongoing concern for the public service. The City’s...
Planning Department has set a goal of making Toronto “the most engaged city in North America,” and has identified better consultation as key to achieving this goal. How best to go about improving these processes is the question.

What follows is a discussion of key principles for capturing the value of collective wisdom by bringing residents and governments together in decision-making processes. These have been distilled from relevant academic literature and insights offered by panellists.

Communicative planning

Collective approaches to decision-making can be seen in the origins of Western urban planning practices. Prior to the professionalization of planning, many city-building issues were addressed through neighbourly collaboration. But by the early 1900s, the majority of those decisions were turned over to accredited professionals. In lamenting this departure from collaboration, scholar Patsy Healey noted, “It is hardly surprising that the activity of planning has become linked with a past from which we should now be trying to escape.”

Healey was a leader in the “communicative turn” in planning, which emerged in the 1980s and ignited debates on the roles and responsibilities of planners as scientists, facilitators, advocates, and activists. “Planning for whom, with whom, and against whom?” should be the central question of planning, argued theorist John Friedmann, and communicative planning prioritized these questions.

Influenced by philosopher Jurgen Habermas’s theory of communicative rationality, which endorses communication amongst citizens as a powerful strategy for inciting structural change, the communicative planning movement became an attempt to restore planning to its pre-professional roots. Communicative approaches, which also include collaborative, deliberative, and consensus-building processes, seek to involve residents in decision-making and facilitate knowledge sharing so that plans and policies can more effectively serve the public interest. They offer an alternative for those who believe planning to be relevant not just to the physical environment, but also to good governance.

Healey argues that in order to support healthy and just communities, governing policies cannot be developed and implemented in isolation from one another and without consideration for people, time, and space. Given these motivations, communicative planning theory is applicable beyond spatial considerations and can inform policy-making processes.

Principles for meaningful consultation

Principle #1: Build trust in relationships

As Cheryll Case noted, consultations can provide opportunities for communities to come together and connect. All panellists agreed that relationships between governments and residents, and amongst residents themselves, are central to the success of consultation processes. These relationships need to be strong to influence decision making. And strong relationships, noted Lindsay Kretschmer, require a foundation of trust.

The work of communicative planning scholar Judith Innes reinforces the importance of trust in consultation. Innes argues that all stakeholders working in collaboration must be fully committed to a process in order for it to succeed. They must be confident that each participant is entering with the same goal of developing shared understandings.

Nicole Swerhun argued that given government’s mandate to serve the public interest, it is incumbent upon government to take the first steps in building trusting relationships. The City of Toronto’s Youth Engagement Strategy, on which Swerhun consulted, identified lack of trust in government as a significant barrier to youth participation in municipal consultations.

John Robinson’s research led him to similar conclusions. During his presentation, Robinson summarized his recent “participatory backcasting” study, which was based on collaboration with Torontonians to create visions for the future of the city and identify strategies for achieving those visions. Robinson shared two key lessons from this research on the role of consultation: (1) consultation should build trust, and (2) consultation should address questions that are important to participants.

Robinson shared advice that could help governments achieve trust: “Don’t assume there is a singular set of values and beliefs about what the city should be.” Too often, Robinson noted, governments seek to create one vision for the future of a community. In a large, diverse, and growing city, there cannot be one vision for the future. Instead, governments should recognize that different communities will have different priorities. “There are many Torontos,” noted Robinson, “some are working together, some don’t know about each other, and some are in conflict.” Governments can build trust by acknowledging these differences and identifying the various questions and issues that are important to individual communities within the larger city.

Building lasting relationships and realizing the benefits of access to a diverse range of experiences, ideas, and skills within a community requires immersion, argued Robinson. Robinson compared consultation to the challenge of interdisciplinary in academia; only through collaboration can researchers truly grasp the value that experts from other fields can bring to their studies. Swerhun agreed, noting that
the way for governments and communities to build trust in each other’s intentions and capacities is to spend time together.

**Principle #2: Recognize privilege and address inequities**

“Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody,” said urbanist Jane Jacobs. In order to protect the wide range of interests in policy discussions, panellists agreed that it is necessary to recognize the roles that privilege and identity play in consultation processes and to address inequities when designing these processes.

Exclusionary practices predate the Athenian agora, a public market space used as a site for citizens (although not all residents) to convene and make collective decisions. Women, immigrants, and slaves were barred from the space and therefore unable to participate. Although today the local, provincial, and federal governments advocate for (and often mandate) inclusive processes, there remain significant barriers to the participation of currently underrepresented groups. “Homeowners over the age of 55 typically dominate the conversation,” notes the City of Toronto, despite the fact that 85 percent of Torontonians are under the age of 64 and almost half of all residents rent their homes.

Researchers have documented lower participation rates in municipal public consultations among newcomers, women, and those with lower levels of education or income. In a 2018 report, Social Planning Toronto noted that more than 200 languages are spoken in the city and the nearly 5 percent of residents who do not speak English face significant barriers to participation.

Dave Meslin noted that the residents most in need of better policy solutions are often absent from consultation processes. Common barriers to public meeting participation include transit fees, inaccessible or distant venues, and conflicting work or caregiving responsibilities. Online consultations may address some of these issues, but present other challenges as they require Internet access and technological literacy. Residents facing these barriers, or those who feel unwelcome in traditional public meeting environments, can be either unable or unwilling to devote the time and energy required to participate in consultations. Sometimes the most elaborate consultation processes can be the most inaccessible.

Cheryl Case noted that underserved communities have long been accustomed to being ignored, unaccommodated, and directly harmed by government planning decisions. This pattern dates back to the colonization of Indigenous lands, and continues through direct and systemic discrimination. An example is the use of zoning by-laws to restrict many residential dwellings solely to families, which continued in parts of the Greater Toronto Area until the 1980s. Case also cited indirect discrimination (including the failure to legalize rooming houses in certain parts of the city), and systemic discrimination (such as the persistent lack of representation in governance processes from lower-income groups). She sees the resulting impacts of this history in her own consultation work. She noted that while she was facilitating a recent session, local residents expressed to her their confusion and surprise at being asked to share their own visions for the future of their community. Their previous experience had led them to believe that government was not interested in their opinions.

We know that consultation processes that better reflect and respond to the diversity of local communities lead to more effective policies and plans. Meslin asked, “How can we understand the ways that privilege intersects with
consultation?" How can organizers make consultation processes more accessible, equitable, and representative, and thus more meaningful?

Theorist Nancy Fraser’s “parity of participation” framework for fostering inclusivity offers helpful guidance in seeking social justice in governance processes.²⁶ It calls for three elements: “representation, recognition, and redistribution.”

**Representation**

To diversify representation in consultation processes, John Robinson urged governments to dedicate resources to removing logistical barriers. Holding public meetings at convenient times and in accessible locations, and offering free food and childcare is necessary if organizers expect participants to dedicate energy to these processes.

Robinson shared a number of principles for effective consultation processes that he derived from his participatory research, one of which is that there should be “no net increase” in effort for participants. This means that organizers should recognize that residents lead busy and demanding lives, and that they are often asked by governments and community leaders to participate in decision-making processes. In an attempt to minimize this burden, organizers have a responsibility to seek out other ongoing initiatives that they can partner with to streamline engagement.

Additionally, organizers will reach more residents and encourage greater participation if they identify and communicate intersections between the agenda of the consultation process and the existing agendas of communities. “You need to speak to what people care about and want to do,” recommended Robinson. Augmenting in-person events with online opportunities and social media presence is important, but organizers must recognize the limitations of these tools. Robinson recommended what he calls a “bow tie” approach as it brings together both “high-tech” and “high-touch” strategies.

Nicole Swerhun agreed, noting that both in-person and remote participation models are useful, but they need to be tailored to specific communities and topics. Swerhun recalled an experience facilitating consultation sessions in Toronto’s Regent Park neighbourhood where a participant identified the strict start and end times of meetings as presenting cultural barriers for many participants. Understanding the unique expectations and needs of each community is vital in designing successful consultation processes.

**High-touch engagement in a post-pandemic world**

As Robinson and Swerhun noted, in-person or “high-touch” engagement is critical to consultation processes. However, this imperative looks different in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead of traditional large meetings and workshops, some local facilitators are hosting smaller virtual meetings that allow participants to make individual connections to organizers and their fellow participants. It is unclear how long physical distancing measures will continue and when (or if) communities will feel comfortable gathering in large groups again. This presents a challenge to facilitators to develop new and creative approaches that ensure safety and allow for meaningful engagement.

**Remunerating participants is an important step in addressing power differences, shows good will on behalf of the organizers, and can help to build stronger relationships between organizers and participants.**

**Recognition**

Lindsay Kretschmer argued that an important first step is for organizers to reflect on their own privilege, how that informs their assumptions and actions, and how it can be perceived by others, especially within underserved or racialized communities. “I encourage you to unlearn in order to relearn,” implored Kretschmer, to achieve a level of authenticity that will help to build relationships with community members. Kretschmer noted that to make audiences feel comfortable, representation must also be considered when organizers determine who presents, shares information, and answers questions during events.

**Redistribution**

Creating a more inclusive process also requires redistributing power to all participants – not just organizers or government representatives. Lindsay Kretschmer argued that redistribution should also include financial benefits. Kretschmer noted that organizers are paid for their time and expertise, yet unpaid participants dedicate a significant amount of time and offer immense value to the process.

Kretschmer specifically urged organizers to pay elders who are often invited to attend events, give remarks, and offer blessings. Although budgets for consultation can be limited, Kretschmer recommended that organizers prioritize this expense. Remunerating participants is an important step in addressing power differences, shows good will on behalf of the organizers, and can help to build stronger relationships.
between organizers and participants. “You can’t afford not to,” remarked Kretschmer.

Cheryll Case noted that all of the suggestions identified here fall under a human rights approach to planning. The central goal of this approach is to ensure that lower-income and marginalized residents are able to participate, collaborate, and lead in the creation and implementation of planning strategies.

**Principle #3: Share power and let communities lead**

Planning theorist John Friedmann wrote extensively on the many power relations with which planners, communities, and politicians must grapple. He argued that planners and others in leadership positions have ethical obligations to advocate on behalf of communities and advised that a strategy for upholding this responsibility is designing engagement processes that empower citizens.27 Friedman advocated for strong “relationships between planners, consultants, and participants, and the use of processes which facilitate personal, social, and political empowerment.”28

Power discrepancies can often be the root of conflict in decision making.29 Unfortunately, “power cannot be ‘removed’ from governance, notes Healey. “It comes into being in the active work of constituting identity and social relations in social contexts.” To minimize this conflict and build trust, Healey encourages organizers to rethink power as a relationship instead of an identity. She argues that reframing power is the first step in addressing its role within engagement processes.

“We can broaden our idea of power beyond ‘power to’ to also include ‘power as ‘ability’, the power to ‘make a difference’.30 Acknowledging differences in power and other intersecting identities that may impact engagement can help both organizers and participants navigate associated challenges, and provide opportunities to redistribute that power more equitably.31

Cheryll Case noted that when designing her consultation processes, she aims for them to fall within the “degrees of citizen power” rungs at the top end of Arnstein’s ladder of citizen participation. To achieve this, Case’s work is informed by a single overarching goal: “plan with the public, not for the public.”

Redistributing power requires recognizing the value that all participants bring to the table. “How do we combine expert knowledge of various kinds?” asked Robinson. Reflecting on his own experience in academia, he noted that researchers often view the world as a source of data to be collected and analyzed. This extractive approach leaves only the researchers in positions of power. To engage in more successful participatory research, academics need to become comfortable giving up some control.

Robinson encouraged researchers to work towards transdisciplinary co-production of knowledge, a model that involves academics from various fields as well as non-academics. Giving all participants power in collaboratively determining questions, methods, and approaches may be uncomfortable for some academics at first. However, Robinson argued that it can provide greater access to the knowledge and expertise within communities, allow for testing of ideas, help build stronger community relationships, and ultimately offer greater possibilities for the research to contribute to real-world outcomes.

Similarly, Kretschmer argued that in order to share power in a meaningful way, consultation organizers must be willing to step out of their comfort zones, show vulnerability, and explore unconventional approaches. “Colour outside the lines to think differently about how you are consulting,” she advised.

Kretschmer noted that, despite the challenges, current political and economic conditions provide exciting opportunities for power-sharing and the exploration of new consultation strategies. As governments increasingly download social responsibilities to the non-profit sector, coalitions like the Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council are called upon more frequently to lead consultation efforts. Although this can place additional financial and administrative burdens on these organizations, it also allows for consultation processes to be led by the participants who are most affected by the issues at hand. Participants are empowered to identify priorities, challenges, and opportunities, and self-determine outcomes. Kretschmer has observed that this level of community power over the process has encouraged higher levels of participation. Additionally, she argued that this approach yields more valuable results because it is the experts – those most familiar with the neighbourhoods and communities – who lead the decision-making process.

Other panellists agreed that processes that allow residents to lead conversations on the futures of their communities are more successful. Robinson suggested that a higher level of community empowerment can also be achieved within
consultation processes led by government. He encouraged organizers to find and collaborate with trusted intermediaries who are already active within their own communities.

Nicole Swerhun cited a successful example of this approach from her own consulting experience. While working with the Government of Ontario to produce the Roots of Youth Violence report in 2008, Swerhun connected with community service providers across the province to identify and hire community members to engage with local youth. The shared understanding between the intermediaries and youth allowed for more open and honest communications, which provided organizers with the information they needed to generate appropriate policy solutions.

Although the strategies identified here are useful, Robinson cautioned against assuming that governments either need to run their own consultation processes or explicitly empower non-profit organizations to do so in their place. Similarly, he argued that residents should not feel that approaching government with their ideas and concerns is the only course of action. “We don’t just need to think about getting the City to listen to us,” he noted. An alternative strategy is for communities to make their own decisions and act accordingly – an approach that many are already taking.

The strong tradition of grassroots community development shows us that engagement and action do not need to be tied to policy. Given the proven capacity of communities both to understand their own conditions and to effect change, Robinson argued that questions of how consultation can be improved should be expanded to recognize the power that already exists within communities. In addition to asking how government can encourage residents to participate, we should also ask how government can better engage with and support the work that communities are already doing.

Following advice from panellists on how power can be redistributed in consultation processes, an audience member raised an important question: is there a limit to power sharing? For example, is it wise to crowd-source public policy? Throughout the discussion, all panellists expressed a high level of trust in communities to make the best decisions for their unique conditions. However, Swerhun noted that organizers should always be aware of the potential tyranny of the majority. “If we accept that there are multiple public interests,” she noted, “then we have the burden of recognizing those multiple interests.” Any approach to policy making, including crowd-sourcing, needs to demonstrate how different views, needs, and desires have been considered, and clearly explain the rationale behind decisions made.

Principle #4: Communicate clearly and honestly
Once the structure of a consultation process is determined, panellists agreed that providing clear and truthful information is an important responsibility for organizers.

Planning theorist John Forester, author of the seminal 1988 book Planning in the Face of Power, wrote extensively on the power inherent in the production, framing, and dissemination of information. The management of information is important because it “can make that process more democratic or less, more technocratic or less, still more dominated by the established wielders of power or less so,” he argued.

With rapidly improving technology and increasing access to information, there are also heightened standards for transparency and responsiveness from government. Given this power and growing public expectations, consultation organizers must think carefully about best practices for sharing information openly and honestly.

Nicole Swerhun advised that organizers should begin by determining the issues that are on the table for discussion and the issues that are beyond the scope of the process. Making this information clear to all participants provides a framework within which conversations can remain relevant and work can remain productive. These limits can be challenging to determine and, at times, can be frustrating for participants whose agendas extend beyond the scope of a specific consultation.

An audience member mentioned a recent decision by Toronto City Council that allows staff to determine new locations for homeless shelters without first consulting neighbourhood residents. In response, many Torontonians have voiced dissatisfaction, expressing a desire to participate in these decisions. However, City staff have cited that the historically high levels of resident dissatisfaction with local shelter proposals make the prospect of garnering neighbourhood support for potential new locations virtually impossible, and have argued that not all government decision making should require community consent through consultation.

Panellists acknowledged the reality of these challenges, but agreed that more communication from the City could help address community resistance. Case advised that fears could be quelled by sharing information about the dire need for shelters and the community-wide consequences if new shelters are not established (which can include increased poverty, crime, and strain on health services).

Lindsay Kretschmer mentioned a recent and very divisive consultation she held to plan a new women’s healing lodge. Although during the consultation phase local residents expressed many concerns, she found that the project became more contentious after more information was shared. The reduction of fear continued as residents became more familiar with the Government of Ontario to produce the Roots of Youth Violence report in 2008, Swerhun connected with community service providers across the province to identify and hire community members to engage with local youth. The shared understanding between the intermediaries and youth allowed for more open and honest communications, which provided organizers with the information they needed to generate appropriate policy solutions.

Although the strategies identified here are useful, Robinson cautioned against assuming that governments either need to run their own consultation processes or explicitly empower non-profit organizations to do so in their place. Similarly, he argued that residents should not feel that approaching government with their ideas and concerns is the only course of action. “We don’t just need to think about getting the City to listen to us,” he noted. An alternative strategy is for communities to make their own decisions and act accordingly – an approach that many are already taking.

The strong tradition of grassroots community development shows us that engagement and action do not need to be tied to policy. Given the proven capacity of communities both to understand their own conditions and to effect change, Robinson argued that questions of how consultation can be improved should be expanded to recognize the power that already exists within communities. In addition to asking how government can encourage residents to participate, we should also ask how government can better engage with and support the work that communities are already doing.

Following advice from panellists on how power can be redistributed in consultation processes, an audience member raised an important question: is there a limit to power sharing? For example, is it wise to crowd-source public policy? Throughout the discussion, all panellists expressed a high level of trust in communities to make the best decisions for their unique conditions. However, Swerhun noted that organizers should always be aware of the potential tyranny of the majority. “If we accept that there are multiple public interests,” she noted, “then we have the burden of recognizing those multiple interests.” Any approach to policy making, including crowd-sourcing, needs to demonstrate how different views, needs, and desires have been considered, and clearly explain the rationale behind decisions made.

Principle #4: Communicate clearly and honestly
Once the structure of a consultation process is determined, panellists agreed that providing clear and truthful information is an important responsibility for organizers.

Planning theorist John Forester, author of the seminal 1988 book Planning in the Face of Power, wrote extensively on the power inherent in the production, framing, and dissemination of information. The management of information is important because it “can make that process more democratic or less, more technocratic or less, still more dominated by the established wielders of power or less so,” he argued.

With rapidly improving technology and increasing access to information, there are also heightened standards for transparency and responsiveness from government. Given this power and growing public expectations, consultation organizers must think carefully about best practices for sharing information openly and honestly.

Nicole Swerhun advised that organizers should begin by determining the issues that are on the table for discussion and the issues that are beyond the scope of the process. Making this information clear to all participants provides a framework within which conversations can remain relevant and work can remain productive. These limits can be challenging to determine and, at times, can be frustrating for participants whose agendas extend beyond the scope of a specific consultation.

An audience member mentioned a recent decision by Toronto City Council that allows staff to determine new locations for homeless shelters without first consulting neighbourhood residents. In response, many Torontonians have voiced dissatisfaction, expressing a desire to participate in these decisions. However, City staff have cited that the historically high levels of resident dissatisfaction with local shelter proposals make the prospect of garnering neighbourhood support for potential new locations virtually impossible, and have argued that not all government decision making should require community consent through consultation.

Panellists acknowledged the reality of these challenges, but agreed that more communication from the City could help address community resistance. Case advised that fears could be quelled by sharing information about the dire need for shelters and the community-wide consequences if new shelters are not established (which can include increased poverty, crime, and strain on health services).

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resistance at first and then, post-completion, receiving very few complaints.

She suggested that the City begin gathering community reactions to shelters after their construction and asking residents to reflect on how their opinions changed throughout the course of development. These stories could then be shared in future consultation processes for new shelters. In addition to shelter initiatives, presenting information that helps participants learn from the similar experiences of other communities can be a useful strategy in many consultation processes.

Swerhun offered advice on how consultation organizers can help participants develop a collective mindset when making decisions. She encouraged organizers to design processes that allow participants to generate deeper understandings of the experiences of their neighbours. This requires fostering an environment that is respectful and welcoming so that participants feel safe and confident in sharing their opinions. Similarly, she noted, organizers must be prepared to respect the opinions of participants, even if they are in opposition to the policies or mandates of the project.

Sharing information may not always change opinions or behaviour, cautioned Robinson, but it is still an important part of the process. Digestible information that is tailored to the audience can help to bridge knowledge gaps between organizers and stakeholders. Case also urged organizers to avoid professional jargon and to prepare materials and presentations using clear and concise language: “The language of the practice should be accessible to everybody.”

Principle #5: Record feedback and take action

Beyond sharing information, the manner in which feedback is recorded during consultations and how that information is interpreted is a vital consideration for organizers. In speaking of the benefits of a communicative approach to planning, Healey encouraged organizers to focus on the process of consultation rather than a desired end result. Instead of a pre-determined plan or policy, Healey argues that the final product of a communicative process should be conceptualized as “a way of acting which we can choose, after debate.” This prioritization of process over product has been criticized by scholars and practitioners for being impractical, but panellists reinforced elements of this approach by agreeing that a consultation process is only meaningful if participants have a real opportunity to affect decisions.

Robinson identified another principle for consultation processes stemming from his participatory research that is relevant to this discussion: there must be “mutual benefits” to all involved. Organizers and governments benefit greatly from consultation processes as they offer opportunities to share information and gather feedback from residents that help improve their own work. However, he noted, this advantage can often be one-sided. Residents devote a significant amount of time and energy to these processes and may not reap similar benefits. Organizers should be conscious of this pattern and design consultation processes that are beneficial to participants. Case agreed: “It is important to ask yourself if participants are going to take the time to attend, what benefit will they get? Will the organizers listen?”

Kretschmer noted that consultations do not always result in change for various political, economic, and logistical reasons. Additionally, the expectations of participants may diverge widely from the reality of eventual outcomes. Both of these circumstances risk straining relationships between organizers and participants, as participants are led to believe they did not benefit from the process they engaged with. Kretschmer joked that she collects “strategy” documents that have not been implemented. Consultation processes are not valuable unless “we can move from the collection of information to action,” she noted.

Swerhun advised that governments have a duty either to act on the advice they receive from consultation processes or to explain clearly why they have chosen not to implement that advice. Even when governments decide not to heed the advice of the public, the documentation of that advice remains important and the record should be accessible. Communicating this information requires governments to be transparent about the many factors that affect decision-making, including and in addition to public consultation.

Swerhun reflected on a recent project that demonstrates the importance of recording community feedback and responding to that information. The Toronto District School Board led an eight-month initiative to consult the public on the potential closure of over 70 pools. Participants clearly communicated that they did not support the closures, the information was provided to the School Board, and ultimately more than 60 pools remained open.

Recording feedback gathered through consultation and sharing that information with organizers and participants is important in maintaining fair and transparent processes and in building trust between organizers and communities.
Knowing that organizers have listened to and accurately understood participant input offers participants greater confidence in their contributions and confers an important degree of legitimacy on the process.

**Conclusion**

Designing meaningful consultation processes with the potential to lead to real change has long been a challenge for organizers, but even more so in the current environment of increased political polarization and declining trust in public institutions. Planning scholar Vanessa Watson warns that a climate of growing inequality and what she calls “deepening difference” presents new challenges for collaborative processes. To address this issue, Watson encourages organizers to position questions of value at the centre of decision-making processes. “The aim of deliberative democracy in this formulation is to arrive at new kinds of knowledge(s) or wisdom drawn from a range of situated perspectives,” she argues.57

Our panelists agreed, noting that to achieve meaningful consultation, organizers and participants need to enter into the process with a commitment to learning; value one another’s experiences; share knowledge and power; and translate information into action. This paper has summarized the following five principles presented by panelists for achieving more meaningful consultation processes:

1. **Build trust** between government and communities, and between neighbours

2. **Recognize privilege and its impacts on decision making,** and address inequities by making every effort to design more inclusive consultation processes

3. **Share power and let communities lead,** including reformulating concepts of power and recognizing the expertise and knowledge that communities hold

4. **Communicate clearly and honestly,** recognizing the power inherent in determining and sharing information

5. **Record feedback and take action** to build trust, legitimize the process, and ensure mutual benefit for participants and organizers

The City of Toronto Official Plan envisions a future city where “individuals and communities actively participate in decisions affecting them.” The document goes on to plan for “the participation of all segments and sectors of the City.”38 Similarly, the Toronto City Planning Strategic Plan seeks “broader, more meaningful engagement within and outside City Hall to respond to the pace and complexity of change in the city.”39

The principles listed above will help achieve these visions. But, as Cheryl Case noted, implementing any of them first requires a desire to support collective well-being. “How can we best use this land to support our community?” should be a guiding question for every planning consultation process, Case suggested. The question of how to support our community can also guide policy making and a broad range of decision-making processes.

It is hoped that the insights presented in this paper will help improve consultation processes and support a transition to more inclusive governance. This model, explained John Robinson, will lead to policies that more effectively address the many different conditions, opportunities, and challenges of our growing and diversifying urban neighbourhoods and support the long-term health and vitality of our communities.

**Endnotes**


Engagement to Action: Improving Policy Outcomes Through Better Consultation


15. Healey, “Collaborative planning in perspective.”


17. Toronto City Planning, *Youth Engagement Strategy*.


27. Friedmann, “Planning in the public domain: Discourse and praxis.”


35. Innes and Booher, “Reframing public participation.”

36. Healey, “Planning through debate.”


