An ICC Recommendation Comes to Life: The Municipal Youth Cabinet's Role in Inclusion

By Kathryn Asher

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Disclaimer
The views expressed in this paper reflect those of the author and not necessarily those of Inclusive Cities Canada, the Saint John Human Development Council or Human Resources and Social Development Canada.

Contents

Introduction

Saint John's young people find themselves in a vulnerable position. A meaningful response calls for their involvement in decisions that affect their lives. As with any devalued population, young people are in the best position to identify the range of struggles they face and generate strategies for addressing them.

This paper documents the Saint John Youth Cabinet's (SJYC) journey from the theoretical to the practical. The idea to create a youth cabinet stemmed from a recommendation by the Saint John Civic Panel of Inclusive Cities Canada (ICC). They recommended that the Human Development Council spearhead the creation of a municipal youth cabinet to remedy local youth disengagement. A youth cabinet was seen as a body tasked with advising municipal representatives on youth issues and making the community more youth-friendly.

The paper examines the emergent youth cabinet model, and places it in a broader context by exploring youth (dis)engagement in Canada and its effect on social inclusion. This evolution from theory to practice offers insight into improving the inclusiveness of communities for their young members.

The paper presents a snapshot of Saint John and its local youth community, including challenges faced by a high poverty rate, the looming youth exodus, and local young people's feelings of exclusion. ICC's work on social inclusion is explored, particularly in relation to youth civic engagement, and youth (dis)engagement.

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This ICC policy and practice paper offers insight into Saint John's journey of implementing a youth cabinet locally, which has been coloured by the ups and downs of working to engage a transient and undervalued segment of the population. The paper explores the Saint John model in light of the initial theory to practice transition, governance structure, membership, municipal relations and funding, and local and national initiatives. The paper concludes with an examination of challenges and prospects. Since the author is also the founding coordinator of the SJYC, parts of this paper are written in the first person.

Saint John's Youth Community: A Snapshot

The Loyalist city

Saint John is an interesting case study for a youth cabinet. It is Canada's first incorporated city and New Brunswick's largest municipality, and so its youth find themselves confronted with a slew of urban issues, against a rural provincial backdrop. The City of Saint John also has a large land mass spread out over many very distinct and disjointed neighbourhoods. (Its geography actually exceeds the land areas of the cities of Montreal and Vancouver combined!) The city has a population just slightly under 70,000 — the census metropolitan area population exceeds 120,000 — while New Brunswick's hovers close to 730,000. Saint John's urban core

has experienced a startling population downturn attributed largely to the allure of the suburbs. The youth population is in comparable danger, due to the out-migration of young people to greener pastures, which leaves the city vulnerable to the damaging effects of the "brain drain" (Statistics Canada, 2001).

In Saint John, poverty is neither out of sight nor out of mind. The city continues to struggle with an ominously high poverty rate, which accounts for the host of local groups dedicated to addressing its decline. The 2001 census tells a story of a heartening improvement to a disheartening situation: Saint John's poverty rate of 24.5 percent dropped from 1996's rate of 27 percent, although it continues to be well above the national average of 16.2 percent. This brings with it another discouraging statistic: more than one in three Saint John youth (aged 15 to 24) live in poverty (Saint John Civic Panel, 2005; Parker, 2005).

The youth exodus

The city's youth population is shrinking and lags behind Fredericton and Moncton, New Brunswick's two other major municipalities. Of concern in the Maritimes is the quality and stability of highly skilled personnel, particularly because the retention of university graduates from the region is in decline. There are three contributing factors for the youth exodus: youth emigrate, do not immigrate, and do not repatriate, all of which require a focus on retention/ engagement, attraction, and repatriation.

One made-at-home solution to this trend is FUSION: a volunteer group of 20- and 30-year-olds who work to make the city vibrant for its younger residents. Nurturing the youth community is particularly important in Saint John, because, as FUSION member Sara Mudge notes, "Saint John is enshrouded by a stigma of being old: old people, old houses, old industry and an old mentality." The reality is that youth are not only leaving in search of jobs, but also for quality of life development though culture, art, entertainment, and diversity (Statistics Canada, 2001; Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission, 2003; Gosselin, West, and Grant, 2006; Mudge, 2006; Jardine, 2006).

Incorporating young citizens in Canada's oldest incorporated city

Looking at Saint John with an inclusion lens presents mixed results. One of the most telling pictures of the local youth landscape and the inclusiveness of the city for young Saint Johners was unearthed in a 2002 survey of middle and high school aged youth. The survey was prepared by the Search Institute for the Committee for a Caring Community of Greater Saint John. Highlighting an extreme feeling of exclusion, less than a quarter of young people surveyed had the perception that adults in the community value youth, while not even one third believed that young people are given useful roles in the community. Only slightly less disconcerting is the fact that not even half of youth reported that they experienced caring neighbours.

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While many of Saint John's young people are involved in their communities, the survey indicates that around half are disconnected from community life. Only slightly over half of local young people spent three or more hours per week in sports, clubs, or organizations at school and/or in community organizations, while less than half served in the community one hour or more per week. These findings leave no question as to whether local young people feel slighted and socially excluded (Search Institute, 2002).

Youth (Dis)engagement and its Effects on Inclusion

ICC and social inclusion

Inclusive Cities Canada: A Cross-Canada Civic Initiative (ICC) was established in 2003 as a multi-year partnership between five community and regional social planning councils across Canada — one of which is the Saint John Human Development Council (HDC). The ICC initiative identified four goals: 1) strengthen the civic capacity of cities to build inclusive communities in which all residents are valued and engaged; 2) ensure that community voices of diversity are fully recognized as core voices of the new Canada; 3) promote senior government investments in the social infrastructure of cities as essential to advancing social inclusion and a Canadian urban strategy; and 4) create opportunities for mutual learning on promising inclusive initiatives and practices across cities and urban regions (Clutterbuck, Freiler and Novick, 2005).

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The foundation of this initiative rests on the belief that in addition to benefits to the broader community, all individuals (including those who are vulnerable and devalued) have the potential to gain from social inclusion, which provides opportunities for the best development for all. An inclusive community does not simply decrease exclusion, it also acknowledges and values diversity, fosters civic involvement and human development, and promotes needed community supports and cohesive living conditions. Social inclusion offers acceptance, belonging, and recognition to all. In contrast, social exclusion places those who are vulnerable, devalued or considered inferior at the fringes, which thwarts their participation as a valued member of society (Clutterbuck, Freiler and Novick, 2005; Inclusive Cities Canada, 2004; Clutterbuck and Novick, 2003).

Social inclusion calls for the reduction of economic, political, and social imbalances in society to ensure social justice and the economic, cultural, and social well-being of all individuals. ICC sees social inclusion as promoting common principles and values of social citizenship, and accommodating and respecting diversity in society. An oft-overlooked aspect is that inequality and exclusion bring disadvantages to all community members (not only the most vulnerable), while equality and inclusion offer benefits to all. An inclusive city also contributes to the economic and social health of its province and nation. Well-being is closely associated with place, which makes the inclusiveness of communities and cities significant. Both social and physical infrastructure are needed to build inclusive communities (Inclusive Cities Canada, 2004; Saint John Civic Panel, 2005).

The ICC process began with identifying five critical dimensions of inclusive communities and cities: institutional recognition of diversity, opportunities for human development, quality of civic engagement, cohesiveness of living conditions and adequacy of community services. Each partnering city — Burlington, Edmonton, Saint John, Toronto, and Vancouver/North Vancouver — then convened a civic panel, co-chaired by a senior community leader and municipal official, and comprised of members from diverse cultural backgrounds and civic sectors. The panel oversaw a civic inquiry process that included: community focus groups and local soundings with groups reflecting specific perspectives (including youth), as well as research, analysis, and reporting. In March 2005, social inclusion reports were released in these five cities, which evaluated the state of local social inclusion and offered policy and program recommendations. The findings and recommendations from these reports were examined and synthesized in a cross-Canada report (Clutterbuck, Freiler, and Novick, 2005), and complemented by a national symposium in November 2005. The symposium invited local participants to engage in a national dialogue on building inclusive cities and communities.

Findings and recommendations on youth civic engagement

Youth civic engagement emerged as a cross-cutting issue in the ICC initiative, with all the participating cities finding that more action is needed to engage young people in community and civic affairs. Major findings and recommendations related to youth engagement include the following:

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Burlington

While local attempts to engage youth were a strong point, a weakness lay in the fact that less readily engaged youth were being overlooked. A youth sounding found that while nearly all the young participants regard themselves as political, they believe their opinions are overlooked and undervalued in the political process. The reason they give for low voter turnout among young people is largely a lack of a meaningful choice among politicians (Burlington Civic Panel, 2005).

Edmonton

While a key weakness for civic engagement was that the majority of citizens (including youth) do not feel engaged, key strengths in this area included the involvement of youth in designing a skateboard park, and the work of the Youth Secretariat to acknowledge young voices (Edmonton Civic Panel, 2005).

Toronto

The Toronto Youth Cabinet was identified as one of the city's strengths for local governance. The report offered many recommendations on civic democracy and the youth community:

- the school board should assess the scope and cultural appropriateness of civic education curriculum from elementary through to secondary school education;

- the community councils of Toronto should develop strategies for the creation of civic youth panels drawn from secondary schools, community centres and col-

leges that can review municipal governance issues of interest to youth and that can select area wide youth cabinets, which would report regularly to the community councils;

- the City of Toronto should request from the federal government that the New Deal for Cities and Communities include funding to support youth-initiated and youth-managed community projects; and

- lower the voting age to 16 years of age for municipal elections (Toronto Civic Panel, 2005).

Vancouver/North Vancouver City

Nine recommendations for a more inclusive city were offered, one of which was to encourage an always-increasing level of citizen engagement in all areas of civic and social life. Under this theme, there were two suggestions pertaining to youth: encourage the participation of local government in the development of civic education curriculum in high schools; and work with youth organizations to develop a strategy to create child and youth councils to promote the involvement of people under 25 in civic and community activities (Vancouver/North Vancouver Civic Panel, 2005).

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Saint John civic panel's recommendations and the emergence of a youth cabinet

The Saint John civic panel recommended establishing youth cabinets, in addition to recommending: developing a sustainable funding strategy for community-based services; strengthening local government; ensuring all residents can participate in the economic, social, and cultural life of their communities; and convening a regional forum on transportation. The Saint John report highlighted a number of local youth issues: the closure of community centres during the summer; a lack of free activities for youth aged 15 to 19; police insensitivity to youth issues; a lack of public transportation for suburban youth; and negative perceptions of young people along with a tendency to deter them from public spaces. One focus group participant lamented that because City Council does not dialogue with youth, "by the time they are old enough to vote, they know very little about municipal government." The Saint John civic panel noted that concern about local young people centered on poverty, high levels of youth incarceration, and the detachment (especially in terms of aspirations, experiences, and participation) of many youth from mainstream society. They found there was a tendency for youth to be identified as a burden rather than an asset in Saint John, and that local young people felt their age group was stereotyped and viewed with suspicion, rather than valued and accepted. A youth cabinet had the potential to tackle some of these youth issues and encourage City Council to do the same (Saint John Civic Panel, 2005).

The Human Development Council (HDC) developed an action plan in the summer of 2005 to make sure action was taken on the recommendation to address the social exclusion of local youth through the establishment of a youth cabinet. My duties as a summer student for the HDC resulted in a feasibility report at the end of the summer that explored the viability of establish-

ing a youth cabinet and determined that one would flourish in our municipality. In the report, I outlined the need for the initiative in Saint John and presented other models as case studies on the anatomy and functioning of a youth cabinet. Based on this information, initial recommendations for a local cabinet were offered. Within three months, this summer project had translated into a tangible undertaking, and I was hired as the youth cabinet coordinator to establish and sustain the Saint John Youth Cabinet.

Evidence of and reasons for youth disengagement

As the ICC work has shown, there is evidence of political and societal disengagement by Canadian youth. Younger generations are less engaged, in a variety of ways, than older generations were at the same age. In comparison to older age groups, today's youth are more disengaged, especially with respect to political party membership, political knowledge, and voting. It is not all doom and gloom however. In

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a 2005 survey of young people, engagement was identified as of concern. Out of the six themes — becoming active citizens, health, identity, injustice, opportunities, and our natural and urban world — participants rated becoming active citizens as most important (Stolle and Cruz, 2005; Saxena, 2005).

The explanation for youth disengagement in politics and society is not completely clear. While some point to the effects of societal transformation as the culprit, others give new forms of youth engagement — lifestyle politics, political consumerism, and protests — as the reason why youth involvement in traditional political activities has petered off from that of previous generations. Other explanations include the need for more mutual respect between youth and politicians, and a lack of incentives for youth involvement. We are warned however that these newfangled forms of engagement do not substitute for the loss of traditional forms of participation (Stolle and Cruz, 2005; Saxena, 2005).

(Dis)advantages of youth (dis)engagement

Why concern ourselves with ensuring young people's involvement in the decision-making process? There are several reasons, including: fostering a relationship between youth and adults, and combating mistrust between the two; allowing young people to recognize that their views are important, and empowering them to assume a changing role in society and be in control of their lives; laying the groundwork for a knowledgeable and engaged next generation; and increasing social cohesion by allowing youth to be cognizant of the role they play in bettering society (O'Connor, 2003).

Conversely, the ramifications of a disenfranchised youth population are: crime as a result of (a feeling of) alienation from the community, which causes young people to act against the community's interests; drug and alcohol consumption (often a result of boredom); and an uncertain place for the needs of Canada's aging population in the future, as priorities begin to divide based on age. Engagement in community life breeds responsible young members. Those who miss out on the opportunity to embrace active democratic citizenship early in life may never change course. In addition, such a decline in social capital and citizen engagement could negatively affect Canada's economic and political resources (O'Connor, 2003; Gosselin, West and Grant, 2006; Stolle and Cruz, 2005).

As with other devalued groups, young people have a unique and insightful perspective on the barriers they face, and the remedies needed to combat them. Youth cabinets provide a mechanism for addressing the disconnect between adults' perception of young people's needs, and young people's conceptualization. (However, "youth-friendly" adults play an important role in youth engagement efforts.) Youth often require an incentive to volunteer their time, particularly as they juggle school, work, and recreation. Youth cabinets encourage young people by providing youth with a (flexible) opportunity to make a difference and implement their ideas, and by offering fun activities and volunteer credit hours, and of course food (O'Connor, 2003).

Establishing youth-led volunteer programs, and fostering youth leadership and participation within organizations are two strategies for promoting youth civic engagement. Youth mobilization can also be strengthened if young people's experiences are more directly reflected in political and societal issues (Stolle and Cruz, 2005).

Civic educational programs, socio-economic resources, and social networks play an important role in fostering youth engagement in politics and society. As a result, if marginalized youth — with fewer resources and lower levels of education — continue to lag behind other young people in their "civicness," the Canadian democratic system will continue to be less representative of the diversity in the Canadian population (Stolle and Cruz, 2005).

Research for the feasibility report highlighted the importance of positive reinforcement and perceived rewards for sustaining youth engagement. There is a need to balance work with play through social events and to ensure the "3 Fs" are adhered to: fun, free, and food. Awards and training were other incentives highlighted, along with the need to prevent activist burnout among members (from an over-involvement in committees). Interestingly, many of the cabinets consulted did not identify youth engagement as a challenge — their members' passion and willingness to take the lead ensures the group's success (Asher, 2005).

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In 2005, young participants were brought together to discuss citizenship and democracy at the National Dialogue and Summit Engaging Young Canadians, organized by the Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN). They offered the following vision for Canada's youth: youth be well informed about public issues; governments actively work to (respectfully) engage young people; young people are active in their communities and public affairs, and public institutions support youth in this endeavor; youth involvement be diverse, and include avenues such as interest groups, political parties, protests, and volunteering; and that Canada's public policies reflect the country's important role in advancing democracy, human rights, and justice around the world as respectful global citizens.

The young participants offered four key actions to meet their citizenship vision:

- ensuring that the education system adequately prepares young people to assume their role as active citizens engaged in civic and political life through revitalized civic education;

- increasing trust in public leaders by revisiting the rapport between individuals and politicians to promote greater accountability and transparency;

- reforming democratic practices and institutions to ensure they reflect Canada's diversity, promote intergovernmental cooperation, and improve citizen participation; and

- ensuring that citizenship (and citizens) are valued (CPRN, 2006).

Youth cabinets in Canada

Youth cabinets add to the vibrancy of a city and make the community more inclusive for its young inhabitants, thus helping the city attract and retain more young people. The aim of a youth cabinet is to be the official voice for local young people at city hall and empower them to better their communities. The body acts as a liaison between the youth community and city hall and advocating on behalf of local youth to ensure that City Council meets the needs of this vulnerable population. A youth cabinet also works to increase youth participation in decision-making and civic affairs, and improve young peoples' access to city services. It is important that a youth cabinet: has long-term standing to avoid being a band-aid fix; provides proprietorship and ownership to young people; is inclusive (reflecting the cross section of local youth); and is more than a token gesture (by having a real effect in the community and a say with City Council) (Gosselin, West and Grant, 2006).

According to Christopher O'Connor in Social Cohesion, Citizenship, and Youth, the youth cabinet model is a relatively new phenomenon — with a multitude of groups scattered throughout Canada — in part because community organizations and municipal governments are just now coming to realize that young people can offer helpful insights into a range of issues. While their novelty may be partly due to the challenge of sustaining these bodies over time, some have been operational since the early 1980s. The majority of youth cabinets have a municipal affiliation in the form of an advisory role or an active role (or a combination of both), while others have no direct relationship with their municipal government. Cabinets enjoy a variety of funding sources, including the municipality, private sector or community sponsors, federal and provincial government, in-kind donations, fundraising, grants, foundations, and an aboriginal association. In general, the main operational cost is a support staff. In many cases, cabinets are governed by an executive (often appointed by adults or elected by youth). The executive generally includes a chairperson, vice-chairperson, and a number of directors. Committees report to the larger group on their progress, and are established as warranted by the cabinet (based on emerging issues). Many cabinets ultimately report to a coordinator or city staff.

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O'Connor has found that, in general, youth cabinets are on the smaller side: many have less than 20 members. Size variation is partly due to the fact that the majority of cabinets restrict membership through a screening process, which can be beneficial if funds are limited and a cabinet prefers to work with a small dedicated group; however, a larger group offers more

Topics of Interest

- affordable housing,

- access to public spaces,

- parks and recreation,

- public transit,

- recreational facilities,

- skateboard parks,

- youth crime,

- and youth homelessness.

opportunity for a diverse membership. The majority of cabinets hold meetings once per month, while a cabinet's executive and committees — which are flexible and generally meet on an as needed basis as issues materialize — meet in addition to these regularly scheduled meetings. Age guidelines are a reality for most youth cabinets (though generally flexible to avoid being unnecessarily exclusive) and tend to range from 12 to 29 years of age. Many cabinets have a diverse membership that represents their community, including representation from devalued or marginalized groups — indeed some have designated seats for these young people. Nonetheless, attracting such individuals can be a challenge.

Research for the feasibility report revealed that the diversity of Canadian youth cabinets is evidenced in their initiatives. Canadian models have held forums on the environment, health and wellness, homelessness, post-secondary education, stress, voter apathy, and youth and police. They have also worked to recognize youth achievement though annual youth investment awards and celebrations of youth volunteerism. Some cabinets train young people through workshops on capacity building, youth facilitation, and leadership, while others have engaged in outreach by holding community consultation meetings. One cabinet increased the youth profile by hosting a teen expo, and another supported young people's involvement in arts and culture by hosting a coffee house to showcase their talents. Some cabinets have launched campaigns, including one that prevented the closure of school pools, while another encouraged community organizations and others to involve youth in decision-making. Other topics of interest for Canadian models include affordable housing, access to public spaces, parks and recreation, public transit, recreational facilities, skateboard parks, youth crime, and youth homelessness.

Municipal affairs are a significant part of a youth cabinet's work. Examples of efforts in this area include: allowing members to shadow a city councilor as part of Youth Day; holding mock civic elections in high schools; sending a delegate to city council to express concerns about the city's budget; engaging in a youth-endorsed city space program; and conducting a youth-can-vote program (a web-based initiative that offered students non-partisan resources on the municipal election process). These undertakings serve to make a community more inclusive (from a civic engagement perspective) for its young members (Asher, 2005).

There are a multitude of issues that can threaten a youth cabinet's success, including funding, a lack of adult respect and confidence, and bureaucracy and politics. In addition, recruiting marginalized youth, power struggles from within, balancing members' schedules, transportation, and a lack of youth participation also play a role. To keep a cabinet afloat, many things are required, including fun, interactive and free activities, adult support, training, and funding. Youth cabinets need to have established goals, a willingness to provide a voice for youth, and action-oriented results. For a youth cabinet to maintain momentum, concrete results must be produced within a reasonable timeframe — attainable short-term goals are key. Cabinets also require a commitment from youth, as well as patience, perseverance, credibility, honesty, and accountability from all those involved (O'Connor, 2003).

A Youth Cabinet in Saint John

The Human Development Council (HDC) created the Saint John Youth Cabinet (SJYC, or Cabinet for short), for which I am the coordinator. It is a volunteer group of youth tasked with advising the city's Mayor and Council on issues that affect youth, engaging local young people to make Saint John more youth-friendly, and promoting youth civic engagement. The HDC's role is to guide the youth cabinet through its inception and help sustain it while it matures. While rare, nonprofit involvement of this sort is not unique.

There are few other municipal youth cabinets in Atlantic Canada, and so this initiative puts Saint John (and New Brunswick) on the map. Prior to the Cabinet's establishment, there was no voice for young people at the municipal level, and as a result, the workings of City Hall were without a youth perspective. Affording youth an opportunity to serve an advisory role to City Council makes Saint John more livable for all young people and ensures the Council's past and present policies do not create barriers for the city's young inhabitants. In addition to filling this void, the model also addresses the lack of "for youth, by youth" advocacy. More than 16,000 youth who live in Greater Saint John stand to benefit from the Cabinet through direct involvement or from the SJYC's youth-focused community-based initiatives.

Trading paper for practice: the open house

Information on other cabinets' transition from "paper to practice" is scare, and so we developed a plan to move the ICC recommendation to a practical model from scratch. This first foray from the theoretical to the practical took the form of an open house held in late November 2005 to showcase the Cabinet and recruit inaugural members. The idea was to craft an informal drop-in at City Hall that provided attendees with an opportunity to mingle, learn about the SJYC, become a member, and voice their views on local youth issues, all in a non-threatening environment. The evening had the three key ingredients of any fruitful youth event: food, prizes, and interactive and inviting activities.

Publicizing the event was a challenge because the SJYC had yet to form ties in the community, and so school announcements and a poster campaign were the main tools. A local high school art student was recruited to design a graphic for the promotional poster on the premise that a fellow-youth would be able to capture the attention of their peers.

The open house marked an uncommon occasion at City Hall: the convergence of youth in a traditionally adult-dominated setting. Opening the space to young people provided a rare opportunity for local youth to dialogue with municipal representatives, including the Mayor and a city councilor, as well as a mayor from a neighbouring town.

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The evening's main event was a display of 15 interactive exhibits with basic information on the Cabinet. Participants were given an opportunity to share their thoughts as they journeyed

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>
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>
> **...three fingers** or more represents consensus: from not being in total agreement but comfortable enough for the recommendation to pass, to strong feelings of support.

through the displays. A trivia contest with prizes accompanied the exhibits, which offered an incentive for participants to learn about the SJYC. The closing display invited attendees to create a visual representation of their thoughts — participants flipped though magazines for words or images they felt spoke to youth issues. The resulting collage included the following words: buzz, celebrate, girl power, health, insight, power, sex talk, wake-up call, and when was the last time someone listened; a perceptive commentary indeed!

Next steps: governance structure

The first meeting two weeks after the open house marked the first step in solidifying the SJYC's structure through a brainstorming session on the Cabinet's vision, mission, and mandate. This session allowed the group to get a feel for the Cabinet's purpose and was an initial step towards ownership.

Establishing the committee configuration was next on the agenda, and was a youth-directed effort from the onset. Members' application forms gathered at the open house provided information about their interests and what they hoped to tackle as a member. Common themes arose, which pointed to committees. At this first meeting, I presented the group with tentative committees — some were standard to most cabinets (council relations, membership, and public relations), while others were based on their interests (social development, the environment, and positive activities for youth). Members were asked to critique the initial arrangement, which resulted in a fair amount of agreement (with some opposing viewpoints).

In the next meeting, the group returned to finalize the committee structure through a consensus building activity: fist-to-five consensus-building. Members were divided into small groups to foster an initial attempt at consensus on the 13 major suggestions that arose from the earlier critique. They rated each suggestion on a scale from fist to five. In this system the fist represents a way to block consensus (a no vote). One finger indicates a need to discuss aspects of the proposal and recommend changes, while two fingers symbolize a greater comfort level with the recommendation along with a desire to discuss minor issues. A vote of three fingers or more represents consensus: from not being in total agreement but comfortable enough for the recommendation to pass, to strong feelings of support. Individuals who recorded fewer than three fingers were given the opportunity to state their objections and have the group address their concerns. The fist-to-five process continued until each group: achieved consensus; achieved a unanimous fist (consensus by agreeing to disagree); or decided to put the issue aside if consensus could not be reached. Following this process, each member recorded their scores on a large worksheet, which offered a visual representation of the potential for consensus in the larger group. Encouragingly, 12 of 13 recommendations showed signs of consensus, and only one proposition was tabled (The Freechild Project, 2006).

This consensus-building process resulted in seven committees, to be implemented over time:

1. an activities committee, to increase the availability of positive activities for youth;

2. a social development committee, to tackle everything from immigration and safety, to poverty and youth homelessness;

3. an environment committee, to address concerns about harbour cleanup and public transit;

4. a membership committee, to focus on recruitment and internal concerns;

5. a public relations committee, to take the Cabinet's message to the public and media;

6. a council relations committee, to oversee the SJYC's relationship with City Council; and

7. an orientation committee, to ensure new members make a smooth transition into the group.

This executive structure will be revisited once the Cabinet has secured official status with the City and completed some preliminary tasks.

Once the committees are convened, the idea is that a director will head each committee, while general members will staff them. The directors will report to the SJYC's president, responsible for overseeing the overall work of the Cabinet, who in turn will ultimately report to the Cabinet's coordinator. (At the age of 26, I am just on the cusp of the SJYC's age range, which reinforces the youth-led nature of the group. I was hired prior to the establishment of the Cabinet, and so members were not involved in this process; however, my role will take a back seat once the SJYC is fully operational.)

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In hindsight, the committees may have to be narrowed down to ensure the Cabinet is not stretched too thin financially, and does not have too many priorities at once or is prevented from addressing emerging issues. In the interim, the group is exploring the possibility of appointing go-to people for these areas, until more members are recruited to staff the committees. If a committee structure proves to be too demanding, directors could be elected for each portfolio (thus comprising the executive) and could engage non-executive members on an as-needed basis.

Near the beginning of the Cabinet's journey, meetings were held once per month, which on the members' request, morphed into bi-monthly meetings a couple months in. Once the SJYC's constitution has been adopted — members have already offered an initial draft, which will go to City Council for approval — the meeting schedule will be revisited.

The faces of the SJYC

The faces of the Cabinet are diverse. Currently, there are 10 official members as well as numerous others who have expressed an interest and attended meetings. There is a core group of

members (their dedication is remarkable!) who have consistently attended meetings and events since the beginning, and are to be credited with keeping the group afloat in the face of some stormy seas. The SJYC, which has an open membership, has seen its numbers fluctuate during its inception, and due to the transient nature of the youth population, some members will soon be leaving the Cabinet to attend university, complete exchanges, and travel.

SJYC members represent several schools, including the local university. The majority are students while others work full-time, and some juggle both. They bring an impressive variety of experiences (and life challenges) to the table, including involvement in the political realm, activism, volunteering, recreation, dance, school groups, environmental advocacy, and more. The SJYC also has representation from ONE Change — a local group (focused on youth) that works to improve the quality of life in Saint John's Old North End.

Although members currently range in age from 13 to 22, the official SJYC age range is 13 to 25. The Cabinet has proven flexible with its age guidelines from the onset by welcoming a then 12 year-old who was keen to become part of the group. The membership is coincidentally divided equally among the genders, and while most members have English as their first language, French is the mother tongue for two members (who are also siblings). Members find themselves with differing life circumstances, and are spread out over the city, including its suburbs. Members' length of residency in the community ranges from 9 months to 22 years, which gives the group a varied perspective on Saint John and its challenges. Although some of these differences are at times pronounced, by and large the members associate harmoniously irrespective of (and perhaps because of) this variety.

Steering the Cabinet through its inception required someone experienced in the myriad of challenges that come with youth engagement. In this regard, the SJYC has been fortunate to have the youth development manager for the local community health centre as an advisor from the beginning.

Municipal relations and funding

Although municipal relations generally represent a large share of a cabinet's focus, the SJYC's relationship with City Council thus far has been limited. The Cabinet's affiliation with the HDC has meant that interactions with Council during the planning stage need not be regular. This brings both advantages (the Cabinet's evolution has not been slowed by bureaucratic inertia) and disadvantages (the SJYC risks being conceptualized as an entirely external entity). This is not to say that the two have not interacted. There have been a number of occasions where representatives from the two bodies have intersected. In addition, City Hall provides the Cabinet with in-kind meeting space, and the Mayor showed his willingness to work with the group in his State of the City Address earlier this year, where he underscored the importance of turning to the SJYC for guidance to ensure the community is able to retain young people. Now that the Cabinet has proved it can withstand the initial test of time, a request to establish the group as Saint John's official youth committee by a resolution of Council has been made, and the SJYC is awaiting word from the City Manager. The importance of this relationship with municipal decision-makers cannot be overstated, and so will be a focus for the group in coming months (McFarlane, 2006).

The SJYC's funding is somewhat unconventional because of its association with a community organization. The local United Way and the Greater Saint John Community Foundation made

financial contributions to the initiative in the beginning, while I was hired with the help of the New Brunswick Department of Training and Employment Development. (An initiative of this sort almost certainly requires a paid staff who has the responsibility of guiding the body though its inception, when it is at its most fragile.) Over time, as the Cabinet proves successful, other sources will be approached for financial support.

The Saint John Youth Cabinet in action

Although the SJYC is in its infancy, the group has several major initiatives under its belt. The first was a campaign that encouraged youth to vote in the January 2006 federal election. The SJYC was only a month along at that point, but the members felt it was important that they publicly establish their role in addressing local youth voter apathy from the onset. Young voters who contacted the Cabinet with their poll number were entered into a draw to win lunch with the new Saint John MP and various other youth-oriented prizes. The lunch was the grand prize, which fit nicely with the initiative's goal of increasing youth engagement and interest in politics. The local candidates were all agreeable to the contest and welcomed the opportunity to dialogue with the young winner. The Cabinet spread the word about the initiative through various avenues, including traditional media sources, online forums, e-newsletters, and the local university and community college networks. In the end, the turnout for the contest was small (something that will require attention in future initiatives), but the results for the winners were noteworthy, who were featured in an article in the local newspaper and Saint John MP Paul Zed's community report.

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There was impressive media coverage around this election initiative, resulting in the SJYC's name circulating around the city. In fact, the Cabinet has enjoyed monthly media attention from the beginning (print, radio, and television), which is one benefit of housing such an initiative in a small city (in a small province). Even when the Cabinet has been slow to garner young people's interest, the media has come knocking. This interest has been beneficial for increasing the profile of the Cabinet and indeed local youth issues in general.

Shortly after the election initiative, the SJYC adopted the role of on-site co-facilitator for TakingIT-Global's Cross-Canada Mapping of Youth-led Initiatives: a 40-day cross-Canada tour that touched down in Saint John in February 2006. In addition to helping organize this gathering, the SJYC was part of the project's open forum and an in-depth interview series, which were used to collect first-hand information on the assets and needs of young people and youth initiatives in Canada.

In early May 2006, the Cabinet celebrated International Youth Week in solidarity with young people all over the world with its Chalk the Walk initiative, which invited young passersby to "chalk the walk" outside various Saint John locations, with sidewalk art that speaks to youth culture and inspires young people to make positive contributions to their community. In addition to being an enjoyable event, Chalk the Walk helped reinforce positive youth perceptions in the community.

In July 2006, the SJYC had an opportunity to spend time with New Brunswick's Minister of the Environment, the Honourable Trevor Holder, to mark his return to his home riding following a provincial tour. The Minister joined the group for a cleanup of Saint John's uptown area and sat down with the Cabinet and representatives from other youth organizations in roundtable format later that day to discuss a wide variety of topics (directed by the youth in attendance) including: affordable housing, the brain drain, bringing youth to the decision-making table, the impending closure of the Saint John-Digby Ferry, education in Saint John and New Brunswick, harbour cleanup, the proposed Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) pipeline, neighbourhood-based initiatives, Saint John's water system infrastructure, stereotypes of youth, student debt, trades programs, and the importance of being organized to move initiatives forward. This day was a valuable experience for the SJYC members who were especially pleased to have such an open and honest dialogue in which to share their views.

To facilitate an action component from the beginning, SJYC members were also offered opportunities to be involved in external events and projects, which provided a nice contrast to the more administrative and organizational tasks at the beginning. The SJYC has sent representatives to a local youth forum and conference on health and wellness, a tobacco-free schools rally, a multicultural youth conference, and a marijuana awareness project. The group also attended the Live 8 NB: Rally in the Valley in mid-August 2006, a one-day community event to raise awareness for the Make Poverty History campaign. Members are regularly kept up-to-date at meetings and through the mailing list on youth-related happenings in the community. (As a testament to the wired world we live in, the Cabinet stays in contact outside of meetings almost exclusively online.)

To address the need for national coordination among youth cabinets across Canada, the Toronto Youth Cabinet hosted the 2006 Promoting Action Nationally - Creating Advocates Now (PAN-CAN) Youth Conference in June, which marked the first time youth cabinets throughout Canada were united to form a national youth voice. The SJYC sent the largest delegation, with the most varied age-range, to the conference thanks to fundraising activities to support the trek, which proved fruitful to the tune of $5,000.

The conference was a great opportunity for the SJYC to share with, and learn from, other youth cabinets from Vancouver to St. John's. Prior to the conference, there had yet to be significant partnership between youth cabinets in a pan-Canadian framework. The gathering was the first of its kind to allow youth cabinets to converge in one city to network, build capacity, share experiences and best practices, and learn from various models of governance. The conference was especially crucial for the SJYC because our group is new and isolated from other youth cabinets (although this has bolstered the SJYC's sense of uniqueness and strengthened its self-sufficiency).

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The conference offered interesting activities, discussions, and workshops. A youth cabinet manual and best practices guide was developed by conference participants, which will strengthen the work of seasoned cabinets and act as a guiding framework for new groups (including ours!). A National Youth Charter (in mural form) was also created — offering policy solutions on youth issues — which made its way to Vancouver for the World Urban Forum later that month. The Charter was

based on five issues identified by participants as of importance to youth: 1) street-level services (poverty, homelessness, substance abuse, mental health, and the sex trade); 2) education (tuition, access to post-secondary education, and quality of education); 3) safe and healthy communities (healthy living, arts, culture and recreation, safety, police-youth relations, and spirituality); 4) opportunities for youth (oppression, un/under-employment, regionalization, and youth engagement); and 5) environment (public transit, green space, and sustainability). Participants analyzed these issues and developed solutions (local and national), statements, and policy recommendations. Based on this work, murals (artistic summaries of the discussions) were created for each issue, which combine to form the Charter.

> ...one of the biggest strains is finding and keeping dedicated members; when numbers become low, momentum often goes with it and frustration ensues.

The plan is to continue this pan-Canadian dialogue and eventually form a national youth body (modeled after the Federation of Canadian Municipalities) to effectively lobby all orders of government on youth issues. On a local level, the SJYC will use what we learned from this experience to strengthen the Cabinet and to improve our ability to foster an inclusive environment for youth in Saint John.

The SJYC has a new initiative on the horizon: hosting an outdoor movie in partnership with another local youth organization to raise awareness and recruit members. The Cabinet has also just launched its official website (www.sjyc.ca), the importance of which cannot be overemphasized given the "plugged-in" nature of today's wired world. The group has also designed a logo, t-shirt, and brochure to bolster the effectiveness of initiatives and increase the Cabinet's profile. Securing core funding will also be on the agenda once the Cabinet's seed funding runs dry.

Challenges and Conclusions

Since the Cabinet's inception, the group has faced challenges initiating and sustaining youth engagement. An ever-present one has been the need to compete with members' other commitments and schedules: school, work, social life, and involvement in other groups and activities. As with any youth initiative, the initial interest was high, but leveled off over time — one of the biggest strains is finding and keeping dedicated members; when numbers become low, momentum often goes with it and frustration ensues. Limited numbers at meetings during this time also stalled decision-making. Now that the core group has emerged, the SJYC has a strong and resilient backbone to propel itself through emerging hurdles. Yet, despite this dedicated group, there is an imminent need to increase the group's numbers and diversify the membership. Enlisting new members does leave the group off-balance until a certain comfort level develops — introductions, icebreakers, and feedback forms have proven useful in the regard. As with any youth group that has a wide age range, the SJYC has faced challenges in bringing together young people from very different times in their lives — a difference in age brings a divergence in interests and development levels.

Another point of note in our attempt to sustain youth engagement in community and civic affairs is ensuring that the group continues to move forward and is not overly hesitant to make decisions concerning the SJYC's direction, or to take charge, especially with respect to task

delegation. (Ownership through the creation of an executive may help curtail such tendencies as specific roles and responsibilities are defined and assigned.)

Keeping the Cabinet going involves attention to many aspects, including: funding, adult support, bureaucracy and politics, personality clashes and power struggles, members' schedules and commitment, accessibility and transportation (which is complicated by Saint John's large and disjointed geography), ensuring interesting activities, and establishing action-oriented goals and achieving concrete outcomes. As with any youth-led initiative, there is the underlying worry that it could unravel at any time due to an inability to strike the right balance between a multitude of variables; however, at the end of the day most of these hurdles can be chalked up as growing pains of an attempt to weave a more inclusive social fabric for Saint John's youth.

In addition to the internal dynamics, a number of local issues require attention. Certainly the brain drain in Saint John is a pronounced challenge facing the city as well as the SJYC. Without the ability to harness the expertise, skills, and enthusiasm of young people and divert their attention from MTV (Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver) — and perhaps now we ought to add Fort McMurray: MTV-FM — the city's move forward will be a slow one. (In terms of causality and creating change, we certainly seem to be looking at a Catch-22.) The local youth exodus is without a doubt tied to feelings of social exclusion and alienation from civic life and, as mentioned, this calls for a focus on retention, attraction, and repatriation, as well as employment and quality of life development. Navigating the brain drain will be a journey full of complexities to be sure, yet something that the Cabinet should explore in time.

> Fostering acceptance, belonging, and recognition will help those local young people on the fringes make the transition into valued members of society.

As has become clear, this young generation is facing tangible issues concerning political and societal disengagement. While many issues facing Saint John are beyond the SJYC's scope (or cannot be tackled due to a lack of human and financial resources), this area is the Cabinet's raison d'être. The SJYC must, above all, work to ensure that young people are involved as much as possible in decisions that affect their lives and given useful leadership roles through engagement in community life. Attempts to further integrate young people in civic life must be sensitive though to local dynamics — as outlined at the beginning of the paper — to ensure a made-at-home solution.

In due course, the Cabinet would benefit from revisiting Saint John's ICC work to help foster a fertile environment for youth civic engagement. ICC's work has shown that it is essential to recognize and address barriers to inclusion by addressing the gamut of issues ranging from embracing and encouraging diversity among young people, to advocating for needed community supports for youth. Fostering acceptance, belonging, and recognition will help those local young people on the fringes make the transition into valued members of society. This is certainly no small undertaking as encouraging social inclusion involves combating economic, political, and social imbalances in society through positive change in institutions, organizations, policies, programs, and systems. This is a tall order indeed, and so the Cabinet's unique niche will have to be carved out bit by bit over time.

Youth civic engagement is an issue across Canadian cities and communities. Identifying and understanding best practices and networking are therefore of great importance. In addition to examining how the SJYC can tackle the youth issues unearthed during the ICC work in Saint John — including a lack of free activities for youth, police insensitivity to youth issues, a lack of public transportation for suburban youth, and negative perceptions of young people along with a tendency to deter them from public spaces — the SJYC could examine the other ICC cities' findings and recommendations, and consider how these may relate locally. Additionally, a baseline audit of the particulars concerning Saint John's youth community will provide direction on how to move this population forward. Once the Cabinet secures official status with the City, it will likely also take direction from City Council on areas of focus.

The ICC recommendation for the SJYC is still a work in progress. While the City of Saint John enjoys a youth cabinet, the regional towns that make up Greater Saint John — Rothesay, Quispamsis, Grand Bay-Westfield, and St. Martins — do not (which was part of the recommendation). Yet, as the Maritimes' only social planning council, the HDC is in a unique position to promote the youth cabinet model to other municipalities in the spirit of nurturing inclusion elsewhere. (The HDC's executive director and I have met with these regional mayors who expressed interest in this idea and the Saint John model and recognize the benefits it would bring to their communities.)

In keeping with the ICC recommendation, the Cabinet will likely explore the possibility of having representatives from local schools, as it has already done with representatives from local youth groups. The recommendation also asked that the cabinet(s) report back in 12 months with advice on increasing youth civic participation. No formal call has been made as of yet, and would likely be better suited to after the Cabinet has completed its internal restructuring and formalized its relationship with City Hall.

It is impossible to pinpoint exactly when, but at some point the SJYC took on a life of its own, thus moving from paper to practice. Overall, the model has been a welcomed addition to local work aimed at fostering a more socially inclusive and civically engaged youth community. The Cabinet's devoted inaugural members have been pioneers in this process and are indeed laying the groundwork for generations to come.

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