

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AT THE CITY OF EDMONTON  
SHARE YOUR VOICE SHAPE OUR CITY

Edmonton

# THE COUNCIL INITIATIVE ON PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

PHASES 1 AND 2  
FINAL REPORT **SUMMARY**



## INTRODUCTION

*Through a collaborative and consensus based process that involved City Council, Administration and Edmontonians, the Council Initiative on Public Engagement (the Initiative) has defined and set the stage for innovative and inclusive public engagement practice for years to come.*

*This Report chronicles the activities of the Initiative, which took place from the spring of 2014 to the spring of 2017. It describes why the Initiative was started, how it was carried out, what its findings were, and provides a path forward for public engagement at the City of Edmonton.*

**Public engagement is about building community.** It's about coming together and creating a sense of belonging. It's about taking time to know and understand each other, to explore the strengths of our diversity and to build on our shared values. It's about actively taking part in the discussions and decisions that will shape our future together.

**Fran Ross**, Public Member, Community Leadership Working Group

### **WHY THE COUNCIL INITIATIVE ON PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT?**

Following the 2013 Civic Election, City Council and Administration identified a need to review the City of Edmonton's approach to public engagement. Many Edmontonians, stakeholders, Councillors, and members of City Administration observed that the City faced a number of challenges in public engagement including: responding to evolving citizen expectations; supporting growth; ensuring consistent and quality processes; and capitalizing on opportunities for innovation.

### **THE PROCESS**

Building confidence in public engagement begins with a shared understanding of what public engagement is and what needs to happen for it to work best. In a collaborative and consensus based process, the Council Initiative on Public Engagement reached out to thousands of Edmontonians — City staff and the public — to do just that, by asking them to tell the Initiative what good public engagement looks like.

No new funding was required for the Initiative. Funding was gathered from the existing budgets of City branches that undertake significant public engagement activities.

## PHASE 1 FINDINGS

*Phase 1 of the Initiative engaged City staff and members of the public in a conversation about public engagement. Four main questions emerged: What are the key themes about public engagement? Why is public engagement important? What are the elements of effective public engagement? And, what are the obstacles to effective public engagement? In answering these questions, the Initiative identified five focus areas for consideration in Phase 2. Throughout Phase 1 it became clear there were underlying concerns about the broadness of definitions and the misalignment of expectations.*

### KEY THEMES ABOUT PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

- A better way forward begins with clarity about public engagement.
- City Council, City staff and Edmontonians value public engagement.
- People see opportunities to do things better.
- Public engagement is about trust and respect.
- Public engagement promotes transparency and strengthens accountability.
- Public engagement strengthens both government and community.
- Public engagement makes decisions better.
- Public engagement supports democratic ideals.

### WHY PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IS IMPORTANT

**DECISION MAKING** There was broad consensus that effective public engagement leads to better decisions, and decisions that are more trusted and credible.

**COMMUNITY AND DEMOCRACY** There was broad consensus that effective public engagement builds strong communities with a greater sense of connection, belonging, and ownership.

**CITY BUILDING** There was broad consensus that good public engagement plays a major role in building a great city. Good public engagement creates efficient, realistic plans and improves project outcomes.

### THE ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

**INCLUSION** There was broad consensus that effective public engagement is inclusive. It includes everyone and is representative and accessible.

**PROCESS** There was broad consensus that effective public engagement includes open, fair and democratic processes.

**COMMUNICATION** There was broad consensus that effective public engagement includes communication that is clear, frequent and informed.

## AREAS OF FOCUS FOR PHASE 2

Five areas of focus emerged that served as the foundations for Phase 2 of the Initiative.

**VISION, POLICY AND FRAMEWORK** Create organizational foundations that support, inspire and guide effective public engagement such as One City and Open City.

**TOOLS, TECHNIQUES AND PRACTICES** Expand and diversify public engagement tools and techniques, and pilot innovative public engagement processes.

**COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP** Expand, diversify and facilitate community involvement and leadership in public engagement by fostering connection points and sharing influence.

**LEARNING AND TRAINING** Improve public engagement knowledge and capacity through learning, leadership development, skill building, and training (City and citizen).

**EVALUATION, REPORTING AND RECOGNITION** Create a culture of excellence and accountability for public engagement through improved transparency, measurement, and celebration.

## OBSTACLES TO EFFECTIVE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Participants were asked, if this is what good public engagement looks like, what is standing in the way of us achieving it? Many obstacles were identified but some of the highlights were:

- Mutual distrust stifles opportunities for authentic participation and engagement.
- Holding tight to established practices inhibits flexibility and a creative process to meet changing expectations of engagement.
- Consultation fatigue from many projects saps energy and effectiveness of both City staff and the public.
- Ineffective communication, both content and delivery, creates misunderstanding and gaps.
- Bureaucratic processes that are difficult to understand and not open to change, which stifles meaningful and creative participation.

## BROAD DEFINITIONS AND MISALIGNED EXPECTATIONS

Consistent concerns emerged throughout Phase 1 about the broadness of definitions and the misalignment of expectations. Unfortunately, the City's current definition of public engagement, although very broad and inclusive, does not provide guidance to making expectations more clear.

Misaligned expectations undermine trust in the public engagement process, especially when there are different expectations around why people are being asked to participate, what will be done with their input, and how their input will influence decision making. In particular, it became clear that "information sharing" should not be considered "public engagement" but should instead be a standard activity underlying all of the public engagement the City does.

## PHASE 2 FINDINGS

*In Phase 2, the Council Initiative on Public Engagement became focused on identifying solutions in five areas of public engagement: 1) vision, policy and framework; 2) tools, techniques and practices; 3) community leadership; 4) learning and training; and 5) evaluation, reporting and recognition. Each of these areas were assigned to a working group.*

*The findings from Phase 2 – integrating the findings from all five Working Groups – can be divided into the following nine themes:*

### **ENHANCE FOUNDATIONS**

Building meaningful and effective public engagement starts long before particular topics or issues are top of mind or a decision is on the horizon. It starts with establishing the foundational elements that make it possible. The five foundations identified were: policy, procedure, and framework; learning and training; community leadership; communications; and evaluation and recognition.

### **TAKE A TEAM APPROACH**

The Initiative identified the need for an integrated, team approach which incorporates decision makers, program or project managers, public engagement advisors, public engagement coordinators, communications advisors, community leaders and community organizations. A team approach is needed to ensure that community members remain integral and ongoing partners in public engagement. Expertise is required to transition to and sustain an inclusive relationship focused culture of engagement.

### **BUILD PRACTICE**

The Initiative developed a systemic approach to how the City can approach public engagement by examining the general practice of public engagement and piecing together the important factors of “enhancing foundations” and “taking a team approach.” Three important aspects of this approach are deciding when to engage, doing proactive public engagement planning, and carrying out the plan.

In addition to building a practice for public engagement, it is important to be aware that first, effective public engagement ensures that decision makers have the opportunity to consider information and perspectives from the public as part of their decision making process. This can give decision makers more confidence in their decisions and generate more public credibility and support for those decisions.

And second, public engagement helps to rebalance power between citizens and government. It does this by creating opportunities for participation and building and sustaining relationships built on dialogue, partnership and co-creation, rather than seeing citizens as consumers of programs and services.

### **BUILD CAPACITY**

Public engagement is all about people. Effective public engagement depends on people knowing their roles and how to fulfill them. To this end the City needs to engage in effective capacity building both in terms of general learning and training and fostering community leadership. At its core learning and training build skills and competencies that enable the public and staff to come to the table better equipped to work together in collaboration. Further, learning and training help build a joint agenda for development and moving forward together, which in turn fosters understanding and trust. Lastly, learning and training foster a culture of learning, reflection and action.

Community leadership is a tremendous asset. With the right invitation, support, resources, and encouragement, community leaders can help make connections between different populations; lead, support, and nourish discussions that honour diversity; help to discover shared values and common ground; and, ultimately, build community.

### **COMMUNICATE BETTER**

Public engagement depends on people understanding both the City's approach to public engagement and what opportunities are available to them. It requires people to have enough information and understanding of the decision at hand to participate effectively. It demands that they know how they can influence a decision and what is being asked of them. To build awareness, trust, support and community, it requires that people know how public information was used in the decision making process and what decision was made.

### **EVALUATE OUTCOMES**

Effective evaluation needs to be a consideration at the front end of public engagement planning as well as at every step through delivery and wrap-up. Evaluation starts with a shared understanding of the high level vision, principles, goals and outcomes, and moves to the development of performance measures, metrics and targets.

Evaluation is best done using a cascading approach that evaluates individual activities, larger processes, bigger organizational units, and the organization as a whole. It measures culture, effectiveness, efficiency and influence on decision making through outputs, outcomes and impacts.

Return on Investment analysis is required for the public engagement process and activities. All the inputs, outputs and outcomes need to be documented and carefully analyzed, and a clear link established between appropriately segmented costs and directly attributable benefits.

### **REPORT RESULTS**

Edmontonians want to know how their input is used in decision making, what the final decision is, and what the rationale is for making the decision. Reporting is how the City communicates to decision makers, participants, staff and the public about what was learned, what input was collected, how it was analyzed, and what it means. In order to be credible and build trust, this reporting must be accurate, transparent, timely and detailed enough not to water down important themes and perspectives.

### **RECOGNIZE IMPROVEMENTS**

Effective public engagement is built on an engagement culture, where people value, support, and want to offer their time to take advantage of opportunities to contribute to decision making. Recognition is important because it is one aspect of encouraging people to be part of public engagement. It also enables the sharing of stories and successes that are worth celebrating, as well as acknowledging all of the hard work and dedication that goes into public engagement.

Recognition for public engagement needs to hold a higher status within and outside the organization, to help advance the practice of public engagement forward. Though, spontaneous, personal recognition has an important place in supporting public engagement, it also needs to be supplemented by more formal approaches to recognition, for both City staff and members of the community

### **MONITOR PROGRESS**

The time, commitment, investment and success of the Initiative suggests that it, or something like it, may have a further role to play as the City's public engagement improvement efforts persist. Therefore, thought should be given to how this partnership can continue with the mandate to help monitor the City's progress in achieving the public engagement goals, outcomes and milestones it has set for itself as the result of this Initiative.

## **CONCLUSION**

*This report marks the end of a long journey and the beginning of a new one. The findings of the Council Initiative on Public Engagement described in these pages provide a path forward for public engagement at the City of Edmonton.*

*It is now up to City Council and Administration, in collaboration with community, to set a new course for public engagement through better practice. The details of this new course can be found in the New Public Engagement Practice Report.*

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