

Working
Paper

School of Public Administration
University of Victoria

LOCAL GOVERNMENT INSTITUTE
WORKING PAPER SERIES
November 2006

You say you want an Evolution?
From Citizen to Community Engagement in Canadian Cities

By: Dr. Susan Phillips School of Public Policy and
Administration, Carleton University

Abstract: Citizen engagement is at once old and new for local governments in Canada. Consulting with and involving citizens through various means, apart from elections, in policy development and planning have been regular practices for the past thirty years. Provincial legislation mandates public consultation in official land use planning and other circumstances, and requires that all debate and decision-making by local councils be conducted in public. Municipal governments, however, especially those in the larger urban centres, have generally gone far beyond their provincially legislated obligations for engaging citizens. Indeed, they have been leaders in citizen participation in Canada by undertaking a variety of experiments, often setting best practices for provincial and federal governments. In this sense, citizen participation had become standardized practice, perhaps too standardized.

Citizen participation is now on the verge of a renaissance of sorts in Canada's major cities. This is significant not only because it brings another wave of interest in engagement but because it represents an important evolution from citizen to *community* engagement. Unlike the citizen engagement movement, emerging interest is not so much rooted in philosophies of democracy, but is driven by the pragmatics of two intersecting agendas. The central argument of this paper is that the intersection of municipal government-led city-building and the externally driven community-building agendas have created a space for and given rise to innovation in reconfiguring relationships between governments, citizens and communities. What is new about this most recent evolution in citizen participation, is the establishment of new institutions or institutionalized mechanisms of engagement and more integrated forms of neighbourhood planning and community capacity building. This innovation is at very early stages and varies extensively in form and commitment across Canadian municipalities.

Local Government Institute
School of Public Administration
University of Victoria
P.O. Box 1700, STN CSC
Victoria, B.C. V8W 2Y2

Phone: (250) 721-8055
Fax: (250) 721-8849
E-mail: padm@uvic.ca

Web: <http://publicadmin.uvic.ca/lgi/index.htm>

This research paper was prepared as part of a Local Government Knowledge Partnership between the School of Public Administration and the British Columbia Ministry of Community Services.