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RESPONSE TO THE CITY OF EDMONTON'S PROPOSALS  
FOR CITIZEN COMMUNITY COUNCILS  
AND THE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Presented to the Mayor's Ad Hoc  
Committee On Citizen Participation  
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## INTRODUCTION

A guiding principle of the work of the Edmonton Social Planning Council during the past decade has been a desire to encourage citizen participation in municipal government. We are therefore pleased to have this opportunity to respond to the initiatives that have been taken by City Council as a result of recommendations from the Task Force on City Government. During the deliberations of the Task Force, the Social Planning Council offered a number of constructive suggestions on how meaningful citizen participation might be achieved. While it was apparent that the Task Force, in its Interim Report to City Council, was generally sympathetic to the arguments presented by the Social Planning Council, many of the concerns that we expressed at that time still remain. Therefore, in commenting on the present proposals, it is our intention to build upon our earlier recommendations that have not been heeded.

In keeping with the responsibilities of the Social Planning Council, our staff have been involved during the past few months with many community groups who have been anxious to learn more about the city's recommendations on citizen participation. Understandably, these meetings have been of value to the Council as they have allowed our staff to be better informed on the views of a wider cross section of Edmonton citizens than is generally possible. In preparing our response to the City's proposals, we have hopefully reflected these wider community responses.

While the Council is sensitive to the view that any proposed structure for citizen participation must be appropriate for the particular city and its communities, it is our opinion that there are lessons which can be learned from earlier approaches that have been taken to implementing meaningful citizen participation. Consequently, in commenting on the current proposals, we have attempted to assess the strengths and weaknesses of other models of citizen participation.

### Apathy and Alienation

It is a paradox of modern society that as the complexities of urban living have multiplied, our ability to understand and cope with them has tended to lag further and further behind. A growing concern is that citizens are feeling divorced from the decision making processes and manipulated by forces that are quite beyond their control. It is apparent that this alienation causes citizens to turn away from expressing any concern about the future of their communities. This lack of social interaction in a community is personally debilitating and collectively does not allow the community to draw on the multiplicity of human resources that citizens can provide. The unresponsiveness of citizens also means that municipal decision makers are essentially isolated from those they are expected to represent.

### Effective Citizen Participation

Citizen participation has been acknowledged as the necessary antidote to these personal, community and political ills. To the Social Planning Council, the concept of citizen participation recognizes the right of citizens to be involved in the formation of local decisions that shape their environments and their lives. Individual citizens grow and learn from the experience of being involved and gradually see that it is possible for communities to anticipate future alternatives, and to recognize the wider implications of certain actions; rather than simply be forced to adapt to imposed circumstances. To a community, effective participation can encourage the development of a mutual respect between citizens and their elected officials and as well foster a greater sensitivity to the democratic process. It can also result in the gradual expansion and enrichment of the resources that will be mobilized in the interests of the community.

In developing a structure that will bring about the desired form of citizen participation, it is our belief that a number of critical concerns must be addressed. As the Social Planning Council commented in its report to the Task Force, it is vital that any structure that is introduced should be "sensitive, compatible and adaptable to the needs of the people within each district". This requires that the units of formalized citizen participation should, as closely as possible, reflect community and neighbourhood boundaries, so that existing community organizations are actively involved in any new structure. As well, it is important that the size of the units for citizen participation be kept small enough to maintain a reasonable sense of community. If at all possible they should be also closely related to the decentralized service delivery districts, so that it is possible for the units of citizen participation to monitor the provision of municipal services to their community.

It is also crucial that participation should not be occasional or incidental involvement in only part of the decision making process. It must be a formalized ongoing approach that is characterized by the closest communication and dialogue between elected officials and members of the community. As well it must be more than an opportunity for participation by veto. Rather than simply providing a chance to block plans that are proposed by the city, it must allow for the development of constructive alternatives. This requires that full and comprehensible information on all aspects of a local issue should be provided at an early stage in the decision making process. As well technical expertise and legal advice must be available to community groups if they are expected to respond in a co-operative and positive manner.

While internal flexibility is necessary to allow the units of citizen participation to order their own priorities, previous attempts at formalized citizen participation have shown the need for a defined list of responsibilities so that it is possible for the units to develop a clearer focus on issues and then to decide what particular problems

should be addressed. It has also been shown that it is necessary to involve Councils in responsibilities where a concrete and visible impact on the community is possible, rather than committing the majority of their time to long range planning alternatives that may not have any visible influence on the existing community.

It has also been shown that effective citizen participation is invariably issue oriented. It is therefore important that in any proposed structure the opportunity should be provided for a form of rotating participation so that as issues touch a person's self interest he or she becomes involved. This requires that there be a small group of core participants who are available to facilitate community involvement around a particular issue of concern. The core group would be responsible for gathering the necessary information and managing a resource centre that all community members could call upon when required.

A critical aspect of positive citizen participation in other cities is the level of support that any formalized structure receives from elected officials. If any approach is to improve the responsiveness of citizens to municipal decision making, aldermen must be prepared to accept the opportunity to become better informed about the views of the citizens they represent. It is desirable to formalize the relationship between the elected officials and the units of citizen participation so that a regular interchange of ideas and information is encouraged. As important as the link is between the two, it is necessary to stress that this should not be the only channel through which citizen opinion might be voiced. The opportunity to appear before City Council or to take an issue directly to the administrative department concerned, should still be available to all citizens.

## The City's Proposals

In reviewing the city's statements and policies on citizen participation, it is apparent that there are many philosophical similarities with the principles of effective citizen participation that we have outlined above. However we are concerned that the structure for formalized citizen participation that has been proposed frequently is inconsistent with these guiding statements and policies. We therefore have major reservations about the possibilities of the proposed Citizen Community Councils and the Community Development Office achieving a significant improvement in citizen participation.

Our major concern is that the proposals are likely to manage and control citizen participation rather than to encourage the community based responses that are desired. In particular we question the wisdom of formalizing citizen participation through the Community Development Office and the administrative structure of city hall. Given that one of the primary motives for seeking greater citizen involvement is to improve the responsiveness of elected officials to those they represent, it is fundamental that any proposed structure should relate directly to these officials and not to an administrative arm of city hall. In any representative democracy, citizens may ultimately exercise their right to replace an unresponsive elected official. The same prerogative is not available to citizens faced with an unresponsive administrative official.

Secondly we are bothered by the political naivety that occasionally is evident in the proposals. For example, to suggest that the role of a Community Development Office should be that of a "neutral conduit" fails to recognize that the form and shape of community development, to be effective, must be determined at the local community level and therefore, is by definition, hardly neutral. Similarly, it is difficult to accept that an employee who is ultimately accountable to the Chief Commissioner would be able to remain as an "impartial catalyst" in the face of preconceived proposals from within city hall.

We also view with concern the proposal that public groups and organizations who wish to participate in the new structure must be formally recognized by City Hall. Despite the city's commitment to the statement that "mutual trust is essential to the efficient and purposeful functioning of government" this proposal suggests that the city is in fact not prepared to trust community groups. As well it ignores the reality that many of the more effective forms of citizen participation are likely to involve organizations that lack the formalities required for official recognition.

#### Citizen Community Councils

While the Social Planning Council supports in principle the need to establish Citizen Community Councils we do have reservations about a number of important aspects of the city's proposal that are not consistent with encouraging the kind of effective citizen participation that we have outlined above.

Firstly the size of the Citizen Community Council districts are too large for meaningful citizen involvement and they do not adequately reflect communities of interest. We would therefore recommend that the Citizen Community Council districts should be coterminous with the proposed twelve human service delivery districts. It is apparent that these twelve districts show a greater sensitivity to community boundaries and existing community groups and organizations. Further, the coterminality would allow for the Citizen Community Councils more effectively to monitor the provision of municipal services to their communities.

Secondly, the Social Planning Council supports the view expressed by the General Municipal Plan that citizens of a district should have considerable freedom in determining the size and composition of their Council in accordance with the nature of the problems the type of interest groups or the extent of citizen involvement. While we do not share the city's concern that the elected group may be unrepresentative unless controls are applied, we would recommend that nominations for the positions on Citizen Community Councils should be made by local

community groups. We also support the proposal that the election of members for the Community Council's should be carried out at an annual general public meeting, with all citizens of the district having an opportunity to vote.

Thirdly, it is our belief that the relationship between the Citizen Community Councils and the elected officials is fundamental. We therefore recommend that Aldermen be appointed as ex-officio members of the Community Council that parallels their constituency boundaries. Further, we recommend that the responsibility of the Aldermen to attend a given number of meetings per year be established in the legislation.

Fourthly, while the Social Planning Council supports the need for local flexibility, it recommends that the areas of responsibility for the Community Councils should be established as guidelines within the enabling legislation. It is important that these responsibilities should include the opportunity to monitor and evaluate the provision of current and proposed services to the district and that participation should not be overwhelmed by a long and uncertain involvement in the planning process. Further, the Community Council should be responsible for maintaining a Community Resource Centre and ensuring that all documents and policy proposals are forwarded by the appropriate departments of City Hall. In recognizing the facilitator role of the Community Councils and the issue oriented nature of citizen participation, we would also recommend that Councils be encouraged to establish local committees to respond to local issues. In particular all proposed changes in land use by-laws should be reviewed by a Committee of the Citizen Community Councils with the recommendations being forwarded through the Community Council's Alderman to City Council.

#### Community Development Office

The Social Planning Council is not convinced that effective citizen participation will result from the establishment of the Community Development Office; in fact as we have already suggested, its existence



is likely to be more of a hinderance than a help. Financial and staff resources are a vital element in the likely success of Citizen Community Councils and therefore it is necessary that the city be prepared to provide this necessary support. However it is our recommendation that the hiring of any staff, such as a Community Development Officer, must be the decision and the responsibility of the local Community Council, even if the job description and the salary are established on a city wide basis. Access to City Hall information for any Community Development Officers must also be guaranteed by City Council. As well, this officer should be encouraged to work closely with appropriate local field staff.

#### District Planning

The Social Planning Council recognizes the importance of a district planning component in the implementation of the overall city-wide objectives contained in the General Municipal Plan. However, we would be concerned if the move to district planning did not allow an opportunity for communities to prepare neighbourhood plans that could in turn be included within the district planning process. As we have indicated above, it would also be detrimental to effective citizen involvement if the work of the Citizen Community Councils was predominantly concerned with facilitating the development of district plans.

#### Implementation

In introducing any new approach to formalized citizen involvement, it would be unusual if there were not some difficulties of implementation. Given the need for flexibility and the variations in levels of community interest it is critical that there should not be an expectation of instant results. Nurturing effective citizen participation almost invariably is a slow arduous process that involves many false starts and many moments of frustration for those involved. Facilitating support services, that are preferably independent of City Hall, should also be available to assist the Community Councils overcome any organizational difficulties that might arise.

Further, it is important that a mechanism for monitoring the introduction and development of Community Councils be established during the implementation stage, so that it will be possible to chart the progress of improved citizen participation in the years to come.

Our final concern is that the implementation of a new formalized structure for citizen participation will only be possible if there is a solid commitment on the part of City Council and City Hall to the principles and approaches that are adopted. Notably this may require adjustments in other aspects of municipal government; such as alterations in the ward boundaries and a determination to effectively decentralize the administration and delivery of all city services. As major as these changes may appear to be, it is our belief that they are a small price to pay if we are to restore the health and vitality of our city communities and the political responsiveness of our local decision making processes. In closing, we commend City Council for its initiative in proposing the introduction of formalized citizen participation. However we trust, that in the best spirit of community involvement, the Council will be prepared to modify its approach in the manner that we have recommended.

## SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Citizen participation can encourage the development of mutual respect between citizens and their elected officials, and as well foster a greater sensitivity to the democratic process. Accordingly, the Edmonton Social Planning Council suggests the following recommendations:

- 1) That citizens have a right to be involved in the formation of local decisions.
- 2) That citizen participation requires full and comprehensive information on all aspects of local issues. That this information be provided at an early stage in the decision making process.
- 3) That citizen participation requires the availability of technical expertise and legal advice.
- 4) That the units of formalized citizen participation should reflect community and neighbourhood boundaries, and thus the Citizen Community Council districts should coincide with the proposed twelve human service delivery districts.
- 5) That the units of citizen participation have a defined set of responsibilities which are included in the enabling legislation and must allow for the development of constructive alternatives. That these responsibilities include the opportunity to monitor and evaluate the provisions of current and proposed services to the district and that participation should not be overwhelmed by long and uncertain involvement in the planning process. That the CCC be responsible for maintaining a Community Resource Centre and ensuring that all documents and policy proposals are forwarded by the appropriate departments of City Hall. That CCC be encouraged to establish local committees to respond to local issues. In particular all proposed changes in land use by-laws should be reviewed by a committee of the Citizen Community Councils with the recommendations being forwarded through the CCC aldermen to City Council.

- 6) That the units of citizen participation be involved in areas which have concrete and visible impact upon the community as well as long-term planning issues.
- 7) That the aldermen must be prepared to accept the opportunity to become better informed about the views of the citizens they represent. That there be a formalized relationship between the Aldermen and the CCC within their constituency. Further, that recognition of this relationship be included in the enabling legislation.
- 8) That this formal link not exclude direct citizen access to City Council nor to any concerned administrative departments.
- 9) That the city recognize the true nature of citizen involvement, and omit any requirements for formal recognition of public groups and organizations.
- 10) That citizens of a district should have considerable freedom to determine the size and composition of their Councils.
- 11) That the nomination for positions on the CCC should be made by local community groups, to be carried out at an annual general meeting open to all residents of the district.
- 12) That the hiring of any staff such as the CD officer must be the decision and the responsibility of the local CCC.
- 13) That any CD officer be guaranteed access to City Hall information. That this officer should be encouraged to work closely with appropriate local field staff.
- 13) That District Planning allow for communities to continue to prepare neighbourhood plans that could be included in the District Planning process.
- 14) That a period of adjustment and public education be allowed.
- 15) That a facilitating support service independent of City Hall be available to assist the CCC overcome any initial organizational difficulties.

- 16) That a mechanism for monitoring the introduction and development of CCC be established during the implementation stage.
- 17) That there be a solid commitment on the part of City Council and City Hall to the policies and principles that are adopted.

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