BRINGING CITIZEN VOICES TO THE TABLE: INFRASTRUCTURE NEEDS IN A DEMOCRACY
WITH DR. CAROLYN J. LUKENSMeyer
MAY 22, 2014

WORKSHOP FINDINGS

SFU CENTRE FOR DIALOGUE SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

creating space for transformative conversations
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Bringing Citizen Voices to the Table: Infrastructure Needs in a Democracy was convened by Simon Fraser University’s Centre for Dialogue in partnership with SFU Public Square. The Centre for Dialogue is grateful for ongoing support from the Bruce & Lis Welch Award, which made this event possible.

ABOUT SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY’S CENTRE FOR DIALOGUE

Simon Fraser University’s Centre for Dialogue uses dialogue to generate non-partisan and constructive communication around difficult topics. We partner with government, business, and community groups to explore critical issues that impact the social, economic, environmental, and cultural well-being of our communities.

ABOUT SFU PUBLIC SQUARE

SFU Public Square is a signature initiative designed to spark, nurture and restore community connections. More than a single place or program, SFU Public Square assembles the hearts, minds, and talents of diverse communities to promote inclusive, intelligent, and inspiring dialogue.

ABOUT THE BRUCE AND LIS WELCH COMMUNITY DIALOGUE

This annual event is generously supported by the Bruce and Lis Welch Award, and engages the community at large to explore innovative approaches to local issues through dialogue.
ABOUT DR. CAROLYN J. LUKENSMeyer

Carolyn J. Lukensmeyer is the Executive Director of the National Institute for Civil Discourse and founder of AmericaSpeaks. Under Carolyn’s leadership, AmericaSpeaks has earned a national reputation as a leader in the field of deliberative democracy and democratic renewal. The organization has successfully applied its 21st Century Town Meeting® to a number of health care-related topics, including state-wide health care reform in California and Maine, and the national childhood obesity epidemic.

Prior to founding AmericaSpeaks, Carolyn served as Consultant to the White House Chief of Staff from November 1993 through June 1994, as the Deputy Project Director for Management of the National Performance Review (NPR), Vice President Al Gore’s reinventing government task force, and as Chief of Staff to Governor Richard F. Celeste of Ohio from 1986 to 1991. She also led her own successful organizational development and management consulting firm for 14 years. In this capacity, she worked with public and private sector organizations on four continents.
PURPOSE

This report provides a record of participant ideas and discussion from the Bringing Citizen Voices to the Table workshop, hosted by Simon Fraser University’s Centre for Dialogue and SFU Public Square on May 22, 2014.

The information in this publication is intended to reflect, as accurately as possible, the ideas expressed by the dialogue participants, except in the final section, which contains a brief analysis of the dialogue outputs. This publication does not necessarily reflect the opinions of Simon Fraser University’s Centre for Dialogue or SFU Public Square. This publication is published in the Creative Commons (CC BY-ND). It may be reproduced and distributed so long as its contents are not modified and credit is attributed to Simon Fraser University’s Centre for Dialogue. Any works referring to this material should cite:


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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*Bringing Citizen Voices to the Table* brought together 67 prominent citizen engagement practitioners from British Columbia to evaluate the province’s citizen engagement infrastructure and explore ways to strengthen the influence of citizen voices on policy decisions at all levels of government in the region.

Featured guest Dr. Carolyn J. Lukensmeyer presented seven types of infrastructure required to support citizen engagement in a democracy. Participants then worked collaboratively to evaluate British Columbia’s citizen engagement infrastructure in the focus areas of neighbourhood planning, transportation, and mental health & addictions. Common infrastructure assets identified among the three focus areas included: *safe, accessible physical spaces; access to technology; and a network of skilled facilitators*. Repeated infrastructure gaps identified among the three focus areas included: *a trustworthy, fact-based media; and robust civic education*.

Within each focus area, participants voted on the degree to which citizen engagement currently impacts policy development. Average results ranged from “a little” to “moderate,” with the focus area of neighbourhood planning registering the highest perceived impact. Participants then nominated and voted upon the top barriers that prevent the expanded use of citizen engagement at the municipal level in British Columbia. The top three choices related to the voluntary decisions of stakeholders to enter into a citizen engagement process. These were: *low political will; commitment by all; and engagement is unappealing*.

In the final activity of the workshop, participants each wrote down one key government action that could strengthen the influence of citizen engagement on policy decisions in their focus area. The five most common themes were:

1. Allocate resources and infrastructure
2. Codify engagement responsibilities
3. Make outcomes transparent
4. Leverage third party implementation or monitoring
5. Pre-disclose how citizen input will be used

Two overall themes emerged from the workshop findings. First, the expansion of citizen engagement at all levels of government in British Columbia is dependent on elected representatives and citizens making stronger commitments to collaborative decision-making. Second, participants suggested that many jurisdictions in British Columbia appear to lack a culture of engagement that provides the transparency, predictability, and sophistication required for governments and citizens to engage effectively and with confidence. These two themes could be related; many elected representatives and citizens may treat citizen engagement with
skepticism due to negative past experiences with engagement processes that do not reflect modern best practices.

Suggested next steps include working with governments to initiate pilot projects that increase familiarity with modern citizen engagement practices. Over time, such pilot projects could build stakeholder capacity to implement and participate in citizen engagement processes and create confidence that these can be fair and lead to better outcomes. Research is also required to collect the perspectives of elected representatives and citizens, both of which would provide further insights into the status of citizen engagement at all levels of government in British Columbia.
OVERVIEW

GOALS AND OUTCOMES

The *Bringing Citizen Voices to the Table* workshop was designed to support innovation in citizen engagement at all levels of government within the geographic boundaries of British Columbia, Canada. The event featured Dr. Carolyn J. Lukensmeyer, Executive Director of the National Institute for Civil Discourse, founder of AmericaSpeaks, and one of North America’s foremost citizen engagement practitioners.

Drawing upon Dr. Lukensmeyer’s research, 67 prominent citizen engagement practitioners from British Columbia (BC) worked collaboratively to evaluate the province’s citizen engagement infrastructure. Participants then identified key barriers that prevent the expansion of citizen engagement in BC, as well as actions governments could take to strengthen the influence of citizen voices on policy decisions.

CONTEXT OF CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

Citizen engagement continues to be both a challenge and an area of innovation for governments in BC. In 2013 and 2014, the engagement processes used to develop community plans in several municipalities received significant criticism. On a regional level, plans for a referendum in 2015 to determine new sources for transportation funding in Metro Vancouver have initiated a discussion about when and how best to give citizens direct control over policy decisions. A 2012 Ipsos Reid poll indicated that 45% of British Columbians did not trust their local/municipal governments to “do the right thing,” although trust remained stronger for municipalities than higher levels of government.¹

Notwithstanding these challenges, BC is also home to many innovations in citizen engagement, including the province’s 2003/4 *Citizens Assembly on Electoral Reform*. Many municipalities have launched initiatives to enhance citizen engagement, such as the City of Surrey’s *SurreySpeaks* online engagement platform, and the City of Vancouver’s *Engaged City Task Force*. Three out of the thirteen most significant online citizen engagement platforms have been developed in BC, according to a 2014 whitepaper.²

PARTICIPANTS

Organizers sent workshop invitations to citizen engagement practitioners working in three focus areas: *neighbourhood planning, transportation, and mental health & addictions*. Invitees were selected to ensure representation from a broad range of perspectives and sectors, including government, non-profit, academic and

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BRINGING CITIZEN VOICES TO THE TABLE: INFRASTRUCTURE NEEDS IN A DEMOCRACY

Participants were guaranteed anonymity to allow for candid discussion.

SUMMARY OF ACTIVITIES

Dr. Lukensmeyer opened the workshop by presenting on the citizen engagement methods she developed through AmericaSpeaks and the seven types of citizen engagement infrastructure she has identified as necessary to support a healthy democracy. These types of infrastructure, listed in Figure 2, were described as key enablers for strengthening citizen voices in government decision-making, and provided context for the workshop’s primary breakout exercise. Dr. Lukensmeyer discussed the importance of leaving legacies of enhanced infrastructure with each new citizen engagement project, so that an area’s ability to engage and its culture of participation are increased over time. She also explored the potential to blend on-line with in-person engagement, as well as the opportunity to decrease polarization through a mixed format of large scale voting and small group discussions.

Participants also heard from two local innovators in citizen engagement. Public engagement specialist Susanna Haas Lyons discussed defining features of the City of Vancouver’s Citizens’ Assembly on the Grandview-Woodland Community Plan,

 Figure 1: Participant origins by sector

 Figure 2: Summary of infrastructure components that support democracy. Content paraphrased from chapter 13 of Bringing Citizen Voices to the Table: A Guide for Public Managers by Dr. Carolyn J. Lukensmeyer.  

**SEVEN INFRASTRUCTURE COMPONENTS THAT SUPPORT DEMOCRACY**

1. A legislative mandate for participation
   Citizen engagement structures are mandated by legislation

2. Safe, accessible physical spaces
   Where everyone feels welcome and able to participate

3. Broader access to technology
   High speed Internet access and the capability to use it

4. A facilitation infrastructure
   An ever-expanding “bank” of skilled process facilitators

5. An organizational infrastructure
   Mediating organizations that are trusted by the public

6. A trustworthy, fact-based media
   Non-ideological news media

7. Robust civic education
   Citizens know about participatory opportunities and demand to be part of them

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including proactive attempts to recruit membership that is reflective of the neighbourhood’s diversity and the blending of assembly activities with public events that engage the broader community. SFU Centre for Dialogue Fellow Shauna Sylvester discussed a regional citizens’ dialogue held in partnership with Translink to explore road pricing. Citizens from four regions in Metro Vancouver were asked to identify their commuting challenges on a map and jointly develop principles that should inform any future road pricing policies.

The workshop participants acted in groups to quantitatively evaluate the condition of BC’s citizen engagement infrastructure as it related to the specific context and jurisdiction of their table’s focus area [i.e. neighbourhood planning, transportation, and mental health & addictions]. Groups nominated up to two additional types of infrastructure they felt were relevant to their focus area beyond those provided by Dr. Lukensmeyer. They then identified the strongest asset and single most critical gap among all infrastructure categories.

The day ended with an interactive dialogue that built upon the morning breakout exercise to identify barriers and opportunities for expanding citizen engagement at all levels of government in the geographic boundaries of British Columbia. The dialogue used a blend of group discussions to stimulate participant ideas, followed by individual voting to produce quantitative information about participant perspectives. Organizers designed this process to emulate a simplified version of AmericaSpeaks’ 21st Century Town Meeting® citizen engagement model, using the online system Poll Everywhere for mobile phone-based voting. The questions explored in this format were:

1. In British Columbia, what level of impact does citizen engagement currently have on policy development within your table’s focus area?
2. What is the single largest barrier to expanding the use of citizen engagement at the municipal level in British Columbia?
3. In your focus area, what is the most effective action governments could take to strengthen the influence of citizen engagement on policy decisions?
BRINGING CITIZEN VOICES TO THE TABLE: INFRASTRUCTURE NEEDS IN A DEMOCRACY

EVENT MODERATOR MARK L. WINSTON, ACADEMIC DIRECTOR AND FELLOW OF SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY’S CENTRE FOR DIALOGUE
FINDINGS BY FOCUS AREA

NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANNING

Three groups examined citizen engagement in neighbourhood planning, focussing their analysis at the municipal level. When individual participants voted on the impact of citizen engagement on policy development in their focus area, a clear majority of participants indicated an impact of “moderate.” FIGURE 3 lists the full vote tallies.

The groups identified three categories of citizen engagement infrastructure in addition to those provided by Dr. Lukensmeyer:

- Inclusive representation (table assigned score of 2)
- “Accountive reporting” (table assigned score of 1.5)
- Communications / networking / information sharing / social amplification (table did not assign a score)

The categories nominated as the strongest infrastructure assets were: safe, accessible physical spaces; broader access to technology; a facilitation infrastructure; and smaller, vocal intermediary organizations.

Groups identified several critical gaps in infrastructure, including: a legislative mandate for participation; a trustworthy, fact-based media; robust civic education; and an organizational infrastructure. FIGURE 4 shows the average scores for all infrastructure categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of Infrastructure</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A legislative mandate for participation</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safe, accessible physical spaces</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broader access to technology</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A facilitation infrastructure</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An organizational infrastructure</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A trustworthy, fact-based media</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robust civic education</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3: Tally of individual votes for the impact of citizen engagement on policy development, as it applies to the focus area of neighbourhood planning at a municipal level of jurisdiction.

Figure 4: Average evaluation scores assigned to categories of citizen engagement infrastructure, as they apply to the focus area of neighbourhood planning at a municipal level of jurisdiction.
TRANSPORTATION

The three transportation-focused groups examined citizen engagement at a regional level of jurisdiction. When individual participants voted on the impact of citizen engagement on policy development in their focus area, a clear majority of participants chose “a little” or “moderate.” FIGURE 5 lists the full vote tallies.

In addition to the categories provided by Dr. Lukensmeyer, groups identified four additional types of infrastructure as being especially relevant to their focus area:

- Culture of engagement (table assigned score of 2)
- Philosophy and principles of engagement (table did not assign a score)
- Decision-maker commitment and involvement (table assigned score of 1)
- Resource availability (table assigned score of 2)

The categories nominated as the strongest infrastructure assets were: broader access to technology; safe, accessible physical spaces; a legislative mandate for participation; and a facilitation infrastructure.

Groups proposed the following categories as critical infrastructure gaps: robust civic education; a culture of engagement; a trustworthy, fact-based media; and decision-maker commitment and involvement. FIGURE 6 shows the average scores for all categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of Infrastructure</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A legislative mandate for participation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safe, accessible physical spaces</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broader access to technology</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A facilitation infrastructure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An organizational infrastructure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A trustworthy, fact-based media</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robust civic education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4: Average evaluation scores assigned to categories of citizen engagement infrastructure, as they apply to the focus area of neighbourhood planning at a municipal level of jurisdiction.
MENTAL HEALTH & ADDICTIONS

The two groups focussed on mental health & addictions examined citizen engagement at the provincial level of jurisdiction. When asked to vote on the impact of citizen engagement on policy development in their focus area, most individual participants responded “a little” or “moderate.” FIGURE 7 lists the full vote tallies.

The groups identified four types of infrastructure relevant to their focus area in addition to those provided by Dr. Lukensmeyer:

- The champion role (table did not assign a score)
- Building local capacity (table did not assign a score)
- Sustainable funding (table assigned score of 1)
- Capacity to support people to participate (table assigned score of 1)

The strongest citizen engagement infrastructure assets identified by groups were: a facilitation infrastructure; and an organizational infrastructure.

The most critical infrastructure gaps identified by groups were: a legislative mandate for participation; and the capacity to support people to participate. These two gaps were specific to the context of mental health & addictions, with groups explaining that there is no legislative requirement to engage the public before changes to mental health services, and that people with mental health or addictions conditions require an additional level of infrastructure to participate in an engagement process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of Infrastructure</th>
<th>Score</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A legislative mandate for participation</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safe, accessible physical spaces</td>
<td>2.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broader access to technology</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A facilitation infrastructure</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An organizational infrastructure</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A trustworthy, fact-based media</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robust civic education</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FIGURE 8: AVERAGE EVALUATION SCORES ASSIGNED TO CATEGORIES OF CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT INFRASTRUCTURE, AS THEY APPLY TO THE FOCUS AREA OF MENTAL HEALTH & ADDICTIONS AT A PROVINCIAL LEVEL OF JURISDICTION.
RESULTS FROM INTERACTIVE DIALOGUE

KEY BARRIERS

In the final activity of the workshop, participants examined challenges and opportunities to expand the use of citizen engagement. The first question asked participants to identify “the single largest barrier to expanding the use of citizen engagement at the municipal level in British Columbia.” Each group had fifteen minutes to agree upon a consensus answer. Organizers entered these answers into the voting system and participants then individually voted for the answer they preferred. The results of this vote are listed in FIGURE 9.

Participants’ top three choices related to the voluntary decisions of stakeholders to enter into a citizen engagement process. These were:

1. Low political will
2. Commitment by all
3. Engagement is unappealing

ENABLING ACTIONS

To end the day, participants were asked the question: “In your focus area, what is the most effective action governments could take to strengthen the influence of citizen engagement on policy decisions?”

After fifteen minutes of plenary discussion, participants each wrote down their individual answers on an index card. The five most common themes from these cards are listed in FIGURE 10. Numbers in parentheses indicate the total quantity of cards touching upon each theme. The sum of these numbers is greater than the total number of cards because some cards related to multiple themes.

![Figure 9: Tally of individual participants' votes for the question: “What is the single largest barrier to expanding the use of citizen engagement at the municipal level in British Columbia.”]
### MOST EFFECTIVE ACTIONS TO STRENGTHEN CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Allocate Resources and Infrastructure (17)</td>
<td>Meaningful engagement requires dedicated staff time and budgets, as well as investments to renew engagement infrastructure and build human capacity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Codify Engagement Responsibilities (15)</td>
<td>Renewed legislation and policies could build trust between citizens and elected representatives by setting consistent expectations for citizen engagement and replacing ineffective models with modern best practices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make Outcomes Transparent (8)</td>
<td>Publicly available summaries of citizen feedback and explicit information about how citizen voices impacted decisions help to establish positive feedback loops that build a long-term culture of participation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leverage Third Party Implementation or Monitoring (8)</td>
<td>Public confidence requires citizen engagement processes that are independent and non-partisan. Neutral mediating organizations are especially helpful in circumstances that suffer from a lack of trust or perceived bias.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Disclose How Citizen Input Will be Used (7)</td>
<td>Public confidence requires citizen engagement processes that are independent and non-partisan. Neutral mediating organizations are especially helpful in circumstances that suffer from a lack of trust or perceived bias.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 10:** Major themes in response to the question: "What is the most effective action governments could take to strengthen the influence of citizen engagement on policy decisions."
ANALYSIS AND NEXT STEPS

Two overarching themes connect the findings in this report. First, the expansion of citizen engagement in British Columbia at all levels of government is dependent on elected representatives and citizens making stronger commitments to collaborative decision-making. Second, participants suggested that many jurisdictions in BC appear to lack a culture of engagement that provides the transparency, predictability, and sophistication required for governments and citizens to engage effectively and with confidence. These two themes could be related, with elected representatives and citizens feeling skepticism towards future citizen engagement opportunities due to past negative experiences.

Elected representatives may fear that a poorly designed process could be coopted by interest groups or result in decisions being made without the benefit of key information and expertise. Conversely, citizens may fear that their contributions will not meaningfully affect policy, but will instead be used to legitimize decisions that politicians have already made or to reduce the power of citizens to protest decisions they oppose. Both viewpoints risk becoming entrenched over time if trust breaks down between citizens and elected representatives as they continue to interact with citizen engagement processes that do not reflect modern best practices.

Breaking this cycle will require concentrated efforts to build familiarity with the benefits of modern citizen engagement practices and, over time, create a culture of engagement that allows all parties to have confidence that the process will be fair and lead to better outcomes. Governments could help to initiate this cultural shift by implementing citizen engagement pilot projects that create space for learning and experimentation. The most effective methods could then be systematized to ensure predictable, high standards for all future engagement.

Governments can also make long-term efforts to evaluate and renew the types of infrastructure that support citizen engagement, as described in this document and through the writings of Dr. Lukensmeyer. Civic education, in particular, was identified as a critical gap by workshop participants and is directly within the power of government to improve.

The outcomes from the Bringing Citizen Voices to the Table workshop reflect the perspectives of individuals who self-identify as citizen engagement practitioners. Additional research is required to collect the perspectives of elected representatives and citizens, both of which would provide further insights into the status of citizen engagement at all levels of government in British Columbia.