A POLICY AND PRACTICE PAPER

Respect All Voices: Neighbourhood Councils as a Tool for Building Social Inclusion

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By Glynis Maxwell

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Acknowledgements

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> "An Inclusive City promotes growth with equity. It is a place where everyone, regardless of their economic means, gender, race, ethnicity or religion, is enabled and empowered to fully participate in the social, economic and political opportunities that cities have to offer. Participatory planning and decision-making are at the heart of the Inclusive City."
> *(United Nations Human Settlements Programme, 1999: 1)*

Introduction

From the work of Inclusive Cities Canada: A Cross-Canada Civic Initiative (ICC), it is clear that residents are looking for opportunities to engage more deeply in civic processes, and that civic engagement is a key dimension of social inclusion.

The ICC cross-Canada report, *Meeting the Civic Challenges of Social Inclusion: Cross-Canada Findings and Priorities for Action,* notes that municipal governments have dual roles as both public service providers and local democracies, and that this has implications for creating inclusive communities.

> "As a public service provider, the municipality must ensure equity in its policy and practice. As a local democracy, it must ensure that all community members have access to the decision-making process on civic affairs. It is important that good municipal governance not just be limited to structures and processes for executive level decision-making, but that it also 'open-up' access to the planning and policy-making process, especially to historically marginalized groups" (Clutterbuck, Freiler and Novick, 2005: 26-27).

Most jurisdictions in Canada practise some form of citizen consultation, whether mandated by legislation or otherwise. However, as suggested in the UN-HABITAT definition of the inclusive city, such mechanisms should advance the principles of equity, universal ability to participate, empowerment, and participatory planning and decision-making. Community consultations and advisory committees, while well-meaning, often do not go far enough to reflect these principles.

Different models of community engagement may be appropriate for different cities at different times. However, to allow meaningful participation, community-building and the development of civic skills, not all community engagement can take place in a forum that spans an entire city. Recognizing that cities are made up of neighbourhoods, and providing meaningful participation for those neighbourhoods, requires incorporating into municipal government a human-scale, geographically-based body in which individuals can participate. This may be accomplished through the establishment of some form of neighbourhood council.

In response to a concern about the democratic deficit and the need to make local democracy work, as well as local participants' enthusiasm for the community council which had developed in one area of their city, the ICC Burlington Civic Panel recommended:

> "That [Inclusive Cities Canada] research ways in which local municipalities can implement and use community councils at the ward and neighbourhood levels to enhance broad-based engagement of residents in the life of their community" (Burlington Civic Panel, 2005: x).

This paper provides an overview of some matters for consideration which can be used not only in developing neighbourhood councils, but also may be useful in ensuring that good process is followed in other more traditional forms of community engagement, such as advisory committees and public consultations.

Background: Inclusive Cities Canada — Burlington

In 2004, Inclusive Cities Canada conducted social inclusion inquiries in five urban areas - Vancouver/North Vancouver; Edmonton; Burlington, Ontario; Toronto; and Saint John, New Brunswick - to examine multiple dimensions of social inclusion:

- opportunities for human development

- adequacy of community services

- institutional recognition of diversity

- cohesiveness of living conditions; and

- quality of civic engagement

> Participants expressed concern that overall there is little involvement of local residents in municipal politics, perhaps due to apathy, to overall contentedness, to a lack of awareness of important local issues, or to lack of time in what is largely a commuter community.

ICC is a partnership of community leaders and elected municipal politicians working together on civic panels that directed each city's research and developed recommendations related to building inclusive and vibrant communities.

The intent of the ICC research was to identify both those issues particular to, and those shared by, the participating cities and, from them, to develop common themes that may apply to communities across Canada. One of those issues was the democratic deficit experienced in all five cities.

In Burlington, a city of about 150,000 with six ward councillors, each representing an average of 25,000 residents, participants found that access to their local councillor and to council committees is relatively easy and uncomplicated. Even so, they believed that the city council is too small to represent the full diversity of the community. In particular, participants commented that low-income individuals experience financial barriers to running for office, and are thus excluded.

Participants expressed concern that overall there is little involvement of local residents in municipal politics, perhaps due to apathy, to overall contentedness, to a lack of awareness of important local issues, or to lack of time in what is largely a commuter community. Those who participated in the Burlington study noted that the act of voting is a very "thin" means of political participation and, moreover, that participation rates are usually low. Although voter turnout

in the 2006 municipal election was 34.8%, it was only 16.5 per cent in 2003. Participants attributed much of this to the fact that the Mayor was acclaimed in 2003, thus reducing voter interest in the election. In 2006, by contrast, there was a contest and a mayoralty debate which provided an opportunity to bring significant issues to the fore in a public forum.

...residents felt that the process of selecting members of advisory committees tends to favour those whom they called "the usual suspects"...

Participants felt that interest in local politics can be further compromised by a lack of civic awareness about the roles and jurisdictions of various levels of government, and a sense that city government has little control over many important issues: the Province of Ontario is responsible for education and health care, and the Regional Municipality of Halton, in which Burlington is one of four municipalities, has jurisdiction over such important areas as social services and housing. A particular sore point with participants was that even in planning, one of the few areas in which the city does have jurisdiction, the Ontario Municipal Board has the power to override local decisions.

Although there are numerous advisory committees to the city council, on issues such as physical accessibility, crime prevention, sustainable development and youth issues, residents felt that the process of selecting members of advisory committees tends to favour those whom they called "the usual suspects" – those who are already civically engaged, have previous civic experience and are conversant and comfortable with committee work and the procedures used for city decision-making. Further, although participants found that advisory committees and even group and individual delegations to city council are politely listened to, they expressed doubts as to whether their recommendations had any ultimate impact on the decisions made. As one commented, "it's just a little more information to add to the pile".

The Burlington findings were mirrored in those of all other participating cities even, in some cases, to the degree of identical language. Although participants in all cities recognized and praised efforts made to provide avenues for citizen participation in local government, the same problems were found to persist in all five cities. In Vancouver:

> "Particular populations – youth, immigrant communities, seniors – are seen as having limited access to local government. Public consultation, similarly, was criticized for being too formulaic – often involving 'the usual suspects' and not doing much to consider alternative ways to engage the public" (Vancouver/North Vancouver Civic Panel, 2005: 6).

The Edmonton study found that

> "City Council doesn't reflect the diversity in Edmonton; there are perceived barriers to elected office...education of citizens about civic responsibility... is needed" (Edmonton Civic Panel, 2005: 7).

In Saint John, participants noted that:

> "City Council is mainly male white professionals. It is not representative of racial, disabled, gay-lesbian, immigrants, poor or seniors," and that "there's ready access to [City Council] but unless you have 20 people behind you making a noise, or if you are a "name," [you're] not listened to" (Saint John Civic Panel, 2005: 34; 23).

The Toronto study reflects these same concerns:

> "Limited efforts are made to inform and encourage people to participate in the political process...Council does not adequately reflect diversities of the City ...community consultations are selective rather than broad-based" (Toronto Civic Panel, 2005: 16).

The similarities across all participating cities are reflected in the cross-Canada report:

> "Participants generally recognized that revitalization of the democratic culture at the local level would depend on encouraging the full diversity of the community with special efforts and supports to include those traditionally excluded" (Clutterbuck, Freiler and Novick, 2005: 27).

> ...community members feel they lack the knowledge required to make an informed choice in elections; others feel their vote won't make a difference to the outcome of the election and/or to the policy choices made thereafter.

Citizen Engagement as a Transformative Process

Why Voting Is Not Enough

Daniel Shugurensky has noted that there is a worldwide decline in what is called "the contract of representation" - that is, in citizens' confidence that elected officials are providing adequate representation of their needs and priorities: "We are experiencing what political commentators, and also some politicians, call the 'democratic deficit'. Poll after poll, all over the world, tells us that citizens have low confidence in politicians and in political institutions, and they believe that many politicians have lost touch with those they claim to represent" (Shugurensky, 2004: 1-2).

In many cases, community members feel they lack the knowledge required to make an informed choice in elections; others feel their vote won't make a difference to the outcome of the election and/or to the policy choices made thereafter.

Several provinces in Canada (including Ontario, through its Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, British Columbia, Quebec, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island) have reviewed, or are reviewing, their electoral systems with a view to possible reform. Such initiatives offer the promise of a renewal of public confidence in the electoral system, and increased voter participation. This would be an extremely important contribution to democratic renewal.

Nevertheless, providing meaningful participation for citizens requires consideration of other elements as well: to provide the knowledge base for making an informed choice; to allow deeper involvement than can be achieved through voting every three or four years.; and to build civic engagement which includes those who are excluded from participating in elections.

Often, when we refer to "citizen" engagement, it is unclear whether we are referring to those with national citizen status (thus excluding refugees and landed immigrants); those who are eligible to vote (thus excluding refugees, landed immigrants and youth under the voting age); or to all of those who live, and have a stake, in the community – a "civic" citizenship.

Where, as in Canada, populations are made up of increasing numbers of newcomers, an ever-larger segment of the population is disenfranchised in the electoral process. In Toronto, for example, nearly 30 per cent of residents do not have the right to vote (Toronto Civic Panel, 2005: 16). Myer Siemiatycki (2006) provides a thorough analysis and discussion of this issue, and the recommendation to extend the municipal franchise to those who do not yet have national citizenship, in *The Municipal Franchise and Social Inclusion in Toronto: Policy and Practice.*

To address the need to include all "civic citizens" in the decisions that affect their lives, and to fulfill the desire for deeper engagement in civic affairs, we need to develop other mechanisms in addition to voting.

But We Already Consult, and Have Advisory Committees

If community engagement is "the opportunity, capacity and willingness of individuals to work collectively to share public life" (United Kingdom Home Office, 2004: 2), it becomes clear that true engagement involves more than simply collecting "input." It is a transformative process, one that deepens understanding of the community; fosters attitudes that recognize and appreciate the benefits of working together for community problem-solving; and develops the skills needed to engage in community dialogue and decision-making. Meaningful public participation has the capacity to foster informed deliberation and to inspire confidence, both in the electoral process and in local governance.

Citizen consultations and advisory committees, while a welcome improvement on voting as the sole means of civic engagement, often fall far short of what is required of a truly transformative process. Some of the pitfalls can be illuminated by examining common practices in the context of the principles of the inclusive city: equity; universal participation; empowerment; and participatory planning and decision-making.

1. **Equity**

   Following the principle of equity means more than simply ensuring that those of all incomes, faiths, genders, ethno-cultural and racial identities, ages, citizenship status, and so on, are included in the process of consultation. It also means that building greater equity within the community should be a primary, and clearly articulated, goal of all decision-making.

   By assisting in the formation of neighbourhood councils, municipal governments have the opportunity to provide not only a process which builds inclusion (by fostering the engagement of all groups) but also to work toward more inclusive outcomes (by bringing social inclusion issues into policy debate and decision-making) in a way that may not be possible through consultations or advisory committees.

   Working toward inclusive outcomes, with the resultant financial and planning consequences, is more difficult than implementing inclusive processes. Developing public support for inclusive outcomes requires opportunities to discuss general city needs and priorities, and to build a deep sense of common purpose and awareness of underlying social issues.

   Consultations that focus on specific concerns, particularly if they attempt to bring an entire city together in one forum, rarely provide such opportunities. Rather

than providing a foundation of civic awareness for building social inclusion, they are often more apt to bring out single-issue opposition groups. In consequence, even those governments seeking to work toward more socially inclusive outcomes (by, for example, building affordable housing) may find themselves, somewhat ironically, deliberately trying to avoid public consultations in order to contain opposition.

Advisory committees may be more successful at bringing to the fore the interests of certain groups (those living with disabilities, seniors and youth, as examples) or, if focused on certain topic areas such as sustainable development or crime prevention, provide deeper analysis to the debate. However, there are several dangers in relying on advisory committees as the only, or even the primary, mode of citizen consultation:

> ...although consultations and advisory committees are, in principle, open to most groups, participation and impact are often limited according to income

First, reliance on advisory committees alone may provide the impression that "full consultation" has been undertaken when, in fact, those constituencies lacking their own advisory committee (such as, perhaps, low-income families) remain unheard. Second, as found in the work of Inclusive Cities Canada, it is very uncertain what degree of impact advisory committees have on decision-making, particularly when the advice of an advisory committee contradicts that of staff, another advisory committee or other constituencies, such as local business. Third, advisory committees, as we have seen, tend to recruit from a narrow band of citizens – in general, those who are familiar with committee procedures and civic government, and who are already civically engaged. Without specific efforts to counteract that tendency, it is likely that advisory committee members will be drawn from similar ranks as are local politicians (and city staff), and be unlikely to articulate a widely differing viewpoint.

2. Universal Participation (Breadth)

Universal participation implies that everyone should be able to participate regardless of economic means, gender, race, ethnicity or religion. Yet Inclusive Cities Canada found that, although consultations and advisory committees are, in principle, open to most groups, participation and impact are often limited according to income ("those with money control the process [and have] a great deal of influence with City Council and administration"); gender ("women in a wide range of difficult circumstances [are] invisible in City policy and planning initiatives"); organizational funding ("funding cuts to community groups hurts capacity for civic involvement"); language ("for newcomers, the lack of services and communication in languages other than English, and a lack of awareness of city functions and protocols make it difficult to understand and participate"); and other factors ("particular populations – youth, immigrant communities, seniors – are seen as having limited access to local government"). (Edmonton Civic Panel, 2005: 10; Toronto Civic Panel, 2005: 16; Saint John Civic Panel, 2005: 23; Burlington Civic Panel, 2005: 56; Vancouver/North Vancouver Civic Panel, 2005: 6).

Breadth of participation is best assessed on the basis of who does participate, not who may. Groups and individuals may be prevented from participating in community consultations and advisory committees by a number of factors: transportation availability or cost; physical barriers; lack of civic experience; lack of confidence that their participation is welcomed, or will have impact; lack of confidence in the sincerity of the process, and others.

3. **Empowerment for Full Participation (Depth)**

As Katherine Graham and Susan Phillips note in *Citizen Engagement: Lessons in Participation from Local Government*, "effective public participation is not simply obtaining good information. It also involves asking how the process affected relations with citizens, contributed to individual and community effectiveness and resources, and whether it made government agencies more responsive to the public" (Graham and Phillips, 1998: 10).

The development of civic skills is essential to full participation. Developing inclusive, meaningful public participation through neighbourhood councils can also build social capital, by helping individuals to develop civic skills and by promoting active citizenship. Providing civic education, comprehensive information and a format that assists citizens in gaining a deeper understanding of their community and the issues it faces, are an investment in a knowledgeable, caring community that will pay dividends in all decision-making to come.

> True participatory planning and decision-making means taking citizens into the process before the agenda is even set, let alone the decisions made.

A community consultation is rarely conducive to this kind of evolution. Typically, community consultations bring together a diverse group of people to assist in decision-making on a specific issue, for a short period of time, often never to see one another again. Frequently, attendance is heavily composed of organizations or groups whose goal is to ensure their view is heard and their "input" makes it to the final report. Such an environment, where both organizers and participants are oriented toward a goal, is unlikely to provide the leisure, or cultivate the desire, to examine deeper underlying issues or build common understanding of broader principles or priorities.

4. **Participatory Planning and Decision-Making**

Consultations by governments (and other local authorities) with the public must not be, or be seen as, illusory and meaningless – confined to minor side-issues, or to details of the implementation of decisions, when the decisions themselves have already been made.

True participatory planning and decision-making means taking citizens into the process before the agenda is even set, let alone the decisions made. Participatory planning should, first of all, allow citizens to embark on a voyage of discovery

– of their community, their neighbours, their own assumptions and experiences, in an attempt to deepen understanding of the community, to find some common ground and establish priorities before the defining of options and decision-making begins.

Models of Community Engagement

Finding the most appropriate form of community engagement can be a difficult task. A number of models are in use around the world, with varying degrees of success. As cities have expanded, through growth, amalgamation or both, many have begun to adapt their models of municipal governance in an attempt to counteract the effects of extremely large and unwieldy councils, overcrowded agendas and the inability to consider impacts at the neighbourhood level. Some have instituted what are, in effect, sub-councils with membership consisting solely of the councillors from the constituent wards, and which may (or may not) have the authority and budget to deal autonomously with local issues such as traffic lights, parking, crime prevention strategies, and so on. However, although these models may have conferred some benefits in streamlining the work of city councils and making councillors more accessible to community members, they have not been conspicuous examples of increasing public participation in decision-making, or in developing citizens' civic skills.

In other models, neighbourhoods or communities have their own grassroots organizations which, in various locations, have a greater or lesser degree of formal relationship with their city councils. Some of these, such as Portland, Oregon's neighbourhood associations, Edmonton's community leagues and the Porto Alegre, Brazil neighbourhood associations have had a significant degree of success.

Neighbourhood Councils

A caution is required for those wishing to review other literature on neighbourhood councils and similar organizations. The term "neighbourhood council," and other terms such as "neighbourhood association," "community committee," "community board," "citizens' advisory committee" are used in different ways, in different places, to describe a wide variety of formal and informal mechanisms for engagement in civic affairs. There is no commonly agreed definition for any of these terms: what is one city's "community council" may be another's "district board." Some may be funded by municipal governments, others are grassroots community organizations with no official standing in local governance; some have significant, others negligible, impact on decision-making. What calls itself a "neighbourhood council" or "community committee" might be a formal venue for citizen participation in municipal government; an advocacy organization representing the interests of the marginalized, or even an ad hoc ratepayers group seeking to bar the building of a shelter for homeless people.

> As cities have expanded, through growth, amalgamation or both, many have begun to adapt their models of municipal governance in an attempt to counteract the effects of extremely large and unwieldy councils, overcrowded agendas and the inability to consider impacts at the neighbourhood level.

It is probably unrealistic, and unnecessary, to attempt to establish a commonly-agreed vocabulary. More useful is to determine the distinguishing characteristics which determine how well a particular model contributes to building social inclusion and civic skills. For purposes of this paper, the term "neighbourhood council" is used to describe a mode of citizen engagement that is:

- neighbourhood-based

- formed with the support of, and a formal relationship with, municipal government

- formed for the purpose of building social inclusion and civic engagement

The shape of what makes an appropriate neighbourhood council will vary from city to city, and over time. As Paul Hilder has found in his work on neighbourhood "arrangements" for the Young Foundation in the United Kingdom, "a variety of arrangements should be available dependent on context – processes and outcomes matter most" (Hilder, 2005: 4). Processes and outcomes of participation however, are very large concepts and, without further definition, are susceptible to a lot of fuzzy thinking and a very wide range of interpretation. What one civic official may see as participatory planning and decision-making may well be seen by citizens as a mock democracy exercise.

Using a social inclusion framework to think about civic engagement provides clarity. There are many matters for consideration, and each is a substantial area of study on its own. However, there is a broad range of experience of deep citizen participation around the world, and many resources, such as Tools to Support Participatory Urban Decision Making (United Nations Human Settlements Programme. UN-HABITAT, 2001) and Community Consultation in the Planning and Development Process: a Guide for Edmonton (Edmonton Federation of Community Leagues, 2003) are available which deal in some detail with each. In deliberating these considerations, and trying to develop an appropriate local model, neighbourhoods and governments should measure options against the overriding goal of building social inclusion and the four principles of: equity; universal participation; enabling and empowering full (transformative) participation; and participatory planning and decision-making.

The Political Environment of the Neighbourhood Council

A neighbourhood council can have some degree of success without any formal relationship with city council. However, the advantages for citizens, and of course, for governments, will only be fully realized if the neighbourhood council is embraced by city governments as an effective and important tool of governance.

Perhaps the frequent disappointment engendered by "community engagement," in the form of consultations and advisory committees, is due to the tension between two views of what community engagement is "for." If government views the community member as a "consumer" of services (the "taxpayer" approach), it may very well be participating only nominally, looking for compliance or providing, but only grudgingly, a "service" demanded by the public. In that case, governments are unlikely to carefully nurture the process as a means of building informed

deliberation, nor to be receptive to the ideas and priorities articulated – they just want to get the consultation over with so they can move on with the "real" work. If, on the other hand, government views the community member as a valued and respected "urban citizen" with a vital role to play in governance, a new realm of possibility is opened up.

Becoming open to truly participatory planning and decision-making can be extremely difficult for governments, as it inevitably requires power-sharing, and requires that governments have confidence in "neighbourhood intelligence." However, as has been demonstrated in the model of participatory budgeting practised in Porto Alegre, Brazil, now being adopted in varying degrees and adapted in localities around the world, including Toronto and Guelph, Ontario, citizen participation can be instrumental in formulating good policies and practices based on local knowledge and community-building. There is a deep well of local knowledge, creativity and commitment available to be tapped by governments which have the vision to embrace one of the teachings from the Global South: that people are the principal wealth of cities.

> ...community engagement has been found to produce positive effects in the areas of crime reduction, health, education, employment and housing.

Moreover, there are other more pragmatic and distinct advantages to governments in fostering informed deliberation among stakeholders. A corollary to social inclusion is social cohesion. By contributing to the development of civic trust, in which "urban communities become places where people are able to influence how they are governed, to demonstrate their care for others through voluntary and community action, to respect and value differences...and to discover their commonalities" (Clutterbuck, 2003: 44), community engagement has been found to produce positive effects in the areas of crime reduction, health, education, employment and housing (United Kingdom. Home Office, 2004: 6).

Further, enhancing involvement is "vital for supporting the legitimacy of local government, developing community leadership and improving service delivery" (United Kingdom. Home Office, 2004: 6). The legitimacy of local government is reinforced as citizens develop a sense of the community's needs from a perspective larger than their own:

> "Community engagement brings the views of citizens to bear on the
> development of public services, as individuals, who place their own
> needs within the broader context of the community of which they are part.
> What one may demand irrespective of the needs of others is quite differ-
> ent from what one may seek on the basis of an inter-personal appreciation
> of wider community concerns. If satisfaction with public services is to
> improve amongst users and stakeholders [it] needs to be taken forward
> through the most appropriate form of community engagement" (United
> Kingdom. Home Office, 2004: 1).

For the neighbourhood council to be successful, there must be buy-in at the level of city staff and elected officials. Anything less than sincere commitment will be immediately recognized as such by neighbourhood council members. Civic officials must be genuinely respectful of neighbourhood knowledge and neighbourhood intelligence, and prepared to believe that there is goodwill to work in common on problem-solving. Those who find the public's advice to be ill-

informed, unrealistic or self-centred should not consider this to be an argument against working for deeper civic engagement, or treating the outcomes seriously – rather, it is a sure indication that they have not provided sufficient information, in the right forum, with the right process, and done the work required to help build civic awareness and civic skills in the community.

Understanding urban citizens as true partners can be a difficult adjustment to make, and requires some self-examination by elected and civic officials. Ultimately, neighbourhood councils are about sharing power and, as such, may be seen as something of a threat – interpreted by city staff as denigrating the professional administrative skills and structures they have worked so hard to build or, by elected officials, as diminishing their position and authority. Neither is the case.

> An effective neighbourhood council cannot be inaugurated without the community, nor without reference to pre-existing organizations and groups in the community.

Neighbourhood councils can enhance the ability of city staff to do their best work, by assuring staff there has been thorough discourse on policy options; building community support for policy decisions; and increasing the community's appreciation both of the skills of civic administrators, and the challenges they face. For city councillors, neighbourhood councils can enhance their understanding of their neighbourhoods, the quality of their decision-making and, ultimately, their legitimacy.

Matters for Consideration in Developing Neighbourhood Councils

The neighbourhood council should not be confused with periodic neighbourhood-based consultations. Unlike the latter, which are occasional, probably fairly cursory means of gathering "input" on specific issues, the neighbourhood council is a long-term endeavour, designed to grow, to elicit ongoing participation in civic affairs and to build community capacity for civic engagement.

Infrastructure
It is important that, if possible, cities provide some funding and infrastructure support for such things as technology, printing, and so on, to neighbourhood councils, to ensure that they have the resources for outreach, facilitation and organizational work. However, it is vital that the neighbourhood council be driven, not by government, but by citizens.

First Steps
Getting started on neighbourhood councils requires that neighbourhood members be involved from the very beginning. An effective neighbourhood council cannot be inaugurated without the community, nor without reference to pre-existing organizations and groups in the community. That said, a neighbourhood council cannot be simply an agglomeration of existing neighbourhood organizations. The very concept of a neighbourhood council recognizes the need for a different forum for engagement from what already exists, and to bring in those citizens who are not already civically engaged. Furthermore, a neighbourhood council will want to avoid being defined by mandates, orientations, agendas and inequities within pre-existing neighbourhood or community organizations.

The neighbourhood council should not be inaugurated by addressing a specific, contentious or previously-decided issue (as in "We're considering a group home for your neighbourhood. Let's start a neighbourhood council to talk about it"). This will almost assuredly create conflict, divisions and factionalism from the outset. For neighbourhoods to learn to work together in neighbourhood councils, it is far better to begin without the sense of urgency or drive to "win" that such discussions tend to engender. And, of course, identification of neighbourhood needs should arise from the processes of the neighbourhood council itself, not be imposed upon it. Alternatives are discussed more fully, below, in the section "What Does the Neighbourhood Council Do?"

What Is "the Neighbourhood"?

Defining the "neighbourhood" of the neighbourhood council can provide a significant challenge in itself. Scale is an important consideration. In a cities context, a "neighbourhood" is generally considered to comprise between 1000 and 10,000 individuals (Hilder, 2005: 6), depending largely on the size of the city. The lower part of this range is probably the maximum at which the goal of fostering meaningful face-to-face discourse among individuals is possible; however, even in small cities, this would translate into a vast number of neighbourhood councils (perhaps 150 to 2500), and create obvious difficulties in trying to bring neighbourhood councils together to discuss and contribute to decision-making on issues of mutual concern. To provide a human-scale grassroots forum, without creating an unreasonably large number of neighbourhood councils, numerous jurisdictions have developed successful models that are multi-layered: in which discussion begins in a street or block association, comprising perhaps a thousand or so residents, and then feeds into a larger neighbourhood council.

> Experience shows that neighbourhoods are more apt to be amoeba-shaped than to follow the neat right-angles of ward boundaries or census dissemination areas, and that "overlapping neighbourhoods are a reality of lived experience".

The neighbourhood should be essentially self-defining, rather than imposed on the basis of existing electoral or service districts, census areas, and so on, although taking these into consideration may prove useful. Defining the "neighbourhood" is in itself a process of consultation, discourse and discovery, and can be the first step in the journey of building a shared sense of identity and community, greater social cohesion and inclusion.

Ideally, the neighbourhood council should encompass a "natural" neighbourhood. Residents will tend to define their natural neighbourhoods with reference to certain boundaries, such as major arteries and natural features, and according to historical identification with a certain community and the patterns of their lives – where they live, where they shop, where their children go to school, where they take the dog for a run. Experience shows that neighbourhoods are more apt to be amoeba-shaped than to follow the neat right-angles of ward boundaries or census dissemination areas, and that "overlapping neighbourhoods are a reality of lived experience" (Hilder, 2005: 7).   Although this certainly presents a challenge in determining the boundaries of neighbourhood councils, it also presents an opportunity: working toward an understanding of the layers of "neighbourhood" provides a venue for exploring assumptions, knowledge and priorities, and deepening awareness about one's neighbourhood and neighbours. The technique of Community Asset Mapping (see "What Does the Neighbourhood Council Do?") can provide

useful insights into how the neighbourhood should be defined, and it is quite possible that more than one configuration must be tried before the neighbourhood council feels that its "neighbourhood" has been accurately identified, and that its borders describe a true community..

Who is "the Neighbourhood"?

As a tool for building social inclusion, the neighbourhood council is, by definition, welcoming of everyone in the community, regardless not only of economic means, gender, race, ethnicity or religion, but also of ability, age, civic experience, literacy, language and national status. The neighbourhood council, as the means of engagement "closest to where people live" is the foundation and "training ground" for active citizenship at not only local, but all levels of government and in the community at large. In order to fulfill this purpose, it should include all "urban citizens," regardless of their voting status.

To accomplish this goal, it's first necessary to find out who "everyone" is, and it is useful for cities to undertake the work of developing tools to determine this. At the least, it is advisable to develop a "population matrix" that identifies different groups in the population; ideally, cities should consider producing or commissioning a complete "social profile" that correlates multiple factors, such as visible minority status, age, immigrant status, income and so on, in order to gain a better understanding of the city and its neighbourhoods.

A "population matrix" tool can be used both in targeting the promotion of the neighbourhood council (and of other consultations, meetings and events, as well), in assessment and in deepening understanding of issues in the community. As an example, if no one living with a disability attends a discussion on public transit, it would be easy to overlook their absence. Using a population matrix as part of the process and evaluation, however, may make it clear that people with disabilities do live in the area, may be extremely interested in the issue, but perhaps couldn't get to the public transit discussion – using public transit. Such knowledge would be informative in enhancing understanding not only of the issue at hand, in a way that may not have arisen among fully mobile participants, but also of how the processes of the neighbourhood council can be improved upon.

Having identified who "everyone" is does not guarantee that they are all able, and willing, to participate. Developing an awareness of barriers to participation in the neighbourhood council is part of the process of deepening understanding of community generally, and broadening engagement, and is considered more fully below.

Further, the neighbourhood council will want to give thought, in their own particular context, to the roles that civic officials, other local authorities, business and property owners should play in supporting and/or participating in the neighbourhood council.

Bringing the Neighbourhood Together

Although many of the following precepts should be obvious, they are so frequently ignored that they deserve mention here. Any serious attempt to build inclusive participation of citizens should bear in mind some basic requirements:

- Neighbourhood council meetings (and, indeed, all public meetings and consultations) should be scheduled for times and dates that allow for a full diversity of participants (i.e. not on days or at times that conflict with religious holidays, weekly worship or prayer times of any faith; not conflicting with other important local events of interest, including secular holidays of various cultural groups), and to consider various issues such as the difficulty of night driving for seniors; need for child care or elder care provision.

- Neighbourhood council participation should be accessible to those with limited mobility, vision and hearing; to those who use public transit; and to those of lower income. Consideration may be given to providing, as many do, a modest stipend to offset transportation or other costs.

- Neighbourhood councils should be promoted in a variety of languages, and provision made for assisting the participation of those who do not speak the dominant language of the community.

A sincere desire to include everyone in a neighbourhood council means concerted and targeted outreach particularly to those who are currently least civically engaged. This means that putting an ad in with City announcements in the local newspaper, for example, is far from sufficient. Not everyone is literate, not everyone can afford a newspaper, and certainly, those who are not engaged in civic life are highly unlikely to be reading the city's announcements page. Further, publicity alone is not enough.

> ...those who are most needed are those who already feel excluded; and someone who feels "they don't belong" in the community will, in the absence of any counteracting initiative on the part of organizers, likely feel they wouldn't belong in the neighbourhood council either.

The very people who are likely to most enrich the neighbourhood council's base, knowledge and problem-solving are not the "usual suspects," who are easy to recruit, but those who are marginalized, who are most likely to feel disenchanted and cynical, and to lack the confidence to participate. From a social inclusion perspective, those who are most needed are those who already feel excluded; and someone who feels "they don't belong" in the community will, in the absence of any counteracting initiative on the part of organizers, likely feel they wouldn't belong in the neighbourhood council either.

These, therefore, are the people who may need to be invited, assisted and "courted" into participating. A good starting point is to consult with those already-existing community organizations that are committed to inclusion and equity, to discuss the concept of the neighbourhood council, formulate direction on how to proceed and develop strategies for outreach through service providers, workplaces, schools, places of worship, and so on. Such organizations generally have strong local networks of those who are committed to the same goals as a neighbourhood council, work within the same inclusion framework, and have a wealth of experience to share.

Where is the Neighbourhood Council?

There is much to suggest that the neighbourhood council is best situated with an existing neighbourhood centre, association or hub. Although a neighbourhood council may not have a permanent "home" or office, linking to a physical space where people may already have some degree of engagement is empowering, and serves to give the neighbourhood council a face that is "personal" rather than "official." In cities fortunate enough to have them, neighbourhood

associations or centres can provide not only detailed understanding of the community, but have likely also developed comprehensive networks, made inroads in empowering individuals and already engaged to some degree in analysis and problem-solving related to local issues in general, and social inclusion issues in particular. For those cities that do not already have neighbourhood associations, a transit- and physically-accessible community centre, school or other facility (but not a place of worship or private home) may be suitable. Caution must be exercised in housing the neighbourhood council in locations that may be considered unwelcoming or exclusive, and consequently impede participation. There may be advantages, for example, in bringing the neighbourhood council as close as possible to those who may be marginalized in, for example, the recreation room of a lower-rent apartment building, but not in that of a deluxe condo building. And, of course, the basic requirements outlined in the preceding section should be adhered to.

> In order for participation to be meaningful, it must deal with meaningful issues, and in a substantive way.

The Scope of the Neighbourhood Council

Some cities have found it useful to establish charters or similar agreements outlining the respective roles, rights and responsibilities of neighbourhood councils and their municipal governments. However, such mechanisms may be extremely time-consuming and difficult to devise. Furthermore, they may inadvertently promote the formal environment of motions and clauses that the neighbourhood council should be eager to avoid, and therefore not be an appropriate focus for new neighbourhood councils. Nevertheless, there should be some common and clear understanding of what the neighbourhood council is, who it is for, and what it does. Developing that common understanding is particularly useful for positioning the neighbourhood council within a social inclusion framework, and nipping in the bud any nascent tendencies for the neighbourhood council to be taken over by those who are experienced in organizations and civic affairs or by those who are not committed to, or perhaps don't understand, social inclusion as the foundation of the neighbourhood council.

The purpose of the neighbourhood council is to engage people, within a social inclusion framework, in the decisions that affect them, to build social cohesion and develop civic skills. If the decisions are on trivial matters, there will be little by way of significant outcomes that build social inclusion and, more immediately, people will soon lose interest. Further, if discussion is centred on minor details, when the major issues have already been decided, people will sense (quite correctly) that they are being courted only for their compliance and to provide the illusion of participation – in consequence they will be, not bored, but infuriated. In order for participation to be meaningful, it must deal with meaningful issues, and in a substantive way. This means that the neighbourhood council must have significant impact on decision-making; that the matters must have significant impact on the individuals involved; and that the process must build understanding and engagement that is both broader (encompassing more – and more diverse – people) and deeper (increasing knowledge of the community and comprehension of differences and inequities).

In a number of cities, in Canada and elsewhere, participatory budgeting has been found to be an ideal vehicle for inaugurating neighbourhood-based engagement. Budget discussions allow consideration of a broad spectrum of important issues with real impact on everyday life.

Participatory budgeting has been used in Porto Alegre, Brazil for nearly two decades. What is often known as the Porto Alegre model has been a beacon of success for those around the world seeking to build both civic engagement and social inclusion. As noted by the United Kingdom Home Office, "even politicians hostile to the Participatory Budget find it hard to reject such a statement of popular opinion; as a result, its recommendations have been passed every year without major alteration. Its popular legitimacy has enabled property tax rises and high rates of tax collection. The redistributive aims...have been met, with citizens choosing to invest the majority of public funds in poorer residential districts. In 1988 75% of residences had running water; today the figure is 98%. Over the same period, sewage coverage has increased from 46% to 98%; the number of functioning public municipal schools is up from 29 to 86 and the number of families given housing assistance per annum has risen from 1,714 to 28,862" (United Kingdom. Home Office, 2004: 63).

One reason for this model's success is that, in Porto Alegre, the participatory budget was demanded precisely in order to build social inclusion, by increasing the redistribution of wealth into the city's slums. From modest beginnings, participatory governance in Porto Alegre has now grown beyond the participatory budget to include decisions on the provision of health and social services, education policy and human rights.

Participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre has succeeded in both of the objectives of a neighbour-hood council viewed from within a social inclusion framework – that of providing a process that develops community engagement and civic skills, while providing outcomes that increase social inclusion.

In Canada, participatory budgeting has been piloted in two cities: Toronto and Guelph, On-tario. In some cities, neighbourhood organizations have been given budgets of their own, and responsibility for some service provision. In Edmonton, Alberta, community participation is supported by Edmonton's Community Leagues, which were established in 1917, and thus have a long-standing relationship with the city council. They are governed by the umbrella organiza-tion, the Edmonton Federation of Community Leagues and engage in activities such as building and operating facilities such as community halls, skating rinks, and playgrounds; offering adult and youth recreation, art, and sport programs; running crime prevention programs; and advo-cating on issues such as development, transportation, and the allocation of resources to their communities.

There can be obvious advantages to such locally-based arrangements, such as being able to suit service delivery to the individual needs of local neighbourhoods and offering important, prag-matic issues for public discussion and decision-making; however, the service-provision model also raises some issues.

First, unless specific counteracting measures, such as citywide participatory budgeting, are undertaken, such a model can easily reinforce the differences between "have" and "have-not" neighbourhoods, as neighbourhoods provide more of their own facilities and services and, presumably, augment their budgets through fundraising and other means. Second, it is impor-tant that neighbourhood councils not become so preoccupied with providing services, facilities and programs that the building of civic skills and social inclusion is lost in the shuffle. Third, in some cases, as in the United Kingdom, where "neighbourhood arrangements" are being ener-

getically promoted by governments, there is reason for concern that the underlying motivation may be less an agenda of empowering neighbourhoods and building inclusion than it is one of downloading service delivery onto neighbourhoods. Including a service-provision component in neighbourhood councils should therefore be undertaken with great caution.

What happens in the Neighbourhood Council? Participatory Planning and Decision-Making

There is no single "recipe" for conducting a neighbourhood council. Each will develop a dynamic, evolving culture as unique as its community. However, some general considerations may be useful.

Inclusive Cities Canada identified a number of promising initiatives. One which may help in describing the "feel" of how a neighbourhood council may work is the technique of community asset mapping. This is a participatory action research tool that assists in identification of local assets and gaps and in deeper analysis of local issues. It recognizes the problem-solving capacity of citizens, emphasizes local control, and is used to inventory services and service gaps and build community empowerment.

> ...the neighbourhood council is not, primarily, an organization – it is a culture, in which processes and community-building are equally as important as decision-making.

Careful attention needs to be paid to the processes involved in the neighbourhood council. A neighbourhood council that attempts to run according to Robert's Rules of Order is apt to be intimidating and incomprehensible to many, dull to most, and unproductive for its stated purpose of building inclusion. It is difficult for many people to conceive of trying to run an organization without these tools – however, it is essential to comprehend that the neighbourhood council is not, primarily, an organization – it is a culture, in which processes and community-building outcomes are equally as important as decision-making.

Experiences with neighbourhood councils show that less formal processes work best, and that some degree of social atmosphere is desirable to make everyone feel welcome, to anchor the neighbourhood council in "real-life" experience, and to provide a relaxed forum in which all feel free to participate, and to learn. The neighbourhood council may take the form of periodic meetings or, if it is fortunate enough to be attached to a neighbourhood hub, may also be able to act as a drop-in. It may be useful for the neighbourhood council to provide a service or information that draws citizens in for numerous purposes – either a free cup of coffee or community information. In guided discourse, it is important to have a skilled facilitator to focus the discussion, help dig deeper, assist in developing common understandings of issues and priorities and help in working toward problem-solving.

The first and ongoing task is for residents to become engaged in better understanding the composition of their neighbourhood, the needs and problems of its various constituents – in short, "getting to know the neighbours." Only then can specific issues be discussed in a more formal process, in a way that builds on shared knowledge to seek solutions that work for everyone. Face-to-face interaction is the foundation of the neighbourhood council. Ideally, it provides a unique opportunity for a food-bank user, an upper-income resident asking about by-laws and a landlord posting an ad for tenants to get to know one another over coffee and share their knowledge, experience and insights and, by doing so, expand their understanding of their community and their basis for later discussion, debate and decision-making.

The Porto Alegre experience shows that new participants are, initially, often diffident and uncertain, or come with a precise idea in mind of what they want to get out of a participatory process. However, as they find out more about their neighbours, and about other parts of the city, their priorities change. As they develop greater experience, they began to feel more confident, more knowledgeable and begin to take on leadership roles.

Allowing discussion to be wide-ranging, even in more formal sessions, is key. To have significance and to flourish as the training ground for civic engagement at all levels of government, the neighbourhood council needs free-ranging discussion which can cross topics and jurisdictional boundaries. This is particularly true in the Canadian context, where so many important services are provided by senior levels of government. For example, discussion about traffic lights or sidewalks may lead to further discussion of mobility issues for seniors and those with disabilities and, in turn, to social services, planning and income issues. In a typical community "consultation," this would be considered digression, and off-topic. In a neighbourhood council, this kind of flow is precisely the point.

> Canada's cities have the potential to be world leaders in finding ways to enhance civic participation and civic citizenship and breathe new life into our communities and neighbourhoods.

Perhaps one of the defining features of a neighbourhood council is that all topics related to the neighbourhood, and those who live there, are within its mandate.

The Challenge

There are numerous examples around the globe of neighbourhood councils, by whatever name, that are working with local governments to exert a transformative power for social change and social inclusion.

Social inclusion is a most timely matter for Canadians. Amid considerable debate concerning Canada's physical infrastructure, Inclusive Cities Canada suggests that space be made to deliberate Canada's social infrastructure as well. Enriched by the diversity and knowledge of urban citizens from all over the world, Canada's cities have the potential to be world leaders in finding ways to enhance civic participation and civic citizenship and breathe new life into our communities and neighbourhoods. If municipal government, civil society and urban citizens take up this challenge, neighbourhood councils can make a significant contribution to the realization of their vision.

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