

Excerpt From: Paper on Participatory Democratic Process in Local Government

INTRODUCTION

We live in times of change, times of complex and vexing problems, times of fewer municipal representatives relying on leaner public administrations. Into this vacuum between capacity to govern and the enormity of decisions, has entered the two-headed dragon of electoral cynicism and unmitigated citizen involvement in the policy process. Perhaps the dragon was already present. But the new reality of municipalities in Ontario makes it loom closer.

Local government has become the crucible within which forces of globalization, privatization, changing demographics, devolution of services, economic imperatives, amalgamation and representation are being heated to significant intensities of change. Despite a new Municipal Act that modernizes the capacity of Ontario municipalities to govern, there remains a misalignment between the level of responsibility foisted upon councils and their ability to effect policies that meet the varied expectations of those who reside and work within the boundaries. The relationship between the elected and electors is under sufficient strain that it is unlikely to maintain its traditional form.

Public cynicism seems too pronounced and the credibility of politicians at too low an ebb for councils to rely on moral authority and the strict enactment and enforcement of law to slay the dragon. Citizen assertiveness is too far advanced and the capacity of councils too constrained in the face of complex problems to ignore the second thoughts, passionate pleas and knowledgeable deliberations of voters. Some citizens are content to sit in judgment of policies. There is evidence however that many citizens are aspiring to a more cogent relationship with government. It may depend on the issue or the people affected but the policy development topography is more varied than it used to be. Local politicians are witnessing an insistence from voters that manifests in different forms such as reasoned and deliberate argument, passionate belief, well-researched documentation, cultural values and citizen activism. Diffidence is giving way to assertiveness. Municipal administrations and councils are facing greater levels of citizen involvement but not necessarily with the tools to work effectively with it. The new citizen assertiveness is not always amenable to working within the hierarchical structures of municipal governments. They are seeking an interactive relationship rather than a top-down imposition.

This study examines one aspect of the relationship between council and community members: the engagement of citizens in the local government policy process. Councils in many jurisdictions have been responding to the assertiveness of citizens by arranging public meetings to provide information on Council policy, ensuring Councilors are available by E-mail, allowing citizen delegations to make presentations to Council and publishing newsletters. These are positive steps toward reaching citizens but they seem to fall short. Some civic administrators and politicians express exasperation that all this participation does not necessarily add value to the debate or to the outcomes. Many residents declare that participation is just another opportunity for politicians to ignore what they have to say. Is it participation that is to blame here? It seems more likely that there is a misalignment between the traditions of government to rule and the new citizen aspiration for an interactive relationship.

It is imperative to gain a deeper understanding of what is taking place here. There is too much at stake in the modern Ontario municipality. Local governments and citizens need to know how to make this participatory promise live up to its name. Can participation work as a means of realizing this interactive relationship?

The literature describes different participatory forms and methods. This study will focus on two general forms of participation and compare their application to two similar and complex policy issues. The comparison will serve to answer the question of whether a deliberative and interactive form of participation, one that offers opportunity for citizens to learn, deliberate and formulate policy with Council, can achieve "more satisfactory outcomes" with a complex policy issue than a traditional form of participation, one that is distinguished by a top-down approach where citizens receive information from Council on what has been decided and why.