

Winnipeg's Public Engagement Falls Short

You may, or more likely may not, have noticed that the City of Winnipeg has recently been making some wobbly attempts to engage its citizens in the decision-making process. Calls for “public input” have covered everything from the City Budget and transportation master plan to the proposed 20-year urban forest strategy. The City even has an Office of Public Engagement to facilitate the process – who knew?

What the City doesn't have is a clear strategy and the community-based infrastructure needed, to ensure that the public is actually heard. Here's a prime example of why their efforts to engage city residents consistently fall short or fail.

On October 8th, the City's public engagement office launched a campaign to solicit citizen input on a new 20-year urban forest strategy. It includes, among other things, an online survey, discussion groups and two online presentations.

According to the media release, the objective is to ensure “the development of a community vision for Winnipeg's urban forest and help identify opportunities to protect, grow, and enhance it to form the draft urban forest strategy we will discuss in Phase 2.”

Sounds good so far, but there are couple of hitches. First among them is the fact that the “opportunity” for engagement ends on Nov. 1, a mere three weeks after its online posting. A short response window isn't the only issue.

There was little or no advance notice given to residents that this “public engagement “ process was going to happen. There was a media release, which seems to have solicited little press coverage. There was no public education process informing citizens about the complex services the urban forest provides, the fact that it's a City asset worth \$5 billion and that we are about lose more than a third of the canopy to pests and disease. Nor was any attempt made to inform community groups about the engagement process so that they, in turn, could alert their residents.

As a result, it seems that busy, pandemic-weary Winnipeggers are somehow expected to magically divine that they now have an opportunity to comment on how the city will maintain, diversify and expand the urban forest, over the next 20 years.

Now, in a cynical mood, we might be tempted to assume that the City actually wants this engagement process to fail, but neither of us is really that jaded. Instead, we choose to believe that a number of well-meaning folks on City Council, and in Public Engagement, actually do want input from residents. The only problem is that, unlike other cities, Winnipeg doesn't have a strategy or the permanent community-based infrastructure it needs, to ensure that the public actually engages.

Take New York. That city has 59 community-planning boards made up of residents, who advise the city on land use in their area - everything from parks and zoning, to development and school construction. They also participate in the city budget process. Their mandate is to ensure the needs of residents, both social and environmental, are given serious consideration in every project undertaken in their neighborhoods.

And, surprise, surprise - it turns out that the top priorities of every New York community board are sustainability, safety, education and the protection and conservation of public spaces.

Winnipeg already has a number of ad hoc community groups that might play a similar role in City planning. We're members of the Wolseley Residents' Association (WRA), a volunteer organization whose goals are to inform residents on issues of interest and undertake events and projects that improve the community and its environment. There are similar groups all across the city, from Glen Elm and River Heights to the outlying 'burbs.

Those groups could have been notified, well in advance, that an opportunity for public engagement on the urban forest strategy was upcoming. They might even have been brought in as part of the engagement planning process, or - head slap here - directly involved in providing community-based information and input on the strategy document, given the expertise many of these groups have developed on issues related to the urban forest.

That didn't happen. Instead, more than 20 community groups, which actively lobbied last year for more funding for the urban forestry department, found out, almost by accident, that a public consultation process was underway. And their residents had just three weeks to respond.

So, here's the thing. Unless and until the City of Winnipeg gets serious about ensuring community input on all aspects of urban planning – whether it pertains to infill housing or the protection of the city's urban forest – and puts in place a formal strategy and the permanent community-based infrastructure needed to ensure substantive public input, the process will continue to fall short or fail.

It would be a daring project, but if a city the size of New York can do it, surely little ol' Winnipeg could give it a try.

*Erna Buffie is an author, filmmaker and Chair of the WRA's Green Committee
Marianne Cerilli is a community organizer and Chair of the WRA*