

Backgrounder for Public Engagement

Description and Case for Change

Public engagement is a crucial step in creating an inclusive, open and collaborative budget process. A more accessible, inclusive public engagement strategy can broaden the conversation around budgets and result in one which builds a city that reflects the values and priorities of Toronto residents. Toronto's current engagement strategy falls short of this ideal.

Background

The current public engagement process for the City of Toronto Budget provides residents with an opportunity for a very brief (up to five minutes, but depending on the number of speakers, it can be reduced to three – four minutes) deputation to the Budget Committee in person, or by submitting a written deputation. The challenges and limitations to the current process include: restricted flexibility and accessibility (12-hour sessions at City Hall), people are discouraged due to confrontational nature of the interactions with City Councillors, and there is limited outreach to ensure an inclusive process with representation from all wards and communities. Budget discussions are held at the ward level but are not part of the official budget process and are Councillor initiated therefore do not occur evenly throughout the city.

Where has it Been Done?

Examples of inclusive, alternative and interactive public engagement for City Budget consultations

London, Ontario – “Build a Budget Workshop”

- City of London hosts two two-hour sessions where citizens are provided the opportunity to learn about the budget, and where they can ask questions and provide input. The format consists of several stations where people can participate in 15-20 minute sessions on a rotating basis. This is in addition to two traditional public participation meetings.

<http://www.london.ca/Budget/pdf/BudgetWorkshop.pdf>

Ottawa, Ontario

- The Mayor of Ottawa will hold six “Mayor’s Budget Outreach” consultation sessions at shopping centres in all areas of the city in advance of the 2014 budget. The objective is to look for input and suggestions from residents on how the City can make the best use of tax dollars. As part of this process, residents will be able to submit their ideas through an online chat, email and Twitter. This is in addition to traditional in-person consultation sessions. These mall consultations are occurring on weekdays and weekends all over the city. By bringing the discussion to the local communities, the goal is to have diversity in participants and to engage the unengaged and disengaged.

<http://www.jimwatsonottawa.ca/en/news/mayor-watson-conduct-budget-consultation-outreach-sessions-local-shopping-centres>

Calgary, Alberta – “Our City. Our Budget. Our Future”

- The City of Calgary has recently made significant changes to its engagement process. The objective of the priority placed on resident engagement was to understand what services are valued and how the budget could better reflect local needs. Outreach was extended over a considerably longer period of time (four months) and was a three-phased engagement process:
 1. Participants were invited to provide input on how they would like to be involved
 2. Phase two was focused on the values and priorities citizens have for City services. This was done using Budget Kits, which contain an information booklet which describes all of the City’s services and a workbook where input can be given.
 3. Building on phase two, citizens were encouraged to consider the pros, cons and trade-offs they were willing to make to deliver the City services they value.

<http://www.calgary.ca/CA/fs/Pages/Plans-Budgets-and-Financial-Reports/Our-City-Our-Budget-Our-Future/Our-City-Our-Budget-Our-Future.aspx>

Boston, MA. “City Hall on the Go”

- In June 2013, Mayor of Boston Thomas M. Menino announced that the “City Hall to Go” truck will be a permanent fixture of the city. This truck travels throughout neighbourhoods providing a list of services to constituents. It is scheduled throughout the city on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, and on Fridays and Saturdays it can be available upon request for street festivals, block parties etc. This is seen to make City Hall accessible and has been able to reach a new set of constituents. This has not been used for budget specific reasons but is used daily to get feedback and input from constituents on City services and programs.

<http://www.cityofboston.gov/cityhalltogo/>

Key Ideas

A Community Engagement strategy/process should re-examine and define the roles and responsibilities of the public in the decision making process and eliminate/reduce barriers to participation.

There is a need to make public engagement more accessible, making it more convenient for Toronto residents and for community organizations to play an active role. Accessibility can be increased by:

- Using alternative forms of engagement rather than the traditional deputation process
- Bringing City Hall discussions to communities
- Examining lengthening the budget process and re-examining the timing of meetings, including the time of day, day of the week and even time of the year.

There needs to be solutions to reducing barriers to participation and reaching out to the unengaged and disengaged.

What Product are we trying to Create

Better Budget Day will create an inclusive public engagement strategy and agenda for a public meeting. This will include strategies on how to involve the entire city and ways in which the City of Toronto can accomplish this.