

## Peterborough community wants for real public engagement

BEN WOLFE/Special to the Peterborough Examiner  
Wednesday, February 22, 2017 11:59:46 EST PM



Members of the audience unanimously agree to a question during a public information meeting for the potential sale of Peterborough Distribution Inc. to Hydro One Inc. on Thursday March 3, 2016 at Market Hall in Peterborough, Ont. The meeting included a question and answer period. Officials from the city of Peterborough, PDI and Hydro One were in attendance. Clifford Skarstedt/Peterborough Examiner/Postmedia Network file photo

It seems to be understood by almost everyone that public engagement is fundamentally

broken in Peterborough.

The examples tumble off the tongue. Hostile and exhausting public meetings on The Parkway, the casino and the sale of PDI. A six-hour council debate (I was counting, I was there) on a cats and backyard chickens bylaw few people had heard about, let alone had a chance to comment on until the week of the vote.

Can it be better? It can.

Watching these processes is partly what led a group of us to form Reimagine Peterborough. It's our view that genuine public engagement is the right form of leadership for the 21st century. It consists of designing and convening processes that give people back their voice, their responsibility and a renewed sense of possibility.

Does that sound like "pie in the sky?" It's not. It's time to take a look around.

Other cities are a few years into a next generation of public engagement that does what we could do. One of my favourite examples, because it's ambitious, innovative and now completed with great success, is The London Plan -- a rewrite, from scratch, of the Official Plan for the City of London, Ont.

Like Peterborough in 2017, London faced this once-in-a-generation responsibility and opportunity. Unlike Peterborough (so far) their leadership treated it as a chance to hold a community-wide conversation.

London's lead planner, John Fleming, is entertainingly direct about what he calls "the elephant in the room" of dull, conflictual, ineffective, last-generation public engagement processes. Even the term public meeting, he says, has come to "conjure images of long boring presentations followed by an hour or more of comments by the same small group of people who have been involved in these discussions for years." Sound familiar?

He asks bluntly: "Why would an average Londoner attend such an event?" Everything about such processes conveys that they "must be bureaucratic, legalistic, or political in nature -- three things that many people just aren't interested in."

So they did it differently. They didn't start by issuing a completed draft plan based on a few meetings with the same old tiny list of stakeholders. They went through a series of steps of wide discovery, starting from a possibility-oriented question. What kind of city do you want to live in 20 years from now? They worked in plain language, and organized the feedback around themes people understand. How will we live? How will we grow? How will we move? How will we green? How will we prosper?

They issued accessible discussion papers that invited engaged citizens in and informed the learning in a broad way, without predetermining outcomes. A key example was the eye-catching calculation by city staff that continuing to grow in the same spread-out pattern -- "business as usual" -- would cost taxpayers \$2.7 billion more in infrastructure and \$70 million dollars a year in operating costs over the life of the plan than a more compact urban form. (We understand a similar calculation is being worked on here. It's

likely to be similarly startling.)

They held the few old-style meetings required under the Planning Act, where the same old things happened. Chairs in rows, staff at the front, microphones in aisles; few of the citizens in the audience ever speaking to each other or the room. The people who always come and make the same kind of speech, often even though it's not really what's being decided, got to come and do that.

Meanwhile, the life in the process was elsewhere. The planners talked to people where they gather, in plain language, in nearly 100 sessions over a full year -- and something completely different happened. More than 16,000 people took part in a meaningful way. Overwhelmingly clear patterns emerged for what people most want and care about. (In London it was transit, cycling and walking, parks and greenspace, safety, and jobs, in that order.)

And guess what: the finished plan is 33,000 words shorter than the previous one, written in "human," and full of visionary ideas. It's illustrated on every page with gorgeous photos of the city. The process of creating it helped build understanding and consensus and set clear directions. Can you imagine an Official Plan being popular? This one is. The planners got a standing ovation from a packed public gallery when it was released.

A brilliant, small next step in this direction would be to try it on something simple -- like the backyard chickens bylaw. Why not gather people who know and care about an issue to learn from each other and build working relationships before drafting a bylaw and bringing it to a vote?

As long as City Hall limits itself to asking the public to become "policy analysts" of jargon-ridden documents, bylaws and contracts and agreements that are already fully written, it barely has a toe on the playing field of public engagement.

My hunch, rooted in many conversations, is the city actually wants to do better but doesn't yet know how. I think some in senior leadership recognize all the basic principles set out here.

This year, they're creating a Public Engagement Strategy, which is a welcome and necessary recognition of how inadequate and sometimes destructive the current approach has been. The saddest thing they could do is short-circuit this change in a way that leaves us as one of the last communities to buy into the fading remnants of the 1970s and 1980s model.

*Ben Wolfe is a community builder and communicator, and a co-founder of local and national initiatives including Peterborough GreenUP, Peterborough Dialogues and Reimagine Peterborough.*