The City of Toronto, Decision-Making, & Civic Engagement: What People Have Said

This is a summary of data on civic engagement collected from multiple consultations in which the public were specifically asked to comment on their role in local decision-making. Included is data from Listening to Toronto January 2004; Listening to Toronto November 2004; Strong Toronto, Strong Ontario 2005; consultations conducted for the Governing Toronto Advisory Panel 2006; Toronto Civics 101 from 2009, and the 2011 Core Service Review.

2011 CORE SERVICE REVIEW

In 2011, the City of Toronto initiated a Core Service Review to review all of its services, looking at what it takes to run the country's largest, most diverse city and hearing what's important to the public. 13,000 people provided their input. This input was consolidated, analyzed and considered for the City Manager's report on the Core Service Review. This is a summary of the comments received on civic engagement and involving the public in decision-making.

Transparent & accountable
- A number of respondents commented on a need to be transparent; many suggest there is a lack of transparency. "Put all the details online; we have a right to know."
- "Council must be accountable or all services – even those that are contracted out."
- Several respondents said that all people should have a say, not just politicians;
- "The City needs to better communicate with its residents and be clear about where the money is being spent."

Methods of Community & Stakeholder Involvement
- Many respondents said Councillors need to work with local residents and get community buy-in; engage people in planning their own communities; there is a lack of empowerment at community level – "empower the public to address issues themselves."
- A number of respondents felt the City should do more consultation online, suggesting it is "low cost and easy."
- A number of people noted there should be more public events and ways to get involved; some suggested monthly events with their Councillors.
- Others simply said we need more and better consultation; that consultation needs to be meaningful with helpful information.
- There was concern among some respondents about the City's citizen advisory groups and that they should not be dissolved.
- "Engagement must be encouraged and sustained." Involve the public in a more
substantive way, rather than providing questions with limited options.

- Some suggested that the City should consult with people from affected communities/demographic before making changes or cuts.
- Respondents noted the City should work closely with existing community groups that already "know the area" and collaborate with other partners that do similar services, e.g. non-profits.
- Census data, community agency reports, evaluation reports of existing services and response to the town halls should be considered collectively.
- It was also suggested that the City and Councillors should "listen to the experts" on complex issues.

Governance & Decision-Making

- A recurring theme among many respondents was that the City and Council "consider the big picture" and put public needs first.
- Some were concerned that "special interest" would exert too much influence on decisions, suggesting that decisions should take into account as many factors as possible and try to balance as many interests as possible; we should consider the diverse needs of the city.
- Related to this, some noted that decisions should be evidenced-based; and that the government has a role - to set priorities, lead, invest, engage.
- A few respondents noted that Council needs to work together, and that "indecision and cancelling programs makes people cynical."

Equity & Accessibility

- Of importance to many respondents was the need to reflect and include the city’s diversity in programs, policies, and decision making; for the City to consider disability, ethnic background, sexual orientation, women, youth, seniors, language, literacy, etc.
- City consultations should not be complicated; they should be barrier free and accessible.
- "Keep in mind that those to whom city services are most vital will not be responding to your survey"; marginalized and vulnerable people must have a voice.

TORONTO CIVICS 101

In 2009, a group of 175 participants from across the city were randomly selected from 900 applicants to take part in Toronto Civics 101 — a special learning series designed to teach people about their local government, how it works, and how to get involved. The sessions, which ran from September to December, covered such topics as planning, decision making, the City's financial framework, and municipal elections. While Toronto Civics 101 was designed primarily as a learning opportunity for participants, staff collected feedback throughout the sessions including input on what people would like to learn more about to help them get involved with their city, and their general suggestions for civic engagement.
What participants wanted to know about the City's decision making process

• What is the criteria/process for planning and introducing new programs?
• How does City government make decisions that affect communities? Are communities consulted? What and who determines when and why services & resources are given/taken away?
• Interested in the checks and balances on decision making process. How decisions are appealed, etc?
• How does the City run? i.e., what determines how the City moves forward with a specific issue? What is the impact of lobbying?
• How is the final decision made? How does Council work?
• How do decisions that affect everyone in our city reflect diversity of neighbourhoods?
• Is there a way to show that public participation is effective? Does it have an impact?

What participants wanted to know about the City and Council's prioritizing

• How council makes decisions on what our City “values”, i.e., arts & culture? Affordable housing?
• What ideas are presented to City Council to vote on and what are not? How does Council decide what issues to debate?
• How is power achieved and distributed, especially in light of financial restrictions?
• How are decisions for the City and Torontonians being made and how are these being prioritized?
• Who makes decisions on a local level?
• What does the City government consider are the core, essential elements we need to have to ensure a healthy, vibrant city that works/functions well and can grow?
• Where do the resources to run things come from and how does the city government go about prioritizing and allocating those resources and choosing the tradeoffs?

What participants wanted to know about how people get involved with the City

• How do people get involved in the City and how does it run?
• How can I be involved, participate in influencing policy makers, especially regards social justice issues, economic prospects for poor people living in Toronto to give back to City that I’m grateful to be a resident?
• How public opinions/consultations are incorporated into public policy?
• How to influence government?
• How the City makes decisions (big or small)? How can the common citizens influence these decisions (to what extent)? On the other hand, how does the City communicate with citizen to build public awareness on the decisions it’s going to make?
• What does it take to be an active participant within a neighbourhood?

General suggestions on the City’s civic engagement work

• Citizen participation in decision making process.
• Involvement of the community in development issues; the City Councillor should be working with the people.
• There should be monthly meetings to discuss general city issues.
• Want to see expanded use of social media as part of an overall communications strategy.
• Concerned about lack of access to information; told you have to talk to this person or that person.
• As a new immigrant, I didn't know I had the power to talk and to have my voice heard; the City needs to let people know

• The City has to support seniors and people with disabilities to make it easier for them to participate; engage more with youth.
• Council should offer assistance in interpretation for people who don't speak English to follow along with Council meetings.

GOVERNING TORONTO ADVISORY PANEL CONSULTATIONS

In March 2006, at four sessions, three hundred members of the public learned about and discussed the directions Council was considering for city governance and how they would be implemented after the November 2006 municipal elections. Participants had the opportunity to share their ideas about the roles of Council, the Mayor, Councillors, Committees, Community Councils and the public with the Governing Toronto Advisory Panel. Working in small groups, participants discussed three recommendations: city-wide decision-making, local decision-making and civic engagement. Below are the comments related to civic engagement from each session.

Etobicoke Collegiate March 2, 2006

Important of Engaging Citizens
• Makes people feel their voices are heard
• Input is valued, respected and has meaning
• Help make communities safer
• Need to make sure input is being used and that engagement is evaluated so that we get the best

Access and equity
• Address barriers to increase community involvement
• Use plain language
• Use translation & interpretation services
• More evening meetings
• Provide tools and education
• Use outreach workers to involve citizens

Engage Youth
• So that they become engaged adults
• Make them feel part of society
• Low turnout at elections
• Would be welcomed by youth
• Some ideas
• Every community council could have a youth cabinet
• Community councils come to high schools
• Increased efforts to get youth to vote

Communications
• Create a network to spread the word and keep people connected
• Engage the media to connect people
• Councillors should be collecting public opinion on a rolling basis
• Consider posting agenda items for citizens to provide input into agenda items
Other ideas
• Adopt a grass-roots, bottom up approach
• Hold tonight’s kind of session over 1-2 full days
• Appoint community members to committees

• Have more advisory groups to involve communities
• Twinning/sistering of neighbourhoods for success and improvement

North York March 6, 2006

Eliminate barriers
• Identify barriers to participation, e.g., language, transit, child care
• Make translation services available
• Engage youth
• Youth cabinet
• Internships
• Lower voting age
• Vulnerable neighbourhoods and communities may require extra support to participate

Resources for Civic Engagement
• Hold civic engagement awareness training
• Use the schools
• Build partnerships with community organizations
• Provide resources to help people access neighbourhood groups
• Have a citizen’s ombudsperson

Enabling community participation
• Schedule community meetings 1 year in advance and provide ample notice
• Need strong neighbourhood strategies and funding to implement them
• Strengthen neighbourhood associations
• Concern expressed that neighbourhood associations MAY go against best city-wide interests

Neighbourhood Input
• City should find a way to give neighbourhoods a voice
• City is too big, not easy for citizens to be heard
• Link between planning and community needs to be strengthened
• Less formal meetings would be less intimidating

Better communications
• Better use of internet
• Report regularly to the public about what Council is doing, priorities
• Without this information, it’s hard to be involved
• Better use of community sources to get the word out
• Schools, residents association, local bulletin boards, flyers

• Evening meetings should not run overtime
• Evening meetings may be a barrier for Seniors
Scarborough March 8, 2006

Community Council Town Halls
- Strong support of regular meetings
- Some suggest monthly ward meetings hosted by each Councillor
- Need citizen workshops to educate citizens for meaningful engagement
- There should be follow up on issues & solutions
- Consider venues other than civic centres to make them more accessible

Evening meetings
- Overwhelming agreement on the need for evening meetings
- Improve notice of meetings
- Meetings should be easy to get to
- Stagger when meetings are held to allow people on shifts and other schedules to participate

Find New Ways to get Neighbourhood Input
- Create a direct line from Neighbourhood to Community Council to City Council
- City Council decisions should reflect local input
- Use creative and effective means for different communities to participate

Engaging Citizens - Educating for participation
- There should be education activities about civic engagement opportunities
- Prepare a welcome kit for new residents
- Prepare participation guidelines for all Torontonians
- Focus on new Canadians to help them become more involved

Access
- Develop strategies to engage diverse cultures and language groups

Communications
- Communicate in many different ways
- Ward meetings
- Community kiosks
- Web pages / newsletters
- “State of Scarborough” report
- Need to set targets and goals to achieve equitable distribution of resources & services
- Consider a constituent assembly
- Feedback from meetings should be quick & thorough like this meeting

Advice to Council
- Keep an “Open Door” policy
- Be accessible always, not just election time
- Need more passion and leadership from our City representatives
- Councillors should host workshops on how City Hall works
- Councillors should facilitate communications between groups in their wards

Fix the Deputation Process
- Perception that Council does not listen to the people
- Let public speak for more than 5 minutes and respond to Councillors’ comments
- Councillors should stay in the room and listen during deputations
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Youth
• Need to get youth engaged in the community
• Mentoring
• Using community volunteer hours
• Councillors should meet youth at school

Partnership for Engagement
• Empower community change and civic engagement with funding to community organizations
• Use schools and churches to engage youth & allow them to participate

St. Lawrence Market March 4, 2006

Neighbourhood input
• People feel “not heard”
• Some ideas to increase local input:
  • Increase access to Councillors e.g. community office open on Saturdays
  • Better use of on-line methods (e.g. blogs)
  • Get neighbourhoods to do own community improvement plans
  • Neighbourhood citizen committees could be given some decision making roles

Neighbourhood input
• Support for more community councils
• Range mentioned: 6-12
• Would address neighbourhoods better
• Would increase Councillor-citizen contact
• Support for the idea of community council town hall sessions
• Consider more sessions
• Use Community Council’s more strategically to help neighbourhoods

Value of civic engagement
• Civic engagement should help frame the City’s agenda
• Consider Neighbourhood Councils, Citizen Advisory Committees
• More community consultations
• BUT need more community development staff for outreach and communication
• Consult earlier, from the ground up, before issues are finalized

Eliminate barriers to access
• Consult with existing organizations like business and residents associations
• Some suggested referenda for major city-wide issues

Get Youth Involved
• Lower the voting age
• Extend voluntary opportunities
• Explain governance in school
• Get youth involved in neighbourhood associations
• Do an event like this for youth and share the results with Councillors
• Consider a youth rep on community councils
Some Communications Ideas

- Use plain language
- Greater use of technology, internet, blogs, discussion boards for citizen comments
- City should maintain a website for each ward
- Need “City 101” to educate people on how to make a difference
- More public surveys
- Improve the notice the City gives on local issues and meetings

Advice to Councillors

- Meet in the community more often; use schools and places where people gather
- Liked availability of Councillors today to answer questions
- More direct contact with Councillors not just staff
- Each Councillor should have their own formal townhall meeting
- Help resident, business associations
- More events like this!

GOVERNING TORONTO ADVISORY PANEL, 2005

On November 15, 2005, 150 members of the public met to provide their input to the Governing Toronto Advisory Panel. Participants were provided with an overview of the Panel’s work and then in roundtable they discussed two questions one of which was “How should input from you, your neighbourhood and your community be included in the City’s decision-making process?” The following is a summary of the participants comments.

Local/neighbourhood input

- “Not everything has to happen at City Hall”
- Establish, support neighbourhood committees & associations
- Find ways to bring options to the local level
- More frequent local meetings
- Reduce the number of processes, hoops – e.g. OMB
- Established neighbourhood delegates to bring ideas to City Hall
- Increased use of referenda to decide key decisions

Inclusion

- We need transparent processes, easy to understand
- More outreach
- Value diversity
- More ways to involve marginalized people
- Youth
  - Teach about how City works in schools
  - Provide TTC tickets, refreshments, eliminate other barriers
- Input must be valued
- Homeowners and tenants
- Immigrants: Use many languages, Engage new immigrants
Voter accountability
• More feedback and accountability mechanisms
• Make sure we have representation by population – all wards have equal say
• Youth want to engage more with Mayor and Councillors
• Establish a public complaints process

Communications & technology
• Do more to educate people about City structure, processes, issues and decisions
• Better use of new technology to communicate with Torontonians
• E.g. Speaker’s Corner

Community Councils & City Council
• Keep wards vs Elect at-large
• More, smaller community councils
• More decision making at community council level
• Hold more evening meetings

Civic Engagement and Consultation
• Residents of Toronto need to be informed of provincial decisions that have an impact on the City
• Interest in continuing public engagement on the City of Toronto Act, including receiving more information and opportunities for input
• Must create diverse, accessible forums for public to participate in decision making and encourage participation of all communities through outreach, information and education
• City must “keep decision-making close to the people” by encouraging community based consultation by councillors and MPPs
• Commit to helping the public understand the services and programs provided by the City and Province so they can provide informed input.
• Use a wide range of methods for input – surveys, internet, town halls and democratic decision making tools

Governance – Representation
• Torontonians want improved access to councillors, a greater role in deciding how City Council will work and how decisions are made

STRONG TORONTO, STRONG ONTARIO, JUNE 2005

On June 22, 2005 over 700 Torontonians attended the Strong Toronto, Strong Ontario Consultation, a joint City-Provence public consultation on a new City of Toronto Act. Participants were asked: how can the Province and the City ensure a strong Toronto that is fiscally sustainable, autonomous, accountable and has the tools it needs to thrive; and, what advice would you give to the City and the Province to ensure the success of Toronto’s new powers?
• When the provincial government makes decisions they must be sensitive to the local government, local communities and local issues.
• Neighbourhoods and communities should have greater role in local decision making.

“Representation that’s more reflective of the City’s diversity in all areas of government: agencies, boards, commissions” and City Council and at the Provincial level.

LISTENING TO TORONTO, NOVEMBER, 2004

From a report to the Joint Meeting of the Policy and Finance Committee and Budget Advisory Committee, December 6, 2004 summarizing public input at the City’s second Listening to Toronto session. Participants were asked how the City could increase public involvement in civic affairs.

Create opportunities for public debate and dialogue - People know that in order for them to have a role in local decision-making they need clear information about opportunities that reflect their interests and needs.

• Create a public guide to local government with clear information on how and when people can get involved
• Create directories of community and neighbourhood initiatives with information on how the public can get involved
• Provide more opportunities, like Listening to Toronto, for people to come together to discuss local and city-wide issues
• Survey the public and communities and neighbourhoods to find out what their needs are, what’s working or not and how they want to be involved in local action and decision-making
• Encourage civic leadership through recognition and incentive programs

Provide clear, timely information about the City and Council - People want to have more information about city services and get clear, accessible, advance notice of committee and Council agendas.

• Communicate Council and City information using simple, clear language and disseminate it widely
• Use a wide variety of communication vehicles to advertise services, meetings and public events including email, website, public bulletin boards/kiosks, and print and electronic media
• Take City and Council information out to the community using local forums, organizations and service groups
• Increase the notification time for major municipal decisions and publicize the decision time-line
• Make the City’s website more user-friendly and provide information on both neighbourhood and city-wide issues
• Ensure communication is interactive—the City needs to give and receive information/advice
• Work with local print media, television and community radio stations to increase coverage of Council meetings
Tell people how their input is making a difference - People want to know that their participation is valued and makes a difference.

- Tell people what happened to their input, what decisions were ultimately made and what the next steps will be
- Stay in touch when issues or projects are developed and implemented over a long-period of time
- Share neighbourhood success stories with other neighbourhoods
- Develop new, easy ways to receive information and advice such as through a secure website, regularly scheduled public sessions or phone-lines
- Provide ways for the public to track issues as they go through consultations, departments, committees and Council

Break down barriers to engagement - Toronto’s diversity must be celebrated. Every effort must be made to ensure that everyone in Toronto who wants to play a part, can do so.

- Provide information and encourage dialogue in clear and multiple languages
- Make sure that public meeting places are barrier-free, accessible by transit and scheduled at times which are best for the participants, not just staff and Councillors
- Arrange for food, childcare, translation and interpretation at public sessions
- Encourage youth to participate by making city issues relevant and accessible to them and by fostering youth leadership
- Encourage diversity of participants across neighbourhoods, communities and cultures
- Foster civic pride and interest through arts and heritage programs, and fun neighbourhood based events

- Increase participation by working with multilingual organizations and community agencies, faith groups and ratepayer and neighbourhood associations to outreach to their members

Improve Councillor visibility and accessibility - Councillors are an important source of information and can serve as a bridge from community and neighbourhood issues to city-wide decision-making.

- More communications from Councillor using a variety of ways
- Make sure there are lots of opportunities for face-to-face dialogue with local Councillors
- Councillors should take advantage of information, networking and research available from local organizations and associations
- Councillors should be provided with resources to increase the ways they engage with the public
- Councillors should widely publicize their community meetings to encourage representative attendance from their constituents
- Tell the public about day-to-day issues, not just the big city issues.
- Councillors should use their newsletters to inform and involve constituents in public engagement opportunities

Better civic education - Understanding the basics of municipal government and the importance of playing a part in the democratic process are fundamental to building an engaged public.

- Design and support school and community programs which teach kids, youth, adults and local businesses about municipal governments, civic affairs and how to get involved
• Provide the public with a description of what the city does and the roles of staff, councillors, committees and Council play in decision-making
• Encourage voting through a public media campaign and by making voting easy, accessible (physically and linguistically) and relevant to people’s lives through referendums
• Ensure that the municipal voting lists are current and correct

**Improve accountability and transparency of City Hall** - When people can see that city decisions and processes are open and accountable, their trust in local government increases.
• Keep and publicize council voting records
• Develop clear policy and guidelines regarding lobbyists
• Develop council report cards and staff performance measures
• Provide better information to the public on the City budget and budget process
• Make sure that nominations and selections processes for agencies, boards and committees are open and transparent
• Make wards smaller to increase the number of councillors and the proportional representation

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**LISTENING TO TORONTO, JANUARY, 2004**

From a report to the Joint Meeting of the Policy and Finance Committee and Budget Advisory Committee, January 30, 2004 summarizing public input at the City’s first Listening to Toronto sessions:

**Public Participation** - People value opportunities to participate in government and in their communities and neighbourhoods. There is an expectation that the voice of the community will be heard on important civic issues.
• Continue and increase public engagement efforts
• Public input is important in making policy, planning services and setting priorities
• Seek creative solutions through public input
• Strengthen community networks and partnerships
• Encourage volunteerism to support City programs and initiatives

• People have an interest in civic affairs, but it needs nurturing

**Accountability** - People expect the City to operate in an open and responsible manner. They want to hear from their elected representatives and be informed about the City and its work.
• Ensure the decision making process is open and accessible
• Have Council meet periodically in other areas of the city
• Consult communities that will be affected by decisions
• Inform and educate the public about service and budget issues
Use plain language to improve accessibility
Monitor city performance, and allow outside scrutiny
Justify major spending decisions to the public
Ensure integrity in government
Reduce influence from lobbyists

**Equity** - People value a caring and compassionate city. They are supportive of efforts to address inequities.
- Protect the most vulnerable when addressing financial issues
- Focus on high needs in our communities and neighbourhoods
- Promote and invest in our diversity
- Work to close the gap between the rich and the poor
- Ensure services are accessible by people with special needs
- Value the young and elderly
- Ensure equitable access to services
- Equity and equality are not the same

**City Services** - People made many suggestions to improve services or close service gaps
- Need to address our decaying infrastructure; e.g. sewers, bridges, and roads
- Some services are not distributed equitably across the city
- Not enough focus on health prevention
- Not enough access to school and community spaces
- Not enough services for seniors in their own language
- Too much litter on the streets
- Exporting garbage to Michigan reflects badly on Toronto

**Accountable City Government** - People want to know more about decision making and how municipal government works.
- Need to rebuild trust, confidence, accountability in City Hall
- Many feel that self-interest of the few prevails over community interest too often at City Hall
- Citizens need more voice in government
- Citizens need to better understand how Council sets its priorities

**A Civil Society** - Torontonians are proud of how we care for one another and pull together in difficult times. It is these qualities that attract people from other places.
- Everyone can participate in civic life
- There is a tradition of volunteerism, community involvement
- There is freedom of religion, political viewpoint, expression
- Torontonians are tolerant, compassionate and caring
- Torontonians care about the disadvantaged, vulnerable persons
- Everyone can live out their ideals
- Issues and conflicts are resolved through peaceful, democratic processes
- Political pluralism, activism thrives in Toronto