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Innovative approaches for public engagement at the local level

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Advancing climate action through participatory democracy:

Innovative approaches for public engagement at the local level

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ABOUT CLIMATE REALITY CANADA

Climate Reality Project Canada is the Canadian branch of The Climate Reality Project, a global network founded by Nobel Laureate and former US Vice President Al Gore. Our work aims to enhance general understanding of climate science and solutions and empower people to become educators on the subject; promote public policy literacy; encourage citizen participation in decision-making spaces; and help people become real agents of change in their communities.

FOREWORD

For over a decade, Climate Reality Canada has been empowering people to participate in the green transition, helping them to become effective **organizers** and **advocates**, **storytellers**, **researchers**, and **community-builders**. Over this time, society has made significant progress, with an increased awareness among the public of the threat climate change poses, and activists like Greta Thunberg issuing an urgent, public call to action.

Local governments have been stepping up to meet this challenge: a majority of **Canadian municipalities** now have emissions targets and climate plans, and many are integrating climate considerations into their **land-use planning**, **infrastructure development**, **housing**, and other core responsibilities.

At the same time, both climate impacts and mitigation efforts alike can provoke fear and resistance, driven by other challenges faced in Canada and globally such as rising right-wing populism, misinformation and conspiratorial thinking, a loss of faith in institutions, and threats to democracy. In an era of unprecedented economic inequality, it is also more important than ever that climate mitigation and adaptation go hand-in-hand with fostering prosperity and security for all of us rather than only some.

Climate Reality believes that increasing meaningful public participation in policy-making is imperative to overcome political polarization and continue advancing equitable climate action. By commissioning this report, we want to amplify stories of how municipalities, community partners, and residents are working together to develop creative, effective, and equitable climate solutions that are supported by a broad public mandate. We hope it serves as inspiration for municipal officials, climate and public engagement professionals, activists, and anyone interested in the intersection of climate action and participatory democracy.

Hannah Muhajarine
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The Climate Reality Project Canada

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report introduces innovative types of community engagement that can be used to involve the public in municipal climate policy making. It is intended to inform members of the public and municipal officials on the menu of public engagement options available to enable replication of more engaging, inclusive engagement methods in municipalities across Canada.

Amidst an uncertain future of international and federal climate policy, municipalities have an opportunity to rise to the challenge of reducing emissions and building a more livable future. But the fight for ambitious climate policy can be challenging. Introducing innovative formats of public engagement can help overcome political obstacles and can shape stronger, more inclusive climate policy.

* Engaging the public in decision-making can boost legitimacy and public acceptance of climate policy.
* Citizens can take a longer-term view on policy options and impacts because they do not have to be concerned with four- or five-year election cycles.
* Embedding these structures into the policy process can provide opportunities for increased government scrutiny and accountability to citizens.
* Engaging a representative sample of the population can ensure participants hold a variety of lived experiences, challenging existing inequalities in public policy.
* Incorporating more information and opportunities for dialogue into engagements can help to build more informed opinions and boost empathy among participants.
* Innovative approaches to public engagement on climate action (such as citizens' assemblies) routinely produce high levels of support for more ambitious climate policy.

The report is divided into four sections, each focusing on a different engagement method: **citizens' assemblies**, **participatory budgeting**, **citizen advisory committees**, and **consultations**. Each section contains an introduction to the method and two case studies to showcase the different ways the technique can be implemented.

The eight case studies showcase a range of implementation approaches and contexts for innovative public engagement. Citizens' assemblies are explored through examples of a climate assembly (**Bude, UK**) and an assembly that feeds into a community planning process (**Burnaby, BC**); participatory budgeting is explored in one small- (**Edmonton, AB**) and one large-scale program (**Montréal, QC**); a citizens' advisory committee that allocates seats for youth and Indigenous residents (**Saskatoon, SK**) is contrasted with one that uses sortition to select the committee members in proportion to the municipalities' demographics (**New Westminster, BC**); and innovative approaches to consultations are presented in case studies on an ambitious engagement program to build a climate plan (**Halifax, NS**) and a design challenge to future-proof the local shoreline (**Vancouver, BC**).

THE CASE FOR PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IN CLIMATE ACTION

Climate change is no longer a far-off future concern to Canadians: its terrible impacts have already arrived. Canada has sustained billions in damage and continues to warm at twice the global average.[1] Cities and towns have burnt to the ground during increasingly lengthy and severe wildfire seasons; a "heat dome" ravaged British Columbia, killing 619 people, and yielding the highest-ever recorded temperature in Canada of 49.6 °C;[2] and unprecedented intensity of storms and rainfall have led to increased frequency of dangerous floods.[3] International climate negotiations – which risk becoming little more than greenwashing PR – have not succeeded in averting dangerous levels of warming[4] and give no indication that increasingly catastrophic levels of warming will be averted: under existing policies, between 2.6 and 3.1°C of warming is anticipated by 2100.[5]

With international climate negotiations yielding disappointing results and federal and provincial climate policy defined by partisan politics, there is another jurisdiction to which we can turn for action on climate change: local government. According to the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, municipalities have influence over roughly 50% of Canada's GHG emissions.[6] While many types of climate policy fall under provincial or federal juris-diction - for example, carbon pricing schemes and decisions on energy infrastructure - municipalities have unique opportunities to promote action on tackling the climate crisis.

On average, buildings comprise 43% of municipal emissions in Canada;[7] these emis-sions can be tackled through modifications to municipal building codes, as is proposed in Toronto's plan for improved building emissions performance standards.[8]

Transportation emissions can also be curbed through municipal powers: councils can vote to undertake active transportation plans to make cycling and walking more safe and enjoyable, bus routes and bus frequency can be expanded, and road pricing schemes can be adopted to disincentivize personal vehicle use. And municipal-level climate policy can be easier for citizens to engage with: whereas federal climate policy can feel distant and abstract, local climate policy domains - such as the way our neighbor-hoods are organized and fueled, and how we move around - can feel more real and tactile. Furthermore, municipal politicians are often more accessible for citizens to talk to compared to their provincial or federal counterparts.

As many climate activists know first hand, fighting for more ambitious climate policy is no easy feat: many politicians are reluctant to act, or are opposed to action. Political reluctance to act on climate can come in several forms. Councillors may be wary of the cost of policies and initiatives for climate mitigation and adaptation, and concerned that residents may not re-elect them if government expenditures become too high. And they also fear backlash to the substance of policies: for example, reallocation of road space for the expansion of bike lanes or transit-only lanes can often incur the wrath of drivers and business owners.

Introducing innovative formats of public engagement can work through these political obstacles to progress and embed better deci-sion-making structures: consulting the public can boost legitimacy and public acceptance of climate policy;[9] average citizens can take a longer-term view on policy options and impacts because they do not have to be concerned with four- or five-year election cycles; and embed-ding these structures into the policy process can provide opportunities for increased govern-ment scrutiny and accountability to citizens.

Traditional modes of public engagement haven't always been regarded as effective agents of change. When governments engage members of the public for their input, this input is generally taken into consideration to guide policies and initiatives, but there is no requirement for elected officials to adhere to the wishes of the public. Following all public input is often impossible - people generally have a variety of viewpoints which conflict with one another, rendering adherence to

50%

According to the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, municipalities have influence over roughly 50% of Canada's GHG emissions.

every person's preferences infeasible - and also sometimes undesirable; for instance, participants in traditional formats of public engagement tend to skew towards those who have the most time and resources to participate, and adhering to their input could produce unjust outcomes that represent the interests of homeowners over renters, and retired people over young people.[10] In part due to these reasons, some feel skeptical of whether community engagement is a worthwhile undertaking or merely an institutional channel for frustrated citizens to blow off steam.

Novel forms of engagement can mitigate these problems, addressing common complaints about status quo approaches and reinvigorating the argument in favour of the productive contribution of public engagement to the policy process. Selecting a representative sample of the population can ensure participants hold a variety of lived experiences, challenging existing inequalities; and incorporating more information and opportunities for discussion and dialogue can help to inform opinions and boost empathy among participants. Adopting more inclusive and equitable democratic processes produces more just policy outcomes, which is crucial for climate policy-making in particular: because climate action will require large-scale changes, it's important that people are involved in the process, rather than climate policy being something that happens to them without their input.

Novel approaches to engagement appear to yield resounding recommendations in favour of climate action. In Ireland's 2018 Citizen Assembly on the climate crisis, all assembly members agreed that the state should take a leadership role in addressing climate change, and 97% of members recommended that climate change be at the centre of policy-making in Ireland, including the creation of an independent and resourced body with powers and functions to urgently address climate change.[11] Beyond garnering unanimous or near-unanimous support for broad principles, these educational, deliberative formats of engagement appear to be effective at getting participants on board with specific climate policies that may come at a personal cost. In the Irish case, 80% of assembly members voted in agreement "that they would be willing to pay higher taxes on carbon intensive activities." And in Copenhagen's 2019 citizens' assembly on a sustainable future for the medieval city centre, unanimous support was achieved to reduce street parking by 80-90%, even with 30% of assembly members belonging to car-owning households.[12] Evidently, when citizens are given the opportunity to tackle tough conversations about the climate crisis, the outcomes can be resounding in favour of strengthening climate policy and setting ambitious emission reduction targets.

The time is ripe to innovate our democratic systems. In addition to the climate crisis, North America is also experiencing a breakdown of democratic norms: confidence in parliament is low,[13] and corporate power threatens to eclipse representative democracy. At a time when so many are feeling alienated from political processes and policy outcomes, we ought to find new ways to bring a wider range of people into the fold of policy-making.[14] Cities are the perfect place to test out more meaningful forms of engagement.

Novel approaches to engagement appear to yield resounding recommendations in favour of climate action... Evidently, when citizens are given the opportunity to tackle tough conversations about the climate crisis, the outcomes can be resounding in favour of strengthening climate policy and setting ambitious emission reduction targets.

This report spotlights four different ways municipalities can engage the public on climate issues: citizens' assemblies, participatory budgeting, citizen advisory committees, and consultation. Each section includes an explanation of how the method works and two case studies that exemplify different implementation approaches and contexts. To learn more about these methods and the case studies, check out the Further Reading section at the end of this report.

# OF PARTICIPANTS	PARTICIPANT SELECTION	OUTPUT	DURATION
🔴 CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES			
* Between 30 and 100	* Random stratified sample	* Recommendations on the policy pathways and initiatives government should pursue	* Usually conducted on weekends across one to six months
🟡 PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING			
* Ideation and voting open to all; deliberation to select projects usually only open to a select group	* Deliberation participants sometimes selected by random stratified sample	* Allocation of funding to community projects	* Around a year for ideation, deliberation, voting, and disbursement of funds
🟢 CITIZEN ADVISORY COMMITTEES			
* Around 10 citizen representatives	* Open application process or by random stratified sample	* Ongoing input on council's proposed policy initiatives	* Ongoing; citizens usually serve two- or three-year terms
🔵 PUBLIC CONSULTATIONS			
* Open to all, while some include focus groups that target specific populations	* Open participation	* Input on a proposed policy initiative	* Ranges from single consultations in an evening to year-long consultations on major projects

TABLE 1:
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Types of local public engagement and their characteristics

CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES

A citizens' assembly is a group of citizens convened to discuss a policy issue. Whereas politicians are selected to represent us through periodic elections, members of a citizens' assembly are selected through sortition, or random selection.

An assembly usually follows three stages: first, members learn about a policy issue from experts and people with first-hand experience; second, members deliberate together on what policies could best tackle the issue at hand; and lastly, the members put these policy recommendations to a vote to determine how much support each one has. The recommendations are assembled into a report which is delivered to the government that convened the assembly. Citizens' assemblies can have anywhere from a dozen members to over a hundred, and can also be called citizen panels, citizen juries, or community assemblies.

Whereas politicians are selected to represent us through periodic elections, members of a citizens' assembly are selected through sortition, or random selection. This random selection process generally uses a computer program to balance participants according to the demographics of the overall population, such as on the basis of gender and age. For example, if 10% of the population is in the 18-25 age bracket, the program will select participants such that 10% of the assembly members are between 18 and 25. The pool of potential applicants is usually created by sending invitations to households across the jurisdiction, and participants are selected from the pool of people who respond to say they are interested. The idea behind selecting citizens across a variety of backgrounds is to ensure inclusion of a range of life experiences in a policy conversation. Sometimes policy advice from citizens is necessary when there's a conflict of interest if politicians were to make a decision, such as in the case of electoral reform; it can also be useful if progress on a policy issue has stalled or if a public is divided, such as in the case of abortion policy reform in Ireland.

Citizens' assemblies have been used around the world at every level of government to help decision makers shape public policy on topics ranging from urban planning to health policy.[15] Canada was an early leader in making use of citizens' assemblies for tough questions: the 2004 British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform made use of randomly-selected citizens' input to the question of updating the province's electoral system. The decisions of citizens' assemblies are usually not binding – that is, the recommendations members make are considered by elected officials, and the government has the power to decide which recommendations they wish to act upon. Some governments do commit to publicly responding to each recommendation, however, to show their commitment to considering each suggestion.

Citizens can call on their governments to convene an assembly. In Southwark, the local chapter of Extinction Rebellion (XR) activists listed a citizens' assembly for climate as one of its demands; after three years of campaigning, an assembly was conducted, and XR was invited to participate on its oversight panel.[16] Through this oversight mechanism, activists were able to give feedback on the process itself, including input on the question posed to assembly members. Their oversight also led to modifications to improve transparency and expand public access to assembly proceedings.

While most citizens' assemblies are led by the government, they can also be initiated by civil society organizations. In the seaside town of Bude, the Bude Climate Partnership - a collection of local environmental groups - used part of a grant from the National Lottery to convene the Bude Area Community Jury on Climate Change (see case study below).[17] Climate assemblies in the Maldives[18] and Lebanon[19] were also conducted with funding from civil society organizations. While this approach may sacrifice direct connection to policy making, it may be the preferred path if the government shows no interest in conducting an assembly, or has not engaged in good faith with climate activists in the past. Civil society-led assemblies can still be important opportunities to envision and develop stronger climate policy that meets the challenges we face.

Because citizens' assemblies are emerging as a useful tool to help make decisions on challenging policy topics, it's no surprise that dozens of climate-focussed citizens' assemblies have been conducted in countries around the world at the municipal, regional and national levels. The case studies presented here will showcase two approaches to tackling climate issues with a municipal assembly.

First, we'll examine the Burnaby Community Assembly in British Columbia to see how climate issues can be incorporated into a municipal urban planning process to better plan for a low-carbon future. Then, we'll jump across the pond to England to learn about the Bude Area's Community Jury on Climate Change, one of dozens of local climate-focussed assemblies conducted across the UK.

CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY

BURNABY'S COMMUNITY ASSEMBLY

FACT SHEET

Timeframe:

Seven full-day sessions between February and June 2024

Partners:

* City of Burnaby
* Simon Fraser University's Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue
* Vancity

Participants:

45 assembly members selected; 40 assembly members completed the process (after attrition).

ADVANCING CLIMATE ACTION THROUGH PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

Photo courtesy of the Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue

A citizens' assembly does not have to be convened expressly as a climate assembly to contribute to climate objectives. In fact, the Burnaby Community Assembly – convened to contribute to the City's new and revised Official Community Plan – may be superior to the stand-alone climate assembly because of this structural difference: because it is connected to an ongoing policy process, there is greater opportunity for policy makers to incorporate participants' contributions into city plans.

Initiated in 2021, the Burnaby Community Assembly was the first citizens' assembly commissioned in Canada to source community input for an Official Community Plan. Common among many municipalities in Canada, an Official Community Plan (also known as an Official Plan) is a document that outlines a municipality's long-term vision for land use, development, and services; it thus dictates the plans for a number of policy areas relevant to municipal climate goals, including building density, green space, active transportation, and public transit.

In British Columbia, the Local Government Act mandates that municipalities conduct public engagement as part of the development of a new Plan, but it does not specify what form this should take;[20] many cities conduct surveys or pop-up booths in pedestrian areas to get people involved. However, there's no guarantee that these approaches to engagement capture the views of every demographic group of residents. Burnaby's choice to conduct a citizens' assembly (alongside a range of other more standard public engagement tactics) in fulfillment of this consultation requirement exhibits their commitment to sourcing meaningful input from a broad and diverse range of Burnaby citizens. In selecting Assembly participants, organizers ensured demographic balance across eight criteria: gender, age group, language spoken at home, housing type (renter vs. owner), education level, immigration status, neighbourhood, and Indigenous identity. 45 members were recruited to participate (with 40 completing the process, after attrition), among whom seven of these demographic categories were balanced in proportion with the overall Burnaby population,

and a minimum target was set for 3 Indigenous-identifying members (4 Indigenous-identifying members were ultimately selected).[21]

The assembly focused on one central, guiding question: how should Burnaby grow and change by 2050 to create a city where everyone can thrive? Across the seven full-day sessions between February and June of 2024, participants met to learn about and discuss issues facing the city including density, livability, housing, climate change, and transportation.

The Assembly's organizers from SFU's Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue took an iterative approach to its design. Rather than specifying the entire Assembly process from the outset, organizers scheduled opportunities to weave in public input. First, to ensure the scope and objectives of the Assembly reflected the interests of the community, organizers conducted scoping interviews with 27 community organizations as well as with city councillors and staff, and launched a public survey to allow for community input to co-design the Assembly process. Incorporating this feedback and guidance, the first three meetings of the Assembly were held, and participants learned from presentations about planning, climate action, and community amenities, before then deliberating on a vision for Burnaby's future and which issues they wished to prioritize in subsequent meetings.

Between the third and fourth Assembly meeting, another opportunity for public engagement was convened: a "Big Ideas Workshop" that gave community members the chance to contribute their own ideas for Burnaby's future. These ideas fed into subsequent Assembly deliberations.

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"It was a pleasure to be able to participate in a process like this that would normally be happening behind closed doors… to feel that we as a public can provide actionable change and make an impact in the city in which we live is an honour."

The fourth and fifth sessions of the Assembly allowed members to explore and learn more about Burnaby's diverse neighbourhoods, which included both bus and walking tours around town. These sessions also invited community groups to speak with members to enrich their understanding of life in the city from a range of perspectives. Through deliberation, members then developed action ideas to realize their vision for Burnaby's future.

Public feedback was again sought out between the fifth and sixth Assembly sessions. Organizers packaged the Assembly members' emerging action ideas into a public survey to hear feedback on the ideas. The survey was made available in 10 languages, and additional workshops in nine languages were convened to gather additional feedback from community members who would otherwise have faced language barriers to participation.

With feedback collected, the Assembly then proceeded with its final two sessions. Members considered feedback collected through the survey and workshops, as well as feedback from city staff on the alignment between their ideas and city policy, and worked on developing and finalizing their recommendations for Burnaby's future. In total, Assembly members made 24 recommendations to City of Burnaby decision makers to guide the development of the new Official Community Plan, involving housing, affordability, growth, density, land use, transportation, livability, and wellbeing.[22] Recommendations included proposals that the city should implement an inter-generational lens to guide its decision-making, increase the number of urban villages, provide walkable

Assembly deliberation discussed issues relevant to different neighbourhoods in the city *in situ*. Photo: Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue

access to amenities and services for all neighbourhoods, and prioritize the allocation of limited road space for rapid bus services.

Participants were invigorated by the opportunity to contribute to policy making in the novel manner offered by a citizens' assembly. One assembly member shared that "it was a pleasure to be able to participate in a process like this that would normally be happening behind closed doors," adding that "to feel that we as a public can provide actionable change and make an impact in the city in which we live is an honour."[23]

Recommendations were launched at an event held outside Burnaby City Hall and were subsequently presented to City Council. Furthermore, City Council committed from the outset of the process to reviewing and responding to the Assembly's recommendations, establishing a baseline of accountability and good faith for the process. Though this response and the new Official Community Plan have yet to be released at the time of writing, the Assembly's recommendations exhibit a strong endorsement of an environmentally-friendly vision for Burnaby's future that will hopefully guide the city's trajectory of development and services.

CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY

BUDE AREA'S COMMUNITY JURY ON CLIMATE CHANGE

FACT SHEET

Timeframe:
September to November 2023

Partners:
* Bude Climate Partnership
* Shared Future
* The National Lottery Community Fund

Participants:
40 jury members selected; 34 jury members attended all sessions

ADVANCING CLIMATE ACTION THROUGH PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

Photo courtesy of the Bude Climate Partnership

Located on the north coast of Cornwall in England, Bude is one of the most sensitive locations in the United Kingdom to sea level rise.[24] Spurred on by the shocking projected change in their coastline, the members of the Bude Climate Partnership – an alliance of environmental, community and democratic organisations working together to develop community-led response to climate change – decided they would take the initiative to convene a citizens' jury on climate change.

With the help of the Sortition Foundation,[25] the Bude Climate Partnership sent invitations to 8000 households in Bude and its nearby towns and parishes. 170 people responded to express interest, and from this pool 40 individuals were selected using random stratified sampling to form a jury with balance across a set of demographics: gender, age, ethnicity, disability, level of climate concern, location, index of multiple deprivation,[26] duration of residence in Bude, religion, and homeowner versus renter status. Invitations offered £330 in vouchers to cover the costs of taking part, which helped ensure those who may not usually participate would be able to.

To support uptake and visibility of the jury's process and recommendations - and also to monitor the process and suggest topics and speakers - an oversight panel was convened and composed of community representatives. Panel members included local town councillors, a Cornwall city councillor, representatives from the Environment Agency, city staff, community trustees, and a representative from the Chamber of Commerce. Additional town and city councillors also attended as observers.

The jury met for a total of 30 hours across five full days, hearing from 21 experts and commentators. Jury members were involved in the decision of which climate change-related themes they wished to discuss during the Jury's meetings. The oversight panel decided there was only time for two themes to be discussed in greater depth; after the first weekend of the Jury, which included introductions and the first round of expert presentations, the theme of sea-level rise emerged in discussion as the most

important. Then, to select the second theme for the Jury to discuss in-depth, Jury members cast votes, selecting awareness-raising as the other focus. A full day of learning and discussion was devoted to each of the two selected themes. The other four themes not selected in the vote - energy, transport, change-making, and agriculture and land use - were reserved for additional discussion towards the end of the process.

The fifth and final day of the assembly was devoted to drafting recommendations. Recommendations were drafted in response to a guiding question: How can we respond to a changing climate, including sea level rise, to support our community to thrive? To support the drafting of recommendations, facilitators circulated ideas for recommendations drawn from the Jury's discussions and suggestions from previous Jury meetings. The Jury split into groups to focus on discussing draft recommendations on one of four key topics, and were tasked with determining whether a set of draft recommendations on each topic was sufficient or if changes should be made. Members then had the opportunity to move to another table to focus on another of the key topics, giving them the opportunity to give input on any area of recommendations they wished. After this process, members were given the chance to suggest additional recommendations within the categories of themes not selected for in-depth discussion. Following the end of deliberations and an opportunity for reflection on the process, members were provided with booklets to vote on each recommendation, and were able to select whether they strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed, strongly disagreed, or neither agreed nor disagreed with each recommendation or principle.

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* To support uptake and visibility of the jury's process and recommendations – and also to monitor the process and suggest topics and speakers – an oversight panel was convened and composed of community representatives. Panel members included local town councillors, a Cornwall city councillor, representatives from the Environment Agency, city staff, community trustees, and a representative from the Chamber of Commerce.

At the conclusion of the process, the Bude Area Community Jury produced 11 principles to guide future decision making on sea level rise and 29 recommendations across three categories: sea level rise, raising awareness, and other climate-related issues facing the community.

The Jury was designed to run in parallel with a youth Mini-Jury, giving local schoolchildren aged 11 to 16 the chance to learn, deliberate, and contribute to the community's response to climate change. Like a true citizens' assembly, participants were selected according to a demographically-representative sample of the school population: of the 1014 pupils at the local Budehaven Community School who drew raffle tickets during their assembly, 40 students selected a ticket that saw them considered for Jury membership; of this 40, 24 were invited to act as Mini-Jury members. The Mini-Jury met across three half days, hearing from seven experts, and discussing their own experiences and ideas. They submitted 18 recommendations for their school and community to take action on climate change, and presented these findings to the Community Jury as input to their deliberations.[27]

Younger schoolchildren aged seven to eleven also had the opportunity to contribute and learn about the aims of the Community Jury on Climate Change. Primary school classrooms were provided with supplies and activities to engage in dialogue about climate change, including questions such as "How do you feel about climate change?" and "What would you say to adults about climate change?" To report back to the Jury, the children were given postcards to both write and depict their thoughts,

Photo courtesy of the Bude Climate Partnership.

feelings, and vision for the future of Bude.

Because the Community Jury was convened by community groups rather than by a municipal government, disconnection from ongoing policy-making initiatives may have posed a challenge to uptake of the jury's recommendations. To reinforce connections to policy makers, the Jury held a launch event in January 2024 to present recommendations to the community and key

decision makers, including figures from the Environment Agency, Cornwall Council and town and parish councils. In February, the Jury then presented their recommendations and findings to the Bude-Stratton Town Council, which agreed to hold a special council meeting in April for further consideration of the Jury's recommendations. The Jury also set up meetings with other decision makers, including a meeting with their local MP and the Strategic Director of Cornwall Council.[28]

PARTICIPATORY BUDGEING

Participatory budgeting is a process through which residents can deliberate together to make decisions on how to spend public money.

Though details differ from one process to another, participatory budgeting generally involves a government allocating a portion of an upcoming budget for local residents to decide how it should be spent. Participatory budgeting often involves three stages: brainstorming ideas, filtering and refining these ideas, and voting on which ideas to fund. While the first and last phases are usually open to all members of the public, the filtering stage – which involves deliberation among participants – is usually open to a subset of the population. Sometimes called delegates or citizen representatives, these participants can be volunteers, can be selected via random selection according to some demographic criteria (as is the approach for citizens' assembly member selection), or can even be elected into the position, as is the case in some cities in Latin America. Delegates participating in the filtering phase are responsible for considering the submitted ideas, weighing the different options through discussion, collaborating with city staff to assess ideas, and create the ballot of options on which the public can vote. Selection of delegates or participants often seeks to promote the views and needs of under-represented groups.

Participatory budgeting is beneficial in a number of ways: it provides the opportunity for residents to participate in local decision-making, which is something that's usually left to politicians; it creates opportunities for people to discuss local needs and develop ideas and solutions; and it helps fund projects in which people are most interested. It offers the benefits of deliberation-informed decisions while also providing opportunities for all citizens to participate in idea generation and voting on funding allocation.

Since its origins in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 1989, participatory budgeting has spread around the world; in Canada, a handful of participatory budgeting processes have been conducted in municipalities and neighbourhoods. While some of these processes have a general mandate across a variety of municipal policy areas, some processes focus on the allocation of public funds within a certain priority area, such as funding for local environment or arts projects.

In the following case studies, we'll look at two applications of municipal participatory budgeting in Canada: Montréal's $25 million city-wide call for projects that contribute to the city's social-ecological transition, and Edmonton's relatively smaller-budget pilot that set out to work together with residents to bring community ideas to life.

A poster promoting the participatory budgeting process in a public park in Montréal's Notre–Dame–de–Grâce—Côte–des–Neiges borough. Photo: City of Montréal.

PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING

MONTRÉAL'S PARTICIPATORY BUDGET

FACT SHEET

Timeframe:

2020 to 2021; 2022 to 2023; 2024 to 2025

Partners:

* City of Montréal
* Montréal borough councils and executive committee
* Centre d'écologie urbaine

Participants:

Over 20,000 participants in the voting phase (2020 to 2021)

ADVANCING CLIMATE ACTION THROUGH
PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

One of the projects financed by the participatory budget provided for the planting of 15 microforests to improve access to nature in the city, including in Père-Marquette Park in the Rosemont–La Petite-Patrie borough, pictured above. Photo: Olivier Bousquet.

Finding ways to give voice to many types of residents is an important path to democratic empowerment. In a 2022 announcement, Montréal mayor Valérie Plante stated that "the participatory budget is one of the ways to give the population the opportunity to reclaim their power to act on their city, their street, in their neighbourhood. And that is extremely important."[29]

Because participatory budgeting is open to all, it represents a novel approach for the City of Montréal to engage its residents - including those who may not usually participate - on the design of local projects and programs.

The first round of Montréal's participatory budget process encouraged submissions that would contribute to the city's **social-ecological transition**. In particular, submissions had to contribute to **one or more objectives**:

* **Fighting against and adapting to climate change,**
* **Protecting the city's natural habitats,**
* **Producing and consuming differently, and**
* **Promoting solidarity, equity and inclusion.**

In addition to this substantive focus, project submissions were also required to meet the following criteria:

* Serve a collective interest (not intended to benefit an individual or a private entity),

* Be feasible for the city on public property or on city property,

* Involve a capital works investment for equipment or urban planning that can be considered sustainable and long-term, and

* Represent a major project valued between $500,000 and $3,000,000.[30]

The idea generation phase was open to all residents. Program organizers at the city opened the submission period in Fall 2020, and a total of 620 ideas were collected through an online form or via an ideation workshop. Next, in winter and spring 2021, staff read through all submissions to filter them for adherence to the eligibility criteria; 300 ideas made it through this filtering stage. City representatives then worked with civil society representatives to develop these ideas into more comprehensive, thought-out project proposals, resulting in 63 projects; the city then assessed these for technical and legal feasibility and developed cost estimates. This work culminated in their selection of 35 projects that would be included in the public vote.[31]

Voting was open online and in person to residents over 12 years of age as well as to local merchants, and voters could select up to five projects they found most deserving of funding. In the summer of 2021, over 20,000 votes were cast. In the fall, the City announced the top seven winning projects among which the $10 million investment would be divided. The **winning projects** included:

* *Les microforêts de Montréal* (Montréal microforests), calling for the creation of microforests in parks or underutilized municipal lands across five neighbourhoods, adding 6,100 square metres of forests with more than 6,500 trees and shrubs.[32]

* *De l'eau dans ta gourde* (Water in your bottle), calling for the installation of 125 water bottle filling stations in high-traffic but poorly-served areas across six boroughs.[33]

* *Mobilier festif inclusif et sécuritaire* (Safe, inclusive and festive furniture), aiming to create more accessible municipal event spaces. This includes picnic tables for children, solar generators, folding chairs, or tents and festival tents.[34]

* *Le Jardin Éthel* (Éthel garden), aiming to transform the upper storey of Verdun's Éthel parking garage into a public space dedicated to urban agriculture, green space, and arts and culture.[35]

* *Notre serre 4 saisons à Saint-Michel* (Four-season greenhouse in Saint-Michel), seeking to operate outdoor gardens and a year-round greenhouse in Villeray–Saint-Michel–Parc-Extension to promote urban agriculture. These facilities would grow fresh produce year-round, host groups, and distribute harvests to neighbourhood residents at affordable prices.[36]

* *Corridor écologique du grand Sud-Ouest* (Ecological corridor in the greater Sud-Ouest), aiming to connect important biodiversity spaces between LaSalle and Le Sud-Ouest by developing green alleys and new tree islands with shrubs and pollinator gardens.[37]

* *Quai34* (Pier 34), calling to redevelop the pier to add green space and make it a more enjoyable and fun place for residents to spend time.[38]

This initial participatory budgeting process was such a success that in Spring 2022, the City decided to add another $15 million to the budget available for projects. This meant the next five most popular projects from the public vote in the fall were funded. These included:

* *Zones nourricières écologiques* (Ecological food zones), aiming to expand urban agriculture on public property in five boroughs using a permaculture approach that favours indigenous plants. Spaces could include trees, pollinator-friendly flower beds, mushroom farms, and orchards.[39]

* *Les jardins verticaux de la fraîcheur* (Vertical gardens), aiming to grow vegetation on external walls of municipal buildings.[40]

* *Parcours riverain Gouin* (Gouin riverside circuit), seeking to add green space to the circuit that connects several boroughs along the shores of the Rivière des Prairies, promoting biodiversity, outdoor activities, and active transportation.[41]

* *Capteurs de pluie* (Rain catchers), calling to develop sustainable stormwater drainage practices in three boroughs through curb extensions with vegetation at street corners and planting holes in the middle of boulevards.[42]

* *Verdissement de rues* (Greening of streets), aiming to transform paved streets into green spaces in three boroughs through curb extensions, borders and medians with vegetation, and larger tree holes.[43]

As of early 2025, most of these projects' implementation is complete or in progress.

Participatory budgeting has now become a periodic program at the City of Montréal: the process repeated in 2022-2023, and a third iteration is ongoing as of early 2025.

Planners have shifted the focus of project submissions for recent iterations of the program, with the second and third iterations calling for submissions that connect to improving youth experience, equity of access to city infrastructure, and safety (which includes safer mobility and transportation around the city, violence prevention, and protection against severe weather).

The budget allocation has also grown across each iteration of the program - the total allocation grew from $25 million to $31.5 million, and then again in the third iteration to $45 million; and the funding cap per project grew from $3 million in the first iteration to $10 million in the second and third iterations.

The program's outreach strategy has also grown to target young Montréal residents, as well as residents of equity-seeking neighbourhoods.

Ideation workshops were convened to specifically target youth; voting stations were convened in schools and at organizations frequented by young people; and guidelines for self-hosted voting sessions - developed in collaboration with the Centre d'écologie urbaine and the Institut du Nouveau Monde (INM) - allowed for educational staff to facilitate deliberation sessions on the participatory budgeting proposals in classrooms.[44]

The City also organized ideation workshops and voting sessions at community organizations across the city to better reach more residents who may not usually participate.

The program's outreach strategy has also grown to target young Montréal residents, as well as residents of equity–seeking neighbourhoods. Ideation workshops and voting sessions were convened in schools and at organizations frequented by young people, as well as at community organizations across the city to better reach more residents who may not usually participate.

![Participatory budgeting icon](lightbulb with dollar sign)

PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING

EDMONTON'S COMMUNITY-BASED BUDGETING

FACT SHEET

Timeframe:
2022-2023

Partners:
* Two city councilors
* David Suzuki Foundation
* Community organizations

Participants:
23 project leads selected, plus additional participants in brainstorming and implementation phases

ADVANCING CLIMATE ACTION THROUGH PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

Photo courtesy of Community-based budgeting project, Councilor Keren Tang, Edmonton.

Inspired by the use of participatory budgeting emerging in cities around the world, city councillors Keren Tang and Andrew Knack led the charge to bring its benefits to their wards in the City of Edmonton. Part of the program's appeal was its roots in the community for both ideas and decision-making, said Tang: "unlike a traditional micro-granting process where it is often an adjudication panel that decides which group receives funding, it is community members and applicants themselves who make that decision."

Furthermore, she noted that participatory budgeting provides opportunities for citizens to "find ways to collaborate and synergize, so that limited funding can be amplified for much broader impact."[45]

The project team set out **four objectives** for the Community-Based Budgeting program:

* To develop and test out a process for Participatory Budgeting that works in an Edmonton context and to help the City test out how to work together with residents in a community-based way that helps Edmontonians bring community ideas to life;

* To facilitate conversations about community resilience, social connection, and ecological transition;

* To put decision-making power in the hands of the community;

* To support decolonizing traditional granting processes that have embedded systemic barriers for many. To offer an accessible and inclusive process, and reach people who might not otherwise participate in typical civic processes.[46]

To begin, the participatory budgeting team at the city developed a set of best practices based on other cities' experiences, then conducted workshops and online engagement to allow the public to co-develop the process.

Together, the team and the community decided to support between ten and fifteen projects per ward with up to $2000 in funding per project.

The process was designed around **four stages**:

* **Brainstorming.** In the first workshop, participants (community members from the two wards) shared ideas for projects and discussed their ideas.

* **Proposal development.** At the second workshop, participants worked together to develop their ideas into feasible proposals. Where possible, they identified a sponsor or host for their project – such as a community league, school, or place of worship – to house the proposal and act as its host, tasked to manage the allocated funds should the proposal be selected.

* **Voting.** At the third workshop, participants voted on how to allocate the available funds among the proposals.

* **Implementation.** In the final phase, funding is disbursed to host organizations of successful proposals. Projects are implemented.

In total, 23 project proposals were submitted: 13 in Ward Karhiio, and 10 in Ward Nakota Isga. The City was thus able to fund all proposals.

While the program didn't exclusively focus on climate or environment, several projects emerged that were rooted in environmental stewardship and justice. These included:

* Tree Planting programs, seeking to add trees to certain neighbourhoods in need of shade for children and adults to enjoy more comfortable outdoor time.

* Outdoor classrooms for schoolchildren, seeking to expand one school's outdoor programming by creating an outdoor classroom and gathering space for the wider community.

* Bike Streetview (Bike 360), aiming to improve the experience of cycling in Edmonton by documenting the cycling networks with pictures and videos; these will be shared with Google Streetview, which currently lacks coverage of the city's bike paths. This will allow for better planning ahead for cyclists and will help identify gaps in signage and infrastructure along paths.

Edmonton's process is notable for the degree to which dialogue and collaboration was established among community members as well as community organizations. Participants remarked on the connections they established and deepened with local community leagues, non-profits, advocacy groups, businesses, and schools. And not only did the grants contribute to community-building projects, but the participatory budgeting process itself was an act of community building, strengthening ties among residents.

Stronger connections were also forged between residents and local government. Said one participant: "before I had thought of city government as this distant, hazy body that floated above Edmonton. I think this project made me realize that city government is much more ingrained and involved in our communities."[47] And connections helped support project proposals that may otherwise have struggled to receive funding:

Photo courtesy of Community-based budgeting project, Councilor Keren Tang, Edmonton.

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the city helped match informal grassroots groups with organizational partners who were legally eligible to receive public funds.[48]

In 2022, nine projects were fully funded, with seven further receiving funding in 2023. Tang remarked on the workload of the program, noting that future versions should be managed by municipal administrative staff.

Another community-based budgeting pilot was later conducted by administrative staff in the social development department for two additional Edmonton neighbourhoods - Balwin and Belvedere - and these staff also remarked on the size of the workload, noting that the project's resource intensity made it unsustainable.

Staff also remarked that this second pilot felt like more of a "popularity vote", with proponents of certain projects mobilizing to campaign on behalf of their proposed projects.[49] Though the future of participatory budgeting in Edmonton is uncertain, many participants and city representatives alike admired the process for the transparency and engagement it brought to the allocation of funds for community development.

CITIZEN ADVISORY COMMITTEES

Citizen advisory committees are a common institution a municipal council can use to meet with citizens on a policy topic.

Take Saskatoon's committee structure (covered in more depth in the case study on page 29), which follows a common approach: residents are periodically invited to **apply for appointment** to one of its committees and boards, and – much like for an application for a job – those interested are asked to fill out an application form and submit a CV and two letters of reference. Appointment decisions are made by the Governance and Priorities Committee, which is composed of **city councillors**, who consider applications and submit their recommendations for appointments to Council for ratification.

Committee members generally serve as volunteers – no compensation or honorarium is provided for their service. Applying for a advisory committee can be a great way to get involved in environmental **decision making** in your community.

In Climate Reality's National Climate League, a volunteer-driven survey of municipal climate policies across Canada, volunteer researchers found that 21 out of 54 municipalities surveyed had a citizen advisory committee that explicitly included climate in its mandate; an additional four municipalities had committees with the environment or sustainability in their mandates more broadly. In the rest of the surveyed municipalities, there was either no evidence of any citizen advisory committees for the environment in any capacity, or evidence that such committees existed previously but were dissolved or disbanded.

These case studies showcase two innovative approaches to using citizen oversight councils for influence over environmental and climate policy. First, a profile of Saskatoon's Environmental Advisory Committee exemplifies how deliberate and thoughtful approaches to recruitment can boost inclusion of a diverse range of perspectives. Second, we'll showcase how the city of New Westminster is embedding citizen oversight through a standing advisory assembly, bringing a representative sample of the city's population together to advise council on all policy matters.

Assembly members deliberate at a monthly meeting. Photo: City of New Westminster

CITIZEN ADVISORY COMMITTEES

SASKATOON'S ENVIRONMENTAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE

FACT SHEET

Timeframe:
permanent and ongoing

Partners:
* City of Saskatoon
* Saskatchewan Health Authority
* Saskatchewan Ministry of Environment
* Meewasin Valley Authority

Participants:
10 citizen representatives,
3 agency representatives,
plus council and staff

ADVANCING CLIMATE ACTION THROUGH PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

Current members of Saskatoon's Environmental Advisory Committee.

In 2017, when Saskatoon City Council's Governance and Priorities Committee undertook a thorough review of the city's governance practices, the advisory board structure was identified as a key opportunity for reform. Following a thorough review, the Governance Subcommittee recommended a series of reforms to improve the standard of governance for the citizens of Saskatoon. Among these changes were reforms that made way for dedicated inclusion of previously underrepresented groups on the city's advisory boards.

Saskatoon's new and improved Environmental Advisory Committee includes both voting and non-voting members. Its voting membership includes **10 citizen representatives** and three agency representatives - one each for the Saskatchewan Health Authority, the Ministry of Environment, and the Meewasin Valley Authority. Two of these citizen representative positions are allocated for specific demographics: one for youth between ages 16 and 23, and the other for a member of a First Nations or Métis community.

While the Governance Subcommittee reviewed the idea to reserve positions for youth on committees, they also heard concerns regarding the ability of young people to succeed on boards: their report mentions comments that young people "may feel overwhelmed and intimidated" on a board alongside older adults.[50] In response, they proposed a support measure: that young people be assigned a mentor - either the advisory committee chair or vice chair - to support them in their role. This recommendation received unanimous support at the City Council vote.

The committee's **non-voting membership** includes one city councillor and representatives from the city's departments including Sustainability, Water and Waste Operations, Building Standards, Saskatoon Light & Power Planning and Development, Transportation. Initially, a recommendation was made that councilors be removed entirely from citizen advisory committees, but this was defeated with six votes against to four in favour; in response, the recommendation was revised to propose that no more than one councilor sit on each committee,

and that this councilor would not have voting powers within the committee. This recommendation then passed eight to two. Inclusion of staff and councilors on committees as non-voting participants can improve the dialogue between citizen advisors and municipal decision-making activity, improving the flow of information and perspectives from both directions.

The governance review also proposed an update to the **mandate of the Environmental Advisory Committee** to provide advice to City Council on a wider range of policy matters, including:

* **environmental implications** identified in City undertakings, initiatives and other projects

* **waste reduction** and diversion initiatives including food reclamation

* **pollution prevention**

* **water conservation** measures

* **climate change mitigation** and reduction of greenhouse gas emissions (e.g. energy conservation, renewable and alternative energy programming, energy efficiency and building standards, alternative transportation)

* **wildlife** or **habitat conservation**

* **ecological systems** and **greenspaces**

* support of **alternative modes of transportation** (for example: carpooling initiatives, promotion of public transit options, walking, cycling)[51]

The committee has worked on a number of local environmental priorities in recent years. In 2023, the committee reviewed nine matters referred to them by Council and its committees and submitted seven reports or feedback letters to council and its committees. The 2023 annual report includes the following accomplishments:

* Provided feedback to Council on both the Carbon/Climate Budget and the Low Emissions Community Plan Refresh, including review of a report on the Climate Budget for capital projects

* Used the Triple Bottom Line framework to encourage Council to consider social and environmental costs of their decisions on key projects, and how they may lead to future financial costs

* Advised Council to balance plans for urban development with the need for conservation and green infrastructure

* Advised on the expansion of the Bus Rapid Transit system in the city

* Advocated for the continued funding of the Student Action for a Sustainable Future program, which works with elementary and secondary school classrooms

* Contributed to adjudication on the city's Environmental Cash Grants program, which awarded $56,000.00 in funding to 15 local organizations.[52]

CITIZEN ADVISORY COMMITTEES

NEW WESTMINSTER'S COMMUNITY ADVISORY ASSEMBLY

FACT SHEET

Timeframe:
January 2024 to January 2025

Partners:
* City of New Westminster
* Simon Fraser University's Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue

Participants:
36 assembly members

Photo: City of New Westminster

Following the election of a new council and mayor in the BC municipality of New Westminster in Fall 2022, strategic planning conversations were soon underway to rethink the city's advisory committees. While committee members generally viewed their experiences on advisory committees in a positive light, problems were apparent. Some committee members felt the process was top-down, and that they "frequently seem[ed] to be in listening mode."

ADVANCING CLIMATE ACTION THROUGH PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

Participants felt like council was "ticking a box of public engagement but not actually doing public engagement," and that their job was to "rubber stamp what has previously been reviewed and approved by other parts of the City process."[53]

And committee members were often left to wonder about the status of projects they previously discussed. One member expressed they "would like to know what actually becomes of the issues that come to the committee"; another asked: "what happens to the ideas that we propose?" The demographic imbalance of participation was also raised as an issue, with youth and Indigenous representation seen to be lacking.

In Spring 2023, council proposed a new model for advisory committees: collapsing them together to form one Community Advisory Assembly, convened with the objective of bringing together a representative sample of New Westminster residents to talk about City policies and projects and provide advice and recommendations back to staff and Council. With its 36 members, the format of the Community Advisory Assembly incorporates design elements of both a traditional citizen advisory council and a citizens' assembly. Members were recruited on the basis of achieving balance across a handful of demographics: the area of New West where they live, their age group, gender identity, housing tenure (renter, owner, or unhoused), whether they are a visible minority, and if they are of Indigenous identity. The program differs from traditional committees in other ways too: it has a greater number of members than a traditional committee; it

meets monthly, which is more frequent than previous committees met; meetings centre on dialogue and deliberation; and supports are available to participants to help address barriers to participation, including reimbursement for expenses incurred to attend, stipends for child care and elder care, and compensation for low-income members or those who must miss paid work to attend meetings.

Oversight on climate policy implementation has been a prominent focus of the Assembly. In May 2024, the Assembly was presented with the opportunity to discuss the implementation of a decision by council to reallocate 10% of road space in New Westminster to other uses. Members spent the meeting discussing their concerns for the plan, including concern for increased traffic congestion and loss of parking spots, and contributed ideas on where to allocate more space for greenery and bike lanes based on their own experiences of moving through the city.[54] The Assembly's input contributed to the process of translating the council's objective into a concrete policy plan in a way that was mindful of residents' needs and preferences.

The Assembly is also designed to allow a bottom-up approach to deliberation: in addition to following directions to offer input on council initiatives, Assembly members also have had the chance to choose the focus of their discussion. In the May 2024 session, members voted on their preferred areas of focus from a list of 18 topics; climate change stood out as an area of interest for the Assembly with 61% of members voting to prioritize it. Following this vote, the June session focussed on the effects

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of climate change in New Westminster with an emphasis on how various groups - including youth, Indigenous people, elderly people, and disabled people - experience the impacts of climate change differently. In September, a report on the Assembly's findings was submitted to council, and findings were passed on to staff in the Transportation and Climate Action divisions, who were tasked with reviewing the findings and reporting back on how they could be incorporated into the city's initiatives.[55]

While this pilot only recently wrapped in January 2025 and its future is uncertain, examples exist abroad of permanently embedding citizen bodies into the policy process. In February 2019, the parliament of Ostbelgien in Belgium voted to establish a standing citizens' council to provide a mechanism for ongoing input by local residents into decision making, influence over agenda setting, and increased accountability of elected officials to citizens' needs.[56] And in Paris, a 100-member standing citizens' assembly was convened in connection with city council; the assembly is able to choose and pursue priority policy areas and submit proposals to council, enabling citizens to contribute to agenda setting and the co-construction of public policy.[57]

Photo courtesy of the City of New Westminster.

Whether this model is better or worse than the traditional committee model - as presented in the Saskatoon case study - is subjective. While the representative sample approach to recruitment does offer an improvement over the self-selection model in terms of balancing the demographics of participants and including a range of voices, other aspects of the model may not be as desirable from a climate perspective.
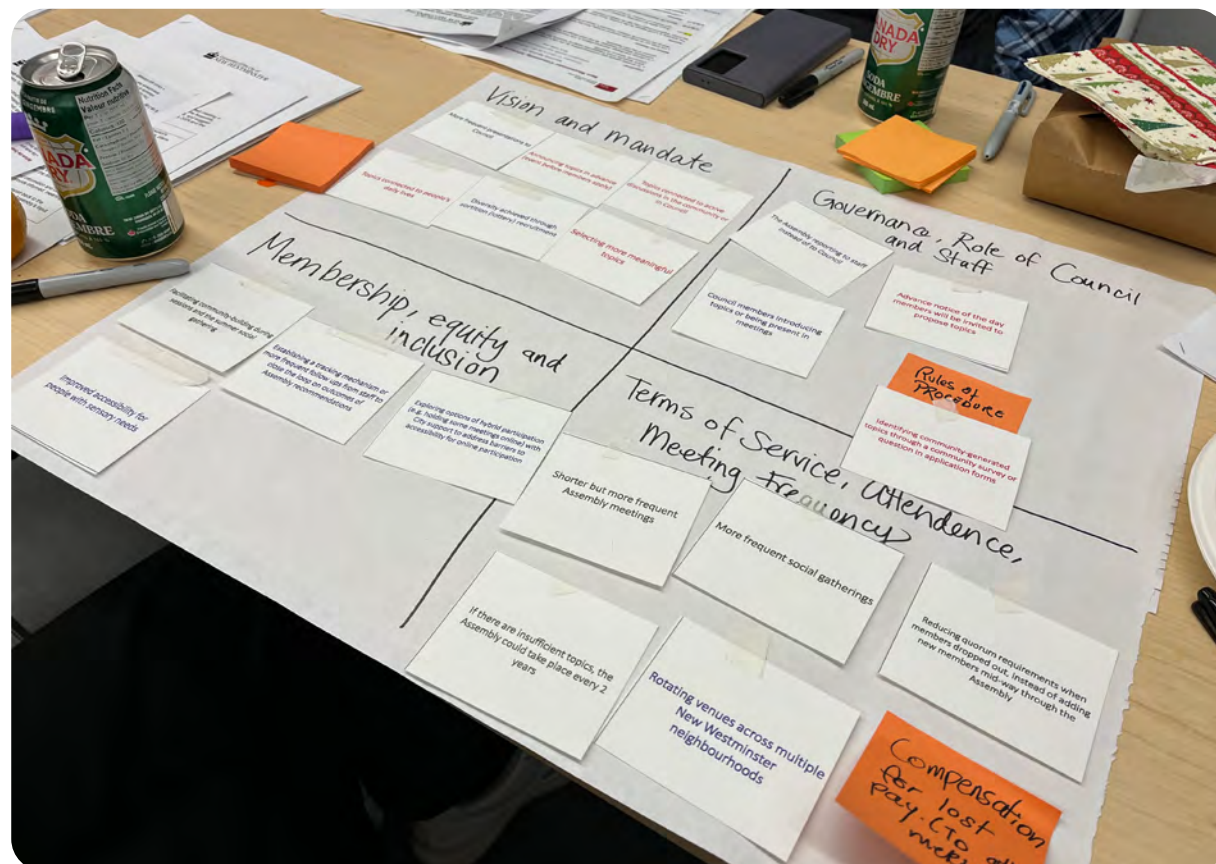
While at least two of the thirteen meetings did focus discussion on topics related to climate and roadway transformation, this is a significant reduction in focussed discussion time spent on climate and the environment compared to a committee that exists solely to discuss climate and the environment. Furthermore, the self-selection model allowed practitioners with years of knowledge and experience on climate to give

input and advice on climate and environmental policies, whereas the representative sample model now reduces the proportion of those voices relative to demographics with other experiences. As with all public engagement approaches, municipalities should ideally seek methods to incorporate input based on subject matter expertise as well as a wider range of lived experiences into their climate policymaking.

PUBLIC CONSULTATIONS

Consultation is one of the most traditional formats of engaging members of the public.

In fact, municipalities often are mandated by provincial legislation to consult the public on certain decisions, including **zoning by-law changes** and updates to **Official Community Plans**. While provincial requirements generally leave the format of these consultations up to municipalities, many municipalities often use a public hearing style of consultation to allow members of the public to give their input. However, some **municipalities** often go above and beyond this traditional format to conduct consultations that reach further – and in more creative ways – to include a wider range of residents.

For **councilors and staff**, traditional forms of consultations can be disappointing, and in worst case scenarios, extremely uncomfortable: while many consultations attract no attendees or nearly none, some are well-attended by poorly-behaved residents who harass and shout at staff and council, creating an unpleasant and even unsafe work atmosphere. At the same time, **many residents** may feel like their participation in consultations is pointless, as though councillors have already made up their minds and the consultation is more of a performance of engagement than a genuine **exercise in seeking public input**.

From all sides, there is an appetite for more meaningful, more constructive approaches to public engagement.

Many local governments across Canada have upped their consultation game on both climate mitigation and climate adaptation initiatives. The first case study showcases a large municipality's approach to consulting the public on the development of a city-wide climate strategy, Halifax's HalifACT plan. The second case study then spotlights an innovative approach to consultation on a technical climate adaptation project at the neighbourhood level to help adapt Vancouver's False Creek to projected sea level rises.

Photo courtesy of the City of Vancover.

PUBLIC CONSULTATION

HALIFAX'S HALIFACT CLIMATE PLAN CONSULTATIONS

FACT SHEET

Timeframe:
January 2019 – July 2020, with additional community engagement in the following years

Partners:
* Over 100 stakeholder organizations
* Halifax Public Library system

Participants:
Thousands of residents engaged through online and in-person forums

ADVANCING CLIMATE ACTION THROUGH PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

The HalifACT Human Library and Ideas Fair is a celebration of the work that local residents are doing to address climate change.

In January 2019, the Regional Municipality of Halifax declared a climate emergency. This declaration sought to recognize the serious and urgent threat climate change posed to the community. Following this declaration, the HalifACT project team was tasked with developing a climate strategy that combined energy, emissions and financial modelling with a wide-reaching public engagement program. The plan would target multiple sectors as opportunities for transformation: buildings, energy supply, transportation, water, wastewater and solid waste.

The HalifACT engagement team set to work convening a Community Leadership Team, inviting representatives from over 100 organizations across the transportation and energy sectors, as well as from academic, government and non-governmental organizations. The Team played an important role not only in gathering feedback on draft emission reduction scenarios, but also in building both commitment to the climate plan and relationships across sectors.[58]

In addition to organizational stakeholder engagement, the team's public engagement program worked to reach a broad range of residents. Online, the team's Shape Your City site had 2800 visitors and 1300 survey respondents sharing their input on their will-ingness to undertake mitigation measures and the barriers they may encounter in doing so; and posts on social media platforms engaged hundreds of thousands of unique visitors.

In person, the team ran 35 pop-up sessions in public spaces, including parks, public libraries, and markets, several of which were scheduled to coincide with local festivals and events. These sessions func-tioned to both provide information to the public about the HalifACT 2050 process and to learn more about people's opinions on and experiences with climate change.

In the What We Heard report, staff reported hearing from pop-up participants that they were unaware of the HalifACT process, but also that with more information, many people were supportive of taking urgent action on climate change.[59]

Published in 2020, the HalifACT 2050 plan set out a series of actions - intended changes and activities that reduce GHG emissions - to reduce emissions by 62% further than the established business as usual scenario. Altogether, the report's actions are predicted to reduce total emissions by 2050 to just 5% of 2016 levels.[60] To support implementation of these actions, a dedicated climate action tax was established to fund the plan for a minimum of ten years. Built into property taxes, the climate action tax is estimated to generate $18 million per year.[61]

Following the release of the HalifACT plan, the City continued to engage residents to maintain channels of communication with the public on climate change. In collaboration with Halifax's Public Library system's Climate Strategy team, the HalifACT team conducted a series of pop-up community forums at library branches across the city. Pop ups were held at 14 branches and each lasted at least a week. Topics included a "Climate 101" on the local impacts of climate change, how to slow climate change, and how to prepare for climate change.[62]

In November 2024, The Coast reported that city staff had recently cautioned councillors that due to lack of implementation of actions in the HalifACT climate plan, the city was at risk of falling behind on its GHG emission reduction targets. While action is progressing, said staff, it's not "at the pace and scale neces-sary to meet the science-based targets." [63]

Ambitious public consultation programs have been conducted in other large Canadian cities as well, such as Toronto's vast public engagement program that fed into their
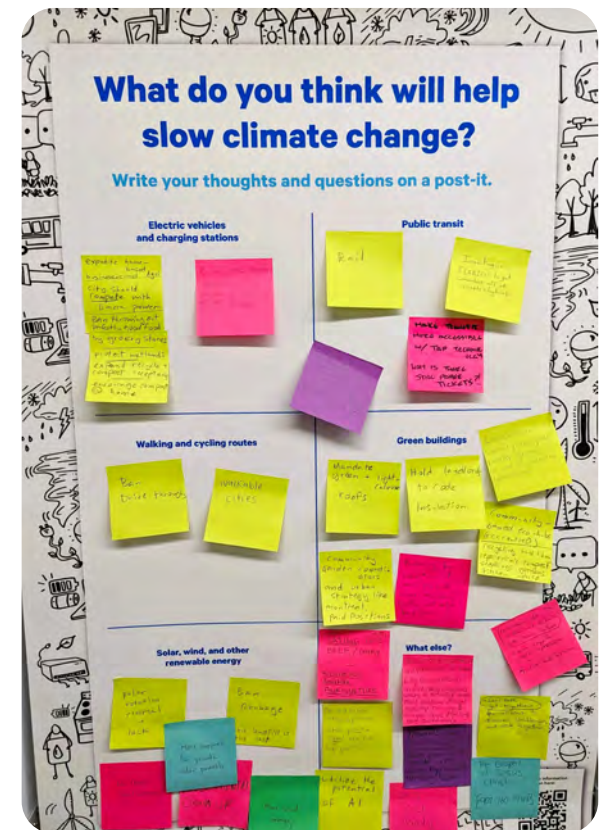

Photo: Halifax Regional Municipality.

TransformTO climate plan.[64] Similarly, Toronto's progress on implementation and funding of their climate plan has lagged since the plan's publication, and the city is not on track to meet its 2030 emission reduction target.[65] Indeed, extensive public engage-ment programs can boost the ambition of the reports and plans to which they contribute, but ultimately, the decision to enact ambitious policy lies in the hands of city councillors.

VANCOUVER'S SEA2CITY DESIGN CHALLENGE

FACT SHEET

Timeframe:
September 2021 to November 2022

Partners:
* City of Vancouver
* EcoPlan

Participants:
Representatives of community organizations; architectural, engineering, planning, and cultural advisory firms; City staff, Park Board, and Host Nations representatives

Rendering of proposed project informed by consultations. Photo: City of Vancouver.

Climate adaptation planning can be a highly technical task that can pose a challenge to incorporating empowered community engagement. In Vancouver, planners found a way to engage the public in re-designing the False Creek floodplain to manage anticipated sea level rise, bringing together community members, two multi-disciplinary design teams, City staff, local coastal adaptation experts, and Host Nation representatives, knowledge keepers and designers from Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh. This was accomplished through a design challenge they dubbed Sea2City.[66]

Vancouver's False Creek is an urban waterway, flowing south of downtown from English Bay all the way to the street that divides the east and west sides of Vancouver. The False Creek floodplain - which surrounds the creek and covers Granville Island as well as the Strathcona neighbourhood to the east and parts of Downtown and Gastown to the north - is among the most vulnerable areas in the city to sea level rise and flooding from a major storm.[67] With public space, industry, and 38,000 residents vulnerable across the floodplain, the City of Vancouver initiated the Sea2Sky Design Challenge to engage the public in a collaborative re-design of the area, seeking a decolonized vision to guide both urban development and ecological revitalization.

Following the City's earlier consultations to inform its Coastal Adaptation Plan, a request for proposals was released to invite firms to apply to participate. Two teams were assembled from the applicants, mixing architects, applied research institutes, Indigenous cultural advisors, biologists, urban planners, mobility experts, and shoreline engineers. Each team was assigned two key sites around False Creek. The False Creek North design team tackled the area between the Burrard and Granville bridges, a high-density mixed-use area, as well as Coopers' Park, which contains open fields and recreational space.

The False Creek South design team handled the Stamps Landing site, which includes a marina, restaurants, and mixed-use commercial and residential space, as well as Olympic Village, a densely-populated mixed-use area that was initially developed to house athletes for the 2010 Winter Olympics.

In addition to a Technical and City Advisory group - composed of private and staff representatives, respectively, with planning, transport, engineering, and sustainability expertise - a Community Advisory Group was also convened to incorporate local perspectives. This 17-member group included representatives from community, social, cultural, and environmental organizations, as well as from neighbourhood associations and business groups. This Community Advisory Group contributed to the Design Challenge by giving input and feedback on ideas and design concepts, advising design teams using knowledge of their organization's connections to the shoreline, and guided designs according to the interests and concerns of the Vancouver community.

The collaborative design challenge proceeded in three stages, each with its own "collaboratorium" - collaborative laboratory - to drive ideation. Collaboratoriums were full-day opportunities for program participants - including facilitators, design teams, and advisory group members - to collaborate and cooperate in the formulation of creative approaches to shoreline renewal. The first collaboratorium, held in October 2021, involved presentations from City and Technical Advisory groups to the design teams to help inform their designs, as well as an overview of the values-based planning approach the projects should follow.

Held in March 2022, Collaboratorium II consisted of presentations on Indigenous perspectives and the Technical Advisory Group's research on sea level rise, then provided the design teams with space to share their preliminary design concepts.

Photo courtesy of the City of Vancouver.

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Throughout the process, a number of public events were held — including community conversations, speaker events and education days — to introduce the wider Vancouver community to the project's approaches and progress.

Later that year in July, the final Collaboratorium included a visioning exercise for the 2050 False Creek shoreline, then presentations from design teams to share their refined design concepts.

Throughout the process, additional workshops were held for Challenge participants - for example, a workshop on decolonizing urban planning from representatives of Tsleil-Waututh and Squamish Nations - and public events, including community conversations, speaker events, and education days, were conducted to introduce the wider Vancouver community to the project's approaches and progress. A Youth Adaptation Lab was also convened to operate alongside the Challenge, bringing 15 youth between 18 and 30 together to learn about coastal adaptation and develop skills to engage their communities on climate adaptation. In total, there were over 2,000 participants across Sea2City's various collaborations and outreach programs.

Teams produced a range of proposals for the four key sites around False Creek. For example, the False Creek North team proposed a cultural learning garden and nursery for the reintroduction of native plants, and for Coopers' Park - which will become a tidal park area by 2100 - the team proposed a floating walkway and floating habitat island. The False Creek South team proposed gradually shifting buildings further south - to set them further back from the shoreline - and restoring the area into a green corridor featuring tidal wetland and mudflats, salt marsh, and forested berms. The team also proposed a Host Nation cultural facility and canoe house.

Photo courtesy of the City of Vancouver.

This format of engagement stretches the traditional conception of consultation, exemplifying a process that incorporates the community into urban design, producing a vision for the shoreline that blends together technical expertise with knowledge from Indigenous Host Nations and local groups.

AFTERWORD

At the end of this report, readers may still be left wondering: can public participation in climate policy making really reduce emission levels and drive other measurable climate outcomes?

Firstly, because public participation is a crucial component of building consensus and mutual understanding - and is therefore key to overcoming polarization - it could be argued that participation is vital to building the broad public mandate required to create climate solutions that people accept. That is: the creation of climate policy that people will support politically may require engagement and dialogue.

And secondly, in 2025, we can all recognize one thing for certain: there is no magic solution to solving climate change, no silver bullet that can force a complete course correction. Many solutions are necessary, many of which involve political bravery, long-term horizons, and prioritization of collective public needs over personal wants. None of these are easy achievements under our existing political system.

This is why better public engagement plays a role in addressing the climate crisis: if there is no single solution to climate change, the solution to the climate crisis must instead be composed of many small efforts. Those who care showing up to say their bit to city council may alone be individuals, but together can persuade and move decision makers to action; and these cities that are thus moved to act, though potentially low in impact individually, considered in aggregate could account for remarkable, meaningful movements towards a net-zero world. And in such a world - which has already warmed by 1.5 C and is on track to warm

catastrophically further - every reduction in emissions counts; and, thus, so too does every voice calling for emissions reduction count, as does every opportunity carved out for such voices to be heard by ears of those with power.

Many forums of public engagement, historically, have been conducted only out of legal obligation, and have offered community members only a false kind of hope that their contributions will make any difference at all. I hope that this report has provided readers with some ideas for formats of public engagement which, through their considered design and commitment to inclusion and dialogue, offer more genuine glimmers of hope to their participants: the good-faith promise that they will be heard, that their words will help transform their community, and thus their world.

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The Climate Reality Project
CANADA

As a non-Indigenous organization working on climate education in what is now known as Canada, we honour and recognize the diverse Indigenous peoples who are the first guardians of the air, land, water, and Spirit that lives within all things. We acknowledge their sense of place and unique relationship to the land, being that they have been its guardians since time immemorial. We respect and value their ways of being, knowing, relating, and carrying this knowledge forward to inform the next seven generations. We recognize our collective responsibility to dismantle the systems of oppression that created the climate crisis and start by listening to the wisdom of the First Nations, Metis, and Inuit. We are committed to amplifying Indigenous voices and supporting Indigenous-led solutions for climate justice.