Towards Inclusive Community Engagement: Engaging Marginalized Residents in the Urban Planning Process

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Graduate Department of Geography and Planning

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Abstract
The increasing diversity of Canadian communities presents a challenge to municipalities as planners are called upon to lead inclusive public engagement programs. This thesis identifies current engagement tools developed by Ontario municipalities to increase the diversity of citizen participation in urban planning processes, and evaluates how well they are implemented in practice. An online review of policies from twelve municipalities was conducted, followed by interviews with staff representing four municipalities. The research findings demonstrate that traditional engagement mechanisms, such as public meetings, are still commonly used by municipalities; however, planners are increasingly expanding their engagement toolbox in order to remove barriers to participation, and in turn reach an audience that more accurately reflects the population. The extent to which these modern engagement tools are resulting in processes and outcomes that are more inclusive and representative of the community is difficult to determine because most municipalities do not yet track participant demographics.
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Chapter 1

1 Introduction

The increasing diversity of Canadian communities presents a challenge to municipalities as planners are called upon to lead inclusive public engagement programs. This research project identifies the current engagement tools used by municipalities in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area to increase the diversity of citizen participation in urban planning processes, and evaluates how successful these tools are when implemented. As outlined by Shipley and Utz (2012), there is a need for more research connecting the theories about inclusive public engagement with the actual practice. This thesis contributes to the emerging discourse on engagement, diversity and inclusion in the context of Canadian planning processes.

1.1 Cities of Difference

In 1998, geographers Ruth Fincher and Jane Jacobs presented the argument that we live in ‘cities of difference’. Almost 20 years later and this statement could not be truer. Canadian cities are ‘cities of differences’ in that they are home to individuals with diverse identities. These differences include: race, ethnicity, culture, gender, class, stage in the life cycle, and sexual preference (among several others). Canadian cities have always been made up of individuals that are distinct and different; however, increasing numbers of racial and ethnic minorities are being drawn to Canadian urban centres (Teelucksingh, 2006). In 2011, nearly one-fifth (19.1%) of Canada’s total population identified themselves as a member of a visible minority group (Statistics Canada, 2013). This is the highest proportion of all G8 countries. In Ontario, over one-quarter (25.9%) of the population belongs to a visible minority group, and in urban areas, such as the City of Toronto, this proportion increases to almost 1 in 2 (49.1%) individuals (Statistics Canada, 2013). The 2011 National House Survey found that Canadian immigrants reported more than 200 ethnic origins, and of these, 13 ethnic origins had more than 1-million individuals report them as their birth place (Statistics Canada, 2013).

1.2 Planning and Diversity

This thesis explores how the increasing diversity of Ontario cities is reflected, or not reflected, in urban planning processes. As Canadian communities continue to grow and diversify, planners
are tasked with the challenge of “managing our co-existence in cities of difference” (Sandercock, 2000, p.13). Planners are increasingly being called upon to respond to the changing demography of the city and to lead public engagement programs that are inclusive of people on the basis of their ethnicity, gender, age, ability, and income (Goonewardena, Rankin & Weinstock, 2004). Public engagement is a required part of the urban planning process as outlined in the 1990 Ontario Planning Act to ensure residents and stakeholders have the opportunity to comment on decisions that may affect them (Ontario., & Canada Law Book Inc, 1992). When undertaking a planning project in a diverse city, it can be assumed that individuals differentiated by ethnicity, age, gender, income, sexual preference, etc., will have different needs, concerns and claims on the built environment (Sandercock, 2000). Therefore, when the attendance at public engagement events is not reflective of the demographic make-up of the city, it can be concluded that the subsequent planning outcome is not representative of diverse resident needs.

The term diversity has two primary meanings in planning and urban design: 1) a variety of physical structures and 2) a mix of land uses. More recently, diversity in the context of planning is also used to describe ethnic and class heterogeneity (Fainstein, 2005). Diversity – referring to both physical variation and social heterogeneity – is now a cornerstone of all planning projects; it has become the latest “orthodoxy of city planning” (Fainstein, 2005). Several scholars have critiqued the use of diversity terminology in policy and planning, especially the practice of celebrating diversity (Fainstein, 2005; Viswanathan, 2009; Ahmed, 2012; Puwar, 2004; Pitter, 2016). As outlined by Leela Viswanathan (2009), the term diversity can negate gender, ethnicity, class, ability and sexuality differences (to name a few) and instead work to sustain the status quo. Nirmal Puwar (2004) critiques society’s embrace of diversity as the “holy mantra”. Diversity is celebrated in municipal and institutional policy, yet the use of the term in planning and policy does not equate to action of redistributive justice (Deem & Ozga, 1997). Sarah Ahmed (2012) suggests that the use of the term diversity has resulted in the departure of other more critical terms, such as “equality” and “social justice”. In response to this criticism, some city-builders in North America and Europe have started to use the term “hyper-diversity” to avoid the oversimplification of diversity and identity politics. Hyper-diversity describes the “diversification of the population in socio-economic, social and ethnic terms” as well as in terms of people’s lifestyles, attitudes and activities (Pitter, 2016, p. 8).
For the purposes of this research, diversity is used as a term to describe differences. The term is used to describe a population of individuals representing different ethnicities, economic classes, ages, genders, sexual preferences and physical and mental abilities. ‘Diversity’ is not used to mean ‘other’ or ‘non-white’.

1.3 Research Objectives

The objective of this thesis is to identify engagement principles and tools developed by Ontario municipalities to increase the diversity of citizen participation in urban planning processes, and assess how well they are implemented in practice. The topic of this research project is a result of my interest in community engagement and social equality. In my own experience working at a community engagement firm, I observed that municipalities tend to emphasize the importance of engagement reach, without specifying diversity targets. Since engagement reach is typically presented as a total number, it is difficult to evaluate if the engagement program was representative of the community. This research project is designed to highlight this failure of planning and explore the ways in which municipalities in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA) are addressing a lack of diversity in public engagement processes.

This thesis will provide a record of current practices, and explore the gaps between design and implementation by answering the following questions:

1. How are municipalities in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area addressing a lack of diversity in public engagement processes?

2. To what extent are inclusive engagement programs increasing diversity of participation in practice?

To answer these questions, qualitative interviews were held with staff from four municipalities located within the GTHA: the Town of Ajax, the City of Burlington, the City of Hamilton, and the City of Toronto. These four municipalities were selected following an online review of municipal policies which found that they have demonstrated a commitment to integrating principles of equity and diversity in their planning practices. This thesis will highlight best practices as it relates to the various tools and approaches used by these municipalities to increase participant diversity and address representation inequalities.
1.4 Significance of the Research

The connection between inclusive public engagement and good community planning is widely recognized (Glass, 1979; Roberts, 2004; Mahjabeen, Shrestha, & Dee, 2009). Planning scholars and theorists have identified a number of engagement mechanisms and strategies to encourage public participation and collaboration (Rowe and Frewer, 2005; Shipley and Utz, 2012; Glass, 1979); however, not much of the literature outlines how effective these engagement tools are at reaching a diversity of community members. This thesis intends to fill this gap by connecting the theories about inclusive public engagement with the actual practice. The research will give insight into whether municipalities in the GTHA are adapting their planning processes to include engagement mechanisms that attract a diversity of residents, and assess how well they are implemented in practice.

1.5 Outline of Thesis

This thesis is presented in five chapters. This first chapter introduces the thesis project, outlining the research objectives and framing the significance of the project in relation to addressing gaps in the existing literature. The term diversity, and the failure of the planning profession to keep up with changing cities, is discussed.

Chapter 2, Literature Review, provides context for the research. Relevant literature on planning, community engagement, diversity and equity is reviewed. The chapter introduces public engagement in the context of community planning, defines the spectrum of engagement, and presents the argument that successful community planning is a result of good public engagement. Chapter 2 concludes with a discussion on traditional public engagement methods and the planning professions’ tendency to emphasize equality, over equity.

Chapter 3, Method and Approach, details the research methods used for this project, including descriptions of how data was collected and analyzed. This chapter describes the participant selection and recruitment process, the interview format, and methods used to ensure validity and rigour in the research.

Chapter 4, Research Findings, presents the results from the online review of municipal policies and interviews. Illustrative quotes are used throughout this chapter to maintain accuracy and authenticity with regards to the wording chosen by participants as they answered questions.
Chapter 5, Discussion and Conclusion, is the concluding chapter of this thesis. This chapter outlines a summary of the project’s key findings in relation to the research objectives laid out in this introductory chapter, the literature discussed in Chapter 2 and the research findings presented in Chapter 4. Limitations of the project and future directions for research are also outlined.
Chapter 2

2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Civic engagement is recognized as a key tenant of modern-day democracy (Shipley & Utz, 2012; Head, 2007). The right of individuals to be informed, to be consulted, and to have the opportunity to express their views – either by voting or providing written or oral comments – on government decisions is largely accepted as central to the democratic process (Brody, Godschalk, & Burby, 2003; Carpenter & Brownill, 2008; Roberts, 2004). This ‘right to participation’ has since infiltrated into several areas of local governance, including community planning which seeks to “manage our co-existence in shared space” (Healey, 1997, p. 3). The focus of community planning has historically been on managing the physical environment; often with little consideration for the people the land and physical structures serve (Davidoff, 1965).

The inclusion of public participation, and consequently public opinion and criticism, in the process of community planning is in theory contributing to better planning outcomes (Hodge & Gordon, 2008; Brody, Godschalk, & Burby, 2003; Fainstein, 2014), more engaged citizens (Lawson & Kearns, 2010) and enhanced equity (Innes & Booher, 2004; Mahjabeen, Shrestha & Dee, 2009). In practice, however, it has been difficult to prove this statement true (Shipley & Utz, 2012; Chess & Purcell, 1999). Are current engagement processes contributing to stronger policies, strategies and plans that are representative of their diverse communities? Do citizens have a say in how their communities are planned? Are current engagement opportunities inclusive, accessible and conducive to reaching all stakeholders? There is little evidence available to demonstrate the extent to which community engagement influences planning outcomes, or how the process benefits engaged citizens (Lawson & Kearns, 2010).

Most planners and public officials do believe in democracy, and therefore the idea of working with citizens and stakeholders to plan and grow their communities is appealing (Brody, Godschalk, & Burby, 2003). However, the level and type of engagement varies widely across municipalities and even departments within one level of government (Head, 2007). Moreover, these different approaches to community engagement are seldom evaluated for their
inclusiveness. As outlined by Shipley and Utz (2012), there is a need for more research connecting the theories about inclusive public engagement to the actual practice.

This chapter will provide an overview of the complex and interconnected relationship between community planning, public engagement and diverse communities. A comprehensive review of the relevant literature on public engagement will be presented to provide the context for this research. The chapter is divided into four main sections. The first section outlines how public engagement emerged as an important and legislated part of community planning. The second section defines public participation/engagement, highlighting that engagement exists on a spectrum with no agreed-upon criteria for evaluating a “successful” engagement program. The third section presents the argument that “successful community planning is a function of good public engagement”. Several of the benefits associated with public and stakeholder engagement are outlined in this section. The fourth section examines the ways in which traditional public engagement methods emphasize equality, over equity.

2.2 The Emergence of Public Engagement in Community Planning

Public engagement has been recognized as an important part of community planning since the 1960s (Arnstein, 1969; Day, 1997; Forester, 1994; Brody, Godschalk, & Burby, 2003); however, engagement did not enter the main stream of planning practice in Ontario until the 1980s when assumptions about what planning is and how it should be done were challenged. The “rational comprehensive model” was the dominant model for planning in the 1960s. This model saw the planner as a technical expert undertaking an exercise in applied science. There was little to no consultation with citizens the land was being planned for. Local planning activists like Jane Jacobs (1961), advocacy scholars like Paul Davidoff (1965), and communicative planning theorists like Patsy Healey (1992) criticized the rational planning model for being exclusive and predominately dependent on the planners’ technical opinion. This model was criticized for fostering uneven power dynamics. As argued by Flyvbjerg (1998), power defines what constitutes knowledge and rationality. Thus, when a planner or politician is regarded as the technical expert, they have the power to decide what is rational, what is right, and what is wrong. Technical expertise under this model is “used as rationalization of policy, of rationality as the legitimation of power” (Flyvbjerg, 1998, p.26). Activism around these critiques resulted in the
collapse of a single planning model, and changes to planning legislation in Ontario in 1983 that saw public consultation become a legal requirement (Shipley & Utz, 2012).

A single, unifying model of planning did not emerge as the field shifted away from the rational model; however, several new approaches and strategies were suggested (Lane, 2005). These new approaches – transactive, advocacy, Marxist, bargaining and communicative accounts of planning – differed in their theoretical explanation, but shared a common goal of overcoming the many criticisms associated with the rational model (Filion, Shipley, & Te, 2007; Lane, 2005). Several planning tendencies emerged through this era of “theoretical pluralism”, specifically as related to public participation (Lane, 2005). First, all contemporary models recognize that planning is political in nature and thus demands an active role for the public (Friedmann, 1994; Brooks, 2002). Second, there is a shared assumption that interests of individual stakeholders are varied and often contradictory; a unitary public interest does not exist (Davidoff, 1965; Lane, 2005). Lastly, all models of planning in this contemporary era view participation as a fundamental component of planning and decision-making. Planners are regarded as facilitators and mediators; not isolated experts (Lane, 2005). This shift in thinking about what planning is, how it is done, and what role the planner has, resulted in changes to planning legislation, including the requirement to consult with the public on planning matters.

Mandates for public participation are intended to increase local governments commitment to democratic practices, specifically as it pertains to increasing the diversity of interests represented in the decision-making process (Brody, Godschalk, & Burby, 2003). Public consultation requirements are detailed in the Ontario Planning Act, and the importance of public participation is outlined in the codes of ethical practices of professional planning associations, including the Canadian Institute of Planners (CIP), Ontario Professional Planners Institute (OPPI), and American Institute of Certified Planners. For example, the Canadian Institute of Planners (2016) outlines that the planner has a primary obligation to “define and serve the interests of the public”. Section 1.4 of the Code of Professional Conduct goes on to state that the planner must:

“Provide opportunities for meaningful participation and education in the planning process to all interested parties.”
Similarly, the American Institute of Certified Planners (2016) Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct states that:

“We shall give people the opportunity to have a meaningful impact on the development of plans and programs that may affect them. Participation should be broad enough to include those who lack formal organization or influence.”

It is evident from the above noted planning legislation and professional codes of ethical practice in Canada and the United States, that involving the public in planning decisions is encompassed within the role of the community planner. What is less clear, however, is what this process looks like in practice, who is represented by this process, how processes are evaluated for inclusiveness, and the degree to which public opinion ultimately influences the plans, strategies and decisions put forward by municipalities. Shipley and Utz (2012) succinctly articulated this when they wrote that “good intentions alone are not enough” (p.22).

2.3 Defining Public Engagement

The term “public engagement” or “public participation” remains a contested concept in the field of community planning and is without a precise definition (Rowe & Frewer, 2005; Day, 1997). In 1969, Sherry Arnstein defined citizen participation as “the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic process, to be deliberately included in the future” (p. 216). Although dated, Arnsteins’ definition reminds us why citizen participation was originally introduced: to give those without power a voice. Forty years ago, Arnstein attempted to differentiate between the various levels of public participation – non-participation, tokenism and citizen empowerment – and yet still today there remains uncertainty about what public participation entails. As depicted in Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation (Figure 1), citizen participation occurs on a spectrum. Instead of referring to a specific action or anticipated outcome, citizen participation, in her analysis, is a categorical term for citizen power (Arnstein, 1969). Therefore, citizen/public engagement encompasses ‘informing’, ‘educating’, and ‘consulting’ with citizens, just as it does ‘partnering with’ and ‘empowering’ them.
A modern definition of public participation as presented by Rowe and Frewer (2005) is “the practice of involving members of the public in the agenda-setting, decision-making, and policy-forming activities of organizations/ institutions responsible for policy development” (p. 253). Rowe and Frewer (2005) acknowledge that this broad definition provides some uncertainty about what is meant by the term “involve”. The scholar, planning practitioner and policy-maker are once again left to interpret the appropriate level of citizen involvement. For example, some public participation is intended solely to inform or consult with the community (one-way communication), while other participation programs are designed to collaborate with and empower the public (two-way communication).

The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2), a prominent international organization advancing the practice of public participation, sees public participation as the process of providing those who are affected by a decision “with the information they need to be
involved in a meaningful way, and it communicates to participants how their input affects the
decision” (IAP2). Unlike the other two definitions, this one includes the expectation that
participants will be informed on how their feedback will be integrated into the decision-making
process. This is an interesting distinction, as there is a new onus on the planner to communicate
both the why and the how of community engagement. Planners must think through and explain
why they are engaging with stakeholders and how they will use the input they receive in the
decision-making process. This definition also highlights the role planners have in preparing
citizens so they can actively participate. Not everyone is coming to the conversation with the
same information or level of understanding, so it is critical that the engagement program
provides an opportunity for learning and developing a shared understanding of the project before
asking for feedback.

Similar to Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participant, the IAP2 offers a Public Participation
Spectrum, ranging from “inform” to “empower” (Figure 2). The title of this table as a
“spectrum” is significant because the IAP2 is communicating to the user that “inform” is the
lowest level of engagement, while “empower” is the highest level. This table outlines what the
promise to the public from the host organizations is under each “level” of participation.

Figure 2. IAP2’s Public Participation Spectrum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL</th>
<th>INFORM</th>
<th>CONSULT</th>
<th>INVOLVE</th>
<th>COLLABORATE</th>
<th>EMPOWER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC</td>
<td>To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives and/or solutions.</td>
<td>To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decision.</td>
<td>To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.</td>
<td>To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.</td>
<td>To place final decision-making in the hands of the public.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We will keep you informed.

We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.

We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.

We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.

We will implement what you decide.

(IAP2, 2014)
IAP2’s definition of public participation provides more direction to planners on what genuine and good public participation looks like, but there remains uncertainty about what the expected level of citizen involvement and/or control is in community planning at the municipal level. This lack of clarity has resulted in the design and implementation of a wide variety of public engagement tools – some intended to solely ‘inform’ or ‘consult’ with stakeholders, while others focus on building partnerships and enhancing citizen control. Although mandated in planning legislation, it is unclear both in theory and practice what authentic public engagement entails. There is no consensus about what public engagement is supposed to accomplish (Day, 1997; Glass, 1979). What level of public engagement is needed for planning decisions to really be influenced by the engagement process? What type of engagement should be implemented to ensure both the process and outcome are reflective of the needs and wants of the diverse residents living, working and playing in the community? In planning practice, evaluating the effectiveness of the consultation process is often reduced to simply going through the motions and checking a box to indicate that some form of public participation has taken place (Klein, 1993). There are no standard tools for the planner or political body to use to measure how participation impacted, or failed to impact, the outcome (Shipley & Utz, 2012; McComas, 2001). This, is in part, a result of there being several community engagement tools and practices employed by planners and government officials across the field (Head, 2007). Table 1 lists some of the engagement tools commonly used in North America.

### Table 1. List of Community Engagement Tools

- Public meetings
- Open houses
- Citizen juries/committees
- Focus groups
- Stakeholder interviews
- Design charrettes
- Scenario workshops
- Visioning symposiums
- Pop-ups/Planners on Duty/Planners in Public Spaces/etc.
- Online surveys
- Municipal websites
- Social media
- Telephone surveys
- Telephone town halls

(Rowe & Frewer, 2005; Shipley & Utz, 2012; Glass, 1979)

After a review of the literature on public participation, Katherine McComas (2001) concludes that there is no agreed-upon criteria for evaluating the success of a public engagement program; however, the literature presents several possible criteria for measuring success. Table 2 (drawn from McComas, 2001) lists evaluation criteria under two headings: process-oriented and
outcome-oriented. The former measures an engagement program’s success against implementation, while the latter evaluates success against the results of the engagement effort (Chess & Purcell, 1999). McComas (2001) outlines that most of the literature on public meetings focuses on evaluating “process-oriented” criteria, such as whether the process was fair and representative. Less research has focused on connecting process to outcome. For this reason, it is unclear if successful processes always lead to successful outcomes (McComas, 2001).

Table 2. Evaluation Criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Process-oriented criteria</th>
<th>Outcome-oriented criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How many people participated?</td>
<td>Were participant comments relevant?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many people provided feedback (verbal, written, etc.)?</td>
<td>Did participant comments influence the decision?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How fair was the process?</td>
<td>Were participants satisfied with the process?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did participants represent a broader community?</td>
<td>Did relationships between participants and the agencies improve (e.g., was trust built)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How well was the event publicized?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did dialogue occur?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(McComas, 2001)

Shipley and Utz (2012) also discuss the lack of evaluation standards and guidance in the planning profession, pointing out the several attempts that have been made to evaluate the success of a public engagement exercise. They outline an increasing trend among researchers to study and evaluate the effectiveness of various approaches to engagement in order to improve public engagement in practice. Some of the evaluation questions asked most often in practice, include:

1. Are people better informed about projects and their impacts as a result of the public participation activity?
2. Were all major interest groups adequately represented and did their ideas and opinions make any difference on project outcomes?
3. Were traditionally underrepresented groups brought into the process and did their opinion matter?
4. Did the elected and appointed leadership respond to the input received from the public and did it make a difference in their decision making?
5. Was an acceptable compromise reached among competing interest groups leading to broad support for the final decisions? (Shipley & Utz, 2012)
Of particular interest to this research is evaluation question 3. This question suggests that effective public participation seeks equitable community representation, instead of simply having an “open door” policy where everyone is welcome. This criterion relates back to Arnstein’s view that citizen participation involves the redistributed of power in order to empower have-not citizens. Unfortunately, as indicated above, no evaluation criteria is mandated through legislation, and therefore this question, and others like it, are not always asked during evaluation.

2.4 Successful Community Planning is a Function of Good Public Engagement

Although there is no single definition for public engagement, many planning scholars, theorists and practitioners argue that successful community planning and good public engagement go hand-in-hand (Arnstein, 1969; Glass, 1979; Burby, 2003; Roberts, 2004; Mahjabeen, Shrestha & Dee, 2009). Frisken and Homenuck (1972) actually define community planning as “the process by which the residents develop a sense of community and a measure of control over their local government” (p.1). According to this definition, community planning is a process that results in enhanced citizen control and influence. Similarly, Hodge and Gordon (2008) recognize participation as being central to the field: “the effectiveness of planning in a community, in the end, is more a function of the participation in planning decisions than any other factors” (p. 299).

Raymond J. Burby (2003) undertook a study that explored 60 plan-making processes in Florida and Washington to answer two questions: 1) does broader stakeholder involvement lead to stronger plans; and 2) do broader stakeholder involvement and stronger plans lead to higher rates of implementation of proposals made in plans? Burby (2003) concludes that strong plans come from planning processes with greater stakeholder involvement. He adds that the goals, objectives and action items listed in plans are more likely to be implemented when stakeholders were actively engaged in the plan-making process. Brody, Godschalk, & Burby (2003) suggest that most planners accept the correlation between citizen participation and the production of the most enduring plans and strategies. The common theme here, and running through much of the planning literature, is that there is an intrinsic value associated with citizen participation that goes beyond meeting minimum legal requirements.

For many planning practitioners and scholars there are several reasons to engage with stakeholders. First, public consultation provides planners with the opportunity to hear from local
stakeholders on their interests, needs and concerns. Planning decisions can significantly affect the lives of large numbers of individuals and groups (Taylor, 1998). On-going citizen participation provides planners with more complete and accurate information about community needs and conditions (Day, 1997). Although planners are the technical experts, they are tasked with making decisions that are in the public’s best interest (Brooks, 2002); an impossible goal given the diversity of cities. Leonie Sandercock (1998) outlines that the increasing diversity of cities requires a transition from the ‘public interest’ to ‘multiple publics’. In a city or town home to a diversity of both residents and other stakeholders, determining what the shared – and diverging – interests of the community are is impossible to do without collecting community input (Davidoff, 1965). To attain a comprehensive understanding of the wants and needs of a community, planners must provide opportunities for residents and stakeholders to share their experiences. This process is often a difficult and contentious one, but it is argued that the subsequent outcome is more effective and tailored to the local community (Brody, Godschalk, & Burby, 2003).

It is also argued that planning decisions are improved when the local knowledge and values held by citizens, business-owners and local organizations are integrated with planning expertise (Innes & Booher, 2004; Lawson & Kearns, 2010). As defined by Clifford Geertz (1983), local knowledge is “practical, collective and strongly rooted in a particular place” (p.75). Local knowledge does not have a technical or empirical origin, but instead pertains to information about the characteristics, circumstances and relationships of a local context (Corburn, 2003). The individuals that live and work in a community often have a better understanding of the neighbourhood character, community assets, and areas for improvement than government officials. As asserted by Edmund Burke (1979), citizens are an important source of knowledge and collective wisdom. The most powerful form of knowledge recognizes both local and scientific knowledge as valuable (Innes & Booher, 2004). This collaborative way of planning is increasingly important as governments continue to grow, and consequently become more distant from the local neighbourhoods and the people that make up those areas (Innes & Booher, 2004). Integrating local knowledge can help to uncover gaps in expert assumptions and provide the opportunity for planners to expand their understanding of local problems, practices and behaviours (Corburn, 2003; Burby, 2003). The flow of information and ideas between planners
and local stakeholder’s results in policies, plans and strategies that are better designed to address local circumstances (Burby, 2003).

Community engagement is furthermore said to increase the legitimacy of government decisions; often regardless of outcome (Innes & Booher, 2004). If several opportunities for public comment are provided, it can be concluded at the end of the process that “everyone who wanted to had a chance to say his/her piece” (Innes & Booher, 2004, p.423). Residents and stakeholders are more likely to respect government decisions if they feel that they were provided with the opportunity to share their opinions. The objective of public participation under this school of thought is to increase the public’s trust and confidence in government, often to prevent criticism and increase the likelihood that stakeholders will accept decisions and plans (Crenson, 1974; Head, 2007). Nelson and Wright (1995) critique this rationale for hosting public engagement opportunities, arguing that community groups and stakeholders must be given sufficient power in order to influence decisions in a meaningful way.

In addition, citizen participation has been linked to increased social capital (Head, 2007; Woolcock, 1998). Social capital refers to “the social networks maintained by individuals and within communities, including ties to family, friends, neighbours, local businesses and co-workers, and the norms of reciprocity and trust which arise from them” (Putnam, 2000, p.19). Social capital has been linked to several individual and community benefits, including: economic growth, skill enhancement, increased civic participation and enhanced community well-being (Woolcock, 2001). Community engagement provides local citizens with the opportunity to increase their social capital by building local networks that they need to advance their interests, or overcome barriers, such as social exclusion (Lawsons & Kearns, 2010). Face-to-face interaction between neighbours and community members fosters trust, collaboration, cooperation and “social norms of tolerance” (Longford, 2005, p.5). The existence of social capital is said to be an enabling factor for individuals to participate and use their individual agency for the benefit of their community (Ling & Dale, 2014). When affected stakeholders are involved in the identification of local problems and the development of solutions, they are empowered by the feeling that they have influence (Lawson & Kearns, 2010). This sense of empowerment and skills enhancement, coupled with increased social capital, can help to eliminate barriers to action.
Lastly, genuine public consultation is seen as a way to advance social and urban justice (Innes & Booher, 2004). The purpose of inclusion under this school of thought is to have diverse interests fairly represented in decision-making processes and subsequent planning outcomes. Inclusive participation is not valued in and of itself (Fainstein, 2014). Working with the public to arrive at fair plans that are representative of the needs and wants of the community is a critical component of the planning process (Brody, Godschalk, & Burby, 2003; Mahjabeen, Shrestha & Dee, 2009). To achieve equitable and fair plans, the voices of systematically marginalized individuals must be heard. The preferences, needs and concerns of the least advantaged have not traditionally been recognized (Mahjabeen, Shrestha & Dee, 2009). As such, some government officials advance public participation because they believe that the people should be involved in identifying and addressing the issues that directly affect them (Head, 2007).

2.5 Traditional Public Engagement Methods Emphasize Equality, not Equity

Until recently, planners paid very little attention to the tensions and issues that arose as a result of community diversity in their practical work (Wallace, 1997). The involvement of people in planning on the basis of ethnicity, gender, age, ability and/or income class was all but ignored (Wallace, 1997). The field of planning has historically failed to keep up with and respond to the changing demography of the city (Sandercock, 2000; Goonewardena, Rankin & Weinstock, 2004). Critics of urban planning have argued that planners primarily serve the interests of English-speaking homeowners, organized businesses and real estate developers (Metzher, 1996). Others argue that planners do not intentionally exclude stakeholders, but instead treat everyone identically (Milroy, 2004). It is assumed that all residents are equally prepared and motivated to participate in the types of planning activities offered (Day, 2003; Wallace & Milroy, 1999; Beall, 1996). This ‘equality’ approach to planning is problematic, as argued by Day (1997), because most residents do not participate in community planning conversations. Instead, the conversation is usually had between planners, politicians, concerned businesspeople, developers and middle-to-upper class citizens who are well educated and ideologically motivated to do so (Day, 1997).

Equality-based planning assumes that people will participate if they are provided with the opportunity (Day, 1997; Grant, 1994). In reality, however, there are several barriers to participation, including but not limited to: economic barriers, physical barriers and social
barriers. First, attending a planning meeting, or even participating virtually through an online portal, is a decision that citizens make only after they have met and provided the essentials of their lives (Iannaccone & Everton, 2004). Community planning projects are typically not regarded as life or death decisions, and for that reason, participation is a luxury that many citizens can’t prioritize without additional support or accommodations. Second, physical barriers, such as accessibility barriers, prevent or limit access to space. For example, a meeting space may have no ramp, a broken elevator, or may not be accessible by transit. Third, the perception of the environment (Frideres, 1997) or the perceived “whiteness” of a space (Ahmed, 2012) influences a person’s decision to participate. Individuals assess and weigh the degree to which an environment will positively or negatively impact them (Frideres, 1997). Although often unintended, public engagement events can be perceived as “white” by non-white bodies. As explained by Sara Ahmed (2012), “whiteness tends to be visible to those who do not inhabit it” (p.3). As such, it is common for white bodies to dismiss claims of exclusivity because “every neighbour was invited”. Nirmal Puwar (2004) writes that white bodies become “somatic norms” within a space, and as a result, non-white bodies feel “out of place”, or unwelcome, within those spaces (p.38). Before deciding to participate, one might ask themselves several questions, such as: “is there diversity among staff?”, “will I experience cultural or language barriers in this environment?”, “will I feel comfortable in this space?”, etc. Disregarding these real and legitimate barriers is a critical failure of current equality-based planning that aims to treat everyone the same.

In recent decades, Canada adopted human rights legislation. Chapter 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) outlines a guarantee of equality rights. Under this section, a distinction is made between formal equality and substantive equality (or equity), whereby the former overlooks personal differences and protects “a right to identical treatment”, while the latter protects “every person’s equal right to be free of discrimination” (Butler, 2013). Substantive equality, or equity, is concerned with the impact of the law on different groups of individuals (Butler, 2013), and as argued by Beth Moore Milroy (2004), must be achieved in instances where individuals identifying with various cultures, genders and physical abilities are involved. As we transition away from an equality-based approach, each profession is left to figure out what equity, or substantive equality, looks like in its own field. That this transition takes place is particularly important in the field of planning, since planning matters directly
influence the daily lives of all citizens (Taylor, 1998); and yet, planning falls behind the rest pack in terms of progress made (Milroy, 2004).

The field of planning has not yet decided what equity looks like in the context of both planning processes and planning outcomes. Attention has primarily been focused on resource distribution (Milroy, 2004), however, as illustrated by Iris Marion Young (1990), equality does not refer exclusively to the (re)distribution of goods: equality refers to “the full participation and inclusion of everyone in society’s major institutions, and the socially supported substantive opportunity for all to develop and exercise their capacities and realize their choices” (p.6). Similarly, Henri Lefebvres’ concept of the ‘right to the city’ sees justice as involving both redistribution, as well as the right for everyone to participate in the creation of the city (Fainstein, 2014). If we assert Young’s definition of equality in the field of planning, then disadvantaged and minority groups must have access to planning processes, and be supported to exercise their right to participate (Viswanathan, 2009). It is not enough to simply offer the opportunity for participation. Planners should evaluate the social structures that enable or constrain community members and stakeholders from participating, and consider how the planning profession is contributing to these constraints in practice (Young, 1990; Viswanathan, 2009).

Critical analyses of the efforts of local governments to include marginalized groups in the planning process have only recently been undertaken, and even then, participation has not been the focus (Uyesugi & Shipley, 2005). There is a new understanding that planners play an important role in managing culturally diverse cities and advancing equity planning (Uyesugi & Shipley, 2005); however, what this actually looks like in practice varies from municipality to municipality. Some suggest that planners must act as advocates for those underrepresented in the process and policies, and as such make decisions that counter the increasingly unequal urban environment (Metzger, 1996; Krumholz & Forester, 1990). This idea stems from John Rawls ‘difference principle’, whereby policies (or plans and strategies) “only improve the situation of those better off when doing so is to the advantage of those less fortunate” (Rawls, 1971, p.75). A similar approach is to actively seek diverse voices, such as those individuals and organizations that have traditionally been underrepresented in the process. It is argued that planning outcomes will be more equitable if marginalized groups have a stronger role (Fainstein, 2014). This could involve targeting specific groups to ensure their voices are heard during the engagement and decision-making process (Brody, Godschalk, & Burby, 2003). Conversely, others argue that a
planners’ role is to work towards the shared common good – something that is never homogenous nor monolithic – by expanding choice and opportunity (Brand, 2015). Edward Soja (2010) asserts that social and urban justice can only be achieved once the processes that continue to produce unjust geographies and communities are transformed.

The academic literature on urban planning is replete with recommendations on how the public engagement process can be improved using a variety of mechanisms (Brody, Godschalk, & Burby, 2003; Rowe & Frewer, 2005; Glass, 1979); however, few studies have challenged the legitimacy of the public meeting and comment process (Innes & Booher, 2004). The assumption presented in much of the planning literature is that the problem lies in how the methods are used; not in the methods themselves (Innes & Booher, 2004). Innes and Booher (2004) argue that traditional public participation mechanisms, such as public meetings, do not foster genuine engagement, seldom result in improved decisions, and fail to include an accurate representation of the public. Mahjabeen, Shrestha and Dee (2009) critique traditional public participation methods for being “trapped within the top-down theoretical paradigm of the 1960s and 1970s” (p. 59). They assert that major rethinking and redesigning of the public participation process is needed for community engagement and planning outcomes to be inclusive and reflective of the needs and wants of disadvantaged and minority groups. Although community engagement is required by legislation, there are stark differences between traditional top-down methods and collaborative, inclusive approaches to engagement, including: top-down education versus mutually shared knowledge; one-way dialogue versus two-way dialogue; elite or self-selected participants versus diverse participants; reactive versus proactive engagement; and one-time engagement versus continuous engagement (Innes & Booher, 2004).

Lily Song (2015) and Susan Fainstein (2000; 2014) outline that traditional engagement methods are not to blame for issues of social and spatial inequity. Song (2015) outlines that several improvements have been made to how citizen engagement and participation occurs in planning and public policy over the past five decades; however, issues of income inequality, social insecurity and urban injustice are intensifying. Similarly, Fainstein (2014) highlights that there is an over emphasis on procedure among communicative, collaborative and participatory approaches to planning. Song (2015) adds that planning’s emphasis on process over outcome has come at a cost. Fainstein’s theory of ‘the just city’ aims to achieve a better balance between process and outcome. The just city values the participation of relatively powerless groups in the
decision-making process, and equity of outcomes (Fainstein, 2000). The argument being made is that spatial and social (in)equity are a result of both process and outcome (Soja, 2009). As concluded by Uyesugi and Shipley (2005), exploring more innovative and practical “multicultural outreach strategies” as part of public consultation processes is needed, but that alone is not sufficient. Government policies must be reviewed and revised to articulate a commitment to equity and respect for cultural diversity (Uyesugi & Shipley, 2005).

2.6 Conclusion

Designing and facilitating public engagement programs in communities composed of a diversity of ethnic, socio-economic, gender and age groups can be challenging (Reeves, 2005; Barrow, 2000; Umemoto, 2001); however, if done successfully public engagement programs can lead to more equitable, implementable and sustainable planning outcomes (Hodge & Gordon, 2008; Burby, 2003; Mahjabeen, Shrestha & Dee, 2009; Brody, Godschalk, & Burby, 2003). As outlined in the literature, the field of planning has been failing to keep up with the increasing diversity of the city (Sandercock, 2000; Goonewardena, Rankin, Weinstock, 2004). Planning processes and outcomes are not reflective of the communities being served, because there is an underlying assumption that all residents and stakeholders are equally able and prepared to participate in the types of planning activities offered to them (Day, 2003; Wallace & Milroy, 1999; Beall, 1996). As outlined in section 2.5, disadvantaged and marginalized individuals and groups face physical and social barriers that prevent them from participating in planning conversations. Without critical evaluation of current engagement processes, the subsequent outcomes of those processes, and the links between the two, the field of community planning will find it difficult to move from an equality-based approach to an equity-based approach.

It is evident from a review of the literature that additional research is warranted in the following two areas: 1) the tools and mechanisms being used by municipalities to increase diversity in public engagement process; and 2) the extent to which inclusive public engagement theories and programs are increasing participation in practice. It is the intention of this research project to explore these two areas of interest. This research project will build on the literature discussed in this review, and add to it by highlighting the ways in which Ontario municipalities are succeeding and failing to design and deliver public engagement programs that are representative of their diverse communities.
Chapter 3

3 Method and Approach

3.1 Introduction

The objective of this research is to identify engagement principles and tools developed by Ontario municipalities to increase the diversity of citizen participation in urban planning processes, and assess how well they are implemented in practice. The research project provides a record of current engagement practices, and explores the gap between design and implementation, by answering the following two questions:

1. How are municipalities in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA) addressing a lack of diversity in public engagement processes?

2. To what extent are inclusive engagement programs increasing diversity of participation in practice?

It is the intention of this research project to present examples of best practices with regards to inclusive, diverse and authentic engagement in a municipal setting, as well as highlight areas for improvement. The research was conducted in two phases: 1) online review of municipal policies, and 2) in-person interviews. To answer research question #1 above, an in-depth online review of the public engagement programs employed by municipalities located within the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area was undertaken. The objective of the review of municipal policies (Phase 1) was to identify engagement tools and mechanisms used by municipalities, and to better understand the principles guiding the design of local engagement programs (e.g., diversity policies). Based on the findings from Phase 1, four municipalities were identified as ‘leaders of innovation’. Interviews with planning and other municipal staff from these four municipalities was conducted as part of Phase 2 of the research, to assess how well the engagement programs discovered through the online municipal review are implemented in practice.

This chapter outlines the methods that were used in Phase 1 and 2 of this thesis project, including descriptions of how data was collected and explanations of why these data collection methods were selected. The chapter describes participant selection and recruitment, the interview process, data analysis and the methods used to ensure validity and rigour in this research.
3.2 Phase 1: Review of Municipal Policies

A review of municipal policies was conducted to better understand how cities located within the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA) engage the public on planning matters, and how, if at all, they are acting to address the lack of diversity in public engagement processes. An online review of policy documents, plans and reports was completed to identify public consultation requirements, types of engagement tools used and any diversity and inclusion principles guiding the design of their engagement programs. This review of municipal policies focused on the twelve municipalities located within the GTHA with a population of greater than 100,000 (listed in Table 3). Data was collected through an online search of each municipal website.

Table 3. Cities/Towns included in the Municipal Review

| City of Hamilton                  | Town of Markham (York Region) |
| City of Burlington (Halton Region)| Town of Richmond Hill (York Region) |
| Town of Oakville (Halton Region)  | City of Vaughan (York Region) |
| City of Brampton (Region of Peel) | Town of Ajax (Durham Region) |
| City of Mississauga (Region of Peel) | City of Oshawa (Durham Region) |
| City of Toronto                  | Town of Whitby (Durham Region) |

The data collected during this phase provided a record for each municipality that lists the following: minimum requirements for public consultation (e.g., number of meetings, community reach); the types the engagement mechanisms employed (e.g., public meetings, open houses, online survey tools, “planners in public spaces”); municipal or region-wide inclusion and diversity principles; and examples of planning projects that incorporated inclusive public consultation. The ease in which this information was collected for each municipality varied. Some municipal websites have a user-friendly design with information organized under key headings and tabs. For example, some municipal websites have a “Get Involved”, “Have Your Say”, or “Engagement Hub” webpage that lists upcoming engagement opportunities on a calendar, provides links to online surveys, and directs the user to the City or Towns Engagement Charter. Other municipalities have a Planning and Development webpage, but no page dedicated to engagement. A database was created in excel to document and keep track of the research findings for all twelve municipalities.

The findings from Phase 1 were used to inform the selection of four municipalities undertaking the most progressive and innovative public engagement programs as it relates to enhancing
diversity. These four municipalities are the focus of Phase 2. It should be noted that this municipal review was not intended to provide a comprehensive record of how each municipality reviewed approaches engagement. Instead, the purpose of the review of municipal policies was to identify general trends in engagement, specifically as it relates to inclusion; and discover any unique principles, goals, tools or projects designed to increase diversity in participation that might be worth exploring further. The information collected through the review reflects what is available online.

3.3 Phase 2: Interviews

Interviews with planning and other municipal staff from four municipalities were held as part of Phase 2 of this research project. The objective of this phase was to answer the research question: to what extent are inclusive engagement programs increasing diversity of participation in practice (in terms of ethnicity, class, age, gender and ability)?

Based on the findings from Phase 1, the review of municipal policies, the following four municipalities were selected as the focus of Phase 2 of the research: The Town of Ajax, the City of Burlington, the City of Hamilton, and the City of Toronto. These four municipalities were selected because they met the following two criteria: 1) they have an engagement plan or charter in place, and 2) they have at a minimum one forward-looking and unique policy, strategy or initiative with a focus on fostering more inclusive engagement programs. The four municipalities selected as the focus of Phase 2 have demonstrated that they have, or are committed to integrating principles of equity and diversity in their planning practices. Details on the methods used in Phase 2 are presented in the following sections.

3.3.1 Qualitative Research and Semi-Structured Interviews

Qualitative research is typically juxtaposed with quantitative research in that it is defined as a research strategy that focuses on the collection of words rather than numbers (Sandelowski, 2011). A more holistic definition sees qualitative research as a form of inquiry that aims to discern how people experience, interpret and understand the social world (Mason, 2011). Qualitative research methods provide a way for researchers to explore and understand the social world through the interpretation of that world by participants (Bryman, 2016). The most widely used methods of data collection in qualitative research are oral (Winchester & Rofe, 2016).
Interviews, one example of an oral method, are commonly used to collect qualitative data in human geography research (Winchester & Rofe, 2016; Warren, 2011). Qualitative interviewing involves a conversation between the researcher(s) and participant(s) in-person or over the telephone/videophone. The researcher(s) asks questions on a particular topic, and the participant(s) takes as much time as they need to answer (Warren, 2011). Participant responses are carefully recorded manually or using an audiotape or videotape by the researcher(s).

Qualitative research methods, primarily semi-structured interviews, were used to collect the majority of the data for this research project. A defining characteristic of semi-structured interviews is that they are flexible and fluid; they are not fixed (Mason, 2011). Unlike structured interviews, which require a set of questions be asked in the same way for all interviews, semi-structured interviews allow for flexibility in how and in what order questions are asked. Rather than being guided by a detailed script, the researcher has a list of themes, topics and questions to be covered, but the order is not predetermined. This allows for follow-up questions to be asked of different participants, and unexpected themes to emerge (Mason, 2011). Semi-structured interviews were deemed as most appropriate for this research to allow for the sharing of personal anecdotes and experiences.

Staff from four different municipalities were interviewed, and it was determined that a semi-structured interview format would result in data that could be compared and contrasted, but also allow for the discovery of unanticipated themes and findings. Additionally, semi-structured interviews accommodate the natural flow of conversation, which is a principle of communicative planning theory (CPT).

3.3.2 Communicative Planning Theory

This research project was informed by CPT. Drawing on concepts from social theorists to interpret and understand planning processes, CPT calls for knowledge that is contextually situated and grounded in reasoning, empathy and various kinds of evidence. CPT is post-positivist in that it does not rely on scientific justification (Fainstein, 2000). CPT intentionally moves away from top-down planning, focusing instead on dialogue between and among participants. A CPT approach aims to advance inclusive deliberation to produce just and equitable planning outcomes through communication, interaction and dialogue (Healey, 1997; Sager, 2013; Innes & Booher, 2015; Fainstein, 2010). Planning theory is traditionally used as a
guide for planning practice; not necessarily planning research. For this reason, key foundations of CPT, such as being post-positivist and rooted in dialogue, are also foundations of this research project; however, a communicative planning theory approach was not taken.

3.3.3 Participant Selection and Recruitment

Conversations with planning and communication professionals formed the basis of this research project. Key staff at each of the four municipalities were identified through the review of municipal policies. Staff were selected based on their involvement coordinating, planning, and leading public engagement activities. The objective was to converse with senior and manager-level municipal staff that have extensive experience with public consultation, have direct and regular contact with the public and other stakeholders, and/or have expertise in communications. Planning staff were targeted, but other municipal staff that met one of the above noted criteria were also invited to participate. This included engagement coordinators, managers of communications and managers of community development. Staff were identified through municipal websites, department directories, and online planning documents. During Phase 1, relevant and unique projects and policies were identified, and the staff involved with those planning initiatives were included in the list of potential participants.

After receiving ethical approval from the University of Toronto’s Social Science, Humanities and Education Research Board, a total of 22 municipal staff were contacted through email and asked to participate in an in-person interview as part of this research project. Initial contact and recruitment was done through email to provide a detailed description of the research and design of the proposed interview. Follow-up telephone calls were made when necessary.

3.3.4 Participant Interviews

A total of 16 research participants were interviewed between May and June of 2016. Based on staff preference and availability, interviews were held both as one-on-one interviews, as well as in small groups. A total of four one-on-one interviews and four small group interviews (ranging from two to four participants) were held. At minimum, three staff from each of the four municipalities was interviewed, as outlined in Table 4. The interviews were all held at the municipal office of the staff being interviewed for their convenience. The length of the interviews ranged from thirty-five minutes to one hour and forty-five minutes.
Table 4. Research Participant List

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<th>City of Hamilton</th>
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To protect participant confidentiality, no personally identifiable information will be included in this research. As such, the name and position of participants will remain confidential.

Participants were asked to review and sign an Informed Consent Form (Appendix A) prior to beginning the interview, which outlined this confidentiality clause, as well as their right to withdraw from the research at any time. In the case of small group interviews, participants were asked not to discuss or share any of the comments made by their colleagues externally. The consent form also outlined that the interviews would be recorded using a secure audio recording device to ensure accurate transcription of participant responses. Handwritten notes were taken to supplement the audiotape and provide a summary of key themes by the end of each interview. Participants were notified that they would have the opportunity to review and approve all direct quotes through email before they would be included in the research results.

As discussed in section 3.3.1, the interviews were semi-structured to allow for the natural flow of conversation. Participants were provided with a list of ten questions (Appendix B) in advance of the interview to allow for preparation if deemed appropriate by the participant; however, it was explained that the questions were intended to act as a guide for the conversation, not a script. The interview questions were developed with the intention of answering the research questions posed at the beginning of this chapter. The goal was to discover:

- How each municipality typically engages the community on planning matters;
- How they measure the “success” of their engagement;
- How, or if, they measure the inclusivity of their engagement;
- How, or if, their engagement programs are increasing the diversity of participation; and
- What barriers their department faces in terms of increasing engagement by underrepresented or “hard to reach” audiences.
3.3.5 Analysis

In social science research, data analysis involves the conversion of raw data into concepts and themes – often referred to as ‘coding’ (Corbin & Strauss, 2012). Coding is a critical component of any research that is qualitative in nature. Strauss (1987) describes three types of coding techniques: open coding, axial coding and selective coding. Open coding and axial coding were used for this project. Open coding is done first and involves a detailed review of the data line by line (or word by word) to discover concepts. Unlike other coding techniques, open coding requires the coder to identify concepts in the data without a pre-determined list of categories to code from (Strauss, 1987). Open coding is followed by axial coding, which involves identifying relationships and connections around the ‘axis’ of each category (Strauss, 1987). As part of this coding process, comparative analysis was done.

Comparative analysis is the process of comparing different sources of data for similarities or differences (Corbin & Strauss, 2012). The data analysis process involved two types of comparisons: intra-municipal and inter-municipal. First, responses collected from staff working within the same municipality were compared (intra-municipal). This review highlighted inconsistencies in practice, and in professional opinion, within one municipality. Second, comparisons were made between the four municipalities (inter-municipal). This review uncovered the many differences and similarities in how each municipality approaches community engagement and inclusion, and is the focus of Chapter 4: Research Findings. The former, intra-municipal comparisons, were not intended to be the focus of this research; however, some interesting points of divergence were discovered through the interviews, and are discussed in Chapter 4.

3.4 Validity and Rigour

Evaluating qualitative research for validity and rigour is critical to producing credible research that can be referenced, expanded on, and critiqued by other scholars (Baxter & Eyles, 1997). To complete this evaluation, Baxter and Eyles (1997) present four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. These criteria, as set out originally by Lincoln and Guba (1985), are already widely used by qualitative researchers outside of geography. The following is an evaluation of this research projects validity and rigour using the four criteria.
Credibility, noted as the most important criteria, requires that the research accurately and authentically represent the experience of participants. Several strategies to satisfy this criterion were employed, including triangulation, member checking and purposeful sampling (Baxter & Eyles, 1997). First, quotations from several participants are presented when arguing a key finding. This is an example of triangulation: the convergence of several sources of data providing similar findings (Baxter & Eyles, 1997). Conclusions are not drawn from one participants account. Second, participants were provided with the opportunity to review transcribed quotes for accuracy. Participants were emailed a document with their quotes organized under theme headings to provide context, and asked to confirm their acceptability. This is an example of member checking: the adequacy of analytic categories and hypotheses are checked with participants (Baxter & Eyles, 1997). Third, purposeful sampling was used to collect “information-rich cases”, which provide the researcher with the opportunity to learn in detail about topics and concepts that are foundational to the research (Patton, 1990). The sample size of 16 participants provided a sufficient number of unique and comparable experiences to develop research findings and answer the research questions. A minimum of three staff were interviewed from the four municipalities to ensure an adequate sample size from each city and town.

Transferability is the criterion intended to assess how ‘transferable’ the research findings are. The question is: can the research findings fit within, or be applied to, contexts that are outside of this study (Baxter & Eyles, 1997)? Transferability is more likely to be achieved when the researcher comprehensively describes the study context, design and methods used to develop hypotheses and key findings (Baxter & Eyles, 1997). The preceding sections within this chapter have described in detail the research context and design, interview format, participant selection and recruitment and data analysis process.

Dependability refers to the degree to which research findings are reliable and developed from interpretations that are consistent from one interview to another (Baxter & Eyles, 1997). Several strategies are available to researchers to help them achieve dependability, including the use of low-inference descriptors, such as audio recordings and field notes (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). A secure audio recording device and handwritten notes were used to capture participant responses verbatim for this research project. Dependability was increased by having one researcher conduct all interviews, and having each interview follow a similar format.
The last criterion is *confirmability*, which assesses if, and to what extent the researchers’ personal interests and biases influenced their interpretation of the data. Research findings and conclusions should be drawn from participant responses and the context of the research project; not from the researchers biases or personal motivations (Baxter & Eyles, 1997; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This chapter has provided a detailed account of how data was collected and analyzed, including the criteria used to select the four focus municipalities and participants. Qualitative research in human geography requires the researcher to be reflexive and consider their own positionality, because absolute objectivity is difficult to achieve in research (Valentine, 2005; Rose, 1997). When developing knowledge, the researcher should consider how their positionality (in terms of gender, race, age, social and economic status) might influence data collection and analysis and knowledge creation (Rose, 1997). As such, it is important to acknowledge my own positionality as female, white, Canadian-born, middle-class, and age 25-29. It is also worth noting, given the context of this research project, that I have an undergraduate degree in Urban Planning and 3 years of experience working as a community engagement coordinator for a private consulting firm. I do not believe that my position as a young woman impacted the way participants engaged with me during the interviews; however, I do think that some participants were more candid in their responses because I am white. Although my research is focused on issues of inequality and diversity in the context of community engagement, I think some participants were more willing to be truthful about their city or town’s disregard for diversity and participant demographics because of my race. I also think that my professional experience working in the field of community engagement impacted participant responses. It was evident from the subject of my research and my background, that I am passionate about public participation, and because of this, participants may have overstated their municipality’s commitment to citizen engagement.
Chapter 4

4 Research Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the key findings from the online review of municipal policies and research participant interviews. Section 4.2 summarizes the results of the municipal review, detailing how the twelve municipalities surveyed approach community engagement and how they are addressing the lack of diversity in community engagement processes. The section following, section 4.3, introduces the four municipalities selected to be the focus of Phase 2 of the research. Municipal profiles that highlight the values, policies and strategic initiatives related to equitable and inclusive community engagement are included in this section. The third section, section 4.4, provides a detailed account of the interviews held with staff from each of the four municipalities. This section highlights where participant responses differed from one another, as well as where there was consensus among staff from the four municipalities. The findings are presented under the following theme areas: community engagement tools and mechanisms, evaluation, inclusivity and equity in the context of community engagement, barriers to inclusive engagement, and the politics of planning. Direct quotes are used throughout this section of the chapter to maintain accuracy and authenticity with regards to the wording chosen by participants as they answered questions (Warren, 2011). It should be noted that the focus of this chapter is presenting the findings of the research. The next, and final chapter of this paper will discuss the significance of the research findings as it relates to current literature and the research objectives of this thesis.

4.2 Review of Municipal Policies

As described in Chapter 3, an online review of the policies of twelve municipalities was conducted to better understand how cities located within the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area engage the public on planning matters, and how, if at all, they are acting to address the lack of diversity in public engagement processes. An online review of each municipality’s policy documents, plans and reports was completed to identify public consultation requirements, the types of engagement tools used and diversity and inclusion principles guiding the design of their engagement programs. Since all twelve of the municipalities included in the review of policies are located within Ontario, they are guided by the Ontario Planning Act, Provincial Policy
Statement and related legislation, such as the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe and the Greenbelt Plan. As such, the minimum legal requirements for consultation are the same for each municipality.

Although the requirements for consultation are the same for each municipality, the way in which engagement is approached is decided locally. This means that each municipality decides what tools they will use to engage the public, how much time and funding they will spend on engagement, who they will target, how they will evaluate their successes, what principles will guide their engagement, and so on. The purpose of the municipal review was to document these local decisions for each municipality, and select the four that are undertaking the most progressive and innovative public engagement programs – as it relates to enhancing diversity – to explore further.

The first question to answer is: how do municipalities engage residents and stakeholders on planning topics? Based on the findings from the municipal review, it is public meetings, open houses, online surveys and social media that are the most widely used engagement tools. These traditional methods of engagement work off the assumption that citizens will take the initiative to participate and join the conversation. The public is usually burdened with the responsibility of seeking information about a project and then physically attending an event or taking the time to complete an online survey. To assist with this, all twelve municipalities have a municipal website where users can locate information about planning projects, contact information for planning staff, and in most cases, details about upcoming public engagement events. Other engagement tools, such as public and stakeholder workshops, focus groups, pop-ups or ‘planners in public spaces’, telephone town halls, telephone surveys, design charrettes and roundtables are also commonly used.

The second question to answer is: are principles of diversity and inclusion guiding the design of municipal engagement programs? To answer this question, a review of municipal vision statements and city council mission statements was conducted to see if principles of inclusivity, equity, and/or diversity are included as part of the overarching direction for the city or town. A list of all twelve municipal vision statements is outlined in Table 5. The key words – as it relates to diversity, inclusion and engagement – are underlined.
Table 5. Vision Statements

| Town of Ajax – A vibrant and caring community where people and history connect. Surrounded by natural beauty where open spaces and unique landscapes set us apart. Rich in opportunity where ideas and innovation flourish (Strategic Plan & Community Vision, 2007-2010) |
| City of Brampton – To be a connected city that is innovative, inclusive and bold (Strategic Plan, 2016-2018) |
| City of Burlington – To be a city where people, nature and business thrive (Strategic Plan, 2015-2040) |
| City of Hamilton – To be the best place in Canada to raise a child, promote innovation, engage citizens and provide diverse economic opportunities (Vision 2020) |
| Town of Markham – Markham, the leading Canadian municipality – embracing technological innovation, celebrating diversity, characterized by vibrant and healthy communities – preserving the past and building for the future (Strategic Plan, 2015-2019) |
| City of Mississauga – Mississauga will inspire the world as a dynamic and beautiful global city for creativity and innovation, with vibrant, safe and connected communities; where we celebrate the rich diversity of our cultures, our historic villages, Lake Ontario and the Credit River valley (Strategic Plan, 2009) |
| City of Oakville – To be the most livable town in Canada (Strategic Plan, 2015-2018) |
| City of Oshawa – A prosperous, collaborative, vibrant, inclusive and green city where people and businesses are proud to live, work, learn and play (Strategic Plan, 2015-2019) |
| Town of Richmond Hill – Richmond Hill, where people come together to build our community (Strategic Plan, 2009) |
| City of Toronto – Toronto is a caring and friendly city; Toronto is a clean, green and sustainable city; Toronto is a dynamic city; Toronto invests in quality of life (Strategic Plan, 2013-2018) |
| City of Vaughan – A city of choice that promotes diversity, innovation and opportunity for all citizens, fostering a vibrant community life that is inclusive, progressive, environmentally responsible and sustainable (Strategic Plan, 2013) |
| Town of Whitby – Whitby will be the "Community of Choice" for family and business, embracing the future while respecting our proud heritage and natural environment, and promoting our strong sense of community identity (Community Strategic Plan, 2002) |

Of these twelve municipal vision statements, five – City of Brampton, Town of Markham, City of Mississauga, City of Oshawa, City of Vaughan – explicitly prioritize being an inclusive and diverse city. The City of Vaughan’s vision statement stands out in particular, as the statement
emphasizes the desire to promote diversity, provide opportunities for all citizens and to foster a community life that is inclusive, progressive and sustainable (Vaughan Strategic Plan, 2013). Although the Town of Ajax, City of Hamilton and Town of Richmond Hill do not have vision statements that highlight principles of inclusion or diversity, they do articulate a desire to engage, connect and bring community members together. The remaining four vision statements do not mention engagement or inclusion.

Following this review of vision and mission statements, a general scan for policies, guides, strategies and initiatives focused on topic areas spanning from diversity to social equity to community engagement was done. Of the twelve municipalities surveyed, six –Town of Ajax, City of Brampton, City of Burlington, City of Hamilton, City of Oakville, City of Toronto – have some version of a community engagement plan available online. These community engagement plans, guides, charters or teams all share a similar objective: to outline the principles of engagement as it relates to two-way communication between the local government and the community (see Table 6 below). That six of the twelve municipalities surveyed have some sort of community engagement strategy in place and available online is significant. There is so much uncertainty about what authentic and representative engagement is (Innes & Booher, 2004; Shipley and Utz), or even why community engagement is important in planning, and therefore it is significant that these six municipalities have developed a localized plan or team to enhance clarity on the what, the why and the how of community engagement.

Table 6. A Spotlight on Community Engagement Plans

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Town of Ajax</th>
<th>Diversity and Community Engagement Plan</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Objective:</strong> To listen and make meaningful recommendations with respect to the Town's strong desire to: 1) attract, retain and support a diverse staff team that is reflective of the diversity of the community, 2) work with community partners to better engage residents and strengthen neighbourhoods so that residents and businesses feel connected to their neighbours and feel a sense of ownership over the success of Ajax as a thriving community, and 3) provide meaningful programs and services that consider the need of all residents.</td>
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| City of Brampton | **Office of Community Engagement**  
**Objective:** 1) works to enable conversations between Council, City staff and diverse groups of Bramptonians, 2) works to create accessible ways for the community to get involved in city-building and decision-making, 3) allows open, productive dialogue between Council, City staff and Brampton’s diverse community, 4) ensures community members input has a meaningful impact on City projects, 5) raise public awareness of the role of municipal government, and 6) strengthen connections among community groups. |
| City of Burlington | **Community Engagement Plan, Charter and Charter Action Team**  
**Objective:** to enhance communications and access to information for citizens, and to facilitate and enable meaningful engagement. The Plan is an agreement between and among City Council and the citizens of Burlington concerning citizen engagement with city government that establishes the commitments, responsibilities, and fundamental concepts of this relationship. |
| City of Hamilton | **Public Engagement Charter**  
**Objective:** sets the ground rules for local government on how the City should actively involve its residents in issues that affect their lives. Key goals:  
- Improve participation in civic activities  
- Improve interaction and participation between residents, stakeholders, elected representatives, City staff  
- Create opportunities for making the City of Hamilton and its residents more accessible and accountable to each other |
| City of Oakville | **Public Engagement Guide**  
**Objective:** to ensure open two-way communication with the community. Public engagement is a key component of open and transparent governance; it helps us to develop and deliver quality programs and services; and is important to Oakville achieving its vision of being the most livable town in Canada. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City of Toronto</th>
<th>Growing Conversations initiative</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Objective:</strong> a process meant to improve the relationship between the City of Toronto and its residents and stakeholders through a better community engagement process. Key goals of the initiative:</td>
<td></td>
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<td>• Better understand the strengths and weaknesses of the current community planning process in Toronto</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Explore new engagement models and tools, particularly those that are intended to help build capacity, inform participation, and build stronger relationships between the community, stakeholders and the City of Toronto</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Explore opportunities and best practices related to implementing Community Planning Advisory Groups in each Ward</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Explore opportunities to broaden participation by engaging new audiences</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Identify other opportunities to improve the quality of feedback received through the community planning process</td>
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</table>

Other interesting strategic plans or policies discovered through the municipal review are centered on diversity and equity. The City of Hamilton has an Equity and Inclusion Policy (2016) that is intended to apply the principles of “equity, inclusion, diversity and public engagement to all City of Hamilton processes, policies, practices, programs, services, opportunities, actions, corporate strategic plans and department goals in ensuring beneficial outcomes and improved quality of life for all of the City’s internal and external stakeholders”. Similarly, the City of Toronto’s Equity, Diversity and Human Rights Divisional Strategic Plan (2015) specifies a goal of embedding “access, equity, diversity and human rights practices in the Toronto Public Service leading to equitable outcomes for staff and residents”. One of the four strategic priorities of this Plan is to expand outreach and engagement in order to better inform the City’s policies, programs and services as it relates to issues of equity, diversity and human rights. The City of Vaughan, Town of Markham and Town of Ajax also have diversity strategies designed to strengthen their commitment to promoting inclusion, protecting human rights and celebrating diversity. The Town of Markhams’ Diversity Action Plan (2010) outlines that extensive public consultation was undertaken to arrive at the 68 recommendations focused on the needs of youth, newcomers and visible minorities, seniors and persons with disabilities.

The final step of the review of municipal policies was to identify the different municipal advisory committees and their duties. An advisory committee is traditionally established by City
Council and comprised of Members of Council, City staff and/or members of the public. Each advisory committee has a mandate related to a particular subject, and the members are tasked with carrying out duties on an ongoing basis. Table 7 lists the advisory committees identified during the municipal review that have a mandate related to diversity, inclusion, equity and/or engagement. A complete list of advisory committees for each municipality is included as Appendix D. Checkmarks are used to indicate that a municipality currently has an advisory committee with this, or equivalent, title. It should be noted that all twelve municipalities have an Accessibility Advisory Committee as required under the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act. The Act requires that every municipality with a population of 10,000 residents or more have one.

**Table 7. Advisory Committee Summary Table**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Municipality</th>
<th>Diversity/ Inclusivity Advisory Committee</th>
<th>Youth Advisory Committee</th>
<th>Seniors Advisory Committee</th>
<th>Community Engagement Committee</th>
<th>Committee Against Racism/ for Immigrants</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Town of Ajax</td>
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<td>City of Brampton</td>
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<td>City of Burlington</td>
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<tr>
<td>City of Hamilton</td>
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<td>Town of Markham</td>
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<td>City of Mississauga</td>
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<td>City of Oakville</td>
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<td>City of Oshawa</td>
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<td>Town of Richmond Hill</td>
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<td>City of Toronto</td>
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<td>City of Vaughan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Town of Whitby</td>
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</table>
4.3 A Tale of Four Municipalities

Based on the findings from the online review of municipal policies, the following four municipalities were selected as the focus of Phase 2 of the research: The Town of Ajax, the City of Burlington, the City of Hamilton, and the City of Toronto. These four municipalities were selected because the municipal review found that they have in some form placed a focus on community engagement and demonstrated a commitment to fostering more inclusive environments. The two key criteria used in the selection process are described below.

The first criterion for selecting the municipalities for Phase 2, was having an engagement plan or charter. All four municipalities selected have a community engagement charter or action plan available online that articulates the municipality’s vision for community-government collaboration. The second criterion for selecting the municipalities, was that they have at least one forward-thinking and unique policy, strategy, or initiative with a focus on fostering inclusive engagement programs. Several of the municipalities surveyed in the online review have acknowledged the importance of citizen engagement in planning processes; however, many have yet to focus their attention on principles of equity, inclusion and diversity. Conversely, the four municipalities selected as the focus of Phase 2 have demonstrated that they have, or are committed to integrating principles of equity and diversity in their planning practices. An example for each is listed below:

- The Town of Ajax’s *Diversity and Community Engagement Plan* details a very specific diversity policy statement that articulates the Town’s commitment to equity and diversity;
- The City of Burlington’s *Inclusivity Advisory Committee* is tasked with monitoring City policies, services and programs to ensure they are developed and delivered through an inclusion lens;
- The City of Hamilton’s *Equity and Inclusion Policy* states that all City processes and practices apply principles of equity, inclusion, diversity and public engagement; and
- The City of Toronto’s *Planning Review Panel* was established so a diverse group of citizens could work together with the City to produce informed, representative public input to help guide growth and change in the City of Toronto.
Municipal profiles for each of the four municipalities are included in the pages that follow. The profiles highlight key municipal values, policies and strategic initiatives related to equitable and inclusive community engagement.

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**Town of Ajax**

**Census Statistics**

Population (2011): 109,600  
Land Area: 76.07 square kilometres  
# of residents who speak a non-official language: 21,680

**Vision, Mission, Values, Priorities**

**Vision**: A vibrant and caring community where people and history connect. Surrounded by natural beauty where open spaces and unique landscapes set us apart. Rich in opportunity where ideas and innovation flourish.

**Charters, Policies, Guiding Documents**

**Diversity and Community Engagement Plan**

A Plan aimed at ensuring all residents have equitable access to employment opportunities, programs and services, community and civic engagement; and tools to help strengthen neighbourhood.

**Diversity Policy Statement**

The Diversity and Community Engagement Plan outlines the following Diversity Policy Statement: “The diversity of Ajax is one of its greatest strengths. The Town of Ajax embraces and values diversity, promoting an engaged, healthy and inclusive community. The Town is strongly committed to equity and diversity through its polices, procedures, services delivery, amenities and employment practices.”

**Relevant Advisory Committees**

- Diversity and Community Engagement Advisory Committee
- Youth Engagement Advisory Committee
City of Burlington

Census Statistics
Population (2011): 175,779
Land Area: 185.66 square kilometres
# of residents who speak a non-official language: 28,025

Vision, Mission, Values, Priorities

**Vision:** To be a city where people, nature and business thrive.
**Values:** Community engagement is listed as one of the 6 ways in which the City is making this vision a reality. “The goal of community engagement is to lead to more informed and, therefore, better decision-making”.

Charters, Policies, Guiding Documents

**Community Engagement Charter**
An agreement between and among City Council and the citizens of Burlington concerning citizen engagement with city government that establishes the commitments, responsibilities, and fundamental concepts of this relationship.

**Engagement Charter Action Plan**
Aims to bring the Engagement Charter to life and to embed engagement into everyday practice at the City of Burlington. The Charter includes an “Inclusion and Accessibility” section, which outlines the objective of building a strong and inclusive community by reaching all demographic groups. The Action Plan also includes a section focused on “managing different viewpoints”. The objective here is to “create a safe and welcoming environment for community engagement”.

**Charter Action Team (ChAT)**
A team of Burlington citizens and Burlington staff that are focused on promoting public engagement. The ChAT created the Engagement Charter Action Plan to ensure public engagement is part of everyday practice within the City and they are tasked with implementing the Action Plan and measuring the success of engagement.

**Relevant Advisory Committees**
- Burlington Inclusivity Advisory Committee
- Burlington Seniors Advisory Committee
- Mayor’s Millennial Group
City of Hamilton

Census Statistics

Population (2011): 519,949
Land Area: 1,117.23 square kilometres
# of residents who speak a non-official language: 118,420

Vision, Mission, Values, Priorities

Vision: To be the best place in Canada to raise a child, promote innovation, engage citizens and provide diverse economic opportunities

Priority 1 of 7: Community Engagement & Participation – Hamilton has an open, transparent and accessible approach to City government that engages with and empowers all citizens to be involved in their community.

Priority 6 of 7: Culture and Diversity – Hamilton is a thriving, vibrant place for arts, culture, and heritage where diversity and inclusivity are embraced and celebrated.

Charters, Policies, Guiding Documents

Public Engagement Charter
The Hamilton Engagement Charter is a promise. It sets the ground rules for local government on how the City should actively involve its residents in issues that affect their lives. The vision is to be “a city where everyone is valued and engaged” and the mission is to “empower all residents of Hamilton to be actively involved in shaping an engaged and inclusive community”.

Equity and Inclusion Policy
The Policy’s purpose is to ensure the principles of Equity, Inclusion, Diversity and Public engagement are applied to all of the City’s processes, policies, practices, programs, services, opportunities, actions, corporate strategic plans and departmental goals.

Racial Equity Policy
In alignment with the Equity and Inclusion Policy, this Policy aims to build a respectful and inclusive civic environment that reflects diversity, equity, inclusion and public engagement for all of the City’s racialized communities in all programs, services, processes and outcomes.

Relevant Advisory Committees
✓ Advisory Committee for Immigrants and Refugees
✓ Committee Against Racism
✓ Hamilton Aboriginal Advisory Committee
✓ Hamilton Centre for Civic Inclusion
✓ Hamilton Engagement Committee (HEC)
✓ Hamilton Status of Women Committee
✓ Hamilton Youth Advisory Committee
✓ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Advisory Committee
✓ Seniors Advisory Committee
City of Toronto

Census Statistics

Population (2011): 2,615,060  
Land Area: 630.21 square kilometres  
# of residents who speak a non-official language: 1,154,245

Vision, Mission, Values, Priorities

Vision: Toronto is a caring and friendly city; Toronto is a clean, green and sustainable city; Toronto is a dynamic city; Toronto invests in quality of life.

Charters, Policies, Guiding Documents

Planning Review Panel
A Panel made up of 28 individuals selected through a random lottery process. Members of the Panel are tasked with working together over two years to provide City Planning with informed public input on planning initiatives.

Growing Conversations Initiative
An initiative intended to better understand the strengths and weaknesses of current community planning processes in Toronto and then explore new engagement models and tools aimed at building capacity, broadening participation, and improving the quality of feedback received.

Youth Engagement Strategy
Employs youth aged 18-30 to study how youth can be better engaged in city building, as the voices of youth are rarely heard in planning processes.

Ethnic Media Strategy
A Strategy targeting five of the largest and fastest-growing language groups in the City with a series of monthly columns in various foreign-language newspapers. Articles will cover a range of topics, including: an overview of the engagement process, the Official Plan, Complete Communities, Complete Streets, Transportation, Condo Development and Waterfront Toronto.

Relevant Advisory Committees
✓ Aboriginal Affairs Committee
✓ Toronto Youth Cabinet
4.4 Interview Findings

As outlined in the previous section, four municipalities were selected as the focus of this research project. Interviews with planning and other municipal staff representing the Town of Ajax, City of Burlington, City of Hamilton and City of Toronto were held. The primary objective of this phase of the research was to answer the research question: to what extent are inclusive engagement programs increasing diversity of participation in practice (in terms of ethnicity, class, age, gender and ability)? The interviews were also intended to supplement the findings from the municipal review. As such, questions about engagement tools and strategies were asked. The key findings from these conversations are detailed in the sub-sections that follow.

4.4.1 Community Engagement in a Municipal Setting: Tools, Mechanisms and Approaches

At the onset of the interview, participants were asked to describe the ways in which their department typically engages the community on planning matters. Several of the engagement tools and mechanisms shared by participants fall under the umbrella of ‘traditional’ engagement methods, such as: public meetings, open houses, online websites, surveys, public comment forms, and citizen advisory committees. As discussed in section 2.5, these types of traditional engagement tools are designed to provide all stakeholders with an equal opportunity and chance to participate in the planning process. The responsibility usually falls on the resident or stakeholder to seek out information about the project, travel to the meeting venue and/or take the time to complete an online form. Several participants highlighted this as a flaw of traditional engagement methods, noting that they are trying to make it easier for citizens to be involved by having their staff go out into the community and engage citizens in their own environment:

“We are moving towards a more informal approach to community engagement. For example, we attended 84 different community events as part of the engagement program for Our Future Hamilton. We went where people are: community festivals, farmers’ markets, shopping malls, laundromats, city parks, grocery stores, etc. Right now, the City of Hamilton relies on outdated engagement processes, such as hosting town hall meetings and open houses at City Hall. Most residents don’t care to attend formal events like these. We are missing out on informal engagement opportunities. We want to make better use of existing channels and our informal networks”. – Participant #1, City of Hamilton
Another participant from the City of Hamilton reiterated this point when they explained that the Planning Department is trying to think of unique ways to reach the public, such as by hosting “pop-ups” at local events and festivals. The idea is to ‘piggy-back’ on local initiatives and events planned by the community, community partners or other city departments. There was some disagreement, however, on the purpose of these “pop-ups”. One participant from the City of Hamilton suggested that these more informal engagement opportunities are designed to provide an opportunity to engage with the community and collect feedback. However, another City of Hamilton participant outlined that “pop-ups” are used as a channel to share information. The objective, as seen by the participant, is to educate and increase awareness about a project, not collect community input.

Participants from the City of Burlington and City of Toronto also used the phrase “go where people are” to describe how they are supplementing traditional public meetings and open houses with more unique and innovative engagement mechanisms:

“We have been going out into the community more. We are finding that it is often the same people coming out to meetings and they don’t necessarily reflect the rest of the community – typically white, older, male. We have been trying to go out to festivals and events; go where people already are.” – Participant #6, City of Burlington

“We are trying not to rely on public meetings to reach those “harder to reach” audiences because we know they are not coming to us. We are attempting to pull in those audiences by going where people are, and putting ourselves in the communities being impacted. This could mean we are standing on the street with an iPad and filling out an online survey with passersby, or pitching a tent on the beach during the weekend. We call this tool our PiPS (Planners in Public Spaces).” – Participant #9, City of Toronto

Both participants highlighted the need to go beyond traditional engagement methods in order to engage with those “harder to reach” audiences – individuals that do not attend public meetings, whether the reason be because they are not interested, not aware of the initiative, or because they do not have the time, resources or ability to participate.

Participants from all four municipalities highlighted online engagement as another tool they are increasingly relying on to reach a wider audience. The use of Social Media sites, such as Twitter and Facebook, were identified as useful online platforms to communicate key information, such as the location and date of a future “pop-up”, PiPS or public meetings/open houses, or to direct
viewers to links with additional information. Municipal websites are often used as a space to keep information about a project in one place. This way, if individuals are unable to attend a meeting or engagement event, they can stay up-to-date on the project. Beyond marketing upcoming events or sharing information, online tools are also being used to collect feedback and input from the community. Online surveys, discussion forums, tweets, emails and electronic feedback forms are all ways in which planners are gathering community input and engaging in a conversation. A participant from the City of Burlington described the convenience online engagement offers citizens:

“We currently use three online platforms for engagement: MindMixer (“Let’s Talk Burlington”), Vision Critical (“Insight Burlington”) and a customized survey tool similar to Survey Monkey. These online tools allow people to engage where and when they want. For the most part, our online tools are mobile-friendly so you can even complete the surveys on the go. Burlington is still a bedroom community, meaning people commute to Hamilton or Toronto for work, so when we have our typical public meetings at night they are often too tired or busy running their kids around to extra-curricular activities to come.” – Participant #7, City of Burlington

Encouraging and fostering engagement from “community champions” was outlined as a way in which municipal staff are attempting to bridge the gap between the community and the local government, and in turn, lead more genuine and authentic engagement exercises. Participants from the City of Hamilton explained that they hired and trained individuals representing different communities to lead part of the engagement for their Our Future Hamilton vision project:

“For Our Future Hamilton, we hired someone from within each different community (e.g., the Arabic Community) to be the “engagement lead”. We trained them and had them ask their community members to share their vision for the future of Hamilton.” – Participant #1, City of Hamilton

As part of this exercise, comment cards were used to collect feedback. These cards were translated into eight different languages, and the “engagement leads” facilitated the conversation in their own language. It was noted by the participant that this engagement tool was effective in gathering feedback from several diverse groups in the community; however, there were some challenges:

“Although the comment cards were effective in gathering feedback from many diverse groups in the community that we couldn’t have reached otherwise, there were other
challenges that arose because project staff were less directly involved in this form of outreach. What I noticed, is that often when we got those cards translated back into English they were used more as a ranting tool than anything else – the issues were far outside the project’s scope. I saw this as less effective, because it was a step removed from us, and the engagement lead did not have as good of a sense of the project. I thought it was a really innovative idea when we first did it, but the comments we received weren’t as impactful in the end.” – Participant #4, City of Hamilton

For another City of Hamilton project, staff organized one-on-one meetings with a few “community champions”, or “key influencers” before reaching out to the public:

“We often meet with individuals who we call “key influencers”, and I find this very helpful. We pick maybe 5 people and it’s almost like a gut instinct on who we reach out to. For example, we have met with community champions and key influencers on social media. We meet with them as project information becomes public to run things by them. We hear from them on what they think may be the key issues, what we got wrong, and where we can improve. I find that very effective.” – Participant #5, City of Hamilton

The City of Toronto and City of Burlington have also recognized the value in collaborating with “community champions”. Participants from the City of Toronto outlined that building an informal network of “community champions” is an on-going and continuous process. City of Toronto participants explained that whenever someone from the community shows an interest in a project and asks to be more involved, staff provide them with the materials needed to engage and converse with residents in their community. One example of working with “community champions” shared by City of Toronto participants was their engagement program for the Poverty Reduction Strategy. For this engagement program, the City subcontracted the United Way to train individuals that have lived in poverty to act as facilitators at their Poverty Reduction Strategy engagement events. This collaboration, as articulated by participants, resulted in a municipal-led engagement exercise that felt safe, genuine and meaningful because the individuals leading the conversation were not technical experts; instead, they were individuals with first-hand experience living in poverty (Participant #10, City of Toronto).

Another example of building and capitalizing on community networks was shared by City of Burlington participants. The City held “kitchen table talks” or facilitated informal conversations to collect feedback for their last two strategic plans. A combination of city staff strategic plan ambassadors and community ambassadors hosted and collected input from residents:
“We have strategic plan ambassadors and facilitators that are city staff, but we also put the word out to church groups, book clubs, service clubs and sporting groups to invite them to give their group a voice. This approach is especially successful with people who may be newcomers, because they are having a conversation with people they are comfortable with, in an environment that is familiar to them. If community ambassadors do not feel comfortable leading the conversation on their own, we provide them with facilitators.” – Participant #6, City of Burlington

Similar to the City of Hamilton’s comment cards, the intent is to provide residents with the opportunity to talk about city-building in both a language and a space that they feel comfortable sharing their concerns, needs and ideas.

The Town of Ajax has also experimented with community collaboration, as opposed to community consultation; however, the partnership came about in a different way. Unlike the examples shared by the other three municipalities, the Town of Ajax did not set out to engage and work with “community champions”; it was not part of the engagement program. Instead, this form of engagement was requested by the community itself:

“An example of taking something to the community and working together to get a better outcome is our cell tower proposals. These proposals are usually highly controversial in their location and appearance. We have taken some applications to the community and they didn’t like the proposed location. For one particular project, the community actually formed a group and they are looking for an alternative location that can accommodate everyone.” – Participant #14, Town of Ajax

Although the establishment of this community sub-committee was not planned by staff, the engagement program for the project was adapted to accommodate it. As this project is still in the review phase, the results of the community group are yet to be seen; however, staff are optimistic that an agreed-upon location for the cell tower will be reached – and partially because the community will have a better understanding of the challenges associated with selecting a preferred location.

During the interviews, several unique and innovative engagement tools and approaches to community collaboration were shared by participants (see Table 8). The City of Burlington’s Charter Action Team (ChAT) is one example. The ChAT is unique for two reasons. First, the team is made up of both city staff and Burlington citizens. Second, the mandate of the ChAT is to make public engagement part of everyday practice within the City. The ChAT team has
worked to develop a Community Engagement Charter and Charter Action Plan, and continues to provide advice on city policies, services and programs related to public engagement, build capacity within Burlington to promote engagement, and determine metrics to measure the success of engagement (City of Burlington, 2014). The goal of the ChAT is not necessarily to increase engagement numbers or citizen reach. Instead, the goal, as described by one participant, is to create a municipal-wide culture of community engagement. One way of achieving this, is to foster more opportunities for community-led engagement. This objective was described by one ChAT member:

“One of our goals is to build capacity in the community; to have citizens working with other citizens. We are not there yet. We are looking to create sub-groups that stem from the ChAT, such as a youth engagement focused sub-group. As a municipality, we can only do so much, so we need to really build capacity within the community to have them help themselves.” – Participant #6, City of Burlington

Another example is the City of Toronto Planning Review Panel (TPRP). Like Burlington’s Charter Action Team, the TPRP is a way for local residents to be more involved. The Panel is made up of 28 individuals selected through a random lottery process in September 2015. As described by Participant #11 “the purpose of the panel is to hear from a representative group of Torontonians on major City Planning initiatives in order to better guide growth and change.” Members of the Panel are tasked with working together over two years to provide City Planning with informed public input on planning initiatives. Over the course of these two years, the Panel has access to city planners, experts and stakeholders and are well equipped and supported to provide input that is grounded in factual evidence, as well as lived experiences. What makes this Panel so unique and innovative, especially with regards to the subject of this thesis, is that the Panel was created to bring a “balance of new voices into the planning process” (City of Toronto, 2016). City Planning acknowledges – both through the action of creating this Panel, and their text online – that many of their traditional consultation methods do not allow them to hear from diverse communities equally (City of Toronto, 2016).

The engagement program for the City of Hamilton’s Light Rail Train (LRT) project is a combination of traditional engagement methods, such as public meetings, and more innovative engagement techniques. One key part of the engagement plan, the Community Connector Program, is described in detail by Participant #5 below:
“For the Light Rail Transit (LRT) project, we are trying something new that Metrolinx has never done on any of their other projects, called the Community Connector Program. We have hired a team of ‘community connectors’ to visit every property that faces onto the route of the LRT. There are at least one thousand properties. We are going to visit with them in-person, twice a year for the 8 years of this project.

We are currently in the middle of our very first visit. We recruited community members on a temporary, casual basis. We are paying them for their time and they are the ones going out to each site. There are 14 community connectors and they are going out in pairs. It will take about 6-8 weeks visiting every property. They have tablets with them, and we are asking questions so we have consistent information and can document each interaction. Right now, it is the first visit so it’s more about getting information about the project out there. We are trying to gauge the level of awareness that they currently have and find out who they are (resident, tenant, business owner, property owner, etc.). We will start asking more questions as we get further into the project. We haven’t gotten into demographics yet, but eventually I’d like to get more information. It is a lot of work, but it is something unique. We wouldn’t have had the resources if we didn’t hire community members to help us. We recruited them, interviewed them and trained them. They are not answering technical questions, but they are helping to make connections between the City of Hamilton, Metrolinx and the property owners. Our team of community connectors are diverse. We have an equal number of males and females, people of diverse ethnic backgrounds and people of various ages. A lot of these people are active in their own neighbourhoods so they are familiar faces.” – Participant #5, City of Hamilton

This Community Connector program is another example of the City of Hamilton working to build and sustain more community partnerships and opportunities for collaboration. As described by Participant #5, city-community partnerships are beneficial both during the engagement process and outcome evaluation. During the engagement process, these types of partnerships provide the City with additional resources. Several participants commented that engaging with the community in unique ways requires a lot of time, staff and funding, and without community volunteers or leaders, they would not have the resources to conduct these engagement programs.

**Table 8. Unique and Innovative Engagement Tools**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Engagement Tool/ Method</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bus Tours</td>
<td>The City of Hamilton hosts bus tours as part of their engagement. For example, the City hosted a bus tour to an alpaca farm. On this tour, more than 100 recent refugees were introduced to the Our Future Hamilton visioning project. The visit to the alpaca farm was the main event of this bus tour, but the visioning project was introduced, and opportunities to engage with the content and provide feedback was also provided.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>Community Champions</td>
<td>Collaborating with community volunteers, “community champions”, is regarded by participants as a way to bridge the gap between the community and the local government. “Community champions” usually facilitate conversations in an environment and language that community members are familiar with.</td>
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<tr>
<td>High School Engagement</td>
<td>Several municipalities (City of Toronto, City of Burlington, Town of Ajax) explained that they are sending staff from the Planning Department to host conversations with high school students, typically as part of their Civics and Geography courses. The Town of Ajax outlined that their staff have hosted planning conversations with grade school children. Unlike most traditional engagement tools, this approach targets the participation of youth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Engagement</td>
<td>All four municipalities indicated that they use online platforms, such as their municipal websites, survey websites and Social Media websites, to share information about planning projects, as well as to collect community feedback.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Planning 101 Sessions</td>
<td>The City of Hamilton hosts Planning 101 Sessions as a way of educating and creating awareness of planning processes and concepts. Since everyone comes to engagement events with a different understanding of the field of planning, these sessions help to educate on provincial and municipal policy documents (e.g., the Planning Act, Provincial Policy Statement, Official Plan, Zoning Bylaw, etc.).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Planning “Pop-ups”</td>
<td>Planning “pop-ups” are seen by participants as one way to make it easier for citizens to be engaged. Planning staff go out into the community and engage citizens in their own environment. This could involve a “pop-up” booth being set up at a local festival, or even at a local park, mall, grocery store or street corner.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reoccurring Neighbourhood/Project-Based Meetings</td>
<td>Meetings are held on a regular basis (e.g., monthly, quarterly) to discuss neighbourhood planning, or a specific long-term planning project. For example, the City of Hamilton hosted monthly forums for the West Harbour Waterfront Project. These reoccurring meetings are seen as a regular touch point with the community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storefronts</td>
<td>Project storefronts allow people to visit and speak with staff during regular business hours. As an example, a project storefront was set up for the West Harbour Waterfront Redevelopment project, and people were able to stop by and ask questions or collect information at their convenience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tele-Town Halls</td>
<td>The City of Burlington and City of Hamilton both use tele-town halls to provide an additional opportunity for people to get involved — especially citizens that find it difficult to get to meetings.</td>
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4.4.2 Evaluating Engagement – What is Success, and how is it Measured?

As discussed in Chapter 2, there is no requirement for planners to evaluate and measure the outcomes of an engagement program. The only statutory requirement is that some form of public participation takes place. The planner is not asked to measure the degree to which engagement actually impacted or changed the outcome; just as they are not required to note who was, and who was not, represented in the process (Shipley & Utz, 2012).

Although evaluation is not mandated, it can be assumed that planners do look back on their engagement events; even if only to learn from past failures and successes. Under this assumption, participants were asked to describe how they measure the “success” of a community engagement event. The word success is in quotes, because there is no professional matrix to measure the success of engagement against (McComas, 2001). Each municipality, department and even individual staff, have their own interpretation of what “successful” community engagement looks like, sounds like and feels like. According to Shipley and Utz (2012), researchers generally agree that “effective participation is that which is real or authentic” (p.32).

When asked this question, at least one participant from each municipality shared that evaluation is usually not given the time and attention that is required. One participant from the Town of Ajax explained that it is not uncommon for them to have very little time, if any at all, to evaluate their successes, “because we are on to some other issue”. Other participants outlined that they work through time constraints by informally evaluating an event or engagement program by asking themselves some general questions, such as:

- How many people were engaged?
- How many comment forms/surveys did we receive?
- What was the quality of comments? Were comments within the scope of the project?
- How many people tweeted or retweeted about the event?
- How many web hits did we receive?
- What kind of reception did we receive?
- Did people leave with fewer questions, and a better understanding of the process and project?
Some of these questions are designed to measure success through a quantitative lens (e.g., how many people were engaged), while others assess the quality of the conversation, rather than the number of interactions. Since there is no shared understanding of what “success” is, some planners evaluate success through a quantitative lens, while others focus on assessing the quality of the engagement. A municipality’s strategic plan and overarching vision for the city or town, as well as departmental budgets, often dictate the lens planners take, but this is not always the case. Even within the same municipality, different evaluation techniques and perspectives on what signifies success can exist, as evident in the following statements:

“Our measurement tools are mostly informal. Our Future Hamilton is the only project I’ve seen that really tried to quantify the number of submissions, the number of web hits, the number of social media interactions, etc. We do a bit of that in other projects, but I don’t think there is much value in that as a monitoring tool.” – Participant #3, City of Hamilton

In this participant’s opinion, there is more value in the quality of engagement, than in the quantity of people engaged. Participant #3 went on to describe success in their view:

“As a policy-maker, I assess the success of the consultation based on what happens at the end of the day. If at the end of the day we are bringing an initiative to council and it appears from the people coming out to the council meeting, or from the commentary coming forward online, that the community is ill-informed than that was a failure of public engagement. If it seems informed than that is a good indication that we were successful. Whether the public is supportive or not doesn’t matter much. The fact that we got everyone to support us isn’t necessarily a sign of good engagement; that can actually be a sign of poor engagement. Having a group that is well informed is success in my eyes.” – Participant #3, City of Hamilton

A participant from the Town of Ajax shared a similar opinion when they described education as a measure of successful engagement:

“What we find is that at every open house there is an educational piece. We are educating the public because they don’t know what we do as planners, what the policies are, what the permitted uses are, etc. Therefore, one measure of success is education. People show up to our meetings with lots of questions. If they leave with fewer questions, and an overall better understanding of the process and development application, than I think that marks a level of success.” – Participant #13, Town of Ajax
A second Town of Ajax participant added:

“Success isn’t necessarily buy-in. Success is getting the message out there. Having people come to the meeting and wanting to be informed is a huge success”. – Participant #12, Town of Ajax

In contrast to these views, Participant #2 from the City of Hamilton stated that “if you have consensus at the end of the day, the process has generally been successful”. Under this school of thought, engagement is successful when agreement is reached.

Another way that planners measure or evaluate an engagement event is by asking those in attendance to complete an online or in-person comment card. Participant #10 from the City of Toronto outlined the following as examples of the types of questions they ask participants following an engagement event or program:

- How satisfied were you with the engagement event or process?
- Did the meeting meet your expectations?
- Did you feel you had a chance to participate?
- Did city staff honour and value your feedback?

Participant #9 from the City of Toronto noted that the City’s Public Consultation Unit is currently developing a set of standard questions to measure peoples’ feelings about the events they attend:

“My department is working on developing a set of standard questions to assess peoples’ feelings about the events they attend. We are continuously trying to improve our engagement, and we look to participant feedback to help us with this.” – Participant #9, City of Toronto

Participant #10, City of Toronto, explained that although pre-and-post evaluation is important, it can be challenging to ask community members in attendance to evaluate the success of an event on the spot because they want to see that the actions or strategies being discussed at that event are actually implemented before providing their feedback. The mentality is often that “the proof is in delivery; not just in the process”. Participant #10, City of Toronto, commented that this mentality is particularly challenging when the project is focused on developing and implementing long-term goals and actions, such as a 10-year strategic plan, or 20-year vision.
Participants from the City of Hamilton, City of Burlington and City of Toronto all outlined that they are working on the development of a standard evaluation matrix. Participant #1, City of Hamilton, explained that they are currently in the process of turning their Public Engagement Charter into policy, as recommended by the Hamilton Engagement Committee. As part of this work, a matrix to evaluate engagement events and programs will be developed, which will in turn “help to improve consistency throughout the City in terms of methodology, implementation and evaluation”. Participant #1, City of Hamilton, went on to explain that one of their goals from an engagement perspective is to draw a clearer connection between the feedback collected during engagement and the outcomes:

“We are using more inclusive engagement to validate outcomes. The effort put in at the front end determines the quality of the outcome. The outcome when we conduct these types of inclusive engagement programs is different – the process brings confidence and credibility to what comes out of the project.” – Participant #1, City of Hamilton

Similarly, participants from the City of Burlington noted that they need a more standardized evaluation matrix. It was explained that staff and the Charter Action Team (ChAT) have recognized this gap, and are working to develop more precise measures. In the meantime, staff evaluate engagement by tracking how many surveys the department put out to the public in a year, how many residents and stakeholders participated in various city initiatives, as well as how many changes were made – to policies, plans, strategies, processes, projects, etc. – as a result of public engagement. These measures can be tracked for one specific project, or city-wide. For example, a total of 176 changes were made to the draft Strategic Plan based on public feedback gathered through engagement at the beginning, middle and end of the planning process.

Conversely, engagement can be evaluated at the municipal level. The ChAT wrote a status update report at the end of 2015 as a way of revisiting the Engagement Charter and asking if and how the goals of the Charter are being met. The update listed the various community involvement activities held throughout the year, the number of responses received for each survey/engagement program, the specific changes made to public policy that year due to public involvement, the various opportunities for training, and priorities for the new year. Participant #8, City of Burlington, explained that it is important to evaluate engagement beyond individual events:
“We are also looking at ways to measure engagement overall on behalf of the city. As part of each communication plan that has engagement included in it, we are looking at evaluation of the whole package, instead of just individual engagement events.” – Participant #8, City of Burlington

Participants from the City of Toronto also outlined that they have plans to develop an evaluation matrix this year:

“We have a meeting scheduled to discuss the development of an evaluation matrix later this month. We want to ask: Who have we engaged? Who is, and is not, represented? What are the ages of participants? Are we reaching homeowners and renters?

Total numbers are interesting but they are not the most important factor of success. What we really want to know is if the experience built trust. Do participants feel it was a transparent process? We want to assess how people feel about city planning processes.” – Participant #11, City of Toronto

According to Participant #11, the evaluation matrix will focus on the experience of the participant, rather than an assessment made by staff. Indicators of success will be feelings of: enhanced trust between residents and government, transparency, honesty and genuine interest from the City in gathering community input. It is important to note that Participant #11 from the City of Toronto was the only participant to mention the “who” of engagement without being prompted. Measuring success in their view requires asking questions about who was, and who was not, represented in the engagement process with regards to ethnicity, race, gender, age, and income level.

4.4.3 Inclusive Community Engagement – Are We There Yet?

As noted above, most participants did not identify diversity of participants as an indicator of successful engagement. As a prompt, participants were asked if their municipality measures the inclusivity of their engagement activities – such as by recording the demographics of participants. Participants were also asked their opinion of whether if this type of measure is, or would be, valuable. Staff from the City of Hamilton, City of Burlington and City of Ajax all explained that their approach is to “treat everyone the same”. They described concerns around asking “private” questions, such as making people feel uncomfortable and/or unwilling to participate:
“Asking morally private questions can intimidate people and make them feel uncomfortable and unwilling to participate. As such, our approach is to treat everyone as the same.” – Participant #1, City of Hamilton

“We treat everyone the same.” – Participant #2, City of Hamilton

“We don’t ask anything other than name, age and gender on any of our evaluation methods. We could have asked more demographic questions through our online survey tools, but we chose not to because we were concerned that it might prevent people from participating. Whether that was a valid concern or not, I am not sure.” – Participant #6 and #7, City of Burlington

“There is a fine line when measuring diversity. Being inclusive is very important, but sometimes it’s too much to the point of being offensive. We just need to be consistent in our approach. Consistency in planning is important when you’re engaging the public because it at least means that you’re treating everyone the same.” – Participant #12, Town of Ajax

“How do you measure diversity without it becoming an ethical issue?” – Participant #15, Town of Ajax

“We would get a lot of push-back from the public if we asked demographic questions. People already look at us like we are the enemy. So by asking those types of questions people are going to ask “why do you want to know this?”, or state “you don’t care about my opinion because I’m a minority, or I’m young.” – Participant #15, Town of Ajax

Participants from the City of Toronto shared a very different opinion with regards to tracking and measuring the inclusivity of their engagement. It was explained that asking questions to determine who is represented in the process is necessary. Participant #11, City of Toronto, outlined that this need stems from the fact that as a municipality, they tend to engage “white, middle-aged, male, well-educated homeowners”:

“Measuring the inclusivity of our engagement processes is becoming more and more important. We tend to engage white, middle-aged, male, well-educated homeowners. We believe that if we are building a city, it needs to be a city for everyone.

We are starting to measure things like ethnic diversity, gender, age and renter/homeowner status (in place of income level). I don’t see there being an issue to asking ‘do you identify as a visible minority?’, ‘do you identify as a male/female/other?’, ‘do you identify as a youth?’, etc. The disclaimer when asking these types of question is ‘we are interested in understanding who you are – who is in the room’.” – Participant #11, City of Toronto
Participant #11, City of Toronto, was the only participant to outwardly state that it is not only acceptable, but actually critical, to ask questions about ethnicity, gender, age, and income. This participant felt that as long as the participants’ name is not required, and it is communicated that this information is being collected to better understand whose voices are being heard, and whose voices are missing, there should be no issue with asking demographic questions.

Other participants from the City of Toronto explained that they do not typically ask specific demographic questions, but instead ask participants to assess the diversity of the room. For example, staff might ask: “do you feel that the people in the room with you today are reflective of your community?” (Participant #9, City of Toronto). This approach is unique, as staff are usually the ones making informal visual judgements about who is present; not residents themselves. Participant #10, City of Toronto, warned about making these types of visual judgements:

“We need to be careful when measuring diversity through informal, visual judgements. This type of judgement does not factor in someone’s personal experiences, political leanings, interests, history with the community or trust/lack of trust with the City.” – Participant #10, City of Toronto

Other questions asked of participants are intended to determine who is in the room as it relates to the specific topic being discussed. Participant #10, City of Toronto explains this approach:

“We generally only collect information that has significance for the specific topic being discussed; something that we would cross-tabulate. For example, if we are discussing complete streets or a bike lane corridor, we might ask: how did you get to tonight’s meeting? Do you ride a bike? Do you own a car? Do you take public transit? These types of questions would give us a sense of who is in the room, and just as importantly, who is not in the room.” – Participant #10, City of Toronto

This approach focuses on ensuring a variety of perspectives on a particular topic are heard. Participant #10, City of Toronto, explained that the results of community engagement would be biased and partial if only one interest group was consulted with. For example, if car owners were the only individuals engaged on the topic of complete streets, the results might be that bike lanes are not needed or wanted. In this example, the voices of cyclists and cycling-advocates were not captured, and therefore the results of engagement are one-sided. The same logic shared by participant #10 could be applied to demographics. If only white, middle-aged, well-educated
homeowners are engaged, several different voices are not being heard, and therefore their needs and wants are not being captured as part of community conversations.

Several participants explained that although they do not formally measure and record the diversity of participants at their engagement events, they do acknowledge that there are the “usual suspects” and “hard to reach” audiences. For this reason, they actively target specific subsets of the population, such as youth or minority groups. Participants from the City of Burlington outlined that their approach is to deliver engagement programs that provide residents with a variety of different ways to have their voices heard. Traditional public meetings hosted by the City of Burlington are often well-attended, but the people in attendance do not accurately reflect the community:

“When we host planning meetings in areas that we know are multicultural, we are noticing that we are not getting a reflective mix of the community.” – Participant #7, City of Burlington

As outlined in Section 4.4.1, City of Burlington staff have been going out to more community events and festivals over the last few years to reach an audience that is more reflective of their multicultural neighbourhoods. Participant #6, City of Burlington, noted that “you do tend to reach more diverse groups through this type of engagement”. Participant #8 added:

“As the city evolves, we will reach out to people in ways that make sense to them and we will more deeply involve all people in decision-making.” – Participant #8, City of Burlington

Participant #8, City of Burlington, emphasized that as the city continues to evolve and grow, it will be increasingly important to engage with community members in a way that makes sense to them; and this may not be through public meetings, or town halls. The Mayor’s Millennial Advisory Committee is an example of engaging with a group regarded as “harder to reach” in a way that may make more sense to them.

“When the Mayor has just started a Millennial Advisory Committee that is made up of around 20 people between the ages of 18-35. We understand that one of the target audiences that we are missing are young voices. At the end of the day, this city will be inherited by people who are millennials right now, so we want to make sure that we hear their voices.” – Participant #6, City of Burlington
The Mayor’s Millennial Advisory Committee was established to gather input from millennials themselves on how the City can better engage and retain residents aged 18-35 in Burlington. Participant #8, City of Burlington, explained that more targeted outreach like this can occur when the new census data is released because staff will have a better idea of who lives in Burlington today, and will be better equipped to assess the representativeness of their current engagement programs.

“The census data that will come out in the next year will give us a better sense of who lives in Burlington today. As an engaging city – the 4th Strategic Direction in the Strategic Plan – we are looking to increase the diversity of how we reach out to people.” – Participant #8, City of Burlington

Participants from the City of Hamilton also commented that engagement led by the City needs to better reach all community members. Participant #1, City of Hamilton, stated that “the more genuine and inclusive engagement we conduct, the better our city will be.” It was explained that the City is working to lead more inclusive engagement programs that “give every Hamiltonian an equal voice”:

“To build a city we need everyone to be involved. In the past, we were not reaching the silent majority. We are working on this. The silent majority isn’t so silent anymore. We are now going to where people are.” – Participant #1, City of Hamilton

Participant #2, City of Hamilton, shared a similar sentiment when they outlined the need to think about who is not being represented, and take action to remedy the inequality: “It is important to try to identify those ‘hard to reach’ audiences and think about ways to reach them.” The term “hard to reach” was also used by participant #1, City of Hamilton, when discussing the make-up of Hamilton and desire to reach a more equal representation of the population:

“We recognize that one forth (1/4th) of Hamiltonians were born outside of Canada. We are trying to come up with ways to reach those audiences. We are always thinking of ways to actively involve “hard to reach” groups, such as: kids, youth, seniors, families, etc., by asking ourselves: Where are they? How can we go to them?” – Participant #1, City of Hamilton

Other participants from the City of Hamilton explained that the level of outreach and ability to target specific audiences is dependent on the budget for the initiative or project: “if it’s a big-budget program, then there are more resources to conduct targeted outreach.” (Participant #3,
City of Hamilton). One example is the City’s visioning project, Our Future Hamilton, which did include targeted outreach. The vision cards used for collecting community feedback were translated into eight different languages. Although, as explained by Participant #4, City of Hamilton, if the budget had not permitted this type of outreach, they would have proceeded as normal:

“For Our Future Hamilton, we did notice differences in the types of comments we were getting from residents in different communities, and it did enhance the outcome of the project quite a bit, but we would have proceeded as normal if it wasn’t happening.” – Participant #4, City of Hamilton

This quote suggests that engaging a diversity of community members on city planning projects is still regarded by some as a ‘bonus’, rather than necessary to achieving successful, inclusive and genuine community engagement.

Participants from the Town of Ajax explained that their approach to targeted engagement is typically done through existing channels and connections, such as town advisory groups and community groups:

“We have different committees that we bring our applications to. These sub-committees are made up of a diversity of Ajax residents. We decide if an application needs to go to a committee based on what is being proposed. For instance, there is a development at Harwood and Bayly with a large urban square as part of the development. The design of that square was important because everyone across Ajax will be using that public space. For that reason, we brought the application to all three committees: accessibility, recreation and culture, and diversity.” – Participant #15, Town of Ajax

Participant #16, Town of Ajax, outlined that their department draws on existing community networks to connect with and engage various groups within Ajax:

“We purposely go to those communities we have ties with – such as different ethnocultural groups, the LGBTQ community, not-for-profit groups and youth serving organizations – and ask them to come out. We make a concerted effort to invite them to the table. Are we then reaching an accurate representation of the community? I’m not sure.” – Participant #16, Town of Ajax

This perspective shared by participant #16, Town of Ajax, highlights that targeted outreach is not a standalone solution to increasing the diversity of participation. There are several drawbacks to
reaching out to specific networks. First, inviting someone to participate in a traditional municipal-led event is not sufficient, as there may be other barriers to participation. Second, deciding who receives a special invitation to participate and who does not is problematic in that some groups may feel overlooked. Participant #16 explained that they reach out to the community organizations they are aware of, but that their list of organizations is likely not complete. Third, assuming targeted engagement reaches everyone is inaccurate. For example, Participant #16 explained that even when their department reaches out to specific community groups, such as the Durham Tamil Association, they cannot then assume that they have reached all people in Ajax that identify as Tamil.

Some participants suggested that who is engaged, and subsequently who is not engaged on city-led projects is largely out of their hands. As articulated by participant #13, Town of Ajax: “you can’t interest the public in something they aren’t interested in”. Participant #4 from the City of Hamilton shared a similar opinion when they outlined that “different projects appeal to different communities”. This idea was further expanded on by participant #3, City of Hamilton:

“It is a classic conundrum. If you are consulting on Aboriginal issues or policies, you will get the Aboriginal community out, but not the non-Aboriginal community. Same thing with the LGBTQ community. For the West Harbour Redevelopment project, we get people from the local community, but not necessarily people from the rest of the city. People focus on the issues that interest them. Reaching beyond the core group given the issue is difficult.” – Participant #3, City of Hamilton

What is being suggested by these three participants is that community members that are interested in or impacted by a project will engage, and others will not.

4.4.4 Barriers to Facilitating Inclusive Engagement

Participants were asked to identify the barriers faced by their department in terms of increasing engagement by the audiences defined as “hard to reach” in their municipality. Budget, resource restrictions, and fixed timelines were highlighted as three of the limiting factors. One participant from the City of Toronto stated that “resources, money and timelines are all barriers to good engagement” (Participant #9), while another outlined that “communication and consultation is very expensive, especially for a small division with a small budget” (Participant #11). Participant #1 from the City of Hamilton explained that facilitating better engagement programs is more
expensive because there is an additional cost associated with implementing the tools that lead to more inclusive and genuine engagement:

“There is a cost associated with this type of genuine engagement. There is the cost of the community champion, the cost of a translator, the cost of producing materials in multiple languages, the cost of translating feedback back into English, and so on. You really need to have City Council and the Mayor on board to approve the additional budget and resource requirements.” – Participant #1, City of Hamilton

In addition to budget restrictions, planning departments are also often faced with resource restrictions. Some participants noted that they simply don’t have the staff required to lead more involved engagement exercises. Participants from the Town of Ajax explained that they are limited by resources: “at the City of Toronto, they have an entire public consultation division. We just don’t have the resources” (Participant #13). Other participants described their resource restrictions as relating more to varying levels of staff experience and comfort with engagement:

“The level of engagement is largely dependent on the capacity of the person leading the project. Some people are really good at public and stakeholder engagement and are really creative in their approach, but others aren’t as comfortable and the quality of the engagement program for that project is reflective of that. We don’t usually have the resources to hire a public engagement expert to support our staff. For planning projects, it’s tough. I’ve always been of the view that the planner should be the one out there talking about the planning. Therefore, even if you aren’t comfortable doing it, you still need to lead the public engagement component of your initiative.” – Participant #3, City of Hamilton

Participant #4, City of Hamilton, went on to explain that each engagement program is decided on a case-by-case basis; partially to reflect the project teams level of experience and comfort leading public engagement. It was stated that a factor which inhibits the creativity, and sometimes inclusivity of an engagement program, is how well the staff on that particular project know how to engage. And even if staff know how to engage, they are often restricted in how creative and innovative they can be because of strict timelines:

“Having adequate time to explore new engagement mechanisms is a limitation. Exploring alternative ways to engage is something that I think you can spend a lot of time on, but it might not necessarily lead to something successful. I often focus on a tool that I have used in the past that worked well, because it is a more productive use of my time.” – Participant #4, City of Hamilton
Similarly, City of Burlington management staff recognized varying levels of commitment to community engagement across municipal departments. As such, the City asked 34 members of their staff to attend International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) training, as described by participant #8:

“All of our staff participated in IAP2 training. We noticed that there was some inconsistency between departments on the commitment to community engagement. Engagement was happening really well in some departments, while others could use improvement. We are now more consistently reaching out to people using the IAP2 spectrum as a set of guidelines.” – Participant #8, City of Burlington

The City of Burlington identified an inconsistency in how engagement was being delivered, decided on the IAP2 framework as a guide to municipal engagement, and trained their staff on this framework. Participant #1, City of Hamilton, explained – during a separate conversation from Participants #3 and #4 – that Hamilton is also working to alleviate inconsistencies across the municipality. It was outlined that staff are working on the development of a policy to support the Engagement Charter and to increase consistency across all departments and projects:

“We are working on developing a policy to support the Engagement Charter. This will help increase consistency across all departments. Our goal is to ensure that legislated engagement is inclusive. As part of this work, we will develop an engagement toolkit for staff that will provide some guidance around formal, informal and online engagement.” – Participant #1, City of Hamilton

Another barrier outlined by participants is language. When thinking about community engagement and hosting conversations, language is an important consideration. What language do residents want to converse in? Is it sufficient to only engage in English because we live in Ontario? Do planners speak using planning jargon or do they speak in a way that is easily understandable by all potential stakeholders? These are some of the questions to consider when thinking about language. Staff from the City of Burlington and Town of Ajax highlighted the importance of minimizing planning jargon and communicating in plain language:

“We are committed to writing everything in plain language and eliminating the use of jargon.” – Participant #8, City of Burlington

“Planning lingo can be very intimidating. We try to use plain language and make it easy for people to understand and approach us.” – Participant #14, Town of Ajax
Participant #14 noted that the use of planning jargon can result in conversations that feel exclusive. It was explained that staff at the Town of Ajax are to speak and produce materials in plain language to eliminate invisible barriers between residents and municipal staff.

Staff from the City of Hamilton also identified language as a barrier to inclusive engagement, but their focus is on the various languages spoken in the community. Participants expressed their desire to offer more opportunities for residents to engage in planning conversations in a language of their choosing:

“It is important that your audience really understands what they are being asked and why. Ideally, the messaging should be tailored to each audience. In Hamilton, we are increasingly using interpreters at meetings, translating meeting materials and feedback cards into multiple languages and hiring community champions to be the first point of contact.” – Participant #1, City of Hamilton

“There are a lot of cultural groups in Hamilton that don’t speak English, or speak very little English. A number of communities also have their own newspapers. We haven’t done as good of a job as we should at tapping into those channels. This is a gap. If we could provide the materials in other languages to these news outlets that would help, or if we had people that could speak different languages. Again, I don’t know how we would do it, but I see it as a gap.” – Participant #5, City of Hamilton

Participant #1 and #5 both identified language as a barrier, but also as an opportunity. There is an opportunity to lead conversations about city initiatives in several languages. As suggested by Participant #5, there are existing channels within Hamilton that could be used to get messaging out, and invite participation by a wider audience, but the logistics and details on how to actually achieve this is still unclear. Participant #10 from the City of Toronto outlined that language may only be a perceived barrier to engagement. They went on to explain that “most people come [to engagement events] expecting to communicate in English”. Participant #10, City of Toronto, added that there is resistance from the community for the City to spend resources on things like translation. It was noted that oftentimes when there is a translator present, the participants themselves want to communicate in English. For this reason, it is difficult to anticipate when the presence of a translator will be of use to individuals in attendance, and when a translator will go unused.
Participants #1 and #2 from the City of Hamilton both stated that some residents are unable to attend city-led engagement events because they cannot find an easily accessible and affordable way to get to events, or because they do not have someone to care for their children while they attend. As described by Participants #1 and #2, the City has recognized these barriers and have implemented strategies to alleviate them. For example, the City pays for public transit fares when necessary to ensure anyone interested can participate. This program is promoted through informal networks to ensure there is genuine need. Additionally, as explained by participant #2, “the same engagement event is often hosted at multiple locations and at different times of the day to accommodate different schedules and reduce accessibility concerns”. It was also noted that the City tries to start events in the late afternoon and into the evening (3:00-6:00 PM) in an attempt to catch people on their way home from work. If, however, a meeting is held during a time that participants require childcare, the City will pay for this service where there is a need (Participant #1, City of Hamilton).

One way to allocate resources intended to facilitate more inclusive engagement is to better know your audience. Participant #2, City of Hamilton, explained that staff are more likely to be able to identify barriers and then act to remove those barriers if they have a sense of who is coming to their event.

“When possible, we ask people to self-identify ahead of time. We can then plan the service to meet their needs by removing any potential barriers ahead of time, such as accessibility and language barriers.” – Participant #2, City of Hamilton

Participant #10, City of Toronto, shared a similar viewpoint with regards to planning engagement events ahead of time. It was outlined that the City can be more sensitive to participant needs if they can anticipate who will show up:

“It is important to review, anticipate and plan for your audience. We try to plan our engagement events in a manner that will work for that particular audience. To do this, we must ask ourselves: who is most impacted by this project? Who might be invested in this project? Who needs to be a part of this conversation? As an example, we set aside a prayer room for one of our all-day meetings a few years ago.” – Participant #10, City of Toronto

Staff from the City of Toronto concluded that there are several barriers they can identify that might make it more challenging for the City to host more inclusive engagement. To better
understand these barriers, and the reasons why people decide to act, or not act on something, they are interested in behavioural economics. They outlined their intent to hire an external company to help them better understand why people decide to act or not act, and learn how to communicate opportunities for engagement in a way that will generate a response.

4.4.5 Planning and Politics

Staff from the City of Hamilton, Town of Ajax and City of Burlington all highlighted at some point in the conversation how politics directly influences the type and style of engagement employed by their department. As discussed in Section 4.3.4, budget restrictions and resource limitations can prevent staff from trying new approaches to engagement that could result in more diverse participation and representative results. Participant #1, City of Hamilton, explains that when City Council understands the intangible benefits of genuine engagement, they are more likely to support staff with funding and resources. Without political support, it is very difficult to move a more extensive engagement program through to implementation.

“We need political will to move things forward. Councillors in Hamilton are genuine about wanting to do engagement right. Genuine, inclusive engagement starts from the leadership. We rely on council to approve budget and resource requirements. It can be difficult for some municipalities to sell authentic engagement to council. The conversation is often about tangible versus intangible assets. For example, how can you make connections between engagement processes and tangible assets?” – Participant #1, City of Hamilton

Participant #3, City of Hamilton, shared a similar opinion with regards to the importance of planners having political support. It was explained that political support does influence the level of engagement, but only if resources accompany this support:

“If the support for engagement trickles down through resources, then yes it does influence the level of engagement. If support trickles down just through words, then no. If we aren’t resourcing projects to accommodate the principles outlined in our Community Engagement Charter, if we aren’t valuing it, then it doesn’t matter.” – Participant #3, City of Hamilton

Participants from the Town of Ajax agreed that their council is very supportive of staff and committed to advancing engagement and embracing diversity. Participant #16 acknowledged that municipal work is still largely guided through a top-down process, and therefore council
support is required. It was explained that because diversity and community engagement are included as part of the Town’s mandate, work in this area is receiving funding and support:

“It’s really based top-down from council. Diversity and community engagement have been included in the Town’s vision mandate for a number of years now, which is why we did the first phase of the Diversity and Inclusion Plan. We are working on phase 2 this year. It’s also why we hired a Diversity and Community Engagement Coordinator. Council’s approval of staffing dollars or their approval of projects and initiatives, directly impacts what we can do as staff.” – Participant #16, Town of Ajax

Council’s support of a project and approval of staffing dollars is critical to advancing a project, but as outlined by Participant #14, Town of Ajax, there are other benefits associated with Council support. When council is supportive of staff and a project, they often use their own platforms, such as Twitter and email distribution lists, to spread the word about a project and upcoming engagement opportunities.

“We are really lucky with our council because they are supportive of staff first and foremost. They give us a lot of room to do our job. They are supportive of a lot of the initiatives in the Town and trying to draw out those different community groups to get them involved. We hear from a lot of residents that they heard about the project from their Councillor; they help us get the message out there. This helps to make our job easier, because they are reaching out and explaining things on their end as well.” – Participant #14, Town of Ajax

Staff from the City of Burlington also outlined that having support at the managerial and council level is required to advance more genuine and inclusive engagement programs. Participant #8, City of Burlington, stated that “you have to have support at the council and senior management level”. They went on to add that the City of Burlington Council is very supportive of staffs’ efforts to advance engagement.

### 4.5 Summary

This chapter presented the findings from the online review of municipal policies of twelve Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA) municipalities and interviews with staff from the Town of Ajax, City of Burlington, City of Hamilton and City of Toronto. The research found that public meetings, open houses, online surveys and social media are the most widely used engagement tools by GTHA municipalities. Having said that, municipalities are increasingly
expanding their engagement toolbox to include other approaches, such as: hosting “pop-ups” in the community, piggybacking on existing community events, building a network of “community champions”, creating project storefronts, holding reoccurring neighbourhood meetings, visiting high schools, etc. Several participants explained that their department is now providing a number of different engagement opportunities, instead of just hosting one public meeting, as a way to increase reach (both in terms of numbers and diversity of participation).

When asked about evaluation, some participants outlined that they do not prioritize this step in the process because they are limited by resources and it is not legally required. Other participants explained that they informally ask themselves, or those in attendance, some general quantitative and qualitative questions to assess the “success” of an event. It was made evident through the interviews with staff that there is no single definition for what “successful” engagement is. Some regard success as achieving buy-in from community members, while others see success as having a large turn-out for a community meeting. One participant explained that success cannot be measured without asking questions about who was, and who was not represented in the process in terms of ethnicity, age, gender, income, etc. Most of the other research participants explained that they do not record resident demographics at engagement events because they think people would feel uncomfortable or offended. Instead, their approach is to “treat everyone the same” during the design and implementation of an engagement program.

The online municipal review found that eight of the twelve municipalities reviewed have vision statements that articulate a commitment to inclusivity, or engagement, or both. This municipal-wide commitment to community engagement and/or principles of inclusion was identified as important by research participants, because without Council support it is very difficult implement inclusive and genuine engagement programs. Participants outlined several barriers faced by their department in terms of increasing engagement by traditionally underrepresented individuals, including: budget restrictions, resource limitations and fixed timelines. Several of these barriers require City Council support for them to be overcome.
Chapter 5

5 Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

The objective of this research project was twofold: 1) to explore if, and how, municipalities in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area are addressing a lack of diversity in public engagement processes, and 2) to determine the extent to which inclusive engagement programs are increasing diversity of participation in practice. This final chapter will provide a conclusion to the paper by answering the two research questions in relation to the literature discussed in Chapter 2 and the key findings presented in Chapter 4. This chapter will first synthesize the key findings, and then discuss the themes that emerged. Limitations of the project are outlined and future directions for research are suggested.

5.2 Summary of Key Findings

The first research question of this thesis asks how municipalities are addressing the lack of participant diversity in their engagement programs. Based on the findings from the online review of municipal policies, traditional engagement mechanisms, such as public meetings, open houses and online surveys, are still the most commonly used tools for engaging the community. There was, however, general acknowledgement among interview participants that these traditional approaches to engagement attract the same people: typically, white, middle-aged, well-educated homeowners. Interview participants from three of the four municipalities surveyed commented that “hard to reach” audiences, such as disadvantaged and marginalized individuals and groups, do not attend their events. To reach these audiences, municipalities are exploring engagement tools that are outside the “traditional toolbox”.

First, planners are going out into the community and engaging citizens in their own environment. Conversations take place on a street corner, at a park, in the grocery store, at a community centre, at a street festival, etc. The idea is to go where people are, instead of asking them to come to a municipal setting. Second, municipalities are increasingly relying on online platforms and social media to reach a wider audience. Online tools are used to market in-person engagement opportunities, but they are also being used to collect feedback from citizens that cannot, or choose not, to attend engagement events. Online surveys, discussion forums, tweets, emails and
electronic feedback forms are all ways in which planners are gathering community input and engaging in a virtual conversation. Third, municipal staff are attempting to build trust between the community and the local government by partnering with “community champions”. Whether paid or unpaid, “community champions” are asked to engage and converse with residents in their community on a topic. The intent is to provide citizens with the opportunity to talk about planning projects and issues in an environment and language that they feel most comfortable in. The involvement of “community champions” can also help to address issues of distrust between government, stakeholders and residents. For this reason, the feedback gathered by “community champions” is often more honest and genuine. These modern engagement tools are designed to increase the diversity of participation by removing physical and social barriers, but they are still largely regarded as supplementary to traditional engagement mechanisms.

As summarized above, each of the four municipalities surveyed are implementing unique and innovative approaches to engagement to increase diversity of participation; however, it is evident that the equality-based approach to planning is still the norm. At least one participant from each municipality, excluding the City of Toronto, explained that their approach to inclusive planning is to “treat everyone the same”. In other words, no favours are granted to certain individuals or groups. As noted earlier, there may be strategic and political reasons for claiming one is treating everyone equally. Equality-based planning assumes that people can, and will, participate if they are provided with the opportunity (Day, 1997), but this thinking fails to recognize the many physical, economic and social barriers to participation. Marginalized and disadvantaged groups face barriers and burdens that others do not. Leela Viswanathan (2009) argues that disadvantaged and minority groups must have access to planning processes, and be supported to exercise their right to participate. To achieve this, planners need to acknowledge the social structures that enable or constrain citizens from participating, and evaluate how their profession is contributing to these constraints (Young, 1990; Viswanathan, 2009). Many of the participants interviewed for this research project are not yet thinking in this way.

The second research question evaluates the extent to which inclusive engagement programs are increasing diversity of participation in practice. This question proved difficult to answer as there is no requirement for planners to evaluate the “success” of an engagement program. It is not mandatory for planners to measure the degree to which public and stakeholder input influenced the outcome, and they are not required to track who was, and who was not, represented in the
process (Shipley & Utz, 2012). Having said that, participants were asked if they evaluate their community engagement events, and if so, how they measure success. Interestingly, when responding to this question, only one participant discussed diversity of citizen participation as an indicator of success. This participant was the only one to mention the “who” of engagement without being prompted. When asked specifically if their municipality measures the inclusivity of their engagement activities, most staff indicated that they do not track participant demographics – such as ethnicity, gender, age, or income – due to concerns around asking private questions. For this reason, it is difficult to determine if the engagement process and planning outcome are representative of diverse community needs. Additionally, it is difficult to assess which engagement strategies are increasing diversity of participation because we cannot draw a correlation between tools and reach if we are not tracking demographics.

5.3 Discussion

5.3.1 Community Engagement in a Municipal Setting: Top-Down to Bottom-Up Engagement

This research explored the ways in which municipalities engage the public on planning matters. The study’s findings indicate that traditional engagement mechanisms, such as public meetings and citizen advisory committees, are still widely used by Ontario planners; however, several supplementary tools are also being used to engage “harder to reach” audiences. As described by Brody, Godschalk and Burby (2003), one way that planners can increase diverse public involvement is to actively target the voices that have traditionally been underrepresented in the process. This research found that municipalities are trying to make it easier for marginalized citizens to participate in the planning process by providing several opportunities for engagement, and in turn eliminating the physical and social barriers associated with traditional engagement mechanisms. Instead of hosting a single public meeting at a set location and time, staff are facilitating several informal engagement opportunities. Many of these opportunities do not require travel on the part of the citizen (such as online engagement, planning “pop-ups”, and telephone town halls), while others attempt to reduce social barriers by having “community champions” facilitate workshops at community centres, places of worship, etc.

As argued by Innes and Booher (2004), traditional engagement methods fail to accurately represent the public and fail to produce equitable decisions. Mahjabeen, Shrestha and Dee (2009)
add that traditional public participation methods are trapped within top-down thinking that does not foster genuine engagement or the creation of plans that reflect the needs and wants of disadvantaged and marginalized groups. Although the municipalities surveyed still host and rely on traditional engagement mechanisms to collect public feedback, they acknowledge the value of incorporating more collaborative and inclusive approaches to engagement into their toolbox. The study’s findings indicate a shift from top-down engagement methods to more collaborative and community-led approaches to engagement. The City of Burlington’s Charter Action Team, the City of Toronto’s Planning Review Panel, and the City of Hamilton’s Community Connector Program for the LRT project are all examples of this transition. Each one of these initiatives is a modification of traditional top-down methods because they prioritize two-way dialogue, mutually shared knowledge, continuous and proactive engagement and diverse participation (Innes & Booher, 2004). These findings support the argument presented by Innes and Booher (2004) that improving public engagement processes requires the creation of new engagement methods; not new ways of implementing existing methods.

5.3.2 Evaluating Engagement – Connecting Process and Outcome

The literature on evaluating public engagement consistently concludes that there is no consensus about what public engagement is intended to accomplish (Day, 1997; Glass, 1979), and as such, there are no standard criteria for evaluating the process and subsequent outcomes (Shipley & Utz, 2012; McComas, 2001). Consequently, a finding of this research project is that there are several different interpretations of what “successful” engagement is, and how it should be measured. Some of the research participants interpreted successful engagement as reaching consensus and buy-in at the end of the day, whereas others strongly reject this idea, commenting that a critical measure of success is education and knowledge building. Some participants evaluate engagement through a quantitative lens (e.g., how many people were engaged?), whereas others use a qualitative lens (e.g., what were the quality of the comments?). Some participants evaluate engagement internally by asking themselves questions, whereas others find it important to have those in attendance evaluate the event. Some participants are concerned with who was represented in the process, whereas others refuse to ask demographic questions. These conflicting findings support the argument that standardized criteria for measuring the effectiveness of various engagement methods is needed (Shipley & Utz, 2012). To fill this policy-gap, three of the four municipalities surveyed are currently in the process of developing
their own evaluation matrix. These matrices are intended to increase consistency throughout the municipality by outlining precise measures and criteria for evaluation.

The research findings highlight the need for evaluation to be included in legislation as a required component of community planning. Participants explained that in many cases they do not have the time or resources required to review and assess an engagement program, because they are not required to do so. The Ontario Planning Act outlines requirements for consultation with the public, such as hosting a public meeting; however, there is no requirement to evaluate the effectiveness or outcome of this meeting (Ontario., & Canada Law Book Inc, 1992). As a result, evaluation in practice is often reduced to checking a box indicating that public consultation took place (Klein, 1993). Without critical evaluation of current engagement processes and the outcomes of those processes, how can we improve public engagement in practice? Evaluation is needed to measure the effectiveness of various approaches to engagement in terms of reaching equitable outcomes and engaging underrepresented and marginalized groups (Shipley & Utz, 2012; McComas, 2001; Fainstein, 2000). One research participant outlined that it is necessary to ask questions about ethnicity, gender, age and income, to determine who is represented and who is not represented in the process. Without assessing the diversity of the room, staff cannot confidently conclude that the process and outcome are representative of the community they serve. One City of Hamilton participant shared a similar opinion when they explained that inclusive engagement is seen as one way to validate outcomes. It was stated that the effort they put in at the front end, determines the quality of the outcome. This participant outlined that one of their municipal goals for engagement is to see that there is a correlation between process and outcome. This research finding is an example of the gap between process and outcome, as discussed by McComas (2001), being bridged in practice.

5.3.3 Inclusive Community Engagement – Do We Need Equality or Equity?

There is general agreement among scholars that strong plans come from planning processes with extensive public and stakeholder input (Arnstein, 1969; Glass, 1979; Burby, 2003; Roberts, 2004; Mahjabeen, Shrestha & Dee, 2009). The literature on race, diversity and engagement asserts that strong and equitable plans are the result of engagement that reflects the voices of systematically marginalized individuals (Mahjabeen, Shrestha & Dee, 2009; Head, 2007; Fainstein, 2014; Uyesugi & Shipley, 2005). The research found that although most participants
follow the equality-based approach to planning, they agree that equitable and implementable plans are often a result of authentic and inclusive engagement.

Several participants explained that although they do not formally measure and record the demographics of participants at their engagement events, they do acknowledge that there are the “usual suspects” and “hard to reach” audiences. One participant from the City of Burlington stated that their meetings are usually well-attended, but the people in attendance do not accurately reflect the diversity within the community. To reach these underrepresented audiences, defined by one participant as the “silent majority”, specific groups are targeted. This is done through advertising, inviting existing community groups (e.g. ethno-cultural groups, youth organizations) to participate, creating youth advisory committees, hosting the dialogue in several languages, and partnering with “community champions”. It is evident from the research that participants do not feel it is within their role to act as advocates for those underrepresented in the process (Metzger, 1996; Krumholz & Forester, 1990), but to instead seek diverse voices by actively targeting groups and individuals (Brody, Godschalk, & Burby, 2003).

It has been argued by several scholars that the field of planning has failed to keep up with and respond to the changing demography of the city (Sandercock, 2000; Goonewardena, Rankin, Weinstock, 2004). Critics of urban planning regard the planner as primarily serving the interests of English-speaking homeowners and organized businesses (Metzher, 1996). The study’s findings indicate that some participants disagree with this critique, explaining that “you can’t interest the public in something they are not interested in”, whereas others agree that planning processes have not evolved as quickly as their changing cities and towns. It was explained by one participant that as the city continues to grow, it is becoming increasingly important for staff to engage the community in a way that makes sense to them. Another participant commented that it is not acceptable to ignore the subject of diversity when planning a city for everyone. To achieve this, there must be acknowledgement that current engagement programs tend to reach white, middle-aged, well-educated homeowners. Participants on the other end of the spectrum shared the opinion that it is a persons’ right not to engage. It was explained that some citizens choose to engage because they are interested in the topic or feel they will be impacted by the decision, while others choose not to participate. The underlying assumption of this argument is that participation is a choice. This viewpoint aligns with the equality-based planning model
which assumes that everyone is equally prepared to participate if they are provided with the opportunity (Day, 1997; Grant, 1994).

A critical flaw of the equality-based planning model is that barriers to participation are ignored. It is assumed that democratic participation is not a privilege granted to certain groups because everyone has an equal opportunity to contribute. Iannaccone and Everton (2004) explain that the decision to participate in a political process is made only after individuals have met the essentials of their lives. Participation is therefore regarded as a luxury to many citizens. Even when citizens are supported and able to participate, the environment is often perceived as unwelcoming. James Frideres (1997) explains that it is human nature for individuals to judge their environment and withdraw from participation if the environment is perceived negatively. The research found that there is a general lack of regard for, or awareness of, the “whiteness” of many municipal spaces. Sarah Ahmed (2012) explains that this “whiteness” is most visible to “those who do not inhabit it” (p.3). None of the research participants mentioned the “whiteness” of municipal environments, or the (lack of) diversity of their staff as reasons why citizens may be choosing not to participate. In order for the planning department to engage a diversity of residents that more accurately reflects the community, critical evaluation of municipal processes and settings is needed.

5.3.4 Barriers to Facilitating Inclusive Engagement

An area of focus of this research project was identifying and better understanding the barriers that prevent municipalities from leading more inclusive and authentic engagement programs. The research found that budget restrictions, resource limitations and fixed timelines are the most common barriers. Participants explained that there is a higher cost associated with facilitating more inclusive and genuine engagement. There is a cost associated with hiring a community champion, hiring a translator, producing materials in several languages, providing transit tokens, providing childcare to participants, etc. To make the most of limited budgets and resources, participants outlined the need to better know their audience and the barriers they face. If these barriers are known, staff can use their resources to remove them ahead of time. For example, municipalities can cover the cost of transit tokens, provide a prayer room, offer childcare services for the duration of the meeting, hire a translator, etc. Within this approach to planning, the planner has a responsibility to identify the social structures and barriers that prevent citizens
from engaging in their community, and plan their events in a way that reduces these barriers (Young, 1990; Viswanathan, 2009).

The research study’s findings indicate that political support from City Council is needed if planners are to proactively minimize the barriers to participation in their municipality. Without budget and resource approvals from City Council, planners find it very difficult to implement an engagement program that reaches a diverse and representative audience. Just as Mahjabeen, Shrestha and Dee (2009) criticize traditional public engagement methods for being trapped in a top-down government process, participants indicated that gaining council support is the first step in a top-down process that guides most municipal work. Most of the participants interviewed for this research project did not highlight this reliance on Council as an issue, because they feel their municipality is committed to advancing engagement and inclusive municipal practices. This is not the case for all municipalities, however. It was evident from the findings of the municipal review that not all municipalities share this commitment to engagement and inclusivity. One participant explained that City Council typically responds better to tangible benefits of projects. Since evaluating the outcome of an engagement program is not yet mandated, the benefits of more genuine and inclusive engagement are largely intangible. For planners working at a municipality where community engagement and equitable policies are not a priority of City Council, it will likely be even harder to keep up with, and better plan for, diversifying cities.

5.4 Project Limitations and Areas for Future Research

This research project focused on four municipalities, and as such is limited in the kinds of conclusions that can be made for all municipalities in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area. The intention of this research project was to highlight municipal best practices with regards to inclusive public engagement, as well as to identify areas for improvement. It was not the intention of this project to rank the municipalities for their efforts, recommend one municipality’s approach over the other, or draw conclusions for all municipalities in the GTHA. These four municipalities – the Town of Ajax, the City of Burlington, the City of Hamilton, and the City of Toronto – are examples of how cities with diverse populations are attempting to address a lack of diversity in public engagement processes, and integrate principles of equity and inclusion into their engagement programs.
A second limitation of this project is that the research was collected primarily through semi-structured interviews with three to five staff from each municipality. Given that a single municipality can employ hundreds of staff, it is important to acknowledge that the research participants do not speak for the entire municipality. Although participant responses are associated with their municipality, their opinions and experiences do not represent the experiences of all staff and should not be read as such. It is worth noting, however, that most of the participants included in this research are senior and manager-level staff with extensive experience planning and hosting public engagement programs, as well as representing their municipality in different settings.

This project only sought to interview individuals from one side of the engagement process: municipal staff. Due to the scope of this project, it was decided that citizen interviews would not be held. Conversations with citizens, especially those self-identifying as marginalized or underrepresented in municipal engagement, would provide insight into how people want to be engaged by staff, what the existing barriers to participation are, how they can be better supported, and where there are opportunities for improvement and collaboration. Research in this area would provide planning professionals and policy-makers with vital information to help them design engagement programs and policies that reflect principles of inclusion, equity and diversity.

Additional research on the evaluation of current engagement processes would assist the planning profession in transitioning to an equity model that is focused on producing outcomes that are fair and representative. It is evident from this research project that evaluation is not a priority in planning practice, yet without it, it is very difficult to measure the effectiveness of various approaches to engagement in terms of reaching equitable outcomes and engaging underrepresented and marginalized individuals. Research that investigates the correlation, or lack thereof, between process and outcome would help fill this gap in the literature.

5.5 Conclusions

A consistent theme in the literature on planning and engagement is that community engagement is good and should be held to enhance citizen control and produce fair and sustainable outcomes (Hodge & Gordon, 2008; Burby, 2003; Mahjabeen, Shrestha & Dee, 2009; Brody, Godschalk, & Burby, 2003; Innes & Booher, 2004). The literature, however, is less clear about what “good”
community engagement looks like in practice, and how it can be measured. This research explored the tools and mechanisms being used by some municipalities in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area to engage the community on planning matters. This study also investigated how the “success” of community engagement events are measured.

The literature on planning and diversity also describe community engagement as good, but critique the field of planning for failing to evolve and reorganize to keep up with growing and diversifying North American cities (Sandercock, 2005; Goonewardena, Rankin & Weinstock, 2004). This research project explored the ways in which municipalities are attempting to reach more diverse audiences when engaging on planning matters, and investigated the extent to which inclusive public engagement programs increase diversity of participation in practice. This project identified the many barriers and facilitators of engagement, specifically as it relates to reaching underrepresented and systematically marginalized community members.

It is evident from the literature and the findings of this research project that designing and facilitating public engagement programs in communities composed of a diversity of ethnic, socio-economic, gender and age groups is challenging (Reeves, 2005; Barrow, 2000; Umemoto, 2001); however, that is the reality of many Ontario municipalities. As such, planners have a responsibility to ensure their processes and outcomes are representative of their diverse cities. This paper argues that it is no longer appropriate for the planning department to host a public meeting and assume that everyone is equally able to participate. Planners must acknowledge the social structures that facilitate or constrain community members from participating, and consider how traditional engagement methods contribute to these constraints.
References


Appendix A

Informed Consent Form

Research Title: Towards inclusive community engagement: engaging marginalized residents

Research Investigator: Amanda Crompton, Graduate Student, University of Toronto

Research Supervisor: Sarah Wakefield, Associate Professor, University of Toronto

Purpose of the Research: To identify engagement principles and tools developed by Ontario municipalities to increase the diversity of residential participation in urban planning processes, and assess how well they are implemented in practice.

What You Will Be Asked to Do: Participate in a one hour in-person interview. The interview will be scheduled according to your availability, and can be held at your place of work.

Withdrawal from the Research: Your participation in this research is voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any time, for any reason. In the event that you withdraw from the research, all associated data collected will be immediately destroyed. No personal information or correspondence between the project team and the participant will be retained. Your decision to stop participating, or to refuse to answer specific questions, will not affect your relationship with the researcher or the University of Toronto.

Confidentiality: All of the information you supply during the research project will be held in confidence. No personally identifiable information will be associated with your responses and your name will not appear in any report or publication of the research. Your responses will be linked to your municipality. All direct quotes will be reviewed and approved by you before they are included in the research results. To ensure the security of your identity, a secure audio recording will be used to capture the interview responses. The interviews will be transcribed and saved to an encrypted hard drive.

Questions: If you have any questions about the research or about your participation, please feel free to contact Amanda Crompton by telephone at (416) 898-5370 or by email (amanda.crompton@mail.utoronto.ca). This research has been reviewed and approved by the University of Toronto Ethics Review Board.

Signatures:

I _____________________________________________, consent to participate in the research outlined above. I have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate. I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicates my consent.

Participant Name: ____________________________
Signature: ____________________________ Date: ____________________________

Research Investigator: Amanda Crompton
Signature: ____________________________ Date: ____________________________
Appendix B

Interview Questions

The following ten (10) interview questions are intended to guide the discussion; however, the interviews will be semi-formal to accommodate the natural flow of conversation.

1. How does the Planning Department typically engage the community on planning matters (e.g., town hall meetings, online surveys, open houses, “planners in public spaces”, etc.)?
2. Has the department tried any unique or innovative ways of engaging and consulting with the public? Was this method perceived as successful? Why or why not?
3. How does the department measure the “success” of a community engagement event?
4. Does the Planning Department set engagement targets (e.g., total reach, number of completed surveys, diversity targets)? How are these targets measured?
5. Does the municipality measure the inclusivity of their engagement activities (e.g., are the demographics of participants recorded)? Do you think this type of measure is, or would be, valuable? Why or why not?
6. In your opinion, are the current planning processes and subsequent planning outcomes representative of the diverse population of [insert municipality]?
7. In your opinion, are the various engagement programs led by your municipality increasing the diversity of participation? Why or why not?
8. What barriers does the department face in terms of increasing engagement and participation by the audiences defined as “hard to reach” in this municipality? How has the department tried to overcome these barriers? Are there any specific examples of projects that attempted to reach a target audience (e.g., youth, seniors, newcomers)?
9. Are you aware of any innovative or interesting engagement tools being used by other departments/divisions within your municipality? Could these tools be used by the Planning Department? Why or why not?
10. To your knowledge, does [insert municipality] include “diversity” or “inclusion” in the core values, vision and/or guiding principles for the municipality? How does this influence the projects and processes implemented by the Planning Department?
SUBJECT: Thesis Interview Request - "Towards Inclusive Community Engagement"

Dear [insert participant’s name]:

My name is Amanda Crompton and I am a Human Geography Graduate Student at the University of Toronto. I am currently conducting research for my thesis entitled “Towards inclusive community engagement: engaging marginalized residents” which aims to identify current engagement mechanisms used by municipalities located within the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area to increase the diversity of residential participation in urban planning processes, and assess how well they are implemented in practice.

Based on my desktop research, I understand that the [insert municipality] is leading innovative public consultation programs focused on encouraging participation and interest from community members representing different ethnicities, classes, ages, genders and abilities. For this reason, I am contacting you and a few of your colleagues to request an in-person interview.

As part of my research, I am conducting interviews with [planning] staff from municipalities that are actively taking steps to develop and implement inclusive and innovative public engagement strategies. One of the research objectives of this project is to evaluate the extent to which current engagement programs are increasing the diversity of participation by residents.

I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to learn more about your departments unique approach to community engagement. If you are interested in learning more about the project, or scheduling an interview, I would be happy to send you a copy of the interview questions and answer any questions.

It is anticipated that the interview will take approximately 1 hour to complete and will be scheduled according to your availability.

Please don’t hesitate to inform me if there is someone else you think would be better suited to discuss this topic with me.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards,

Amanda Crompton, BES
University of Toronto Graduate Student, Human Geography
Appendix D

List of Advisory Committees

Town of Ajax
- Accessibility Advisory Committee
- Diversity and Community Engagement Advisory Committee
- Environmental Advisory Committee
- Heritage Advisory Committee
- Recreation and Culture Advisory Committee
- Transportation Advisory Committee

City of Brampton
- Accessibility Advisory Committee
- Brampton Sports Hall of Fame Committee
- Council Compensation Committee
- Cycling Advisory Committee
- Environment Advisory Committee
- Inclusion and Equity Committee
- Taxicab Advisory Committee

City of Burlington
- Burlington Accessibility Advisory Committee
- Burlington Cycling Advisory Committee
- Burlington Downtown Parking Advisory Committee
- Burlington Inclusivity Advisory Committee
- Burlington Integrated Transportation Advisory Committee (ITAC)
- Burlington Seniors Advisory Committee
- Burlington Sustainable Development Advisory Committee
- Heritage Burlington Advisory Committee

City of Hamilton
- Advisory Committee for Immigrants and Refugees
- Advisory Committee for Persons with Disabilities
- Agriculture and Rural Affairs Advisory Committee
- Business Improvement Area (BIA) Advisory Committee
- Committee Against Racism
- Food Advisory Committee
- Hamilton Aboriginal Advisory Committee
- Hamilton Centre for Civic Inclusion
- Hamilton Cycling Committee
City of Hamilton Continued

- Hamilton Engagement Committee
- Hamilton Municipal Heritage Committee
- Hamilton Status of Women Committee
- Hamilton Youth Advisory
- Housing and Homelessness Advisory Committee
- Keep Hamilton Clean and Green Committee
- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Advisory Committee (LGBTQ)
- Seniors Advisory Committee
- Tourism Advisory Committee
- Waste Management Advisory Committee

Town of Markham

- Advisory Committee on Accessibility
- Agricultural Advisory Committee
- Cycling and Pedestrian Advisory Committee
- Eabametoong First Nations Committee
- Environmental Advisory Committee
- Heritage Markham Committee
- Markham Mayor’s Youth Council
- Public Art Advisory Committee
- Public Realm Advisory Committee
- Race Relations Committee
- Seniors Advisory Committee

City of Mississauga

- Accessibility Advisory Committee
- Community Environment & Noise Advisory Committee
- Diversity and Inclusion Advisory Committee
- Environmental Action Committee
- Heritage Advisory Committee
- Mississauga Cycling Advisory Committee
- Mississauga Youth Action Committee
- Museums of Mississauga Advisory Committee
- Older Adult Advisory Panel
- Public Vehicle Advisory Committee
- Towing Industry Advisory Committee
City of Oakville
- Accessibility Advisory Committee
- Cemetery Stakeholder Advisory Committee
- Heritage Oakville Advisory Committee

City of Oshawa
- Oshawa Accessibility Advisory Committee
- Oshawa Active Transportation Advisory Committee
- Oshawa Environmental Advisory Committee
- Heritage Oshawa

Town of Richmond Hill
- Accessibility Advisory Committee
- Fire Consolidation Study Council Advisory Committee
- Heritage Centre Advisory Committee
- Youth Action Committee
- Yonge Street Bus Rapidway Transit Advisory Committee

City of Toronto
- Aboriginal Affairs Committee
- Affordable Housing Committee
- Toronto Accessibility Advisory Committee
- Toronto Youth Cabinet

City of Vaughan
- Accessibility Advisory Committee
- Heritage Vaughan
- Cycling and Pedestrian Advisory Task Force

Town of Whitby
- Accessibility Advisory Committee
- Active Transportation & Safe Roads Advisory Committee
- Doors Open Whitby Advisory Committee
- Ethno-cultural and Diversity Advisory Committee
- Whitby Sustainability Advisory Committee